INNOVATIVE HOSPITALITY MODEL AS A CATALYST FOR SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Miroslav Knežević[1], Aleksandra Vujko[2], Drago Cvijanović[3]

**Corresponding author E-mail: avujko@singidunum.ac.rs*

ARTICLE INFO

Original Article

Received: *15 April 2025*

Accepted: *15 June 2025*

doi:10.59267/ekoPolj2503905K

UDC 338.486.3:332.146.2

Keywords:

hospitality, sustainability, rural destination, agritourism, South Tyrol

***JEL**: L83, Z32*

ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of innovative hospitality models in fostering sustainable rural development through cultural integration and community engagement. Conducted in Terlan (Terlano), South Tyrol, Italy, the research surveyed 403 tourists to examine motivations related to sustainability, cultural curiosity, and authentic experiences. Using a five-point Likert scale, three motivational factors were identified: Sustainable Escape, Rural Immersion, and Authentic Stay. Results indicate that visitors increasingly value eco-friendly practices, local gastronomy, agritourism, and culturally rooted accommodations. These findings highlight how authentic, community-centered experiences not only support local economies but also nurture entrepreneurship and environmental stewardship. The Terlan model demonstrates a practical pathway for rural destinations, such as Fruška Gora, to enhance competitiveness by integrating sustainability with cultural authenticity, thereby offering high-quality rural tourism experiences aligned with contemporary tourist expectations.

Introduction

The travel industry is undergoing a transformation as sustainability and environmental values increasingly influence tourist destination choices (Vicente, 2024). According to Arsić et a., (2025) Modern travelers prioritize eco-friendly practices and immersive nature-based experiences, viewing sustainability as an investment rather than an expense (Zhou et al., 2025). This shift highlights the importance of clear communication

1 Miroslav Knežević, Ph.D. Associate Professor, Singidunum University, Faculty of Tourism and Hotel Management, Danijelova street no. 32, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia, E-mail: mknezevic@singimail.rs, ORCID ID (https://orcid.org//0000-0002-5586-7213)

2 Aleksandra Vujko, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Singidunum University, Faculty of Tourism and Hotel Management, Danijelova street no. 32, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia, Phone: +381 64 138 55 66, E-mail: aleksandravujko@yahoo.com; ORCID ID (https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8684-4228)

3 Drago Cvijanović, Full Professor, University of Kragujevac, Faculty of Hotel Management anf Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja, Vojvođanska Street no. 5a, 36210 Vrnjačka Banja, Serbia; E-mail: dvcmmv@gmail.com, ORCID ID (https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4037-327X)

about the benefits of sustainable tourism, which enhances overall tourist experiences while considering economic, social, and environmental impacts (Bojović et al., 2024). According to Cammarota et al., (2025), the demand for authentic culinary experiences in rural destinations, driven by food-motivated tourists, underscores the role of local gastronomy and agritourism in enriching travel experiences and supporting rural economies (Moliterni et al., 2025). To meet evolving tourist expectations, accommodation providers must focus on quality service, cultural integration, and diverse offerings that reflect the unique heritage of their destinations (Balderas-Cejudo et al., 2025).

The innovative hospitality model can be defined as a multifaceted approach to hospitality that integrates local culture, environmental stewardship, and community engagement into its operations, aiming to provide unique experiences that highlight the distinctiveness of rural settings (Asghar et al., 2023). Unlike traditional hospitality models, which often prioritize standardized services and profit maximization, the innovative model seeks to create a symbiotic relationship between tourism and local communities (Vujko et al., (2024b). It places a strong emphasis on authenticity, encouraging visitors to engage with local traditions, cuisine, and crafts, thereby enriching their travel experience while simultaneously benefiting the host community (Pantović et al., 2023; Paspalj et al., 2024; Chaisriya et al., 2024). According to Turčinović et al., (2025), initiatives like community-based tourism (CBT) in countries such as Italy showcase how local residents can offer accommodations, guided tours, and cultural experiences that reflect their heritage, thus enhancing the visitor's experience while ensuring economic benefits for the community. According to Candeloro & Tartari (2025) innovative practices such as eco-lodges and farm stays exemplify the integration of sustainable practices within hospitality, where environmental conservation efforts are woven into the very fabric of the visitor's stay. These models not only attract environmentally conscious travelers but also promote a sense of ownership among local populations, who become stewards of their cultural and natural resources.

The implementation of the innovative hospitality model has profound implications for sustainable rural development. One of the most significant impacts is the economic benefit it brings to local communities. By attracting tourists who are interested in unique, authentic experiences, rural areas can unlock new revenue streams that were previously inaccessible. According to (Randelli & Martellozzo, 2019) regions in Italy that focus on agritourism allow visitors to participate in grape harvesting and traditional winemaking, effectively turning local agricultural practices into profitable ventures (Nesto & Di Savino, 2016). This not only enhances the livelihoods of farmers but also stimulates local economies by creating demand for related services and goods. According to Grillini et al., (2025), the innovative hospitality model is instrumental in job creation, providing employment opportunities in various sectors such as hospitality management, tour guiding, and artisan crafts. A case study in rural Ghana demonstrates how the establishment of eco-lodges led to the creation of over 200 jobs, empowering local youth and women, in particular, to gain financial independence (Adom, 2019).

