
TYPE OF ACCOMODATION IN RURAL AREAS IN SERBIA AND CHALLENGES IN FUTHER RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMET

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ABSTRACT

This study explores tourists' accommodation preferences in rural areas of Serbia, aiming to identify the most frequently used types of lodging, key decision-making factors, and potential differences across demographic groups. The research is based on a survey of 250 respondents conducted in March 2024, with data analyzed using descriptive statistics, t-tests, and ANOVA. Results show that tourists most often choose household-based accommodation and hotels, with location, equipment, and accessibility being the most influential factors. No statistically significant differences were found across gender, age, or education level. The study highlights the dominance of short domestic stays, limited influence of digital platforms, and a high share of informal accommodation practices. Findings suggest the need for investment in infrastructure and support for formalizing rural tourism services. The research contributes to understanding rural tourist behavior and offers practical insights for improving rural hospitality offerings in Serbia.

Introduction

Rural areas, as distinct territorial units, are typically defined by low population density, specific land use patterns, and a strong sense of community identity (Cvijanović & Ružić, 2024). Within these spaces, rural tourism emerges as a multifaceted concept that encapsulates various forms of tourism including agritourism, village tourism, and ecotourism. Although these terms are often used interchangeably, rural tourism remains the most comprehensive, encompassing all tourism activities that occur in

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rural settings and utilize the area's natural, cultural, and economic resources (Janković, 2022). According to the Council of Europe (1986), rural tourism is not restricted to farming activities but broadly includes all services and experiences hosted in rural areas, often provided by local populations through accommodation facilities such as guesthouses, lodges, and agritourism units. The OECD further elaborates this definition by emphasizing the functional, spatial, and cultural dimensions of rural tourism, highlighting its embeddedness in traditional lifestyles and sustainability principles.

Despite its recognized potential, rural tourism in Serbia remains underdeveloped and highly fragmented. While more than 90% of Serbia's land area is classified as rural, and a significant proportion of the population resides outside urban centers, the sector has not reached its anticipated economic and developmental impact (Gajić & Cvijanović, 2022; Vidić, 2018). Structural constraints such as inadequate infrastructure, weak institutional support, and limited entrepreneurial capacity continue to hinder sustainable growth (Bejatović & Ristić, 2016). Although rural tourism is frequently positioned as a strategic tool for revitalizing marginalized areas, enhancing rural livelihoods, and diversifying local economies (Vukolić et al., 2024), empirical research on visitor behavior, preferences, and satisfaction in rural contexts, particularly regarding accommodation, remains insufficient.

The quality and type of accommodation play a crucial role in shaping the rural tourism experience. Accommodation not only serves as a necessary logistical component but also constitutes an experiential and symbolic element that reflects local identity, cultural authenticity, and hospitality standards (Vidić, 2018). Investments in rural accommodation are increasingly recognized as a prerequisite for elevating the competitiveness of rural destinations and addressing visitor expectations. Nevertheless, there is a lack of systematic evidence on how tourists perceive various forms of rural accommodation and what factors influence their decision-making processes, especially in the context of Serbia's post-pandemic tourism recovery.

This paper seeks to address these research gaps by exploring the accommodation preferences of tourists who visit rural areas in Serbia. Drawing on recent empirical data collected in 2024, the study investigates which types of accommodation are most commonly used, which attributes are deemed most important when choosing accommodation, and whether these preferences vary across demographic groups. By focusing on the intersection of consumer behavior and rural development, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how accommodation-related decisions can inform targeted investment, planning, and policy-making. In order to address the identified research gaps and contribute to evidence-based planning of rural tourism development, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What types of accommodation are most frequently used by tourists in rural areas of Serbia?

RQ2: What factors influence tourists' decision-making when selecting rural accommodation?

RQ3: Are there significant differences in accommodation preferences based on demographic characteristics such as gender, age, and education level?

The findings aim to support the formulation of evidence-based strategies for rural tourism development, with a particular emphasis on aligning the expectations of contemporary tourists with the socio-economic realities of rural communities. Through this approach, the study underscores the strategic importance of accommodation in the broader framework of rural tourism, positioning it as both a driver and a reflection of sustainable rural transformation.

Theoretical background

In contemporary academic discourse, rural accommodation is no longer a homogeneous category. As noted by Cors-Iglesias et al. (2020), the diversity of rural areas in Catalonia leads to the differentiation of peer-to-peer (P2P) accommodation typologies, highlighting the need for localized approaches in planning and evaluating rural tourism supply. Their analysis emphasizes that universal solutions often overlook the specific characteristics of local territories, infrastructure, and social relations. Conversely, Pulido-Fernández et al. (2024) demonstrate that the choice of accommodation (rural vs. hotel) significantly shapes tourist behavior, including length of stay, spending patterns, and activity preferences. The functional aspects of the growth of small accommodation businesses in rural areas are further problematized in the study by Ye et al. (2019), which points out that the expansion of supply may positively impact guest experience and financial performance, but only when accompanied by strategic management and high-quality service. In contrast, Wojciechowska-Solis et al. (2022) identify substantial “quality gaps” in rural accommodation facilities in the Lublin region, which compromise guest satisfaction and the competitiveness of the destination. From a critical perspective, this discrepancy indicates that quantitative growth in supply must be followed by standardization and consistent quality monitoring.

