

## **RURAL TOURISM OF WESTERN SERBIA - CHARACTERISTICS AND TRENDS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Rural tourism is an important form of tourism industry which plays important role and gives many benefits to rural areas community. Increased interest of domestic tourists in rural destinations during 2020. has shown that in the conditions of a pandemic, priorities in tourism development are changing. Western Serbia is a tourist region with the longest tradition and the strongest competitive position in rural tourism in Serbia. In order to provide a clearer insight into the characteristics and trends of rural tourism of Western Serbia, a survey was conducted. Answering short and concise questions, 100 respondents (tourists) assessed the current state of the tourist offer of observed region and suggested activities that can improve the quality of the tourist experience. Respondents singled out the most attractive localities, motives for visits, satisfaction with service, quality of accomodation, the presence of traditional food and drinks, as well as the authenticity of souvenirs. They also assessed satisfaction with the elements of tourist infrastructure, as well as all other entities whos contribute to the development of rural tourism.

**Keywords:** rural tourism, Western Serbia, characteristics, trends, survey

### **INTRODUCTION**

The development of rural tourism is closely connected with the preserved life environment, cultural values and prosperity of local residents, which otherwise presents a great opportunity for the development of tourism in Serbia. Nowadays, the number of tourists seeking a return to nature and its original values is increasing. There is an increase in demand for green destinations and protected natural regions, for clean and free recreation areas, for active holidays and self-expression, there is an increase in demand for healthy food and environment. Realization of all these things enables tourists to discover the quality of life and their own cultural roots. The development of rural tourism is affected by multiple factors, including flora and fauna as primary ones, as a natural foundation on which a tourist offer is based. Only when the natural environment, landscape units and specific beauties of a region attract tourists, there are grounds for working on other aspects of motivating tourists.

Rural areas have extremely different characters ranging from suburban village territories, to pastures on high mountains. Rural areas are very rich and varied as far as landscape diversity and present cultural heritage are concerned, and they are a huge reserve of skills and energy of people [7], [3].

These are the very reasons why the tourist region of Western Serbia, as being extremely rich in all the necessary resources, deserves more attention when it comes to the development of rural tourism [13].

Its current level is far below the one which can be reached by sustainable and long-term planned activities in the field. Although the very beginnings of this type of tourist movements have a long tradition, it is necessary to constantly direct them towards a more productive way of development.

### **CHARACTERISTICS OF THE OBSERVED AREA**

The region of West Serbia in broader sense, includes a part of Serbia bordering with rivers Sava in the North, Drina in the West and with the valley of rivers Kolubara, Ljig, Dicina and Ibar in the East. This part of Serbia is rich in natural beauties. A bigger part of West Serbia belongs to geographical region of Podrinja which includes Macva and Zlatibor's District. [6].

This paper takes into consideration the touristic region of West Serbia in the narrow sense, where besides municipalities belonging to Zlatibor's District, Ivanjica is included as well, even though it officially belongs to Morava's administrative District. [12] According to available information in touristic region West Serbia, according to the number of registered people 348,841 lived there in 2002. and in 2011. 316,976 people lived there, representing a decrease of 9.13%. The density of population was 32.5 people living per a square kilometer [12].

In the period between 2005. and 2010. there was a noticeable change in the arrival of tourists in the touristic region of West Serbia. When the arrivals of domestic tourists are mentioned 203,624 arrivals were recorded, which represents a decrease compared to the years of 2007. and 2008. when a record number 223,500 of arrivals was recorded. The decrease of almost 10% can be explained with the effects of the economic crisis during 2008, but also with the separation of Montenegro in 2006. making them foreign tourists and causing less tourists coming from this country. On the other hand, in the same period there was a noticeable trend of growth of number of arrivals of foreign tourists which in 2010. was 34,749 which was a growth of almost 135% compared to 2005. In 2011. according to the available information from the Republic Institute for Statistics, a conclusion can be made that the dominant destination was Zlatibor, from municipality Cajetina, which achieved an increase of 11% in tourist arrivals and 18% in overnight stays compared to the arrivals and overnight stays in 2010. [14] In 2019. Zlatibor is still the most visited destination in Western Serbia, with an increase in the total number of tourists by 65% compared to 2011 [16].

