



Rural Tourism Challenges of the Sarajevo Canton's "Green Ring"

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Abstract: Rural tourism is gaining popularity due to a healthier stay in a less developed rural environment. Sarajevo Canton, Bosnia and Herzegovina's most popular destination strives to enhance its tourism offer by developing rural tourism in its immediate surroundings. The "green ring," a basin rim with preserved forest ecosystems and rural villages, serves as the foundation for the rural tourism product. The paper analyses the characteristics of rural tourism in the vicinity of Sarajevo and the role of stakeholders in planning rural tourism. Fieldwork, surveys, and interviews with tourism industry representatives were conducted to determine the cohesion of joint activity and the key features of rural tourism development. Domestic tourists make up the majority of rural visitors, although tourists from the Middle East and Europe are particularly interested in rural tourism. The top motives for visiting rural areas are walking and hiking, traditional gastronomy, and escaping from everyday life. The paper clarifies the challenges and barriers to rural tourism development.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of rural tourism (Fig. below) demonstrates that the focus is on identifying rural areas and categories of rural visitors in order to ensure a diverse and sustainable tourist offer with certified services in rural tourism, as well as sustainable management with economic income and integrated cooperation of numerous stakeholders (authorities, local communities, tour operators, investors, international organisations, etc.), including legal aspects of rural tourism development and marketing impacts on the popularity enhancement of rural tourist destinations. „Rural tourism is a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's experience is related to a wide range of products generally linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle/culture, angling, and sightseeing“ (UNWTO, 2024). „Products in rural tourism are represented by the offer of the farms, tourist villages, ethno-houses, rural architecture, and rural manifestations, i.e., all services that are offered to tourists, such as room and board, sightseeing of the destination, participating in the work of a country host, organising creative workshops, etc.“ (Košić et al., 2015).

„Rural tourism activities take place in non-urban (rural) areas with the: a) low population density, b) landscape and land use dominated by agriculture and forestry, and c) traditional social structure and lifestyle“ (UNWTO, 2024). The Sarajevo Canton comprises nine municipalities, five of which are classified as non-urban (see Fig. 2), indicating its opportunities for rural tourism development. Sarajevo Canton (in Census from 2013, Federal Bureau of Statistics, 2024) has more than 200 rural settlements with an average density of 53.7 inhabitants per sq km; the share of rural population is 14.1%, consisting of the multiethnic rural communities: Bosniaks

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(15.7%), Serbs (8.2%), Croats (3.3%), etc. „Rural tourism has a high potential to stimulate local economic growth and social change because of its complementarity with other economic activities, its contribution to GDP and job creation, and its capacity to promote the dispersal of demand in time (fight seasonality) and along a wider territory“ (UNWTO, 2024). Sarajevo Canton, along with the steady increase in the tourism industry, has recently recognised the need for developing rural tourism, which is currently one of the strategic goals of its tourism development. Although the rural tourist offer and the cooperation of stakeholders in that field are limited, the canton has registered over twenty rural households that are now part of the tourism supply, making the first step to the rural tourism legislative growth.

