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# CUSTOMS AS AN ELEMENT OF ENRICHING THE RURAL TOURIST OFFER - A CHANCE FOR TOURISM DEVELOPMENT AFTER THE CRISIS

## ОБИЧАЈИ КАО ЕЛЕМЕНТ ОБОГАЋИВАЊА РУРАЛНЕ ТУРИСТИЧКЕ ПОНУДЕ – ШАНСА ЗА РАЗВОЈ ТУРИЗМА ПОСЛЕ КРИЗЕ

**Summary:** *Modern tourists are looking for new experiences, i.e. they no longer focus on familiar types of vacation. Rural areas with their material and spiritual heritage can create a product according to the expectations and needs of modern tourists. The 2008 financial crisis and the current health crisis caused by the COVID - 19 pandemic have changed preferences and tourism demand in general. This paper focuses on changes in tourist demand caused by the consequences of the crisis and traditional customs that can be used to differentiate the tourist offer. The initial assumption is that tourists want to escape from urban areas and spend their holidays in rural areas. The results indicate that rural areas have numerous potentials, which, combined with customs, can influence tourists to visit these areas more extensively.*

**Keywords:** rural areas; customs; tourism development; crisis

**JEL Classification:** Z3, T83

**Резиме:** *Савремени туриста жели нове доживљаје и искуства, односно, у фокусу њихових интересовања више нису стандардни типови одмора. Рурална подручја са својом материјалним и духовним наслеђем имају потенцијала да створе производ по жељи и мери савремених туриста. Актуелна финансијска криза из 2008. године и тренутна здравствена криза узрокована COVID – 19 пандемијом променили су преференције и туристичку тражњу уопштено. Предмет овог рада јесу промене у туристичкој тражњи узроковане последицама криза, као и обичаји који се могу искористити за диференцирање туристичке понуде. Полазна претпоставка јесте да туристи желе да побегну од градских средина и да свој одмор проведу у руралним подручјима. Резултати указују да рурална подручја имају бројне потенцијале, који у комбинацији са обичајима могу утицати да привлачење туриста у ова подручја.*

**Кључне ријечи:** рурална подручја, обичаји, развој туризма, криза

**ЈЕЛ касификација:** Z3, T83

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID - 19 pandemic affected all spheres of life. The problems were particularly pronounced in the tourism and hospitality sectors. All tourism sectors faced activity reductions of more than 90% globally (Fernandes 2020). Many tourist destinations witnessed a drastic drop in tourists compared to the pre-crisis period. Airlines canceled flights, fairs and cruises were canceled, and hotels and restaurants were closed. In addition to these, various industries that directly or indirectly rely on tourism suffer the negative consequences of the entire situation.

According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), international tourist arrivals fell by 93% in June 2020 compared to the same period in 2019. These data indicate a severe impact of the pandemic on the tourism sector. Multidisciplinary problems are caused all over the world. Most countries around the world closed their borders and introduced travel restrictions (UNWTO 2020). In addition, to make the crisis even more prominent, 53% of destinations introduced a travel ban in September 2020.

In the context of tourism and global economic crises, the following research questions have arisen:

*Research question 1:* Which crises are closely associated to activities in the tourism industry?

*Research question 2:* What is the current situation after the latest crisis in the tourism industry?

*Research question 3:* What are the prospects for developing tourism as the industry most affected by the COVID-19 crisis?

Based on the defined questions, the primary goal of this paper is to fill a void in the literature by providing a comprehensive theoretical and empirical overview of the current situation in the tourism industry. In addition, based on the defined problem areas, the task of the paper is to offer a solution found in cultural tourism.