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

The complexity of tourism and tourist needs of world population influence the change of tourist request. Requests for new and specific forms of tourism are characteristics of the development of this activity in the beginning of the 21st century. New forms of tourism are more and more requested in the tourist market. It gives a chance for rural areas to be included equally with their tourist offer if they have certain potentials and adequate personnel that could include those potentials on tourist market. [1], [17] There is no commonly accepted definition of rural tourism since different countries have different criteria for defining rural area. Rural tourism has a plethora of definitions, from the very minimalist one: "any tourism activity that takes place in rural areas" [2] to more elaborate

ones such as the definition by [9] who defined rural tourism as a discrete activity with distinct characteristics which may vary in intensity, and by area. According to [20] “the content of rural tourism covers tourism in orchards, farm, culture, life, scenic areas, religious activities, food and air in rural areas.” It comprises rural production, living and ecology, including production: agricultural-activity oriented tourism (agro-tourism or leisure agriculture); living: culture-based activities (cultural and historical tourism, or museum tourism), and ecological: nature-oriented recreation activities (nature tourism, agro-tourism, green tourism or eco-tourism).

The term “rural tourism” has been accepted by European Union, and as such it refers to all tourist activities in rural areas. Special forms of rural tourism could be: tourism on homestead, hunting, fishing, ecotourism, health, recreational, residence (houses for vacation), educational, adventurous, transit, camping tourism, continental nautical tourism, gastronomically and ethno gastronomically, tourism of protected parts of nature, cultural tourism, religious, other special forms [8].

The development of rural tourism is well reflected in the academic literature through many disciplines, including: geography, sociology, economics, and environmental studies [21] Tourism has long been considered as a potential means for socio-economic development and regeneration of rural areas, in particular those affected by the decline of traditional agrarian activities [5] Numerous studies deal with the different benefits derived from rural tourism that can be used as potential solutions to many of the problems facing rural areas [22] ,[10], [19] ,[4] These benefits are: economic growth, socio-cultural development, environmental function.

In addition to the positive effects of rural tourism, negative effects that may accrue include: cost increase of public services such as waste disposal, resulting from increased demand, the creation of partial/temporary jobs, increases in land prices and even a situation in which local residents are unable to acquire more dwellings in the area, and over dependency of the community on one industry, the success of which is not under the local community's control [21], [18], [11].

Serbia has a great potential regarding the offer of rural tourism because of the preserved nature, traditional and autochthonous values. Rural tourism in Serbia presents a significant factor of multifunctional rural development, which is confirmed by numerous theoretical and empirical researches.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Scientific methods are chosen based on the defined problem of research, set goals and tasks. The methods largely used while writing this paper are the following: the so-called desk-research method, the method of research on the field, the comparative method, the questionnaire method or poll method, the method of analysis and synthesis. Applying the stated scientific methods, the corresponding conclusions have been reached and constructive propositions for modifying the existing and creating new directions of successful tourism development within a protected area have been made. The strategy of tourism development in Serbia recognizes the southwestern Serbia cluster, which the observed region belongs to, as one of four key clusters of tourism development. This cluster is a favourite destination of primarily domestic tourists, but also of tourists from the region, as well as a smaller number of tourists from the European market.

The strategy within the southwestern Serbia cluster includes a wider circle of municipalities, compared with the region included in this research (the municipalities

included in the research are Arilje, Ivanjica, Kosjeric, Pozega, Priboj, Prijepolje, Sjenica, Bajina Basta, Uzice, Nova Varos, Cajetina).

## RESULTS AND DUSCUSSION

With the goal of providing a clearer insight into characteristics and prospects which currently follow the development of rural tourism of the observed region, a survey has been conducted. Namely, on a sample of 100 subjects, one can get a clear picture of the state, as well as establish any potential activities which can improve certain parameters. By answering short and concise questions, the subjects, except in introductory eliminating questions, had an opportunity to assess, based on their own experiences, the current state of the tourist offer of the region. They named the most visited localities, motives of the visits, satisfaction with the service, and here we primarily think of the kindness of local residents, the quality of accommodation, presence of traditional food and beverages, as well as the authenticity of souvenirs. They also assessed their satisfaction with elements of tourism infrastructure, as well as all other subjects contributing to the development of rural tourism with their role.