The model supports local businesses and artisans by encouraging tourists to purchase handmade crafts and local produce, thus fostering a circular economy where profits remain within the community (Jog et al., 2024). This collaborative approach not only strengthens the economic base of rural areas but also cultivates a culture of entrepreneurship, as community members are incentivized to innovate and develop new business ideas that align with tourism trends (Islam & Sadhukhan, 2025).

The innovative hospitality model in agritourism combines agriculture with tourism, offering visitors immersive experiences that enhance their understanding of food production while supporting local farming practices (Galluzzo, 2022). Key elements of this model include farm-to-table dining, educational tours, and sustainable practices, which not only enrich the visitor experience but also promote environmental stewardship (Canovi, 2019). Agritourism provides significant economic benefits to farmers by creating new revenue streams and job opportunities, while fostering community engagement and cultural preservation (Grilli et al., 2024). Successful case studies, such Tuscany, highlight the potential of agritourism to invigorate local economies and emphasize the importance of branding, marketing, and collaboration in developing compelling tourist attractions (Abraben et al., 2017; Turčinović et al., 2025).

The research is grounded in the hypothesis that rural tourists are motivated by a combination of environmental values, cultural curiosity, and a desire for authentic experiences, which collectively influence their destination choices and travel behavior. By identifying and understanding these motivational dimensions, the study aims to explore how the positive experiences and innovative hospitality models developed in Italy—particularly in regions such as South Tyrol—can serve as a catalyst for fostering sustainable rural tourism development in Fruška Gora. The ultimate objective is to inform the design of an innovative, culturally rooted, and sustainability-driven hospitality model that can enhance rural attractiveness, support local economies, and promote long-term regional development in Serbia.

Highlighting agritourism as an innovative hospitality model, the authors wanted, through the example of best practice in Terlan (Terlano), South Tyrol (Alto Adige), Italy, to show the key motives that attract tourists to rural destinations and transform them into tourist regions that annually attract millions of visitors. The research conducted in Terlan (Terlano), South Tyrol, Italy, involved 403 tourists and aimed to explore their motivations for visiting rural destinations. Three key factors influencing tourist motivations were identified: Sustainable Escape, Rural Immersion, and Authentic Stay, each characterized by specific variables related to eco-friendliness, cultural engagement, and genuine experiences. The research employed a positivist approach, utilizing quantitative data collection and structural equation modeling to analyze the relationships between these motivational constructs, ultimately aiming to provide insights into tourist behavior in rural settings. Applying this methodology locally can provide evidence-based insights into the preferences and expectations of visitors, thereby guiding the design of tailored agritourism experiences. For a region like Fruška Gora, this means there is strong potential to transform its rural and wine-

growing landscape into a competitive, sustainable tourism destination by adopting similar approaches as those seen in Terlan (South Tyrol). The identification of key motivational factors—Sustainable Escape, Rural Immersion, and Authentic Stay—offers a framework for understanding what drives tourists toward rural destinations. By applying this research model locally, Fruška Gora can gain data-driven insights into what its visitors truly value—be it eco-friendly practices, local food and wine, or authentic rural lifestyles. This knowledge can then inform the development of targeted agritourism offers, enhance the visitor experience, and guide investment into green infrastructure, cultural programming, and community-based tourism.

Literature review

The innovative hospitality model in agritourism is characterized by a multifaceted approach that enhances the visitor experience while simultaneously supporting agricultural practices (Wang et al., 2021). Agritourism can be defined as any activity that combines agriculture with tourism, enabling guests to experience farm life, partake in agricultural activities, and enjoy locally sourced products (Ndhlovu & Dube, 2024). The interplay between local gastronomy and agritourism significantly enhances rural immersion experiences for tourists, driven by a variety of motivations and preferences (Alcívar-Vera et al., 2025). Tourists are increasingly seeking authentic culinary experiences that allow them to engage with local cultures, making gastronomic tourism a powerful tool for rural development and marketing (Arsić et al., 2025). The consumption of local food and beverages, which is central to agritourism, becomes an integral part of the tourist experience, allowing individuals to immerse themselves in the rural way of life while enjoying farm-fresh produce (Ohorodnyk & Finger, 2024). Such interactions not only provide educational opportunities but also facilitate escapism and cultural immersion, further enhancing the likelihood of repeat visits to these rural destinations (Zhou et al., 2023; Paraušić et al., 2025). By prioritizing local gastronomy, agritourism creates a vibrant link between visitors and their destinations, enriching both the tourist experience and the livelihoods of rural residents (Rachão et al., 2021; Pantović et al., 2025).