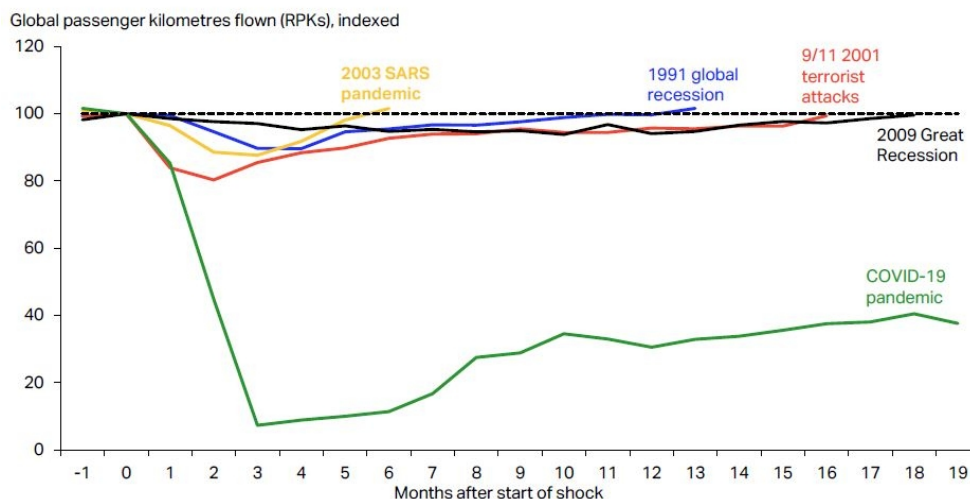
The global COVID-19 pandemic has already resulted in changes in the thinking and behaviour of tourists. Interest in travelling outside the peak season is growing. Due to the reduced risk of infection. However, to attract tourists to the destination past the peak season, it is essential to offer and promote specialized tourist products and as much original indigenous content as possible. In general, based on the study results, it can be concluded that the number of tourists in smaller destinations will increase, where tourists will try to establish personal connections, which can have a long-term positive impact on tourism development (Šerić, Stojanović and Bagarić, 2021).

## 2. THE IMPACT OF THE CRISIS ON INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL

There is no doubt that tourism is an essential source of income and a significant factor in economic stability; tourism contributes to the increase of foreign exchange inflows and the creation of new jobs (Dašić and Vujić 2020). It is rather apparent that the crisis will last for several months, even years. The blows of this crisis are much more severe than the 2008 World Economic Crisis blows, precisely because this crisis is not only financial but also health, economic, political and security. The government and the public sector members are still cautious when lifting bans. In September 2020, officials claimed that the pandemic peak had passed. However, most people believe it will be months before the economy returns to ordinary. The virus spread creates fear of a global recession, which would further reduce the demand for products. The latest data show that industrial production in 2020 fell by more than 13.5 per cent (Fernandes 2020).

According to the International Air Transport Association (IATA), the COVID-19 pandemic is the strongest and largest shock to date to hit the airline industry. During previous crises, the loss and the drop in air traffic were between 5 and 20%, while during pandemics, it reached above 70%. Additionally, recovering from previous recessions took between 6 and 18 months, while in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic in some countries, even after two years, complete recovery is not recorded.

*Figure 1 Mileage in air traffic in times of crisis*



Source: Gulbas 2021

Based on the number of kilometres and the income from kilometres flown, it is evident that this crisis seriously affected the airline industry. The number of air travel has dropped significantly, as evidenced by the number of trips worldwide falling from 4.5 billion to 39 million flights in 2019 (Bielecki et al., 2020).

*Table 1 Economic performance of airline industry during a pandemic*

<b>Per formance of the Airline Industry</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>
Spend on air transport (\$billions)	476	564	876	384
- % change over year	-16,5%	18,4%	3,6%	-56.1%
Passenger departures (million)	2479	2681	4543	1807
Revenue Passenger Kilometers over year (%)	-1,2%	8,0%	4,1%	-65,9%
World trade growth (%)	-2,0%	4,1%	0,3%	-5,1%

*Source: IATA 2021 and IATA 2015*

Nevertheless, after the worst year for the airline industry and tourism (65.9% drop in world revenue from kilometres flown), the air traffic recovery has been slow. The travel ban and travel closures of most countries have also contributed to this. However, it is estimated that recovery is imminent in the following years and that the revenue passenger kilometers will increase by 18% in 2021 and by 51% in 2022.

### **3. TRANSFORMATION OF TOURIST TRAVEL AFTER THE CRISIS PERIOD - LITERATURE REVIEW**

One of the characteristics of the modern tourist market is that unique products are highly valued and that a contemporary tourist strives to escape the uniformity offered by globalization and the modern way of life in urban city centres (Štetić 2001). Standard behaviour patterns are no longer attributed to current tourists, changes in the values and attitudes are noticeable, and forms of alternative, not mass tourism, are recording constant growth (Njegovan 2016). Specifically, regarding travel intention after a pandemic, Li et al. (2020) reported significant influences of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control on travel intentions after a pandemic (Li et al. 2020). The attitudes of the respondents show that the global COVID - 19 pandemic will have long-term effects on shifts in their behaviour when choosing a destination for summer vacation, when choosing specialized tourist facilities and a different structure of non-accommodation consumption (Šerić, Stojanović and Bagarić 2021).