The questions included in the questionnaire can be divided into three groups based on the form: dichotomous questions, questions with scalar answer and questions with multiple answers, and according to the content, they can be divided into questions about the structure of the subjects, questions about visiting rural areas and questions about the quality of received serviced.

The poll was conducted in the period between December 2018 and March 2019, in most cases by filling in the electronic form, which understood sending the questionnaire via email or via modern social networks.

The structure of subjects. The first question is about the sex of subjects, and is answered by all subjects, and the results show that there are 72 female and 28 male subjects.

Despite the wish that the ratio is as even as possible, due to the lack of interest of male subjects in filling in the poll, the ratio in percentage is 72:28 in favour of the female subjects.

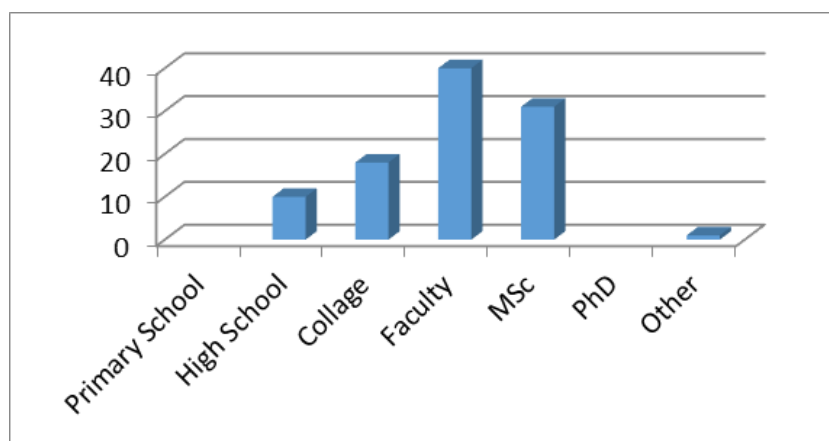
In the second question, the subjects circle, from the given options, their occupation, and the options are the following: pupil, student, employed, retired, and unemployed. The results show that 45 subjects are students, who make the largest group when compared with others. Following students in number are the employed (35), who are followed by the unemployed (19) and a pupil.

The nonexistence of a larger number of subjects who are employed can be considered a potential weakness because it is this group of the market segment that makes the largest number of tourists, i.e. people with purchasing power. It is logical to assume that students, the unemployed, and pupils will be a minority when we speak of tourist movements. What also poses a problem is the fact that pensioners in our country cannot afford longer and more frequent journeys, as is the case in the developed countries, such as Germany.

The third question refers to the age of subjects. The offered answers are: 20 or less, 21-40, 41-60, and over 60. Of course, a slightly younger group of subjects prevails, considering the number of students, thus, there are 90 subjects between 21 and 40.

The level of education of subjects is of great importance for understanding the essence and significance of the problem, as well as for getting variable results. Besides primary and high school, the subjects can choose college, faculty, master's degree, PhD, as well as naming other higher titles. Graph 1 shows the percentage of subjects. Subjects with faculties are the most numerous (40), they are followed by the young with master's

degrees (31), then there is a smaller number of subjects with a college (18), there are only 10 subjects with secondary education, and only one subject with primary education. The heterogeneous picture of the structure of subjects offers us a trustworthy picture, since it is important to see how different segments experience similar phenomena, and how it is reflected in their life experience.