Accessibility introduces an additional layer of complexity, particularly for vulnerable groups. McDaniels et al. (2017) warn that rural communities are often underserved in terms of infrastructure, making it difficult for tourists with special needs to access these destinations. Although tourism is often viewed as a vehicle for inclusion, without adequate accommodation and transport solutions, it may contribute to further marginalization. This issue remains underexplored in the existing literature on rural tourism. When it comes to accommodation selection motivations, Choo et al. (2017) propose a set of criteria that encompass both emotional and functional factors, with authenticity, local interaction, and sustainability emerging as key components. However, as Pina and Delfa (2005) argue, the choice of accommodation type still predominantly depends on tourists’ demographic and economic characteristics, suggesting that economic considerations continue to play a primary role despite rising awareness of sustainability. Short-term rentals in rural areas, according to Torkington et al. (2025), offer potential for diversifying accommodation supply and attracting younger visitors. Nonetheless, if not properly regulated, they may generate tensions

within local communities. O'Halloran (2025), in a recent entry in the Encyclopedia of Tourism, points out that the phenomenon of rural accommodation remains conceptually unsettled, which complicates comparative research and the formulation of coherent policy frameworks.

Given the growing need for ecological solutions, Domljan et al. (2025) propose the integration of sustainable design, inspired by local heritage, into the interiors of rural accommodation units, an approach that could enhance the distinctiveness of the offer and strengthen local identity. A similar line of argument is developed by Cammarota et al. (2025), who explore local residents' perceptions of the concept of "sustainable hospitality" and highlight that the main challenge lies in bridging the gap between theoretical sustainability norms and practical implementation on the ground. Rural tourism is fundamental for both economic growth and the preservation of culture. Lazović et al. (2024).

Given the identified gaps in service quality, regulatory frameworks, and alignment between sustainability discourse and practice, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how different types of rural accommodation influence tourist experiences, community perceptions, and sustainable development outcomes, ultimately contributing to more informed planning and management strategies in rural tourism.

Materials and methods

1.1. Sample and procedure

The research was conducted in March 2024 across selected rural and peri-urban areas in the Republic of Serbia, targeting individuals who had actively participated in rural tourism within the past two years. The selection of participants was based on purposive sampling, where inclusion was limited to respondents who had paid for accommodation or other tourist services in rural areas, thus excluding those who visited family or owned private houses in villages.

Data were collected using face-to-face survey interviews, administered by trained research assistants over a period of 18 days (March 4–22, 2024). A total of 250 valid responses were collected. The sample included 116 males (46.4%) and 134 females (53.6%). The largest age group was 18 to 25 years (34.4%), while the smallest group was 51 to 59 years (8.4%). The majority of respondents lived in cities with over 200,000 inhabitants (43.6%), and only 9.6% resided in rural settlements. Regarding education, 40.0% had completed high school, 36.4% held a university degree, and 9.2% had a master's or higher academic qualification. Most respondents were employed (78.4%), predominantly in administrative (20.8%) and professional occupations (18%) (Table 1).

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents

	f	[%]
Gender		
Male	116	46.4
Female	134	53.6
Age		
18 to 25	86	34.4
Od 26 do 30	56	22.4
Od 31 do 40	56	22.4
Od 41 do 50	31	12.4
Od 51 do 59	21	8.4
Place of birth		
City over 200.000 inhabitants	109	43.6
Town from 100.000 to 199.999 inhabitants	47	18.8
Town from 50.000 to 99.999 inhabitants	26	10.4
Town up to 50.000 inhabitants	44	17.6
Village	24	9.6
Degree		
Finished high school	100	40.0
College	36	14.4
University degree	91	36.4
Master or higher degree	23	9.2
Job		
Student (without a job)	37	14.8
Student (with job)	17	6.8
Employed	196	78.4

Source: Authors' research

This study adhered strictly to ethical standards for research involving human participants. Participation was anonymous and voluntary, and respondents were informed about the objectives of the study, the confidentiality of their data, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. All participants provided verbal informed consent prior to the interview. The study involved no physical or psychological risks and no collection of sensitive personal data, thus formal approval from an ethics committee was not required, in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Republic of Serbia and the Declaration of Helsinki (2013).

3.2. Instruments and pilot study

The survey instrument was developed following an extensive review of relevant academic literature and was carefully adapted to the specific socio-cultural and infrastructural context of rural tourism in Serbia. It was structured into four thematic sections: (1) sociodemographic characteristics, (2) vacation behavior (frequency, destination, and duration), (3) types of accommodation most frequently used in rural areas, and (4) key factors influencing accommodation selection. The final section comprised 15 items

designed to measure the importance of various decision-making elements using a five-point Likert scale (1 = not important at all; 5 = extremely important). These items covered a range of attributes including price, location, accommodation facilities, online reviews (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Booking), booking procedures, road infrastructure, internet connectivity, and proximity to recreational services.