Numerous changes in consumer behaviour occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading us to the assumption that the traditional concept of creating specialized tourist products should be adapted to those behaviour patterns when evaluating destination offers (Jamal and Budke, 2020; Šerić, Stojanović and Bagarić 2021). Fear and other emotions left a significant impact on the tourist consciousness and subconscious, which indicates that the covid-19 pandemic affects the attitudes, expectations and preferences of tourists when choosing a destination to travel to (Šerić, Stojanović and Bagarić 2021).

One can say that new forms of tourism are increasingly in demand in the tourism market (Štetić 2001). Rural tourism is an alternative to mass-market tourism because it attracts segments of tourists interested in staying in nature outside urban areas, protecting the environment and preserving the authenticity of space (Todorović and Štetić 2009). Rural tourism has become a form of tourism that can meet the needs of almost all segments of tourists - young people, families with children, and the elder (Njegovan 2016).

Months of isolation and confinement in homes and cities have sparked a strong urge to travel to areas with preserved natural landscapes. The subconscious need to be outdoors is further fueled by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the human mind. An increasing number of tourists are

interested in getting to know the local culture and customs, which is an additional perspective for small destinations, those where the population is currently declining and which do not offer an attractive quality of life outside the peak tourist season (Šerić, Stojanović and Bagarić 2021).

As the pandemic "moved" the population from urban to rural areas, at the same time, tourism turned to more rural than urban areas. Although rural tourists are heterogeneous, the primary reasons for travelling are to unwind from everyday life and escape from hectic work. Particularly appealing factors are the peaceful atmosphere and attractive landscape. In addition, rural activities, exemplary culture, rural gastronomy and opportunities for children are also inviting factors (Poruiu et al. 2021).

Asquith (2020) notes that rural areas are less affected by the crisis. Due to working from home and isolation, many residents wanted to escape from the most populated cities and regions and enjoy more peaceful and natural areas. As Dimitrovski et al. (2019) claim that agritourism has gained increasing academic interest in recent decades. However, during the pandemic, the role of rural tourism increased significantly. For example, Marques et al. (2021) show that preferences toward rural areas have largely increased in Portugal and those rural regions are best positioned today. Rural regions in this country have undergone a strong and lasting recovery thanks to the domestic demand growth.

Vaishar and Šťastná (2020) pointed out that large regions based on international tourism suffered the most significant decline. Such an example is the Czech Republic, i.e. Prague and the most noteworthy spa in Karlovy Vary, as well as the most famous UNESCO world heritage - Cesky Krumlov. On the other hand, rural tourist sites had a very modest decline. In several cases in the Czech Republic, the occupancy of accommodation capacities was increasing. It was even higher than in 2019.

Zawadka (2019) believes that rural tourism, through various types of physical activities such as horseback riding, cycling and hiking, could increase in an environment dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with indoor gyms and less time spent outdoors. Any specialized tourist offer that includes a stay in a preserved natural landscape, in the fresh air and active participation will encourage the additional interest of tourists in the period after the pandemic (Šerić, Stojanović and Bagarić 2021).

Some of the most important types of tourism that promote sustainable development are ecotourism, agrotourism and tourism based on ethnic heritage and culture (Dorobantu et al. 2011). These types of tourism have a positive impact on tourism development and the struggle against the development of technology, and the negative "consequences" of mass tourism that can endanger the environment, local customs and traditions. Academic studies increasingly focus on customs studies. However, the customs category is a rather heterogeneous term, whether applied to the whole or part of the national culture (Vehrer 2017). A nation's cultural and folklore potential is widespread and consists of elements that merge material and spiritual culture with the rural way of life (Iordache et al. 2008). Rural tourism destinations have become very prominent in many countries (Sagić et al. 2019). In many countries, some customs have kept the old traditional rites with various rituals.

However, customs are constantly and continuously circulating among peoples and cultures and within nations and cultures. For example, folklore, which belongs to these specific customs, prevails in many countries, especially on the Balkan Peninsula. Folklore is a form of tradition that has played an essential role in Serbian society, as confirmed by UNESCO by including *kolo* (traditional folk dance) on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2017.

#### **4. CUSTOMS: MERELY TRADITION OR FUTURE ELEMENT OF ENRICHING THE RURAL TOURIST OFFER ON THE WAY OUT OF THE CRISIS**

Rural tourism implies a series of tourist activities taking place in the countryside. Rural tourism expanded in many parts of the world from the 1970s to the 1980s, both in terms of demand and supply. It happened due to the rise of a society led by lifestyle and leisure and the widespread mobilization of tourism as a strategy for rural development and revitalization (Silva 2021).