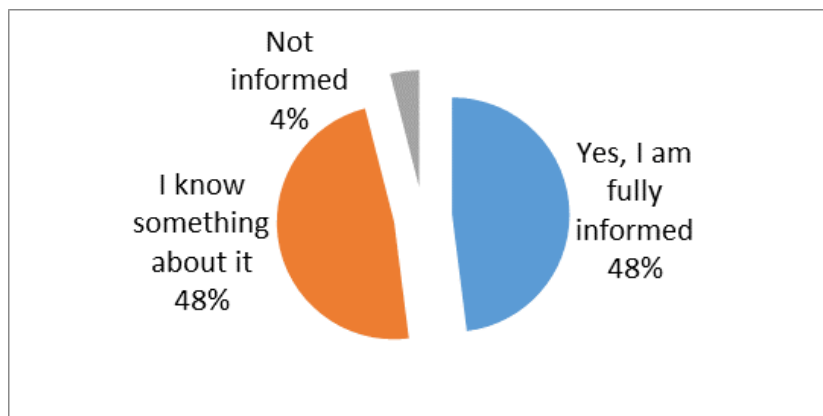
**Graph 1.** The level of education of respondents. Source: Results of authors' survey.

The height of monthly income points to real possibilities of tourists, when it comes to consumption and at the same time the generation of income from rural tourism. The following options are offered in the questionnaire: persons without income – this group mainly includes students, those with income up to 200 EUR, from 201 to 400 EUR, from 401 to 600 EUR, from 601 to 1000 EUR, and subjects with income over 1000 EUR. The results of the poll show that subjects without income are the most numerous (46), which is a result of the bad economic situation of most people in our country. There are 22 subjects with average income, slightly fewer people have income below average (15), up to 200 EUR, there are 13 subjects with income between 401 and 600 EUR whereas only 4 subjects have a somewhat higher income.

Affinities of subjects concerning the observed region. The second part of the poll contains questions which indicate the concrete experiences of subjects with the observed region. In the question which refers to the first associations of the subjects, when we speak about rural tourism in the region, there are various answers.

The first association for the visitors is, in most cases, Zlatibor with its natural beauties, lakes and surrounding villages such as Sirogojno and Mokra Gora. Villages near Kosjeric are also attractive, for example Mionica. Then there are other mountains such as Tara, Zlatar and Golija. Alongside with the natural wealth of the region, the subjects have accentuated the cultural and historical heritage, traditional food and beverages, as well as interesting and authentic old customs.

All the mentioned indicate the presence of positive tendencies in the development of rural tourism of the region. However, some subjects point out to some of the negative associations, such as unemployed experts or insufficiently used capacities during the whole year. The question whether and to what extent they are informed of this kind of tourist movement is answered by equal numbers of subjects who confirm that they are completely informed (48) and those who know something about it, while the number of those who are not informed at all is small (4) (graph 2).



**Graph 2.** The level of awareness of the respondents about the characteristics of rural tourism. Source: Results of authors' survey

Most subjects share the opinion that this region has good conditions for the development of rural tourism (87), while the rest of the subjects (13) partly agree with this statement. According to the subjects' opinion, the greatest potentials of Western Serbia, regarding the development of rural tourism, are preserved and beautiful nature (37), traditional food and beverages (27), villages (houses and objects) (14), people and customs (8), homecraft (4), manifestations and performances (3), cultural and historical sights (3) and other (all potentials together) (4).

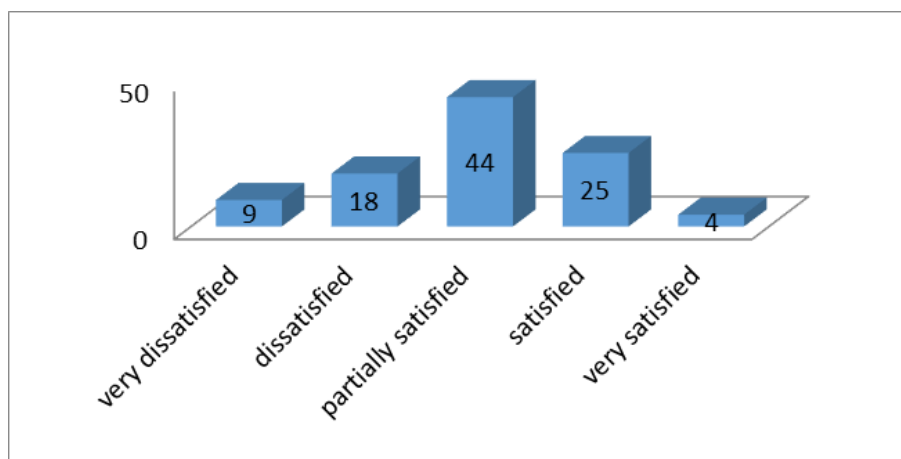
Considering the growing trend of rural tourism in the world, as well as in our country, it is logical that the interest in staying in one of these regions is increased. There is a large number of subjects (76) who would gladly spend their holiday or school break in the countryside. The number of those who might decide to spend a holiday in the countryside is smaller (21), while there is an insignificant number of subjects who are unwilling to venture upon this type of holiday (3).

