



Sustainable Development of Spa Tourism through the Mobilization of Local Resources

Boban Đurović¹ 

Received: June 21, 2023

Accepted: November 3, 2023

Published: March 16, 2024

Keywords:

Spa tourism;
Sustainable development;
Spa destinations;
Sustainable tourism



Creative Commons Non Commercial CC BY-NC: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>) which permits non-commercial use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission.

Abstract: *The heterogeneous needs and demands of tourists have led to the development of different types of tourism. Due to the desire to spend a part of their time outside of the usual daily activities, tourists today are increasingly developing needs that are in line with the principles of sustainable development. The Republic of Serbia is often referred to as the land of spas, due to numerous thermal mineral springs, which have been used as tourist destinations for decades. In order to preserve the value of spas, and then improve the spa's position as a sustainable tourist destination, strategic decisions are needed that will ensure the use of the resources available to the spa, while respecting the principles of sustainable development. Bearing in mind the above, this paper aims to examine the possibilities of spa tourism development through the mobilization, ie engagement of local resources.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism worldwide experienced significant growth following the Second World War. This rapid development brought about numerous positive effects on employment and the gross domestic product. However, it also led to noticeable negative consequences, which are particularly prominent in today's context. The surge in tourist demand necessitated the establishment of new tourism infrastructure, resulting in detrimental environmental impacts. Additionally, tourism involves the intensive utilization of both natural and anthropogenic resources in a destination, leading to a decline not only in the overall availability of resources but also in their quality (Bošković, 2008). To counteract this trend, strategic transformations within the tourism industry are imperative. These changes must encompass the integration and implementation of sustainable development principles in tourist destinations. The notion of sustainable development in tourism aims to prevent further resource degradation and depletion. It involves educating all stakeholders within the tourism sector about the significance of environmental protection, fostering environmental responsibility, achieving a balance between economic, ecological, and social objectives, and advocating for ethical responsibility towards the natural and anthropogenic resources of the destination (Cvetanović & Stamatović, 2013). One particular manifestation of sustainable tourism that holds considerable relevance for the Republic of Serbia is spa tourism.

As the Republic of Serbia is often referred to as a country of spas, the development of this type of sustainable tourism can not only ensure the use of comparative advantages in the field of tourism but also enable the basis of overall social and economic progress (Petrović & Đoković, 2017). In order to achieve this, strategic decisions are necessary, which are based on the sustainable use of local resources available to spa destinations. Bearing in mind the above, this paper aims to examine the possibilities of spa tourism development through the mobilization, ie engagement of local resources.

¹ Municipality of Vrnjačka Banja, Kruševačka 17, 36210, Vrnjačka Banja, Republic of Serbia

The analysis in the paper is based on the case study of Vrnjačka Spa, the most popular and sought-after spa destination in the Republic of Serbia. The specific natural and anthropogenic resources of this spa enable their engagement to develop specific and different types of sustainable tourism. Since other spa destinations have similar resources to a greater or lesser extent, the results of the analysis can be useful for defining the strategy of engaging local resources and developing sustainable spa tourism in the Republic of Serbia.

2. SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Tourism represents one of the fastest-growing activities in the world, which provides a large number of jobs and a significant contribution to the overall economic result. But in addition to the positives, the intensive development of tourism activities also provides certain negative effects, which are especially pronounced when it comes to the effects on the environment (Yazdi, 2012). Increased tourism needs require the construction of new capacities, air, water and soil pollution, consumption of non-renewable resources, but also the degradation of anthropogenic resources that have been created throughout history (Bošković, 2008). In order to prevent the further negative impact of tourism on the environment, it is necessary to develop and implement the principles of sustainable development. Sustainable tourism emerges as a noteworthy new facet of the tourist industry, given the contemporary lifestyle of individuals who seek to substitute noise, stress, and unhealthy habits with healthier principles. It represents a new approach to travel and leisure, aligning with the evolving preferences of people in today's world.