To ensure the instrument's clarity, cultural relevance, and technical adequacy, a pilot study was conducted with 30 respondents who matched the target profile of rural tourism consumers. The pilot participants were recruited from different age and education groups to verify general comprehensibility across demographic segments. Respondents were asked to complete the full version of the questionnaire and then provide qualitative feedback on the clarity, terminology, item structure, and overall flow of the instrument.

In parallel, the draft version of the questionnaire was reviewed by an expert panel comprising two university professors specializing in rural tourism and one expert in quantitative research methodology. These professionals assessed the content validity of the instrument, offering targeted feedback on the alignment of the items with theoretical constructs and practical applicability in rural tourism research. Their input led to minor but meaningful revisions in phrasing, the inclusion of more context-specific examples, and the reordering of some items to improve logical flow. Following these adjustments, the final version of the instrument was confirmed to be comprehensible and appropriate for full-scale administration. The average completion time during the pilot phase was approximately 10 to 12 minutes, indicating high feasibility for implementation in face-to-face interviews without respondent fatigue.

1.2. Data processing and statistical analysis

Data entry, cleaning, and analysis were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 27.0 and Jamovi 2.4.8. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies, percentages) were used to describe the sample and key vacation behaviors (Taherdoost, 2016). To test for differences in preferences across demographic groups, independent samples t-tests (for gender) and one-way ANOVA (for age and education level) were employed (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Where applicable, Tukey's HSD post-hoc tests were used to determine the location of significant differences (World Medical Association, 2013). Before performing parametric tests, assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variances were verified using the Shapiro-Wilk and Levene's tests, respectively. All variables met these assumptions. Additionally, effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's d (t-test) and eta-squared η^2 (ANOVA), interpreted as small (0.01), medium (0.06), and large (0.14), where necessary (Taherdoost, 2016).

To evaluate the internal consistency of the instrument, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated for the 15-item scale measuring accommodation decision factors (World Medical Association, 2013). The result of $\alpha = 0.740$ confirmed satisfactory reliability. Internal consistency of subscales grouped by thematic content (e.g., digital accessibility, service

quality, infrastructure) ranged from $\alpha = 0.68$ to $\alpha = 0.79$, supporting their application in further analyses. Construct validity was assessed via Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) using Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation, which confirmed a three-factor structure aligned with conceptual groupings: (1) Functional features, (2) Booking and online presence, and (3) Surrounding infrastructure and entertainment. All factor loadings exceeded 0.60, and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure was 0.823, indicating sampling adequacy. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 893.27$, $p < 0.001$), confirming suitability for factor analysis. Content validity was supported by expert judgment from two professors in rural tourism and one methodological expert, who evaluated item relevance and theoretical alignment (Taherdoost, 2016).

Results

The results indicate that the majority of respondents prefer to diversify their vacation destinations, with more than half (58.4%) spending their holidays both within Serbia and abroad. A smaller segment (21.2%) travels within Serbia and neighboring countries, while a minority of respondents chooses to vacation exclusively either in Serbia (14.4%) or exclusively abroad (6.0%). This suggests that rural tourism in Serbia is predominantly experienced by individuals who also engage in international or regional travel, indicating a mobile and travel-savvy tourist profile. When traveling abroad, most respondents tend to stay for a full week or longer, with 54.0% typically spending 7 to 10 days, and another 27.6% extending their trips to 11 to 14 days. Only a small fraction travels for shorter periods, indicating that international vacations are perceived as more extended and comprehensive experiences. In contrast, vacations within Serbia tend to be significantly shorter in duration. The most common domestic vacation length is 1 to 3 days (38.0%), followed by 4 to 6 days (34.4%), with only 17.2% staying 7 days or more. This pattern reflects a tendency to engage in rural tourism within Serbia through shorter, often weekend-based trips, likely due to factors such as geographic proximity, work obligations, or spontaneous planning. These insights reinforce the role of rural tourism in Serbia as a form of short-term escape rather than a substitute for longer, traditional holidays (Table 2).

Table 2. Where and how much time you spend on vacations

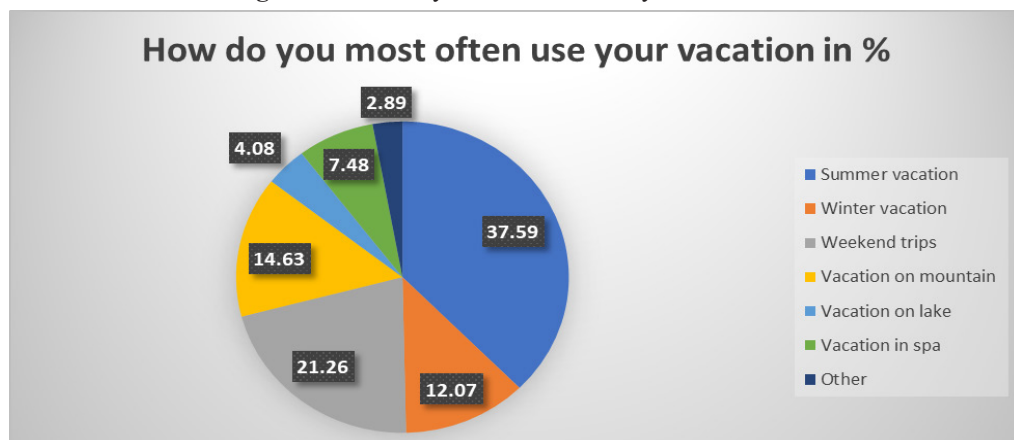
	f	[%]
Where do you usually spend your vacation?		
In Serbia	36	14.4
In Serbia and in surrounding countries	53	21.2
In Serbia and abroad	146	58.4
Exclusively out of Serbia	15	6.0
How long does your vacation usually last when you travel abroad?		
More than 2 weeks	14	5.6
From 11 to 14 days	69	27.6
From 7 to 10 days	135	54.0