Those who have already spent time in one of these rural areas have visited: Zlatibor, Tara, Kokin Brod, Bajina Basta, Mokra Gora (Drvengrad), Kosjeric and the surrounding villages, Jasenovo village, then Arilje, Ivanjica and the surrounding villages, Cajetina, Prijepolje, ethno village Kostunici, Sirogojno, etc.

The durations of their stays were different. 24 Subjects spent four to seven days, 22 stayed for a day without staying over night, 18 subjects spent more than seven days, 17 subjects spent two days, and 14 subjects spent three days there.

Motives of tourists to visit these areas are different. Most of them come because of the necessary rest and relaxation (35), and a lot of them (25) because of the preserved nature as well. Visiting family and friends is a motive for 15 subjects and a great deal of subjects (8) name more than one motive as a reason for the visit. Visitors are also motivated by cultural contents (4), traditional manifestations (3), interesting customs (2), then participation in agricultural works and old crafts, traditional food and beverages, socializing with hosts and health content.

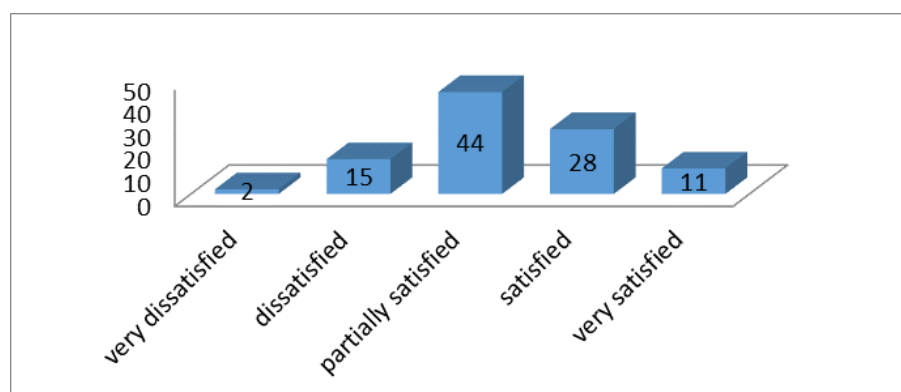
The adequate knowledge that tourists have before arriving at a destination, as well as after the arrival, and during the stay is crucial. It is important that information is well structured and easily accessible. The extent to what this segment satisfies the needs of tourists in both cases can be seen in graphs 3 and 4.



**Graph 3.** Availability of information before arriving at the destination.

Source: Results of authors' survey.

The biggest number of the questioned tourists got their information on destinations of West Serbia through the Internet (65%) and from friends and relatives (24%), and the smallest number of the questioned ones (11%) got the information via other media (TV, radio, newspapers, fairs).



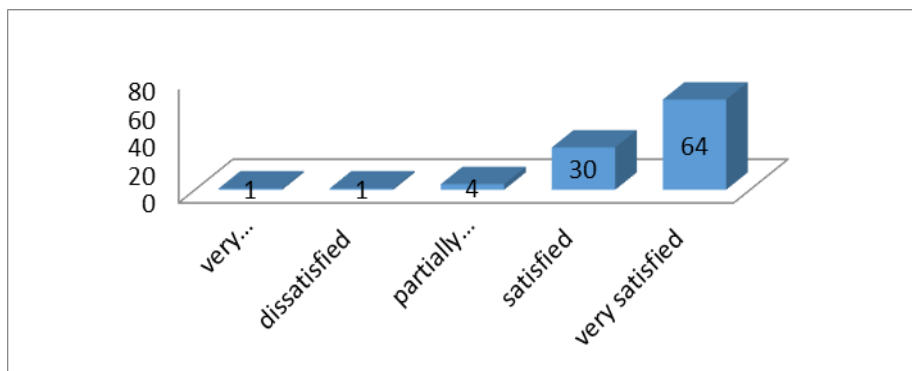
**Graph 4.** Availability of information to the destination itself.