Sustainable tourism encompasses the concept of conducting tourism activities and businesses in a manner that avoids any detrimental effects on both the environment and the socio-cultural aspects of the local community where the tourism takes place (Pavlović et al., 2009). The World Tourism Organization emphasizes that sustainable tourism enables the fulfillment of tourist needs while ensuring minimal negative impact on the environment. Moreover, it asserts that tourism activities should be executed in a way that allows future generations to meet their own specific tourism requirements (Stefanović & Azemović, 2012). The implementation of sustainable development principles becomes crucial in achieving this objective. Thus, sustainable tourism revolves around three pivotal elements (Yazdi, 2012):

1. Quality - the tourist offer must still be at a high level of quality in order to create tourist satisfaction. In parallel with that, it is necessary to ensure the continuous quality of life of the local community within which tourism is realized, which is possible only with the preservation of natural and anthropogenic resources.
2. Continuity - the natural and anthropogenic resources of the tourist destination must be permanently preserved so that they can be used for the needs of tourism and the coming generations in the future.
3. Balance - sustainable tourism necessarily requires a balancing of economic, ecological and social goals.

While the primary objective of sustainable tourism remains the generation of profits for service providers, it is acknowledged that these profits should also be distributed within the local community. Furthermore, sustainable tourism entails promoting an understanding of the local flora and fauna, as well as the historical and cultural attributes of the destination (Pavlović et al., 2009). Consequently, sustainable tourism goes beyond mere leisure and recreation; it assumes an educational dimension as well. In addition to the aforementioned aspects, the following goals

of sustainable tourism can be identified (Niedziolka, 2012; Cvetanović & Stamatović, 2013; Stefanović & Azemović, 2012):

- respect for the interests of the local community when creating the tourist offer,
- development of the mission, vision and strategy for the preservation of resources used within the offer,
- destination branding in accordance with the principles of sustainable development,
- preserving the social, cultural and historical integrity of the community,
- environmental protection,
- satisfying the needs of tourists,
- making a profit.

The realization of the principles of sustainable tourism is possible only with the definition of strategic plans, in which tourist organizations, public institutions and the local community will be engaged. The goal is to ensure optimal engagement of available natural and anthropogenic resources, in a way that will not lead to their degradation (Bošković, 2008). Strategic decisions for the development of sustainable tourism especially require the suspension of unplanned infrastructural construction and the expansion of physical capacities to the detriment of the natural environment. In parallel with that, the revitalization of natural attractions and their sustainable management in accordance with the principles of sustainable development is needed (Cvetanović & Stamatović, 2013). Therefore, sustainable tourism requires a systematic approach to the preservation of biodiversity, cultural and historical creations, optimal use of natural resources, respect for ethnicity, traditions and customs of the local community, in such a way as to ensure the satisfaction of tourists, create a certain degree of profit, but also preserve all the aforementioned resources for the needs future generations (Niedziolka, 2012; Cvetanović & Stamatović, 2013).

3. SPA TOURISM

Spa tourism represents a distinctive form of sustainable tourism that capitalizes on the inherent elements of spas, including thermal mineral springs, healing mud, clean air, abundant vegetation, and unique climatic conditions (Topalović, 2015). Given the specific nature of these natural resources, spa destinations are well-suited for the development of medical tourism, which can be regarded as a specialized form of sustainable tourism (Ljubisavljević & Leković, 2020). However, in addition to medical tourism, spas are also conducive to the growth of other tourism types such as ecological, educational, sports-recreational, wellness tourism, and more.