	f	[%]
From 4 to 6 days	19	7.6
From 1 to 3 days	13	5.2
How long does your vacation in Serbia usually last?		
7 days and longer	43	17.2
From 4 to 6 days	86	34.4
From 1 to 3 days	95	38.0
One day trip	26	10.4

Source: Authors' research

Figure 1 provides a graphical representation of the dominant patterns in how respondents typically utilize their vacation time, offering insight into the purpose and type of trips they most frequently undertake. The visual data indicate that summer vacations are the most prevalent form of travel among respondents, suggesting that extended leisure trips during the warmer months remain a preferred choice. This is followed by weekend trips, which represent a significant portion of vacation usage, reflecting a trend toward short, frequent escapes likely motivated by proximity, affordability, and time constraints. Other common forms of vacation use depicted in the figure include winter vacations, mountain holidays, spa visits, and lake tourism. These categories point to the popularity of nature-based and health-oriented tourism, especially within domestic or nearby destinations. The inclusion of "other" categories further suggests diversity in travel motivations, potentially encompassing cultural, rural, or family-related travel. Taken together, the figure emphasizes that vacation behavior among respondents is characterized by both seasonal concentration (summer and winter) and purpose-driven segmentation, such as relaxation (spa), adventure (mountain), or convenience (weekend trips). This diversity in vacation usage patterns highlights the importance of offering flexible, tailored rural tourism products that cater to different timeframes, interests, and tourist profiles.

Figure 1. How do you most often use your vacation?

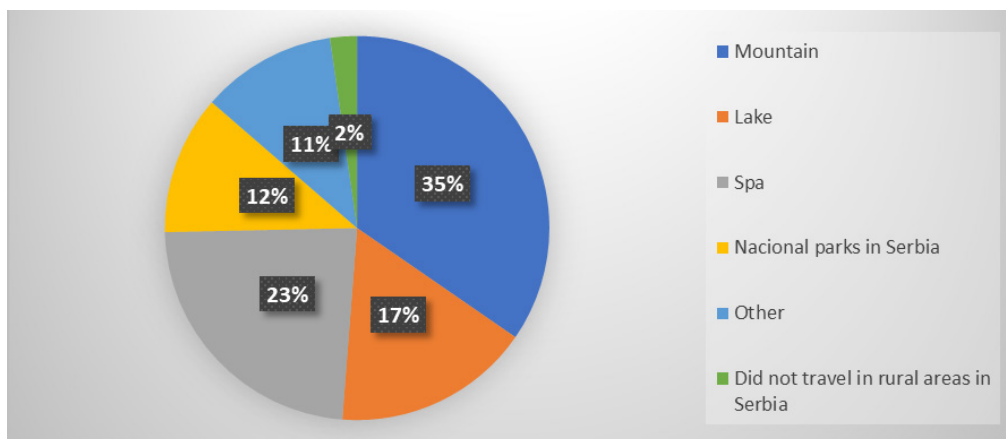


Source: Authors' research

Figure 2 reveals distinct patterns in how tourists engage with rural destinations in Serbia, emphasizing the dominant types of rural environments they prefer when vacationing. The data clearly show that mountain areas are the most visited, with 35% of respondents indicating that their most recent rural vacation took place in a mountainous region. This preference reflects the strong appeal of nature-based tourism, clean air, outdoor recreation, and panoramic landscapes that mountains typically offer, making them a central component of Serbia's rural tourism portfolio. Spa destinations are the second most visited type of rural location, selected by 23% of respondents. This highlights the importance of health and wellness tourism in rural settings, where visitors seek not only rest but also therapeutic and preventive treatments. The popularity of spas points to the multifunctionality of rural tourism, combining leisure with physical well-being. Visits to lakes account for 17%, suggesting that aquatic and recreational amenities also play a significant role in shaping rural travel preferences. Lakes provide opportunities for swimming, fishing, and passive relaxation, especially during warmer months, and are likely visited in short, seasonal stays.

National parks were selected by 12% of participants, indicating interest in protected areas and ecotourism. This reflects a segment of tourists motivated by environmental values, biodiversity, and educational or interpretive experiences related to nature. An additional 11% of respondents categorized their rural vacation as "other," which may include cultural, religious, or agritourism-related visits that fall outside the main geographic typologies. These visits reflect the diversity of motivations for rural travel and suggest opportunities for product diversification. Only 2% of respondents reported that they had not traveled to rural areas, confirming that rural tourism has broad reach and relevance, at least among the surveyed population.