This model is significant for the hospitality industry as it caters to the growing demand for authentic, immersive experiences that foster a deeper understanding of food production (Vujko et al., 2024a). Key components of this model include farm-to-table experiences, educational tours, and sustainable practices. Farm-to-table initiatives allow visitors to savor meals prepared from fresh, locally sourced ingredients, often harvested from the very farms they are visiting (Moliterni et al., 2025). Educational tours, on the other hand, provide insights into farming techniques, the life cycle of crops, and the importance of biodiversity, enriching the guests' appreciation for agricultural endeavors. Acccording to Vujko et al., (2024), sustainable practices, such as organic farming and eco-friendly operations, not only enhance the attractiveness of agritourism but also promote environmental stewardship. According to Fusté-Forné & Filimon (2025) technology plays an increasingly pivotal role in this innovative model,

enhancing guest experiences through online booking systems, interactive apps that provide information about the farm and its products, and virtual tours that expand access to those who cannot visit in person. By integrating these components, the innovative hospitality model in agritourism creates a unique and enriching experience that benefits both visitors and the agricultural community (Chan, 2025).

The implementation of the innovative hospitality model in agritourism yields significant benefits for farmers and local communities (Damnet et al., 2024). Economically, agritourism creates new revenue streams for farmers, allowing them to diversify their income beyond traditional crop sales (Panić et al., 2024). This diversification is especially crucial in times of market fluctuation or poor harvests, providing farmers with a stable financial foundation. According to Tew & Barbieri (2012) job creation is another primary advantage; agritourism ventures often require a workforce to manage tours, hospitality services, and farm operations, thus generating employment opportunities in rural areas that may otherwise face economic decline. Socially, agritourism fosters community engagement by encouraging collaboration between farmers, local artisans, and tourism operators. This interaction can lead to cultural preservation, as local traditions, crafts, and culinary practices are showcased and celebrated through agritourism experiences. According to Gütte et al. (2025), the model promotes environmental sustainability by advocating for eco-friendly practices such as organic farming, water conservation, and habitat preservation. Many agritourism operations are committed to educating their visitors about the environmental impacts of agriculture, inspiring them to adopt sustainable practices in their own lives (Lupi et al., 2017). This interplay between economic viability, social responsibility, and environmental sustainability illustrates how the innovative hospitality model not only supports farmers but also enriches local communities and the ecosystems in which they reside (Josimović et al., 2024; Klopfenstein, 2025).

Several case studies exemplify the success of innovative hospitality models in agritourism, demonstrating their potential to invigorate local economies while providing unique visitor experiences. One notable example is the Provence region in France, which has transformed itself into a world-renowned agritourism destination through its emphasis on wine production, farm-to-table dining experiences, and vineyard tours (Bainville et al., 2025). Local wineries have embraced the agritourism model by offering tastings, educational workshops, and culinary events that showcase local produce, effectively attracting tourists and stimulating economic growth (Mekbel et al., 2025). This region's success can be compared to other agritourism ventures, such as those in Tuscany, Italy, where agriturismos (farm stays) provide visitors with immersive experiences in Italian rural life (Domi & Belletti, 2022). Both regions illustrate how agritourism can leverage local resources, culture, and cuisine to create compelling tourist attractions that benefit the economy. Lessons learned from these successful implementations include the importance of branding, marketing, and community collaboration, which can be applied to other regions seeking to develop their agritourism offerings. By fostering a

sense of place and authenticity, agritourism ventures can attract not only tourists but also foster a stronger sen.odations fosters a sense of ownership and connection to the experience, making their stay more meaningful. Collecting feedback through surveys allows managers to gather valuable insights into tourists' experiences, enabling them to identify strengths and areas for improvement that can inform future decisions (Dedeoğlu, 2019). By embracing these strategies, accommodation providers can better meet the evolving expectations of tourists seeking authenticity in their travel experiences.

The research methodology

The research was conducted among tourists in Terlan (Terlano), South Tyrol (Alto Adige), Italy, with a total of 403 participants involved. Although specific statistics regarding annual tourist arrivals for Terlan (Terlano) are not accessible to the public, we can deduce its tourism activity from regional data. The local tourism office reports that South Tyrol overall experiences more than 8.4 million tourist arrivals each year. Considering that Terlan is a prominent wine village situated along the South Tyrolean Wine Road, it is reasonable to conclude that a substantial number of these visitors are drawn to the area. According to Ahmed (2024), a suitable sample size for a population of around 8,000,000 tourists, maintaining a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%, would require 389 respondents. Consequently, the sample drawn from Terlan that participated in the study is both credible and reliable.

The tourist demographic in Terlan, based on the data provided, reveals the following characteristics: Among the tourists surveyed, there is a higher proportion of female visitors, with 59.3% of the total being female (239 out of 403). Male tourists make up 40.7% (164 out of 403), showing a noticeable but not overwhelming gender imbalance in favor of women. The age distribution of tourists indicates that the largest group is between the ages of 35 and 44, comprising 48.4% (195 out of 403) of visitors. Following this group are tourists aged 45-54, who make up 28.8% (116 out of 403). Younger tourists aged 18-24 are in the minority, representing only 1.5% (6 out of 403), while those aged 25-34 account for 5.5% (22 out of 403). Older visitors, aged 55-64, make up 6.9% (28 out of 403), and tourists aged over 65 account for 8.9% (36 out of 403). Overall, Terlan seems to attract a significant number of tourists in the 35-54 age range, with a notable portion of older visitors as well. The educational background of tourists in Terlan shows a well-educated group. The largest portion of tourists (46.4%, or 187 out of 403) have completed high school. A significant number, 39.7% (160 out of 403), have attended college or university, while 10.9% (44 out of 403) have earned a master's degree or Ph.D. Only a small portion, 3.0% (12 out of 403), have completed only elementary school. This suggests that Terlan attracts a predominantly well-educated crowd, with most visitors having at least a high school education. According to this Terlan appeals to a diverse group of tourists, with a higher number of female visitors, the largest age group being 35-44, and a well-educated demographic. This reflects the region's appeal to a mature, educated, and predominantly female audience, likely drawn to its wine tourism and rural charm.