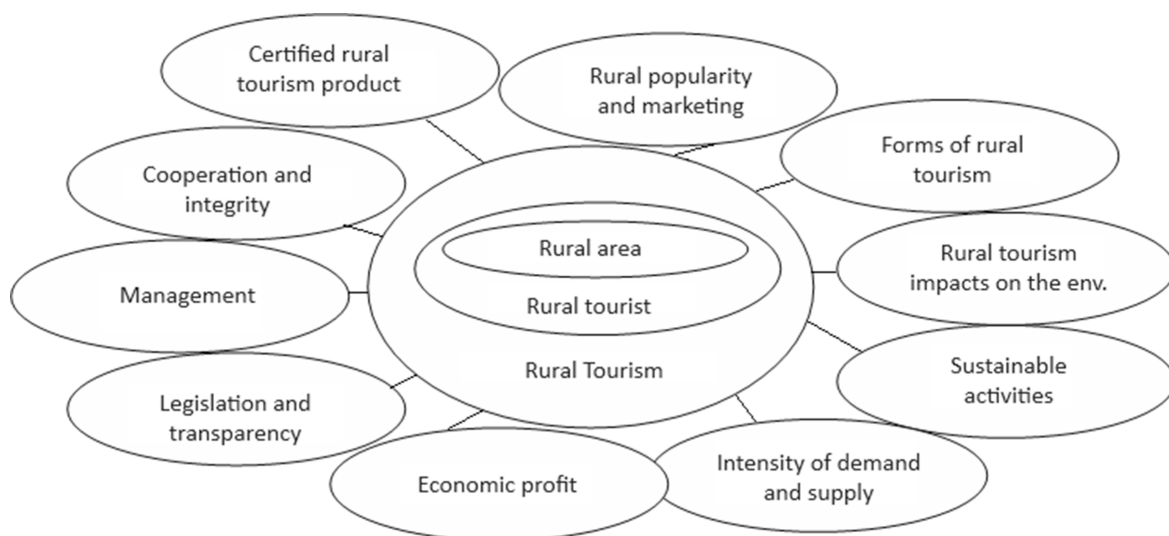


Figure 1. Rural tourism concept

Source: Žunić (2012)

2. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to identify potential and challenges to the growth of rural tourism in Sarajevo Canton. The paper investigates the characteristics of rural tourism in the vicinity of Sarajevo, as well as the involvement of stakeholders in its planning. Fieldwork, surveys, and interviews with tourism industry representatives were conducted to assess the coherence of cooperative activity and the main features of rural tourism development. Five tour operators (inbound agencies) and six rural tourist households from the Sarajevo Canton area participated in the survey, which followed the direct contact and open module principles. An interview was conducted as well with representatives from the canton, Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Bosnia and Herzegovina tourism authorities and tourism associations.

3. TOURISM DEVELOPMENT OF THE SARAJEVO CANTON

Sarajevo Canton (43°52' N, 18°26' E, alt. 630 m) is the country's leading cultural and tourism center, with tourism as "the fastest-growing industry" (Ministry of Economy, 2024). "In 2019, Bosnia and Herzegovina had the third-highest tourism growth rate in the world" (USAID, 2019), with Sarajevo Canton leading by 40% of overall participation. „Sarajevo, as the capital, has a favorable geographic, traffic and tourism position, and it's well connected with Europe and the rest of the World, while it's also part of a very important European tourism corridor which connects the continental Middle Europe and the Mediterranean Europe" (Žunić et al., 2019).