Figure 2. The most common way of using vacation in rural areas



Source: Authors' research

The data presented in Table 3 provide a comprehensive insight into respondents' travel patterns related to rural tourism, focusing on travel destinations, types of rural environments visited, and the categorization and formalization of accommodation used. More than half of the respondents (55.2%) report that they visit rural areas exclusively in Serbia, suggesting that domestic rural tourism remains the dominant form of rural engagement. An additional 24.4% travel to rural areas both in Serbia and neighboring countries, while 18.4% have experience with rural destinations both in Serbia and more distant foreign countries. Only 2.0% of respondents engage in rural tourism exclusively abroad, confirming that Serbia remains the primary rural destination for most domestic tourists. When asked about the last rural destination they visited in Serbia, the majority (45.2%) indicated mountain areas, affirming the continued popularity of mountainous regions as central hubs for rural tourism in Serbia. These areas likely offer appealing landscapes, clean air, outdoor activities, and seasonal tourism infrastructure. Spa towns were the second most visited category (16.4%), reflecting the importance of health and wellness as motives for rural travel. Visits to national parks accounted for 10%, indicating an interest in ecotourism and protected natural areas. Only 9.6% visited lakes, while 18.8% selected "other", likely encompassing cultural villages, rural events, or agritourism farms, demonstrating the diversity of rural tourist experiences. Concerning accommodation formalization, the responses suggest a relatively fragmented and partially informal rural tourism market. Only 29.4% of respondents stayed in categorized accommodation and received a fiscal receipt, indicating a formal, registered service. However, 25.8% stated they stayed in private houses and paid in cash without receiving a receipt, which points to a high share of informality in rural lodging practices. Another 16.5% did not notice the categorization but did receive a receipt, while 4.8% reported both lack of categorization awareness and lack of any receipt, further supporting the presence of semi-legal or informal operations. Interestingly, 4.4% reported staying in private homes booked through platforms like Booking.com, and receiving electronic receipts, which suggests a gradual integration of digital intermediaries in rural accommodation booking, increasing transparency and standardization.

Table 3. Visits of rural areas

	f	[%]
Do you visit rural areas and outside of Serbia?		
No, only in Serbia	138	55.2
In Serbia and in surrounding countries	61	24.4
In Serbia and outside of Serbia	46	18.4
Exclusively abroad	5	2.0
What is the last tourist visit that you had in Serbia?		
Mountains	113	45.2
Lake	24	9.6
Spa	41	16.4
Some of Serbian National parks	25	10.0
Other	47	18.8

	f	[%]
Was the last accommodation you stayed in in a rural area of Serbia categorized?		
Yes, it is categorized and I received a receipt when paying for the accommodation	73	29.4
It is categorized, but we did not receive a receipt for the accommodation	9	3.6
I did not pay attention to whether the accommodation was categorized, but we received a receipt for the paid accommodation	41	16.5
I did not pay attention to whether the accommodation was categorized and I did not receive a receipt when paying for the accommodation	12	4.8
We stayed in a private house where we paid for the accommodation in cash, without receiving a receipt	64	25.8
We stayed in a private house for which we paid for the accommodation, and received a receipt by email (booked/paid through Booking)	11	4.4
Something else	38	15.3