People who live in the countryside and have never been tourists find it difficult to understand why someone outside the community would want to come to experience such a lifestyle. However, tourists strive for happenings different from their usual routine or daily life. What is unusual for a

tourist can be very typical for the host community. Tourists would remember these activities because they are authentic and tested. They would be willing to pay for an experience that is authentic and characteristic of ordinary life in the home community (Angelkova 2010).

Due to their backwardness, the villages have preserved a significant part of their characteristic material and spiritual culture. It is partially maintained: in the form of village memorial buildings, traditional objects, traditional handicrafts, agricultural products, folk costumes, customs and the like (Štetić, Cvijanović and Šimičević 2014). Traditional lifestyles represent the heritage and security of past times. Such culture and heritage are often believed to be well preserved in rural areas through generations (Beronja et al. 2012). Many customs and beliefs have survived to this day. The purpose of folk customs is different and can refer to the need to protect a household's health, preserve and increase birth and property, summon rain, win over a loved one and cure illness (Kordić and Kosar 2018).

It is common for every individual to question oneself about the meaning of the customs we practise only when we notice that some other people do not behave the way we do. It is apparent that customs are related to the long-held practice of a specific community and that people find it hard to get rid of customs, even when the need for them has ceased. The word custom refers to all patterns of behaviours conveyed by tradition and existing in the group. There is no nation that has no customs, no matter which part of the world they inhabit. Every village, every region, every region, and every country has its customs (Jović 2013). Customs are often defined in ethnological literature as unwritten rules established by the people and passed down from generation to generation. Avoidance from practising some customs entailed a sense of guilt and punishment from the local and broader community. Therefore, even among the Serbian people, entire mechanisms were built over time to preserve customs (Rože 1986).

In addition to language and religion, traditions and customs probably have the most decisive influence on the creation and preservation of the ethnic identity of a community in the life of a nation (Marković 2019). Customs, rituals, and ceremonies represent activities related to the life of a particular society. The goal of implementing and maintaining them is to confirm the user's identity. Practising can be public or individual and is related to the life cycle of an individual or a group of people, along with the agricultural calendar and seasons (Nikolić 2010).

The rural area population has a rich spiritual culture manifested in numerous customs and traditions. Customs, rituals and events in rural areas mostly take place outdoors when they are most accessible and visible to visitors and have the potential to enrich the tourist offer, as well as to extend the tourist season (Angelkova 2012). Customs differ territorially, so tourists are often curious to learn about the customs of the area they are visiting (Marković 2019). The essential characteristic of rural tourism is rural identity, which "is crucial for the arrival and stay of tourists in rural areas". On the other hand, this type of tourism plays a fundamental role in preserving the identity of rural communities (Regional Agency for the Development of Eastern Serbia 2019). Each destination has its characteristics and unique customs on which national cuisine and gastronomic specialities are based. They also preserve the spirit of a region, i.e. rural area. This type of manifestation leaves a great impression on domestic and foreign tourists, and at the same time, they raise the level of the village's tourist offer (Tasić 2018). All these contents are based on typical ethnic motifs. The more authentic they are, the more attractive they can become to tourists and thereby strengthen the competitiveness of these areas (Vasiljević and Cvijanović 2009).

Rituals, folk customs and church festivities could be an excellent motivation for tourists to stay nearby during that period and participate themselves. Such manifestations should be marketed and brought closer to future tourists because they can be an incentive for their travel (Milutinović 2008). One of the increasingly common activities of tourists interested in staying in the countryside is related to getting to know the traditional way of life, folklore, customs, dance, song, local legends, and conventional farming (getting to know all the specifics of material and non-material culture: old buildings, traditional construction, local stories, customs) (Krivošejev and Rabasović 2020). Getting to know and actively participate in demonstrations of ancient crafts (weaving, knitting, pottery), as well as intangible cultural heritage such as language, food, customs, way of life, etc., can be particularly appealing for tourists (Marković 2019).

A satisfied guest will talk about the "unique experience" for days, which will also get new visitors who will come next year with current guests or in an independent arrangement (Regional Agency for the Development of Eastern Serbia 2019).

Restrictions on global travel have led to the most severe collapse of the global economy since World War II. The tourism industry was practically paralyzed in March 2020, as the ban on international travel affected over 90% of the world's population. The travel and tourism sectors have shown high vulnerability to the crisis caused by Covid-19, as this crisis has affected passenger demand. Travel between different territories and the overall movement of people became rigidly controlled. Hence, hospitality, air travel, cruises, and car rental are four industries that have experienced significant declines due to the pandemic. As a result, most resorts and hotels remained empty for most of 2020 (Luković and Stojković 2020).