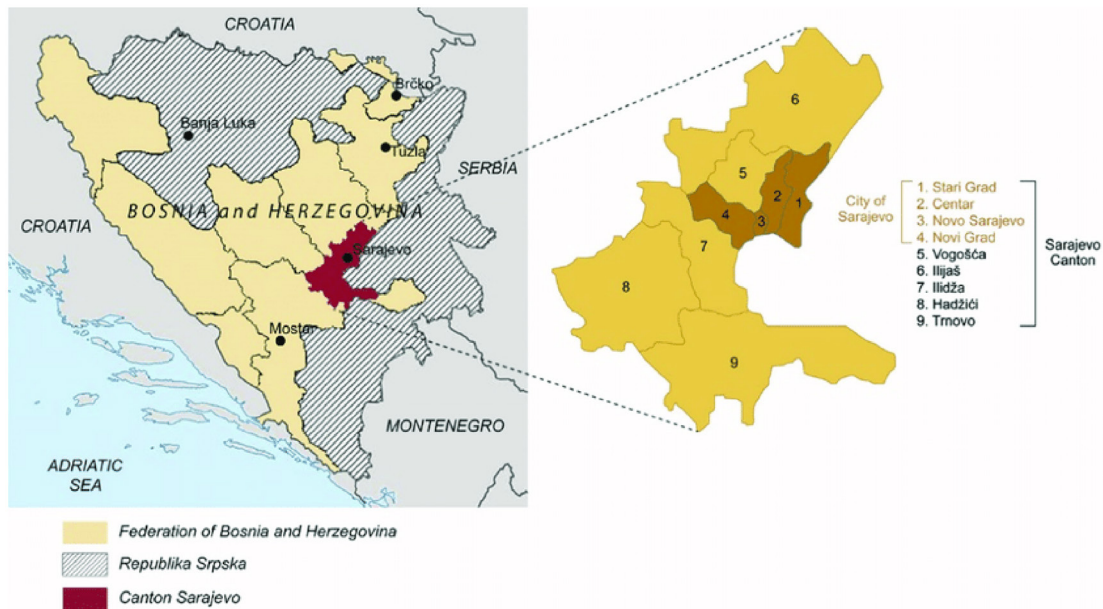


Figure 2. Gül & Dee Map of Sarajevo Canton central position in Bosnia and Herzegovina, formed of its nine municipalities, including four making the City of Sarajevo

Source: Turhan and Ayataç (2020)

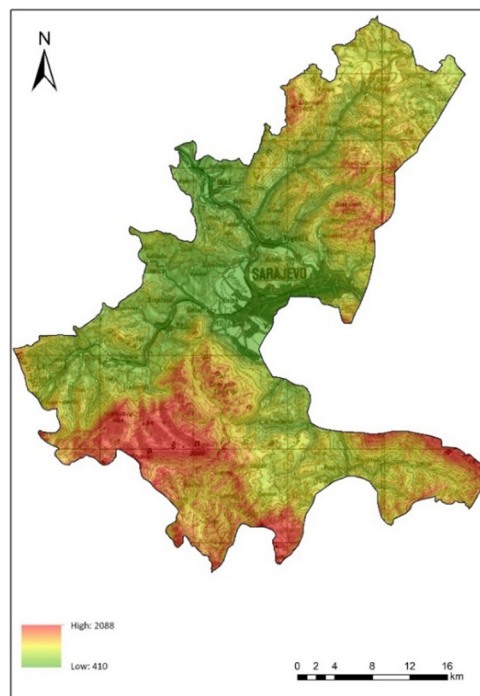


Figure 3. Topography of the Sarajevo Canton with its mountain surroundings popular as the “green ring” or “the Sarajevo lungs”

Source: Own project, supported by GIS

The Sarajevo Canton's terrain has highly pronounced dynamics, with the high mountain surroundings: Bjelašnica (2,067) ft. Igman (1,510), Jahorina (1,916), Trebević (1,629), Treskavica (2,088), Visočica (1,974), Ozren (1,452) ft. Bukovik (1,532), including the Black River Plateau (approx. 1,000), and the valley of Bosnia in the central part (approx. 500). Climate types are temperate continental, pre-mountain, and alpine mountain. “Sarajevo with its immediate surroundings is an area abundant in water” (University of Sarajevo, 2024), settled in the Bosnia river basin, including

its source, the urban area in the Miljacka valley, the peripheral regions popular by thermomineral waters, and the “green ring” with streams and waterfalls. Thus, Sarajevo Canton is also popular for scenic landscapes and five IUCN nature-protected areas, which are an attractive part of its tourism offer. Sarajevo is home to an exceptionally rich natural and cultural heritage, given that “this region comprises the meeting of various civilisations and peoples” (Sarajevo Cantonal Development Planning Institute, 2021), with the Illyrians, Slavens, Ottomans, Austro-Hungarians, and other distinctive marks. “It’s a place where East and West, North and South meet, layers of history and diversity of different cultures and their spiritual and material sediments permeate” (Sarajevo Cantonal Development Planning Institute, 2021). Sarajevo is a growing European tourism destination, with the City of Sarajevo and Ilidža serving as the focal tourism area. Žunić et al. (2020) stated that Sarajevo has experienced positive tourism growth over the past two decades, with a 20% increase in total accommodation offerings; hotels are primarily concentrated in the urban zone, while luxury hotels are located southwest of the city centre near thermomineral waters. Žunić et al. (2024) stated that the growing demand for accommodation in non-urban zone, e.g. Hadžići (Arabian tourist settlements, “Osenik Resort” and “Countryside Resort”) and Ilidža (Spa) highlights the importance of Sarajevo Canton’s natural resources in the immediate green environment, as the natural sites attract the majority of foreign tourism investments, particularly from Gulf countries.