The research started from the starting hypothesis of the paper H that Rural tourists are motivated by a combination of environmental values, cultural curiosity, and a desire for authentic experiences, which collectively influence their destination choices and travel behavior. In order to verify the starting hypothesis, it was necessary to establish three additional ones:

H1: Tourists who are motivated by sustainability and environmental values are more likely to choose destinations that emphasize eco-friendly practices and nature-based experiences.

H2: Tourists with a high interest in rural immersion are significantly influenced by opportunities to engage in local gastronomy and agritourism activities.

H3: Tourists who prioritize authentic stay experiences are more likely to seek non-commercialized, culturally rooted accommodations in rural settings.

From March 2024 to March 2025, the authors of this paper made several visits to the Terlan (Terlano), South Tyrol (Alto Adige), Italy to collect the requisite data. A questionnaire comprising 25 questions was developed, necessitating responses on a five-point Likert scale. The analysis of the gathered data revealed three distinct factors: Sustainable Escape (variables suggest that travelers motivated by Sustainable Escape are guided by pro-environmental values and are inclined to support destinations that demonstrate ecological responsibility and offer opportunities for interaction with nature), Rural Immersion (demonstrates that tourists motivated by Rural Immersion are not merely passive observers, but actively seek involvement in rural life. Their travel motivations are rooted in cultural curiosity and the desire for authentic rural engagement), and Authentic Stay (tourists associated with this factor are typically seeking immersive, community-based tourism experiences that foster cultural understanding and support local ways of life).

Factor 1: Sustainable Escape represents a dimension of tourist motivation centered on environmental consciousness and the pursuit of eco-friendly travel experiences. This factor captures the psychological orientation of travelers who prioritize sustainability in their decision-making processes. It is operationalized through the following observed variables:

- **Sustainable Appeal**: Refers to the extent to which the destination's reputation for sustainability and eco-friendliness influences travel planning. This item suggests that environmentally responsible image plays a significant role in attracting sustainability-oriented tourists.
- **Nature Bond**: Reflects a personal desire to establish a meaningful connection with nature. Tourists endorsing this item seek destinations that offer natural environments, valuing opportunities for ecological immersion and restoration.
- **Sustainable Preference**: Denotes a general preference for destinations that engage in and promote sustainable tourism practices. It indicates an internalized value system in which sustainability principles guide destination choices.

Factor 2: Rural Immersion captures tourists' interest in engaging with rural culture, traditions, and lifestyles, particularly through gastronomic and agricultural experiences. This factor is characterized by an appreciation for sensory, cultural, and participatory elements of rural tourism. It includes the following indicators:

- **Culinary Motivation**: Highlights the importance of local gastronomy—such as regional food and wine—as a key motivator for travel. It implies that culinary experiences serve as a cultural entry point and play a decisive role in destination selection.
- **Farm Curiosity**: Reflects an interest in agritourism activities, including direct participation in farm life. This suggests a desire for hands-on, experiential learning and interaction with local agricultural practices.

Factor 3: Authentic Stay represents a motivational construct focused on the pursuit of genuine, non-commercialized tourism experiences. It emphasizes a preference for staying in environments that preserve traditional lifestyles and local character. The factor is defined by:

- **Authentic Travel**: Captures the intentional search for destinations offering authentic and culturally intact experiences. It reflects tourists' rejection of mass tourism and preference for destinations where culture is experienced in its original context.
- **Rural Stay**: Refers to the motivation to stay in local farm accommodations or rural settings. This variable suggests a preference for lodging options that allow tourists to live in close proximity to host communities and engage with rural routines.

This study adopts a positivist epistemological approach, which is grounded in the belief that reality is objective, observable, and measurable through empirical methods. Positivism assumes that knowledge can be obtained through systematic observation and quantifiable data, allowing researchers to identify patterns, test hypotheses, and establish causal relationships between variables. In line with this approach, the study examines tourist motivations through quantitative data collection and analysis, employing structural equation modeling (SEM) to assess the relationships between latent constructs such as Sustainable Escape, Rural Immersion, and Authentic Stay. These constructs are operationalized using measurable indicators derived from survey responses, reflecting the positivist emphasis on objective measurement and statistical analysis. Furthermore, the use of SEM reflects a commitment to hypothesis testing and explanatory modeling, aiming to uncover the underlying structure of tourist behavior in a replicable and generalizable manner. The researcher maintains a value-neutral stance, allowing the data to speak for itself through rigorous empirical testing, consistent with positivist principles.