Spa tourism, as a specific form of tourism, primarily involves the use of thermal and mineral springs for treatment, rest and rehabilitation of visitors. However, the specific nature and quality of natural resources and climatic features also attract tourists who are eager for rest and recreation in a healthy environment. In addition, business events, congresses and various manifestations are often organized in spas, which is a possibility for the development of some other additional types of sustainable tourism in spa destinations (Petrović, 2017). These are some of the reasons why in a large number of spas there is an even distribution of tourist visits and overnight stays throughout the year (regardless of the season), as well as an average longer stay of guests than in other destinations (Topalović, 2015). In order for sustainable tourism to develop, spas should realize fundamental functions concerning the mandatory protection and rational use of thermo-mineral sources and the planned improvement and development of infrastructure and physical capacities (Petrović & Đoković, 2017). In fact, special emphasis must be placed on the preservation of thermal mineral springs, since it is the most important natural

resource of every spa, which plays a central role not only in providing tourist services but also in providing healing functions (Mojčić & Šušić, 2018). The development of spa tourism is largely based on the healing effects of thermomineral springs, through the promotion of the effects of thermomineral springs on cardiovascular health, skin care, reducing stress levels and physical pain. More precisely, all elements of demand in spa tourism can be viewed from the aspect of the influence of balneological properties on mental, physical and spiritual health (Ljubisavljević & Leković, 2020).

In addition to the above, spa destinations are often characterized by the presence of pronounced cultural characteristics of the local community, as well as the existence of specific cultural and historical creations. Therefore, the development of spa tourism must also be based on ensuring a balance between economic, ecological and social goals (Hrabovski Tomić & Milićević, 2012). Continuous research into the qualitative properties of thermomineral waters is required, to ensure that the development of tourism does not have a degrading effect on this natural resource. In addition, it implies the creation of long-term strategic plans in order to ensure the optimal use of the available resources of the spa destination, first to preserve the flora and fauna, and then to preserve the resources for the needs of future generations (Mojčić & Šušić, 2018).

4. SUSTAINABLE SPA TOURISM DEVELOPMENT THROUGH THE MOBILIZATION OF LOCAL RESOURCES: CASE STUDY OF VRNJAČKA BANJA

As frequently stated, the Republic of Serbia is renowned as the "land of spas" boasting over 300 distinct thermal mineral springs (Topalović, 2015). Spa tourism holds a pivotal role in the overall development of tourism in the country, with Vrnjačka Spa emerging as a highly competitive destination (Petrović & Đoković, 2017). According to data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, a total of 12,245,613 overnight stays were recorded in 2022. Among these, 3,054,744 overnight stays were attributed to spa destinations, accounting for 24.94% of all stays. Vrnjačka Spa, in particular, achieved 756,142 overnight stays, representing 24.75% of the total, securing its second-place position after Sokobanja. However, unlike Sokobanja, where foreign tourists accounted for 2.83% of overnight stays, Vrnjačka Spa experienced a higher percentage of 10.59%, indicating its international recognition as a spa destination (Republički zavod za statistiku, 2022). This recognition stems primarily from Vrnjačka Spa status as the most renowned spa resort in the Republic of Serbia (Hrabovski Tomić & Milićević, 2012). Additionally, the development of various forms of sustainable tourism, including events, sports-recreational activities, ecological tourism, and rural tourism, further contributes to its appeal (Pavlović et al., 2009).

Vrnjačka Banja is located at an altitude of 210-300 meters above sea level, in the valley of Zapadna Morava, on the slopes of Mount Goč and is part of the large forest complex of Mount Kopaonik. The specific climate is also determined by the presence of the surrounding mountains Jastrebac, Stolovi and Željin (Hrabovski Tomić & Milićević, 2012; Savić & Manić, 2023). If we look at its spa location, Vrnjačka Spa belongs to the thermomineral zone of Western Morava and second group of spas (out of a total of three) within which both the summer and winter seasons are expressed (Topalović, 2015).

The sustainable development of spa tourism in Vrnjačka Spa requires responsible and sustainable use of numerous natural and anthropogenic resources. Zrnić et al. (2021) highlight the strategic nature of planning the use of local resources, which implies balancing the needs and

demands of tourists with the sustainable character of natural and anthropogenic resources. The above requires a clear definition of long-term strategic goals, mission and vision of tourism development. The strategic nature of such a plan implies that, in addition to the involvement of tourist organizations, the development of sustainable spa tourism also includes public organizations, which will provide adequate marketing, financial and logistical support.