Figure 4 indicates the continuous growth of Sarajevo’s tourism, showing the increase in the number of visitors and nights for the period 2007–2023, (exc. 2019–COVID), and its greatest expansion in the post-pandemic period:

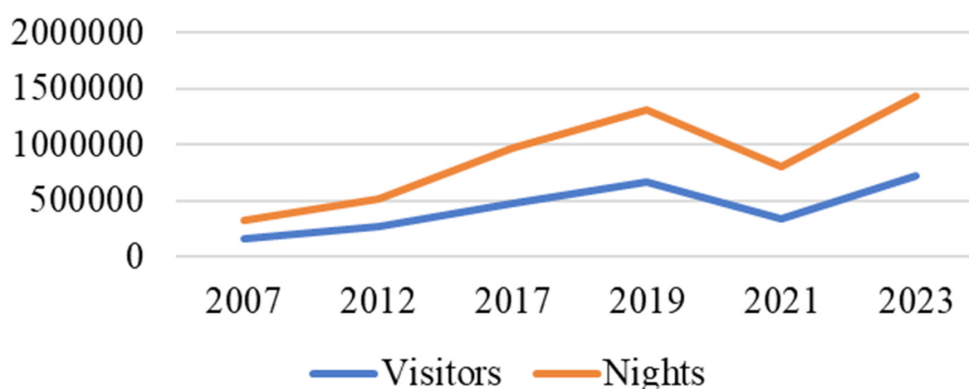


Figure 4. Growth of the total number of visits and overnight stays in Sarajevo Canton in the period 2007-2023.

Source: Žunić et al. (2024)

Žunić et al. (2024) stated the consecutive growth of foreign nights in Sarajevo for the observed period too, highlighting the international tourism importance of the destination. The share of foreign overnight stays is 86% in 2023, with the prevalence of five countries (Turkey, Croatia, KSA, Serbia, UAE) accounting for the statistical majority (53% of total nights).

4. RURAL TOURISM CHARACTERISTICS IN THE SARAJEVO CANTON

According to the Ministry of Economy (2024), Sarajevo Canton has a large-scale potential for all types of tourism development, and it’s a profitable area for foreign investment. The implementation of the Strategy for the Development of Tourism in Sarajevo Canton Until 2030 will be guided by two priorities: the establishment of a system framework for the development of a tourist destination and the development of an appealing year-round tourism offer, focusing,

among others, on rural tourism. The Draft Law on Amendments to the Tourism Law will be established for good tourism development management in terms of stability and green tourism, emphasizing outdoor tourism and the mountain surroundings of Canton as strategically important. Thus, it includes the development of various rural tourism activities in the "green ring" of Sarajevo. The mountain surroundings of the Sarajevo Canton and its green and rural potential provide excellent opportunities for various rural tourist activities, of which many are considered outdoor activities as they're nature-based, such as forest meditation, hiking, walking, harvesting, hunting, farm tours, bird safaris, quad tours, agricultural open-air events, grass moving, and other competitions, etc.

In the new brochure of "Rural Tourism in Canton Sarajevo" (Ministry of Economy of Canton Sarajevo, 2022), over 20 rural households are presented with their tourism offer (accommodation, gastronomy, etc.), including the model of their year-round activities (planting, animal care, moving the grass, horticulture, picking fruits and mushrooms, harvesting, preparation of winter house, home crafts), with the opportunity for visitors to participate based on their interests.