Key Insights on South Tyrol (Alto Adige) Region and Fruška Gora (Vojvodina)

South Tyrol, located in the northeastern part of Italy between the Alps and the Dolomites, and Fruška Gora, a picturesque mountain range in northern Serbia along the Danube River, represent two rural regions with notable potential for sustainable tourism and agritourism development. While both regions share a rich agricultural heritage, scenic landscapes, and a growing interest in sustainable tourism, their stages of development, institutional support, and integration of agriculture and tourism differ significantly. South Tyrol is internationally recognized for its advanced integration of agriculture and tourism, facilitated through well-established models such as the Roter Hahn certification system, which regulates and promotes over 1,600 certified farm stays (Grillini et al., 2025). These accommodations offer tourists immersive experiences in farming life, access to local organic products, and high-quality, authentic rural hospitality. The region has implemented a comprehensive approach to sustainability, which includes widespread use of organic farming methods, eco-certifications, and climate-neutral accommodations (Grillini et al., 2023). Sustainable mobility is actively promoted through public transportation cards, e-bikes, and cable cars. South Tyrol's tourism model is further supported by strong institutional frameworks, including the South Tyrolean Farmers' Association and regional government programs that provide financial incentives for farm diversification. This coordinated approach has enabled balanced regional development, reduced urban overcrowding, and fostered long-term economic sustainability.

In contrast, Fruška Gora remains in the early stages of developing its agritourism potential. The region is known for its fertile hills, vineyards, orchards, and cultural heritage, including a network of historic Orthodox monasteries and the Fruška Gora National Park, which covers approximately 25,000 hectares (Vujko et al., 2024a). Fruška Gora has a long-standing tradition of wine production, particularly of native grape varieties such as Vranac and Prokupac, which forms a strong foundation for wine tourism. However, while the region offers opportunities for nature-based and cultural tourism, agritourism initiatives remain largely fragmented and lack the institutional and certification structures present in South Tyrol. There is increasing recognition of the need for sustainable tourism development, with growing interest in organic farming, traditional hospitality, and rural lifestyle tourism. The proximity to major urban centers such as Novi Sad and Belgrade enhances accessibility and potential market reach, yet coordinated policy measures and branding strategies are still needed to fully capitalize on this potential.

Table 1. South Tyrol (Italy) and Fruška Gora (Serbia)

Criteria	South Tyrol (Italy)	Fruška Gora (Serbia)
Landscape	Mountainous, vineyards, alpine pastures	Gentle hills, vineyards, forests
Tourism Type	Agritourism, wine tourism, wellness, farm stays	Wine tourism, rural tourism, monasteries, nature-based experiences

Criteria	South Tyrol (Italy)	Fruška Gora (Serbia)
Agriculture	Small family farms, organic production, apple orchards, viticulture	Family farms, vineyards, fruit production (e.g., plums, apples), honey
Cultural Identity	Multilingual (German/Italian/Ladin), Alpine traditions	Multicultural heritage (Serb, Slovak, Hungarian), Orthodox monasteries
Hospitality Models	Certified agritourism under *Roter Hahn*, strong regional branding	Emerging rural accommodations, unbranded but growing initiatives
Protected Areas	Natural parks (e.g., Dolomites UNESCO site)	Fruška Gora National Park
Sustainability Focus	Well-developed eco-labeling, policy support	Growing interest in sustainability, but limited institutional support

According to Table 1 South Tyrol serves as a benchmark region for sustainable rural tourism, combining high-quality agricultural production, environmental stewardship, and well-structured tourism practices. Its success is largely due to its cohesive regional planning, institutional support, and effective promotion of authenticity and sustainability. Fruška Gora, while rich in natural and cultural assets, remains at an earlier phase of development. However, with targeted investment, strategic planning, and support for local producers and tourism entrepreneurs, it holds significant promise to evolve into a leading destination for sustainable agritourism in the Balkans.

Result and Discussion

The factor analysis (see Table 2) resulted in a model that groups the variables into three distinct factors, collectively explaining 86.524% of the total variance. As shown in Table 1, each of the three factors has an eigenvalue greater than 1, confirming the adequacy and sufficiency of the extracted factors based on the Kaiser criterion.

Table 2. Total Variance Explained

Factor	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	3,224	40,298	40,298	3,033	37,912	37,912	2,981	37,261	37,261
2	2,120	26,494	66,792	1,884	23,548	61,459	1,893	23,664	60,925
3	1,579	19,732	86,524	1,599	19,986	81,446	1,642	20,520	81,446
4	,646	8,075	94,599						
5	,187	2,338	96,937						
6	,135	1,685	98,622						
7	,066	,829	99,451						
8	,044	,549	100,000						

Source: Autor's research

The factor matrix (Table 3) provides insight into the relationships between the observed variables (items) and the three latent constructs: Sustainable Escape, Rural Immersion, and Authentic Stay. Each value in the matrix represents the factor loading, which indicates how strongly each item is associated with one of the factors. Higher factor loadings (closer to 1 or -1) suggest a stronger relationship between the item and the factor. Positive values indicate a direct relationship, while negative values indicate an inverse relationship.