Source: Authors' research

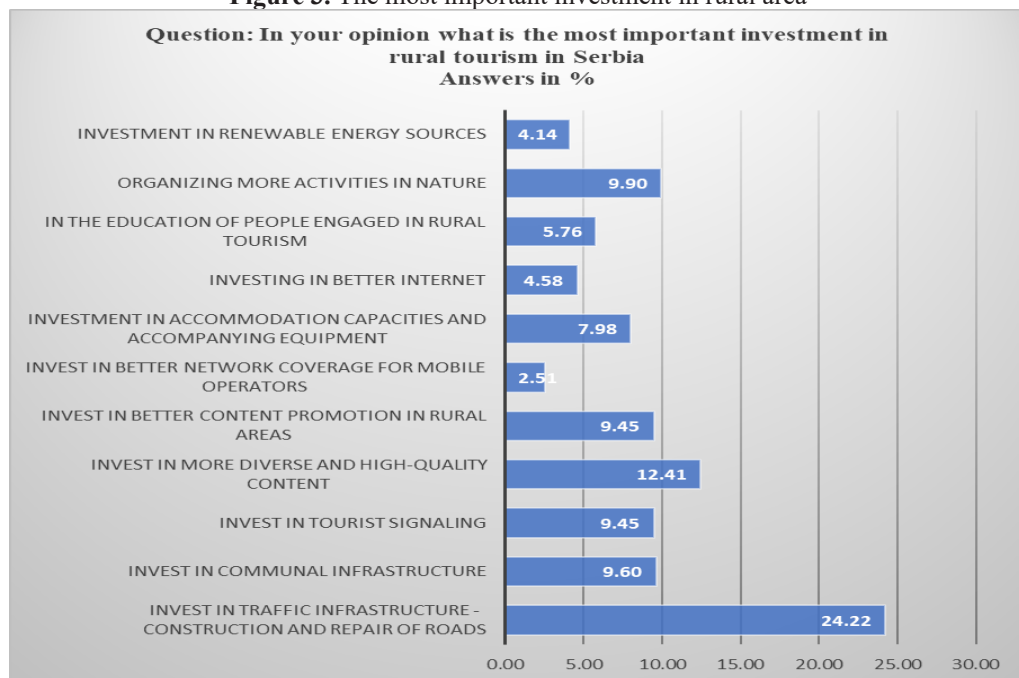
Table 4 provides insight into the preferred types of accommodation among rural tourists in Serbia, revealing important patterns in consumer behavior and structural characteristics of the rural hospitality sector. The most frequently chosen type of accommodation is a room or apartment within a household, selected by 25.52% of respondents. This preference highlights the importance of private, family-run lodging that offers direct interaction with local hosts, home-like comfort, and an authentic rural experience. These forms of accommodation often align with tourists' desire for personalized service and cultural immersion. In second place, hotels are preferred by 18.39% of respondents, indicating that even in rural contexts, a significant portion of visitors values standardized services, higher comfort levels, and professional hospitality infrastructure. Hotels likely attract tourists looking for security, convenience, and predictable quality, especially in more developed rural regions or spa areas. Family houses, selected by 17.70%, represent another major category. These are likely visitors' own weekend homes or properties of relatives, indicating a non-commercial but active form of rural engagement. While such travelers may not contribute directly to the accommodation sector, they often support the rural economy indirectly through local spending. Accommodation in restaurants with lodging accounts for 13.10%, and guest houses for 12.18%, demonstrating the continued relevance of small-scale, locally owned rural tourism enterprises that combine food service and overnight stays. These options typically appeal to visitors seeking local cuisine, intimate atmospheres, and integrated experiences. Less frequently selected are etno villages (5.06%), which offer thematic, heritage-oriented environments, appealing to tourists interested in tradition, authenticity, and cultural tourism. However, their relatively low selection suggests that such niche products still cater to a narrow market or may be under-promoted. The remaining categories, salas-style accommodations (2.07%), bed and breakfast (2.30%), vajats (0.69%), and camping (0.92%), are marginal. Their limited usage could stem from a lack of infrastructure, market visibility, or tourist readiness to accept lower service levels or rustic conditions.

Table 4. What type of accommodation do you most often stay at in a rural area?

What type of accommodation do you most often stay at in a rural area?	Answer in %
Hotel	18.39%
Guest house	12.18%
Restaurant with accommodation	13.10%
Salas	2.07%
Etno village	5.06%
BB (bed and breakfast)	2.30%
Vajat	0.69%
Camp	0.92%
Room/apartment within the household	25.52%
Family house	17.70%
Something else	2.07%
Total	100.00%

Source: Authors' research

Figure 3 illustrates respondents' perceptions of what types of investments are most needed to improve rural tourism in Serbia. The results clearly highlight transport infrastructure as the most urgent priority, selected by 24.22% of participants. This indicates that poor road conditions, limited accessibility, and inadequate transportation networks are perceived as major barriers to the development of rural tourism. Tourists evidently associate ease of access with the attractiveness and feasibility of visiting rural destinations, and improvements in infrastructure are likely to increase visitation rates and enhance overall tourist satisfaction. The second most frequently mentioned investment area is the development of diverse and high-quality tourist content, chosen by 12.41% of respondents. This reflects a growing expectation for experience-rich, well-organized rural offerings that go beyond accommodation, such as outdoor activities, cultural events, gastronomy, and educational programs. Visitors are looking for authentic, engaging experiences that will encourage longer stays and repeat visits. Other investment areas noted in the figure (though specific percentages are not cited here) likely include improvements in digital infrastructure, promotional activities, waste management, and the modernization of accommodation facilities. These components, while perhaps not ranked as the highest priorities, are still essential for building a competitive and sustainable rural tourism offer.

Figure 3. The most important investment in rural area

Source: Authors' research

Based on the results shown in Table 5, it can be concluded that the most important thing for respondents is the location of the accommodation (AS=4.28, SD=0.81) and the equipment of the accommodation (AS=4.28, SD=1.49), while booking via SMS message is the least important thing for them (AS=2.38, SD=1.17).

Table 5. What does mostly influence your choice of accommodation in rural area?