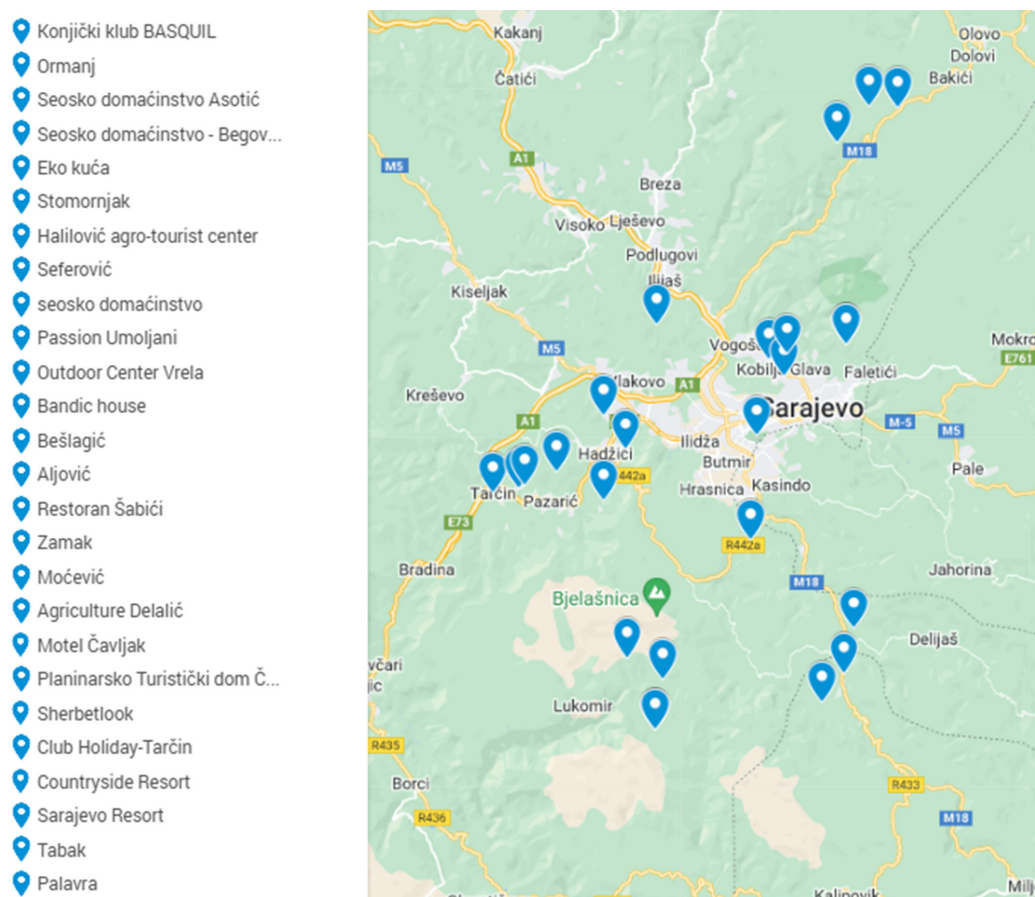


Figure 5. Rural households in Sarajevo Canton, including two Arab tourist settlements: Sarajevo Resort & Countryside Resort

Source: Own project, supported by Google My Maps

Resources for the development of rural tourism in Sarajevo Canton: a) mountains, nature scenic beauty, and protected areas; b) closeness to other attractive destinations; c) gastronomy offer; d) rural culture & tradition (ethnic diversity attractivity with distinctions in religious and other customs, while certain exhibit cultural fusion due to coexistence); e) outdoor activities; f) competitive prices of tourist services (often higher for foreign visitors). Benefits of rural tourism are: i) conservation

of natural resources and increasing awareness of environmental importance; ii) promotion of a healthy lifestyle; iii) creating new jobs and increasing the income of the local community; iv) social interactions and cultural exchange; v) encouraging investments in rural areas.