Table 3. Factor Matrix

	Factor		
	Sustainable Escape	**Rural Immersion**	**Authentic Stay**
Authentic Travel	,016	,177	,948
Culinary Motivation	-,420	,835	-,020
Rural Stay	-,045	,122	,832
Farm Curiosity	-,475	,877	-,015
Sustainable Appeal	,939	,338	-,008
Nature Bond	,843	,323	,032
Sustainable Preference	,910	,266	-,003

Source: Autor's research

Sustainable Appeal (0.939), Nature Bond (0.843), and Sustainable Preference (0.910) are all strongly related to Sustainable Escape. These items reflect motivations driven by sustainability, eco-friendly practices, and a desire to connect with nature. The high positive loadings suggest that these items clearly align with the Sustainable Escape factor, highlighting that travelers motivated by sustainability are drawn to destinations with strong environmental values and practices. This confirms sub-hypothesis H1: Tourists who are motivated by sustainability and environmental values are more likely to choose destinations that emphasize eco-friendly practices and nature-based experiences.

Culinary Motivation (0.835) and Farm Curiosity (0.877) are highly associated with Rural Immersion, reflecting the strong connection between rural tourism experiences and an interest in local food, wine, and farm activities. The positive loadings indicate that these items contribute significantly to the Rural Immersion factor, emphasizing the importance of authentic, hands-on rural experiences in shaping tourist motivations. This confirm sub-hypothesis H2: Tourists with a high interest in rural immersion are significantly influenced by opportunities to engage in local gastronomy and agritourism activities.

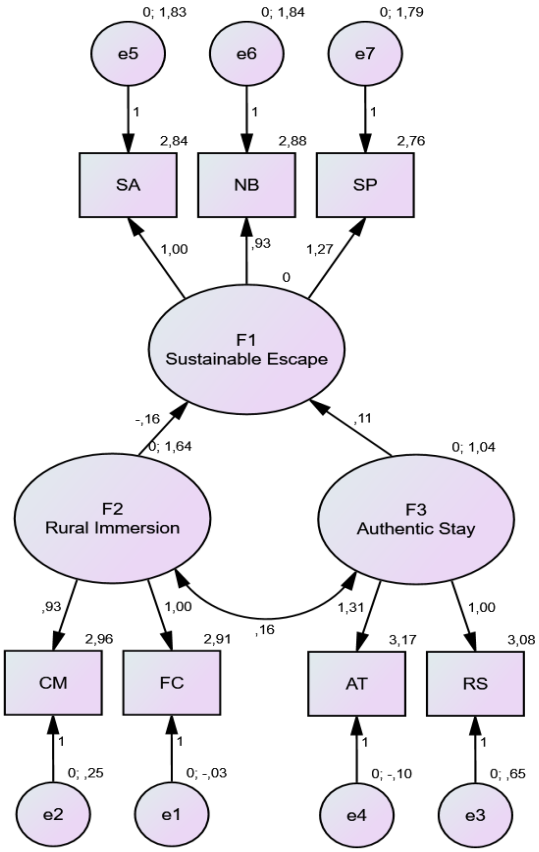
Authentic Travel (0.948), Rural Stay (0.832) are strongly linked to Authentic Stay. The high factor loadings suggest that tourists who prioritize cultural authenticity and non-commercialized experiences are more likely to be attracted to rural stays and authentic travel opportunities. The Authentic Stay factor is predominantly influenced by these items, highlighting that travelers value genuine cultural immersion through accommodation and authentic local experiences. This confirm sub-hypothesis H3: Tourists who prioritize authentic stay experiences are more likely to seek non-commercialized, culturally rooted accommodations in rural settings.

Figure 1 illustrates the relationships between three key motivational factors that influence tourists' preferences and decisions regarding sustainable and rural tourism. The factors identified are Sustainable Escape, Rural Immersion, and Authentic Stay. Each of these

latent variables is measured using specific observed variables that reflect distinct aspects of the travel experience. Sustainable Escape reflects a traveler's motivation to engage with environmentally conscious destinations. It is measured through three observed variables: Sustainable Appeal (SA), Nature Bond (NB) and Sustainable Preference (SP). These variables are strongly correlated with the Sustainable Escape factor, as indicated by high standardized loadings (SA = 1.00, NB = 0.93, SP = 1.27). This suggests that these three aspects are important and reliable indicators of a traveler's sustainable mindset.

Rural Immersion captures tourists' interest in engaging deeply with rural life and agricultural practices. It is represented by: Culinary Motivation (CM) and Farm Curiosity (FC). These indicators also load strongly onto the Rural Immersion factor (CM = 0.93, FC = 1.00), indicating that both culinary and farming experiences are central to the concept of rural tourism. Authentic Stay refers to the pursuit of genuine, non-commercialized tourism experiences. It includes: Authentic Travel (AT) and Rural Stay (RS). Both variables equally define the factor with standardized loadings of 1.00 each, highlighting the significance of authenticity in the rural tourism experience.