Source: Results of authors' survey.

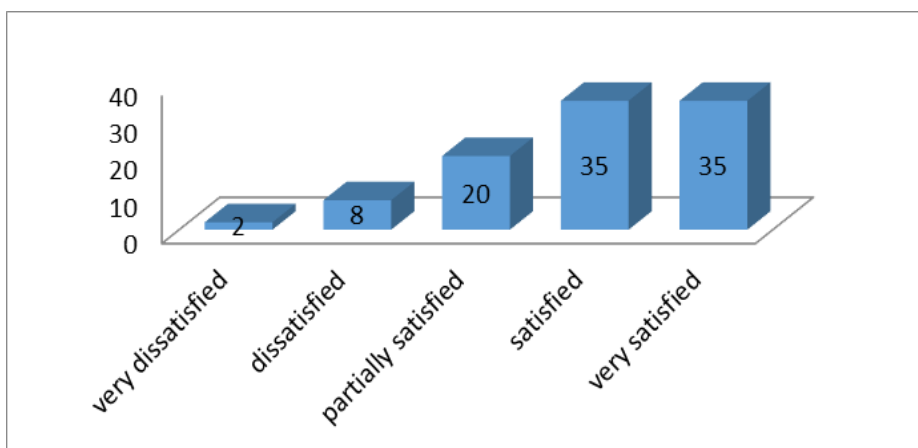
The situation is much similar in both shown cases, i.e. tourists are mostly partly satisfied, satisfied or very satisfied, while the percentage of those who are dissatisfied is smaller, but this fact should by no means be neglected. Even the percentage of the dissatisfied can be overcome by numerous promotional activities.

The development of rural tourism of a region cannot be imagined without traditional food and beverages. Since this region is characterized by varied offer in the field, the results of the research are in accordance with it. Visitors are very satisfied with what the region has to offer when it comes to traditional food and beverages (graph 5).

Besides traditional food and beverages, the authentic image of a rural area is completed with a rich offer of souvenirs with traditional motives. The making of souvenirs should involve and employ a large part of local residents, which brings multiple benefits. As far as souvenirs are concerned, the opinion of the subjects is divided (graph 6).