The Fig. 6 shows the average annual number of overnight stays in rural households, which is higher than the average stay in Sarajevo Canton (the Spatial Development Planning Institute estimates an average stay of two days in 2023):

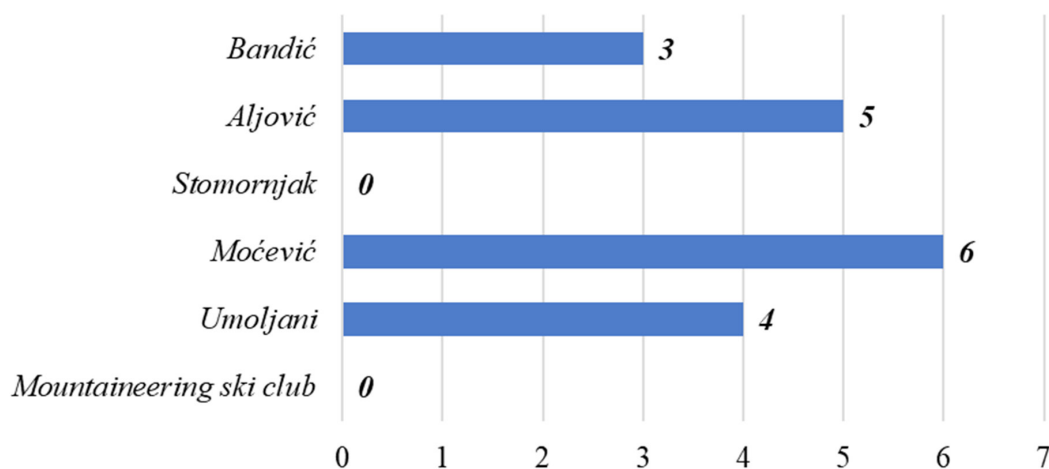


Figure 6. Average annual number of overnight stays in rural households

Source: Own research

Domestic tourists are the most common visitors to rural areas (see Fig. 7 & 8), and the majority of visits occur during the warmer period of the year (April-October), which is the most popular tourist season in Sarajevo Canton (the “extended summer season”):

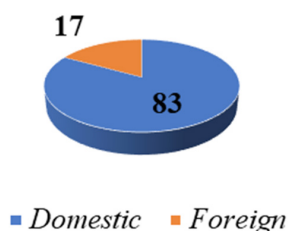


Figure 7. Percentage ratio of dominant visits by domestic and foreign tourists among surveyed rural households

Source: Own research

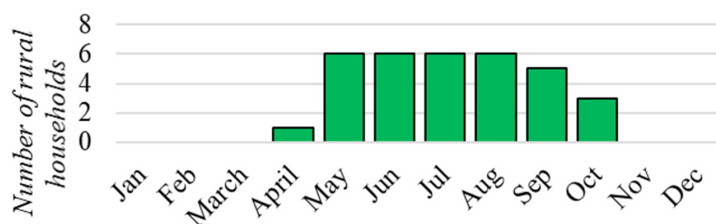


Figure 8. Seasonality of tourist visits in rural households of Sarajevo Canton

Source: Own research

Among the top motives for visiting rural areas in Sarajevo (see Fig. 9) are: walking and traditional gastronomy, hiking, and escaping to a more peaceful place from everyday life.