## 5. PRESERVING CUSTOMS AFTER THE PANDEMIC

It often happens that some customs are misinterpreted, and traditions are invented. Some elements that never existed, but remind us of something we would do, are often incorporated. Many rituals are performed with certain inertia, because their meaning has been lost or is unknown to those practising them. That is why it is vital for our community to know the real purpose of a specific custom (Munjiza 2017).

Another element that can be used in combination with customs is old crafts. Old crafts can animate the tourists themselves so they can participate in them.

Old trades such as blacksmiths, millers, carpenters, potters, weavers, and the gathering of medicinal herbs have not been present in cities for a long time, and we encounter them less and less in rural areas. The situation is similar with handicrafts, making folk costumes and other folklore elements. The principle of the open workshop, which has proven to be very successful in countries with more developed tourism, can also be applied in our observed area (Škrbić and Milošević 2012).

Countless opportunities are available, and the benefits that arise from activating such potential are considerable, both in economic and financial terms, as well as in terms of preservation, improvement and presentation of culture and tradition and other ethnological elements (Ivanović and Pantić 2007).

Solving economic and unemployment problems are the primary prerequisites for revitalizing rural areas. Tourism as an economic activity can and should significantly influence the revival of villages through the revitalization and tourism activation of a wide range of daily activities characteristic of the observed territories (Škrbić and Milošević 2012). On the one hand, the development of rural tourism can increase the economic effects of tourism. On the other hand, it can prevent the outflow of the population from the countryside (senilizing the country) (Bratić, Petrović and Živković 2011). However, remember that the uncontrolled development of tourist activity can have negative consequences. It is necessary to preserve the culture of housing and living in the countryside from urbanization and the introduction of atypical architectural elements, which are not characteristic of the local environment.

It is significant that there are adequate specialized tourism products that can attract and retain tourists throughout the year. Nevertheless, the development of specialized tourist products should be based on specific suggestions to ensure sufficient attractiveness, competitiveness and differentiation. It is essential and necessary to implement additional and expanded content in the development and management of this category of tourist offer, especially in the promotion of what will be offered in periods exceeding the peak season (Šerić, Stojanović and Bagarić 2021).

## 6. CONCLUSION

It is evident that tourist demand is increasingly shifting to rural tourism. Such a situation is even more apparent after the crisis period. The reason is the fact the village has everything to meet the basic human needs, and tourism complements the additional requirements. The combination of rural areas and tourism creates a new tourist product of the modern age. Contemporary trends in tourism demand indicate that tourists are looking for new experiences. Rural areas with their tradition, culture, way of life and customs represent a real treasure with considerable potential for attracting tourists.

It should be stressed that customs are to be practised in the original. It is necessary to avoid shortening them if their execution takes more time and accepting foreign ones. By omitting specific

details, the purpose of a custom can be lost. By adopting foreign traditions, the offer will not be different from others. The offer will be more prosperous if tourists are allowed to participate in the execution of customs and old crafts. Such practices, combined with traditional hospitality, can create a new and unique tourist experience. Another benefit is that rural areas have different customs, and this should be cleverly used. It avoids uniformity and builds a wide range of offers and opportunities for tourists to experience something new with each subsequent visit. This variety affects the differentiation of the offer, which can be decisive for tourists to visit rural areas.

Despite their potential that can be used to enrich the rural offer, customs alone are not enough to attract potential tourists. That is because customs and rituals are primarily associated with a holiday or a day of the week and are therefore of short duration. The question is with which elements it is possible to combine customs to encourage tourists to stay longer in rural areas and thus spend more money in the destination.

Statistical data indicate that numerous manifestations do not contribute to the constant increase in tourist traffic. However, they promote the culture and spirituality of the country through their socio-cultural significance. Improved cultural content would make the guests' stay more pleasant and attractive. In addition to natural requirements, for a village to engage in tourism, it must also have a developed material base, both social and individual (Marković, Ostojić and Popović 2012).

Several villages are located near valuable cultural and historical monuments, which tourists can visit in an organized manner. The buildings of traditional architecture, with the characteristics of a specific area, as well as old crafts and handicrafts, in which the rich heritage of the people is contained, also have exceptional cultural significance. Also, it is possible to visit various exhibitions in the area, as well as tourist manifestations and traditional events which illustrate folk customs and characteristics of village life (Antić et al. 2015). In this regard, numerous cultural manifestations in rural areas and their economic valorization are relevant for future research, especially after the crisis.

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