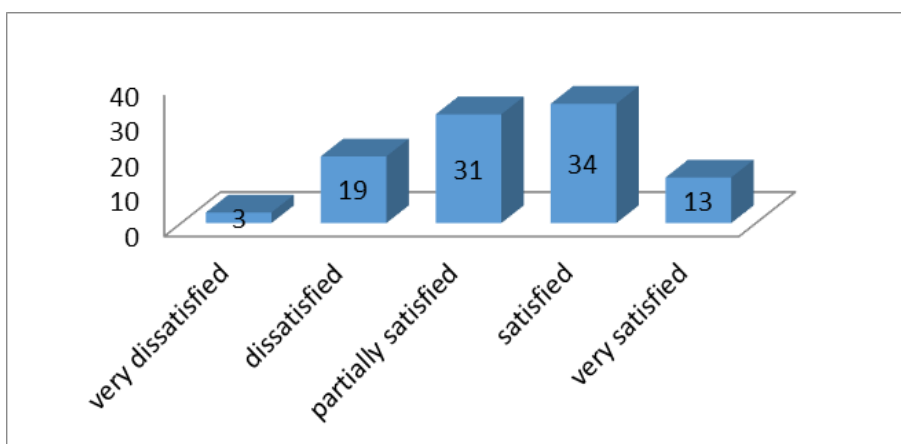


**Graph 5.** Satisfaction gastronomic delights of the region. Source: Results of authors' survey



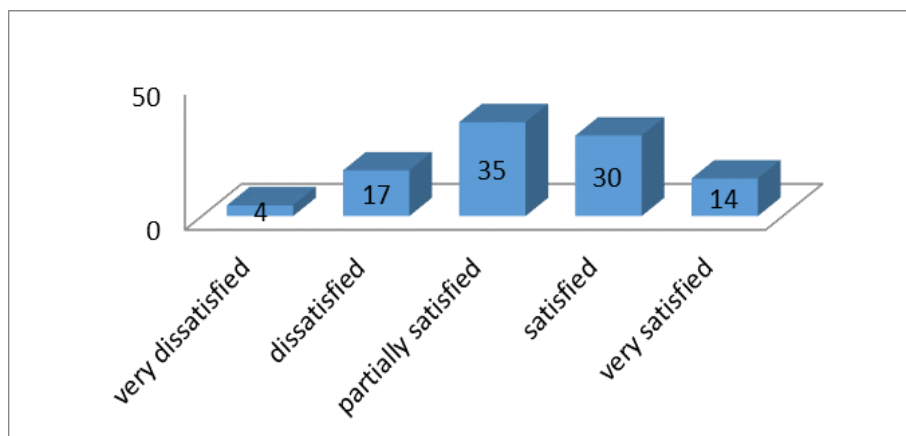
**Graph 6.** Satisfaction with offer of souvenirs. Source: Results of authors' survey

Harmonization of accommodation and hospitality facilities with the surrounding area is significant for the development of rural tourism. It is desirable that these facilities do not impair the look of the environment with their exterior. The subjects are mainly satisfied (graph 7 and 8), but that there is a significant number of those who are not completely satisfied. It is assumed that these are tourists who stayed on Zlatibor or its surroundings, where there degradation of the surrounding area has occurred due to uncontrolled construction.



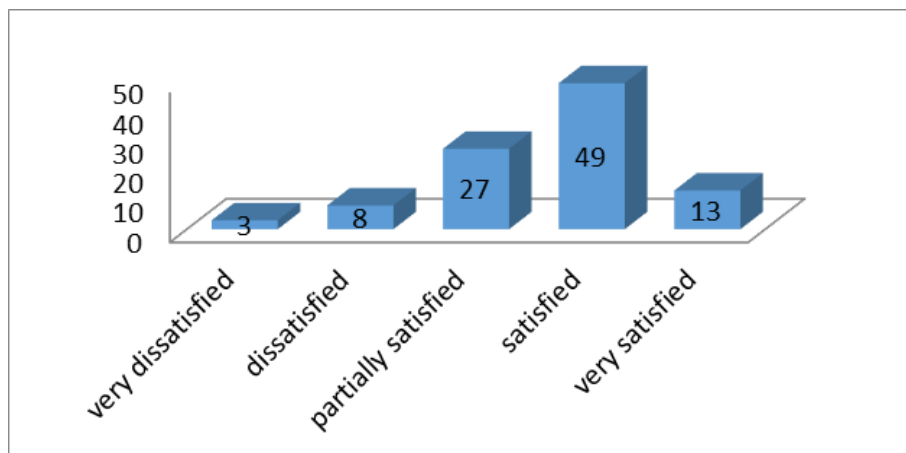
**Graph 7.** The the degree of distortion of the environment with inappropriate exterior of facilities for accommodation. Source: Results of authors' survey.