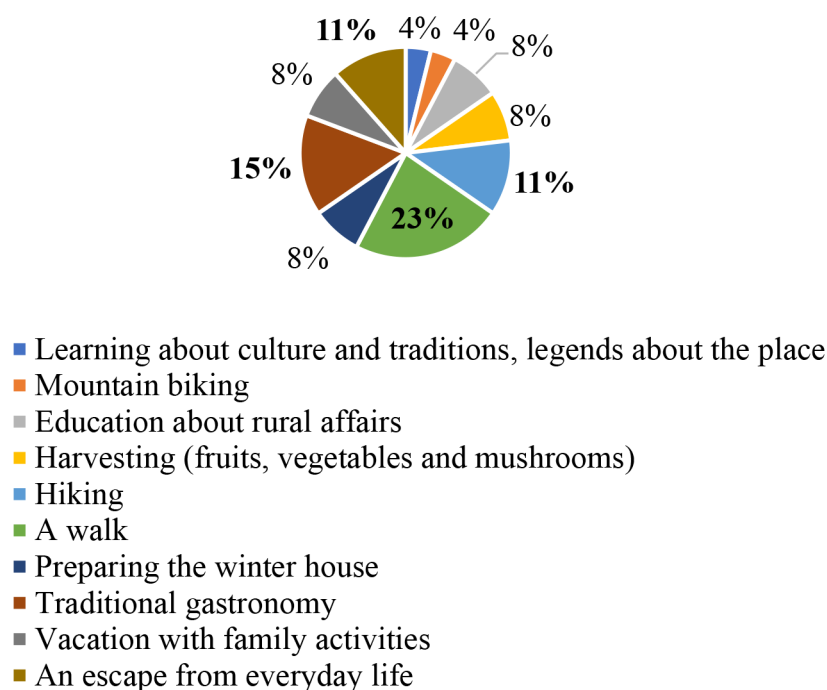


Figure 9. The most common reasons for visiting rural areas according to rural households

Source: Own research

According to Fig. 10, visitors from the Gulf countries (UAE, Qatar, Kuwait), Austria, and Germany are the most interested in rural sites of Sarajevo Canton:

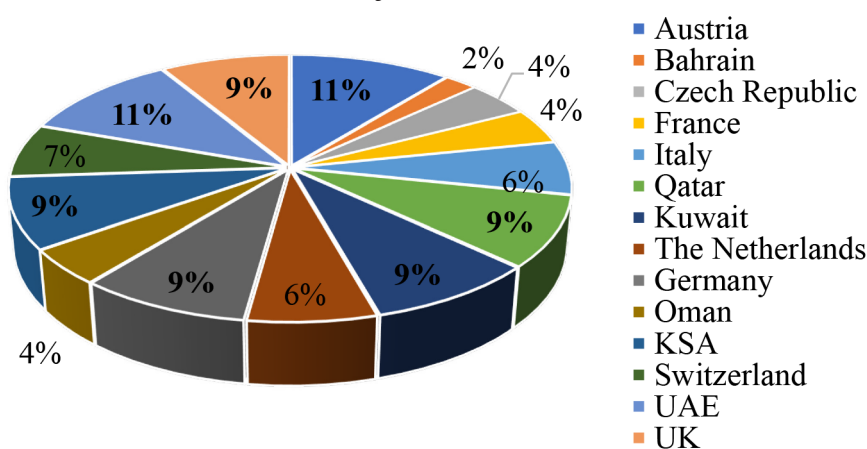


Figure 10. Visitors interested in rural areas by arrival according to the tour operators

Source: Own research

5. LIMITATIONS AND BARRIERS IN THE RURAL TOURISM OF SARAJEVO CANTON

However, rural tourism in Sarajevo Canton hasn't progressed significantly due to numerous constraints. In light of our field observations and the perspectives of tourism representatives (the Tourist Association of Sarajevo Canton, UTA, and the Ministry of Environment and Tourism), we can identify important issues in the development of rural tourism in Sarajevo Canton: insufficient investments in rural development; lack of networking among rural areas with mountaineering societies and tour operators; insufficient investments in rural development; a lack of spatial planning and legal documentation in the field of rural tourism to regulate issues related to the classification of catering facilities in rural households, their purpose, the type of services they provide,