Examining the wealth of natural resources, it is worth highlighting their potential principles and future applications. Vrnjačka Spa boasts a plethora of hydrological resources, including a diverse river network, Selište lake, etc. Notably, there are seven mineral springs, four of which are employed for balneological therapy. Among these, the oldest source, known as Topla voda, stands as a unique marvel worldwide, maintaining a temperature of 36.5 degrees Celsius. Consequently, safeguarding this source from any form of pollution or unregulated use is of utmost importance (Hrabovski Tomić & Milićević, 2012). These thermal mineral springs, along with others, hold immense potential for therapeutic applications and the development of medical and wellness tourism as a sustainable form of tourism. Furthermore, considering the additional hydrographic resources such as Zapadna Morava, Vrnjačka river, Selište lake, and others, opportunities arise for fishing tourism, as well as ecological and educational tourism, offering visitors the chance to explore the diverse flora and fauna within these ecosystems.

Among the array of natural resources, the numerous and distinctive parks in Vrnjačka Spa deserve special recognition. These parks encompass a total area of 27 hectares and host an impressive variety of 165 woody species, including trees that have thrived for over a century. Serving as exceptional avenues, these parks provide well-designed pathways within a pristine environment (Hrabovski Tomić & Milićević, 2012). They contribute not only to the development of medical tourism but also offer opportunities for recreational, excursion, and ecological tourism. Notably, the Japanese Garden, spanning 3,000 square meters, serves as a captivating representation of Japanese culture, architecture, and horticulture, adding an anthropogenic dimension to the natural surroundings (Opština Vrnjačka Banja, 2013). The parks encompass a diverse range of plant species, including deciduous and coniferous trees, as well as exotic varieties like Canadian spruce, Ayan spruce, Japanese cherry, and more. Furthermore, the parks feature expansive flower roundels, spanning over 1,630 square meters, adorned with a plethora of floral species and embellishments. Situated in the central part of the park, the natural monument Crni bor is an ancient black pine tree, over 200 years old, standing tall at a height of 35 meters (Vrnjačka Banja, 2023).

Ecological and educational tourism of Vrnjačka Spa can be developed due to the existence of numerous forest resources. Namely, Vrnjačka Spa represents one of the most forested territories of the Republic of Serbia, since forests cover more than 65% of the total territory. Within these forests there are numerous springs and watercourses, medicinal and aromatic plants (it is estimated that there are more than 650 species), as well as specific flora and fauna. Such an ecosystem enables another direction of potential development of sustainable tourism, which is hunting tourism. Namely, the sustainable development of spa tourism in Vrnjačka Spa can move towards the implementation of specially planned and controlled hunting tourism, due to numerous animal species. This is made possible by the two hunting grounds that exist on the territory of Vrnjačka Spa, namely Vrnjačka Reka and Beli Izvor (Opština Vrnjačka Banja, 2013).

In addition to natural ones, Vrnjačka Spa also has specific anthropogenic resources, which can also be used for the development of sustainable tourism. In this regard, the oldest resources among them should be highlighted, which are archaeological sites dating from the period of

the Roman Empire, such as the Roman spring Fons Romanus. In the 19th century, the first spa resorts were developed, and in that period the development of tourism in Vrnjačka Banja began. In order to provide accommodation, first of all for rich aristocratic families, specific architectural buildings were created that today have specific cultural and historical significance (Hrabovski Tomić & Milićević, 2012). The Belmark's Castle, built in the 19th century based on the model of Polish castles built in the north of Italy, appears as the best representative example of this spa architecture. We should also highlight the traditional Serbian houses on Čajka Hill (49 buildings in total), which represent part of the cultural and historical complex of Vrnjačka Spa (Kovačević, 2001). Vrnjačka Spa boasts remarkable anthropogenic resources that contribute to its cultural and historical appeal. Noteworthy among these resources are the public library, which holds a legacy of over a century, and the Museum of spa treatment housed within the Museum of Science and Technology. Additionally, the memorial room dedicated to Danilo Bata Stojković, one of the most renowned Serbian actors, adds to the cultural richness of the destination. Furthermore, the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary holds significant potential in fostering the development of religious tourism, offering visitors an important spiritual and cultural experience (Vrnjačka Banja, 2023).