Figure 1. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)



Source: Prepared by the authors (2025)

Sustainable Escape and Rural Immersion are negatively related (path coefficient = -0.16), suggesting that travelers who highly value sustainability may not always prioritize immersive rural experiences. Sustainable Escape and Authentic Stay show a positive relationship (path coefficient = 0.11), indicating that sustainability-minded travelers are also somewhat inclined toward authentic tourism experiences. There is a positive correlation (0.16) between Rural Immersion and Authentic Stay, signifying a meaningful overlap in the motivations for rural and authentic tourism, with potential shared values or experiences. This model reveals that traveler motivations for sustainable tourism are multi-dimensional. While Sustainable Escape emphasizes eco-conscious values and a connection with nature, Rural Immersion focuses on interactive, local experiences like food and farming, and Authentic Stay emphasizes a desire for genuine, uncommercialized tourism. The interplay between these factors helps to understand how tourists form their preferences for specific types of destinations and activities. All this confirmed main hypothesis H that rural tourists are motivated by a combination of environmental values, cultural curiosity, and a desire for authentic experiences, which collectively influence their destination choices and travel behavior.

The table 4 presents standardized regression weights derived from a structural equation model assessing relationships between latent constructs (factors) and their associated observed variables, as well as the inter-factor pathways.

Table 4. Standardized Regression Weights: (Group number 1 - Default model)

			Estimate
F3	<---	F1	-,931
F3	<---	F2	,498
Farm Curiosity	<---	F2	1,011
Culinary Motivation	<---	F2	,922
Rural Stay	<---	F3	,785
Authentic Travel	<---	F3	1,031
Sustainable Appeal	<---	F1	,164
Nature Bond	<---	F1	,153
Sustainable Preference	<---	F1	,209

Source: Autor's research

F1 (Sustainable Escape) → F3 (Authentic Stay): Estimate = -0.931 This coefficient indicates a strong negative relationship between Sustainable Escape and Authentic Stay. As the importance of sustainable and eco-friendly travel motivations increases, the tendency to prioritize authentic, non-commercialized stays decreases. This suggests these two motivational dimensions may represent distinct or even conflicting tourist profiles.

This is possible explanations for the negative relationship: 1. different tourist priorities and lifestyles, 2. perceived trade-off between comfort and authenticity, 3. tourism marketing and segmentation and 4. cognitive dissonance or choice overload.

1. Tourists motivated by sustainability (F1) may prioritize environmental responsibility,

low carbon footprints, or eco-certifications in choosing destinations. Their decisions are often driven by values related to climate action, conservation, and resource efficiency. In contrast, those motivated by authentic stay (F3) are more focused on cultural immersion, personalized experiences, and non-commercialized local lifestyles. Their priority is authenticity of interaction, not necessarily environmental performance. These represent different motivational frameworks: one is ideological/environmental, the other is experiential/cultural.

2. Sustainable destinations or accommodations are sometimes perceived as minimalist or functionally eco-centric, which may conflict with the desire for authentic rural charm, traditional settings, or cozy, lived-in environments. Likewise, authentic stays (like a rustic farmhouse or homestay) may lack formal sustainability labels or infrastructure, making them less attractive to sustainability-focused tourists, even if they are eco-friendly in practice.

3. Many destinations market sustainability and authenticity separately. Eco-resorts and green-certified tourism often appeal to a different segment than agritourism, cultural tourism, or heritage travel. A tourist booking an eco-lodge might be drawn by recycling systems and solar panels. A tourist booking a rural homestay might be more interested in local storytelling and traditional cooking, regardless of formal environmental practices. Thus, these motivations may segregate audiences in terms of what they value most in their travel choices.

4. When travelers try to balance multiple values—authenticity, sustainability, comfort, price—they may experience conflicting goals. Those who feel strongly about one goal (e.g., sustainability) may down-prioritize others (e.g., authenticity) to simplify decisions or reduce cognitive dissonance.

F2 (Rural Immersion) → F3 (Authentic Stay): Estimate = 0.498. This reflects a moderate positive relationship between Rural Immersion and Authentic Stay. Tourists motivated by rural experiences (e.g., local food and farm-based activities) are also more likely to value authentic travel and accommodation experiences. These two constructs appear to be complementary in the tourist decision-making process. Farm Curiosity ← F2: Estimate = 1.011. This is the strongest loading in the model, suggesting that farm-related activities are a central component of the Rural Immersion construct. Culinary Motivation ← F2: Estimate = 0.922. This is also a very high loading, indicating that experiencing local food and wine significantly contributes to rural immersion motivations. Together, these two items confirm that sensory and experiential rural tourism is core to this factor.

Authentic Travel ← F3: Estimate = 1.031. The highest loading for this factor, showing that the pursuit of non-commercialized, culturally rich tourism experiences is fundamental to the construct of Authentic Stay. Rural Stay ← F3: Estimate = 0.785. This also loads strongly on F3, reinforcing the importance of rural accommodations in shaping perceptions of authenticity. These loadings affirm that authenticity in tourism is primarily interpreted through immersion in local culture and staying in traditional

settings. Sustainable Preference ← F1: Estimate = 0.209, Sustainable Appeal ← F1: Estimate = 0.164, Nature Bond ← F1: Estimate = 0.153. While all three variables are positively associated with the Sustainable Escape factor, the loadings are relatively low compared to those in the other factors. This may suggest that these indicators, while valid, do not capture the construct as robustly as desired. It could also reflect that environmental motivations are more diffuse or less consistently prioritized among respondents. These findings contribute to a nuanced understanding of tourist motivations, showing that different drivers—such as sustainability, cultural authenticity, and rural immersion—may coexist, complement, or conflict depending on the traveler profile.