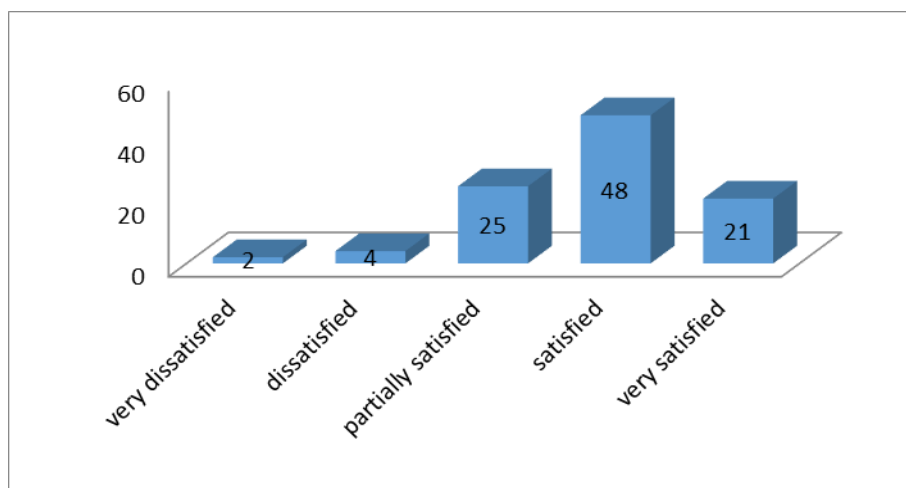
**Graph 8.** . The degree of distortion of the environment with inappropriate exterior of catering facilities. Source: Results of authors' survey.

The quality and price of service ratio is closely connected with all the previously mentioned parameters (Graph 9). It is of great importance that this ratio is satisfying, i.e. that tourists receive a certain service for their money, and not be deprived in this respect. This is also important because it is the only way that will bring a tourist back to the destination, or that a tourist will communicate lovely experiences to their acquaintances. It is generally known that “mouth-to mouth” type of promotion is perhaps the most successful way of making a region more popular.



**Graph 9.** Satisfaction with the quality and price of services rendered. Source: Results of authors' survey.

The overall mark of the offer of the tourist region of Western Serbia is shown in graph 10. Only a few subjects are either very dissatisfied (2) or dissatisfied (4), 25 subjects are partly satisfied, 48 are satisfied and 21 subjects are very satisfied with the offer of the region. The small number of dissatisfied is the result of all weaknesses which are defined through the analysis of other questions. By finding ideal solutions, all weaknesses can absolutely be overcome.



**Graph 10.** The total score of the region offers. Source: Results of authors' survey.

## CONCLUSION

Rural tourism is becoming a more and more popular form of tourist movement and it is a fact that the tourist region of Western Serbia has all potentials of taking its high, competitive position in the market. The problems which are currently present can be overcome in a very reasonable period of time, only if one acts adequately and in accordance with the principles of sustained development. In this research paper there can be seen all potentials which refer to the wealth in natural potentials, cultural and historical sights, the state of infrastructure, material basis and other elements contained in the offer. Alongside with the potentials, there are weaknesses. In order to affirm rural tourism in accordance with its potentials and to make the region an even more important tourist destination of Serbia, it is necessary to implement a series of planned activities. It is necessary to categorize accommodation facilities, increase the number of households that engage in this business, especially in the southeastern part of the region, and educate the local population about new trends in tourism. Tourist posts should be opened in villages and they should, in cooperation with local authorities, work on the promotion of tourist values of rural areas of the region. Since modern tourism cannot be imagined without quality infrastructure systems, one of the main conditions refers to the construction of quality roads and additional contents which will make the stay in a village more complete (sport fields, swimming pools, trim tracks, mountain paths, souvenir shops et al.). It is necessary to professionally design a tourist offer and contents of the stay, together with emphasizing the functions of villages in the region, relying on natural potentials, activities and lifestyle of local residents – from agricultural activities (in a recreational form for tourists), through preparing national dishes, handcrafting, to participating in folklore manifestations, festivals of folk creativity and celebrations. The development of rural tourism is not possible without activities related to its promotion in tourism market. The production of promotional material, internet presentations, constant presence in the media, social networks and at trade fairs are necessary activities in the creation of conditions for a sustainable development of rural tourism. Stays of tourists in villages of the region should be based on an optimal combination of attractive natural and anthropogenic values. This is why the development of tourism must be approached seriously and professionally, fully respecting the principles of ecological protection. In the present material and organizational conditions, rural tourism in the region is almost

completely turned to domestic market, especially to tourists from larger towns. Foreign tourists are rare and they mostly come from ex-Yugoslav republics. If the stated activities are realized, conditions will be made for the promotion of tourist offers of villages of the region in markets of developed European countries, which have an emphasized interest in and need for this kind of tourism.

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