	Min	Max	AS	SD
Accommodation price	1	5	3.86	0.99
Friend recommendation	1	5	4.00	0.96
Pictures and comments on FB	1	5	2.97	1.23
Pictures and comments on IG	1	5	2.90	1.23
Pictures and comments on Booking	1	5	3.23	1.22
Pictures and comments on another online platform	1	5	2.80	1.22
Location of accommodation	1	5	4.28	0.81
Accommodation equipment	1	5	4.28	1.49
Mobile network coverage	1	5	3.71	1.20
Internet signal	1	5	3.76	1.13
Additional entertainment facilities near the accommodation - cafe, restaurant, children's playroom	1	5	3.24	1.32
Additional sports facilities at the accommodation location or in the immediate vicinity of the accommodation	1	5	3.02	1.35

	Min	Max	AS	SD
Quick booking via Booking or another platform and/or other network	1	5	2.95	1.34
Booking via SMS message	1	5	2.38	1.17
Booking without the need to pay by credit card in advance	1	5	3.16	1.27
Good road infrastructure	1	5	3.78	1.12

Source: Authors' research

The reliability of the rural vacation area selection scale was determined based on the Cronbach alpha coefficient. Based on the Cronbach alpha coefficient value, it can be concluded that the correlation is satisfactory ($\alpha=0.740$). To ensure and improve the quality of services in rural tourism, their standardization is important, and some of the criteria for standardizing accommodation capacities are classified into the following clusters: equipment, environment, intangible aspects, such as attention, privacy or ambiance, and safety and security (Vidić, 2018; 30). Investment in accommodation in rural area that will be part of tourist offer, should take in to consideration the above-mentioned clusters, since it will be easier to find both investment and customers. Rural tourism/agritourism is actually bringing benefits, including the preservation of the natural environment, protection of cultural heritage and traditions and support for agritourism farms (Vukolić, et al., 2024). With adequate investment in accommodation all aspects of rural life and economy could benefit.

The research examined whether there is a significant difference in the factors for choosing a rural vacation area in Serbia in relation to the gender, age and educational level of the respondents. To examine the differences in relation to gender, the independent samples t test was used, while to examine the differences in relation to the age and educational level of the respondents, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used.

Based on the t test results shown in Table 6, it can be concluded that there is no significant difference in the factors for choosing a rural place in Serbia in relation to the gender of the respondents.

Table 6. Differences in factors for choosing a rural area for vacation in Serbia according to the gender of the respondents

	Mean Value	t	p
Male (N=116)	3.36 ± 0.61	-1.724	0.086
Female (N=133)	3.50 ± 0.60		

*Statistical significance at the 0.05 level

Based on the results of the ANOVA test shown in Table 7, it can be concluded that there is no significant difference in the factors for choosing a rural place in Serbia in relation to the age of the respondents.

Table 7. Differences in the factors for choosing a rural area for vacation in Serbia in relation to the age of the respondents

	Mean value	F	p
18-25 (N=86)	3.44 ± 0.66	0.702	0.591
26-30 (N=56)	3.52 ± 0.61		
31-40 (N=55)	3.42 ± 0.60		
41-50 (N=31)	3.41 ± 0.52		
51-59 (N=21)	3.26 ± 0.46		

*Statistical significance at the 0.05 level

Based on the results of the ANOVA test shown in Table 8, it can be concluded that there is no significant difference in the factors for choosing a rural place in Serbia in relation to the respondents' educational background.

Table 8. Differences in the factors for choosing a rural area for vacation in Serbia in relation to the respondents' educational background

	Mean Value	F	p
High school (N=99)	3.42 ± 0.67	0.496	0.685
College (N=36)	3.36 ± 0.55		
University (N=91)	3.49 ± 0.53		
Master or higher education	3.40 ± 0.70		

*Statistical significance at the 0.05 level

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine tourists' preferences for types of accommodation in rural areas of Serbia, to identify the most important factors influencing their choice, and to assess whether these factors differ by gender, age, or education level. The findings provide important insights into both the structure of rural accommodation demand and broader patterns of rural tourism behavior.

Regarding the first research question, what types of accommodation are most commonly used by visitors to rural areas, the data reveal that rooms or apartments within a household (25.52%) and hotels (18.39%) are the most popular options, followed by stays in family houses (17.70%). This structure reflects a duality of demand: one group of tourists is oriented toward personalized, host-centered, and culturally immersive experiences, while another seeks comfort and predictability offered by hotels, even in rural settings. These findings are in line with those of Pina and Delfa (2005), who emphasize the continued relevance of both private and categorized accommodation in rural tourism contexts. The relatively low use of camps, "vajats", and ethno villages suggests that although alternative forms of lodging exist, they remain underutilized, possibly due to limited infrastructure or lack of promotional visibility, similar to what Wojciechowska-Solis et al. (2022) observed in the Lublin region.

In relation to the second research question, what factors influence accommodation choice, the results show that location and equipment of the accommodation ($AS = 4.28$) are considered most important, followed by friend recommendations and good road infrastructure. Digital influences such as photos and comments on social media (Instagram, Facebook) scored notably lower, which contrasts with findings by Ye et al. (2019), who emphasized the growing impact of digital presence on consumer decisions in rural areas of East Asia. In the Serbian context, however, word-of-mouth and physical accessibility appear to be far more influential. These results also highlight the practical expectations of tourists: they seek functionality, cleanliness, comfort, and easy access, rather than solely aesthetic appeal or online ratings.