Vrnjačka Spa is also known for numerous events. As an anthropogenic creation, manifestations can be used for the development of sustainable tourism, where the Vrnjački Carnival should first be highlighted, the content of which consists of numerous theater performances, concerts, sports events, exhibitions, as well as other activities through which local culture and tradition are presented (Đorđević et al., 2021). Apart from events that have national significance, Vrnjačka Spa also organizes numerous other events of different characters, which also attract foreign tourists. Among these events, we should highlight "Lovefest" (which promotes contemporary music and youth art), an event in honor of the poet Desanka Maksimović, "Mathematical Bridge" - an event that popularizes mathematics, as well as events that popularize traditional crafts, flowers, sports activities, acting and so on (Vrnjačka Banja, 2023). Given the above, there is a possibility of development and event tourism in Vrnjačka Spa.

5. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Considering the escalating environmental impact of tourism, it is evident that research and development of sustainable tourism will gain increasing significance in the foreseeable future. Within the Republic of Serbia, this form of tourism can be fostered through the advancement of spa tourism, given the abundance of spas in the country, many of which are well-developed and attract a substantial number of tourists. To safeguard both natural and anthropogenic resources, it is imperative to implement sustainable development principles within spa environments, ensuring a harmonious balance of economic, ecological, and social objectives. The findings presented in this paper are based on the case study of Vrnjačka Spa, one of the most renowned spa destinations in the Republic of Serbia. While the results of this analysis can be extrapolated to guide the strategy of sustainable spa tourism development in other destinations, future research should encompass a wider range of spa destinations, particularly those that are most frequented within the Republic of Serbia. This inclusion is necessary to identify significant natural and anthropogenic resources that attract tourists and to preserve these resources from potential degradation. Additionally, future research should delve into analyzing the possibilities of developing specific forms of tourism within spas, examining the roles and importance of individual tourist organizations and public institutions. Furthermore, capturing the opinions and attitudes of tourists and the public will provide valuable insights for comprehensive studies in the field.

6. CONCLUSION

The findings derived from the case study hold significant importance in assessing the potential for utilizing local resources in spa destinations and developing specific forms of sustainable tourism. As the Republic of Serbia is renowned for its abundance of spas, there exists a wealth of natural and anthropogenic resources that can be leveraged to enhance tourism development. However, considering the value and rarity of these resources, along with their unique cultural and historical factors, their mobilization must align with strategic principles. The aim is to achieve a balance between economic, ecological, and social objectives, ensuring the preservation of these resources for future generations.

The distinctive climatic attributes of spa destinations, coupled with a pristine and healthful environment, make them particularly well-suited for the advancement of medical tourism. Indeed, spas in the Republic of Serbia predominantly cater to the development of medical and wellness tourism. Yet, it is important to recognize that these climatic features, along with the distinctive flora and fauna, offer opportunities for the development of other forms of sustainable tourism within spas, such as ecotourism, educational tourism, hunting and fishing tourism, as well as excursion tourism. When considering anthropogenic resources, a plethora of cultural and historical monuments, archaeological sites, architectural wonders, religious edifices, and sports facilities are present within spas. These resources provide avenues for the development of cultural-historical tourism, sports-recreational tourism, and religious tourism as forms of sustainable tourism. Furthermore, it is essential to acknowledge the significance of the local culture, traditions, customs, and the multitude of events taking place in spas, presenting opportunities for the development of event tourism.