Conclusion

The findings from the research conducted in Terlan (Terlano), South Tyrol, Italy, offer valuable insights that can significantly inform the development of agritourism in Fruška Gora. Grounded in the hypothesis that rural tourists are motivated by a combination of environmental values, cultural curiosity, and a desire for authentic experiences, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the key factors influencing tourist behavior in rural settings. These factors—identified as Sustainable Escape, Rural Immersion, and Authentic Stay—highlight the importance of eco-friendliness, cultural engagement, and genuine hospitality in shaping tourist motivations and destination choices. The results of this study provide a robust foundation for guiding the development of innovative, sustainable, and culturally grounded tourism models in rural regions of Serbia—particularly in Fruška Gora, which holds strong potential due to its natural beauty, agricultural richness, and proximity to urban centers.

Designing Sustainable Escape Experiences (H1): Tourists motivated by environmental values are looking for destinations that align with their eco-conscious lifestyle. To attract this segment, tourism developers in Fruška Gora should focus on: Eco-accommodation: Encourage certification schemes for eco-lodging, support the development of solar-powered rural homes, and promote the reuse of traditional structures with sustainable materials; Nature-based activities: Promote hiking, birdwatching, nature interpretation trails, and forest bathing experiences that create emotional bonds with the environment; Green branding: Develop marketing campaigns that highlight sustainability credentials, including waste reduction, biodiversity protection, and low-carbon tourism options.

Strengthening Rural Immersion through Agritourism (H2): The high motivational value placed on gastronomy and farm activities demonstrates a strong market for authentic, sensory-rich experiences. Key practical steps include: Farm-to-table tourism: Develop networks of local farms and food producers who can offer tasting sessions, cooking classes, and seasonal harvest activities; Agricultural festivals and workshops: Celebrate rural life through themed events (e.g., grape harvest, beekeeping days, organic gardening weekends) that allow tourists to participate and learn; Product development: Encourage the creation of rural tourism packages that combine food, wine, and farm experiences with overnight stays in rural areas.

Cultivating Authentic Stay Experiences (H3): Tourists seeking authentic stays are not merely looking for accommodation—they want to feel immersed in local culture. Strategies to enhance this include: Cultural storytelling: Train hosts to share stories about local traditions, history, and personal experiences, enhancing the emotional and educational value of the stay; Traditional design and lifestyle: Support renovation of village houses using traditional building techniques and interior design that reflects the local cultural identity; Host training and empowerment: Equip local families and rural entrepreneurs with skills in hospitality, communication, and digital marketing while encouraging them to maintain their authenticity rather than adopting commercialized models.

In addition to targeted interventions aligned with specific tourist motivations, several cross-cutting recommendations emerge from the research findings. These offer broader guidance for supporting the long-term sustainability and competitiveness of rural tourism in Serbia. Firstly, policy and funding support from municipalities and national tourism authorities is crucial. Local governments should prioritize incentive programs that encourage the development of green infrastructure, promote experiential forms of tourism, and foster entrepreneurship in rural hospitality. Financial and regulatory support mechanisms can help local actors overcome entry barriers and adopt more sustainable and innovative practices. Secondly, capacity building is essential for equipping rural stakeholders with the skills and knowledge needed to implement quality tourism services. Organizing structured training programs, mentorship schemes, and knowledge exchanges with established agritourism destinations—such as South Tyrol in Italy—can provide valuable models and inspiration. These initiatives would enable Serbian rural entrepreneurs to learn from best practices in combining sustainability, cultural authenticity, and high service standards. Lastly, the formation of integrated rural tourism clusters can significantly enhance the visibility and appeal of rural destinations. By encouraging collaboration between farmers, winemakers, artisans, and accommodation providers, local stakeholders can co-create bundled tourism experiences and establish a unified destination brand. Such collaborative networks not only improve the coherence of the offer but also strengthen local supply chains and promote shared economic benefits within rural communities.

The findings confirm that rural tourism in Fruška Gora should not be developed as a copy-paste product, but rather as an authentic, eco-conscious, and immersive experience rooted in local culture and supported by innovative hospitality practices. By examining the successful example of Terlan, where an innovative and sustainability-driven hospitality model has transformed a rural area into a thriving tourist destination, the study demonstrates how such models can be adapted to similar contexts. Fruška Gora, with its natural beauty, cultural heritage, and potential for wine and farm tourism, is well positioned to implement comparable practices. The emphasis on agritourism as a best-practice hospitality model illustrates how rural destinations can attract visitors seeking meaningful and immersive experiences while simultaneously supporting local economies and preserving cultural landscapes.

This research is supported by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia by the Decision on the scientific research funding for teaching staff at the accredited higher education institutions in 2025 (No. 451-03-137/2025-03/200375 of February 4, 2025).

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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