As for the third research question, whether demographic factors influence preferences, the results indicate no statistically significant differences in accommodation choice based on gender, age, or education level. This finding suggests a relatively homogenous perception of rural tourism across demographic groups, which may reflect a shared understanding of rural vacationing as short-term, restful, and pragmatic. This outcome is somewhat surprising in light of previous research by Choo et al. (2017), which demonstrated clear generational and gender-based differences in accommodation expectations in South Korea. One possible explanation lies in the specificity of the Serbian context, where the rural tourism market is still emerging and shaped more by availability than segmentation.

The broader implications of these findings suggest that rural tourism in Serbia continues to function within a semi-formal structure, as evidenced by the large proportion of respondents (25.8%) who paid in cash without receiving receipts. Only 29.4% used categorized accommodation and received fiscal proof of payment. This echoes the findings of Pulido-Fernández et al. (2024), who also identified regulatory and formalization challenges in rural hospitality sectors in Southern Europe. The Serbian case reinforces the importance of improving transparency, regulation, and support for formalization in order to foster both trust among tourists and economic sustainability for rural communities.

In terms of investment priorities, respondents most frequently highlighted transport infrastructure (24.22%), followed by the need for diverse and high-quality tourist content (12.41%). This confirms McDaniels et al. (2017), who emphasized accessibility as a fundamental barrier to rural tourism inclusion, particularly in marginalized regions. Without improved infrastructure, even the most authentic or well-equipped accommodations remain underutilized due to logistical limitations.

Finally, the observed preference for mountain areas (35%) and spa destinations (23%) points to a concentration of rural tourism demand in natural and wellness-related environments. This reinforces previous studies (e.g., Vidić, 2018; Gajić & Cvijanović, 2022) that highlight the potential of these segments to lead rural tourism development. However, the low frequency of visits to national parks and alternative forms (such as lakes or cultural villages) suggests thematic underdevelopment and a need to diversify rural tourism products.

This study confirms that accommodation plays a central experiential and economic role in rural tourism. While preferences are clear and relatively unified, challenges related to infrastructure, service formalization, and product diversification remain key constraints. Addressing these gaps through targeted investments, support for small-scale accommodation providers, and clearer regulation could significantly enhance the sustainability and competitiveness of rural tourism in Serbia.

Conclusions

This study examined accommodation preferences and decision-making factors among tourists visiting rural areas in Serbia, with the aim of identifying dominant behavior patterns and informing future development of rural tourism. The findings highlight that the most frequently used types of rural accommodation are rooms or apartments within households and hotels, suggesting a dual trend: a search for authenticity and personal contact with hosts on one hand, and a demand for comfort and standardized services on the other. Respondents emphasized the importance of accommodation location, equipment, and road infrastructure, while digital reviews and social media presence were less influential. No significant differences in preferences were found based on gender, age, or education, indicating a relatively uniform perception of rural vacationing across demographic groups.

6.1. Theoretical implications

The study contributes to the body of literature on rural tourism and consumer behavior by empirically confirming that accommodation preferences are shaped by a mix of functional and experiential factors. It supports earlier claims (Choo et al., 2017; Pulido-Fernández et al., 2024) that accommodation is not merely a logistical necessity, but a core component of the tourist experience. However, the absence of significant demographic differences contrasts with other international studies, suggesting that in developing tourism markets such as Serbia, supply constraints may override segmentation-driven behavior. Additionally, the findings reinforce the theoretical proposition that the structure and formality of rural tourism supply are critical for shaping guest satisfaction and destination sustainability (Ye et al., 2019; Wojciechowska-Solis et al., 2022).

6.2. Practical implications

From a practical standpoint, the study underscores the urgent need for investment in transport infrastructure, which was identified by respondents as the primary barrier to rural tourism growth. Improvements in road quality, signage, and public transport access could directly enhance visitor mobility and experience. Furthermore, the dominance of informal accommodation use (with a high share of cash payments and missing receipts) highlights the need for stronger regulatory mechanisms, fiscal incentives, and support for small-scale providers to enter the formal market. Local tourism organizations should prioritize the development of diversified and experience-based tourism content, particularly around mountains, spas, and agritourism, to encourage longer stays and repeat visitation.

6.3. Limitations and directions for Future research

Despite its contributions, the study is not without limitations. First, the sample size ($N = 250$) and purposive sampling method, while adequate for exploratory analysis, limit the generalizability of the findings. The research was geographically restricted to Serbia and did not control for regional variation within the country, which may mask local nuances. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to recall bias and social desirability effects. Finally, while the study analyzed behavioral and attitudinal variables, it did not incorporate longitudinal tracking or observational methods to validate stated preferences against actual tourist behavior.

Future research should consider expanding the geographic and demographic scope of the study, including a larger and more representative sample from different regions of Serbia and neighboring countries. Comparative studies between rural tourists and urban tourists, as well as between local and foreign visitors, could offer deeper insights into cross-cultural expectations. Moreover, incorporating qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews or ethnographic observations, would enrich understanding of tourist motivations, emotional connections to rural spaces, and the symbolic value of different types of accommodation. Finally, future work should explore the role of digital transformation, sustainability certifications, and community involvement in shaping rural accommodation strategies, especially in the post-COVID context.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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