References

- Bošković, T. (2008). Održivi turizam kao savremeni koncept razvoja turizma. *Škola biznisa*, 4(16), 123-127.
- Cvetanović, D. S., & Stamatović, Lj. M. (2013). Karakteristike novih usluga u turizmu. *Ekonomika*, 4, 202-216.
- Đorđević, N., Podovac, M., & Milićević, S. (2021). Istraživanje zadovoljstva lokalne zajednice manifestacijom međunarodni Vrnjački karneval. *Oditor*, 7(1), 101-130. <https://doi.org/10.5937/Oditor2101101D>
- Hrabovski Tomić, E., & Milićević, S. (2012). Razvoj turizma Vrnjačke Banje na principima održivog razvoja. *Teme*, 36(2), 755-771.
- Kovačević, T. (2001). Antropogeni potencijali Vrnjačke Banje. *Turizam*, 5, 109-111.
- Ljubisavljević, T., & Leković, M. (2020). Contemporary spa tourism development trends with reference to the Republic of Serbia. In: D. Cvijanović (Ed.), *Tourism in function of development of the Republic of Serbia - Tourism and Rural Development* (TISC 2020), Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja, University of Kragujevac, Vrnjačka Banja, 215-230.
- Mojić, J., & Šušić, V. (2018). Thermomineral sources in the function of healthcare tourism in southern Serbia. In: J. Đurović Todorović (Ed.), *49th International Scientific Conference quantitative and qualitative analysis in economics*, University of Niš, Faculty of Economics, Niš, 89-100.
- Niedziolka, I. (2012). Sustainable tourism development. *Regional Formation and Development Studies*, 8(3), 157-166. <https://doi.org/10.15181/rfds.v7i2.2371>

- Opština Vrnjačka Banja. (2013). *Strategija održivog razvoja opštine Vrnjačka Banja 2013-2023*. Vrnjačka Banja: Opština Vrnjačka Banja.
- Pavlović, M., Radivojević, N., & Lazić, J. (2009). Održivi razvoj banjskog turizma u Srbiji. *Industrija*, 37(2), 37-57.
- Petrović, D. (2017). Banje Republike Srpske kao održive turističke destinacije. *Turističko poslovanje*, 20, 37-50. <https://doi.org/10.5937/TurPos1720037P>
- Petrović, J., & Đoković, F. (2017). Economic aspects of sustainable tourism development of Vrnjci spa. *Ekonomika*, 1(1), 83-91.
- Republički zavod za statistiku. (2022). *Saopštenje. Statistika ugostiteljstva i turizma - turistički promet decembar 2022. godine*. Beograd: Republički zavod za statistiku.
- Savić, A., & Manić, V. (2023). Dalji razvoj medicinskog turizma u Vrnjačkoj Banji uvođenjem Schroth metode. *Zdravstvena zaštita*, 52(1), 94-105. <https://doi.org/10.5937/zdravzast52-43692>
- Stefanović, V., & Azemović, N. (2012). Održivi razvoj turizma na primeru Vlasinske površi. *Škola biznisa*, 1, 38-50. <https://doi.org/10.5937/skolbiz1201038S>
- Topalović, S. (2015). Stanje i perspektive banjskog turizma u Srbiji. *GLOBUS – Časopis za Metodološka i didaktička pitanja geografije*, 37(38), 123-134.
- Vrnjačka Banja. (2023). <https://vrnjackabanja.co.rs/>, Retrieved June 2023.
- Yazdi, S. K. (2012). Sustainable tourism. *American International Journal of Social Science*, 1(1), 50-56.
- Zrnić, M., Đoković, F., Košutić, J., Mašić, C., & Hassan, V. (2021). Planning and development of spa & wellness tourism. In: G. Knežević (Ed.), *SITCON 2021 Spa&Wellness Tourism – Development, Perspectives, and Experiences*, University Singidunum, Belgrade, 60-68.