construction style regulations, etc.; lack of cooperation between tourist organisations and rural communities in planning itineraries and arrangements for visiting rural locations; lower interest of rural households in registering in the tourist offer (according to the Tourism Association of Sarajevo, there have only been seven rural accommodation facilities in the last decade); insufficient communal infrastructure (traffic and sanitary/hygienic) in rural areas; summer seasonality of rural tourism offer (given the poorer traffic infrastructure and heavier weather obstacles during the winter). Among the offer's weaknesses are inauthentic handicrafts, such as woollen socks, which are sometimes manufactured using machine knitting instead of traditional methods like shearing, spinning, and knitting sheep's wool; visitors purchase "improvised" domestic goods of lower quality, which will subsequently reflect negatively on the sustainability of the product. Another issue is poor tourist navigation in rural areas, which includes a lack of information, markers, and organised paths (walking, cycling, hiking, etc.), increasing the risk of underutilization of the stay, as well as other threats such as getting lost, walking into minefields, potential injuries, usurpation of land by inappropriate vehicles, and so on. In terms of current rural tourism promotion in Sarajevo Canton, two key features have been identified: a) there are a limited number of websites that highlight rural households and their tourism offerings, and b) some advertising on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, though it is worth noting that advertising on websites such as TripAdvisor, Booking, and similar is extremely uncommon.

Figure 11 illustrates that rural households share a common motivation to develop rural tourism offers, including lodging facilities. However, their expectations are split into two categories: either they have already planned to increase their capacities, as in the case of half of them, or they are willing to participate but have been impeded by financial constraints:

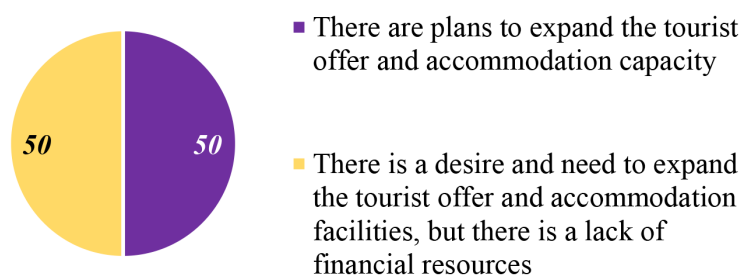


Figure 11. Projection of expansion of tourist offer and accommodation capacities according to rural households in Sarajevo Canton (%)

Source: Own research

6. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

To boost rural tourism, it is necessary to improve its products and promotions, such as ads with seasonal and themed packages (weekend on the farm, family packages, etc.), educational workshops and tours (learning about agriculture, animal husbandry, or traditional crafts), organizing village fairs and festivals, etc., and, among mostly important, tailoring strategies to the target audience. Rural tourism in Sarajevo Canton should be promoted in two directions: a) European countries, such as Austria or Germany, whose visitors are aware of the environment and sustainable development, and b) GCC countries, whose climate and vegetation differ from this area, making Sarajevo's rural areas appealing to these consumers. Furthermore, it is crucial to monitor the results and adjust the marketing strategies according to the needs and feedback of tourists. From the perspective of rural tourism development, the strategic spatial documents for the Sarajevo Canton and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina will focus on: creating an outdoor alliance

for a methodical approach to the development of rural areas, including various actors such as land owners (state, entity, or municipality), governors (Sarajevo Forest), etc.; enhancing and promoting local agricultural, culinary, gastronomic, and rural tourism events; and establishing new tourism clusters that will include more protected areas and monitoring of novel ecotourism products. Professional and scientific experts must undertake a situational analysis of the current conditions and work together with authorities to establish acceptable short-term and long-term objectives in further tourism development strategies.

7. CONCLUSION

Sarajevo Canton has a high potential for the development of rural tourism due to its mountainous topography and numerous villages in the green environment. Tourism development has been progressive over the last decade, with foreign visitors and overnight stays accounting for the majority of tourist traffic. Rural tourism is a developing phenomenon that faces numerous challenges, but the initial steps have been taken in terms of enhancing legislative and planning regulations, as well as creating Sarajevo Canton's rural tourism offer. Rural households are willing to participate in tourism development, which is a key incentive for achieving the goals. Although domestic visits to rural areas are currently the most common, interest in rural areas has grown among foreign tourists, primarily among wealthy Arab clients and Europeans (particularly in central Europe), who will serve as the target groups for the future promotion of Sarajevo Canton's rural tourism product.

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