

POSSIBILITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT OF RECREATIONAL TOURISM IN SOKOBANJA

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ABSTRACT: *The modern way of life and work has a big impact on the use of leisure time and rest. Considering that the contemporary work is less dynamic and excludes physical activity, in each person creates the need for appropriate activities, which will catch up basic human needs in free time, embodied in the entertainment, movement, recreation and game, in order of better and higher quality of life. Active holidays, as a global trend, with big steps takes precedence in the use of leisure time with the modern human. Serbia is certainly very interesting as a destination for the development of this type of tourism, due to its natural and geographical diversity. Sokobanja is one of the most important and most visited spas in Serbia, and it has great potential for active holidays. Climate characteristics, directly mountainous environment, untouched nature, thermal and mineral springs and streams form the basis for the development of modern ways of tourism - active holiday. In this paper, I will analyze the potentials for the development of recreational tourism in the municipality of Sokobanja, current state of development, opportunities for development, material base and tourist traffic, as well as factors that limit the dynamic development of tourism and recreation.*

Keywords: *Sokobanja, recreational tourism, active holidays*

INTRODUCTION

The development of industrialization in the world in the 19th and 20th centuries led to the fact that man was increasingly alienated from nature, he had less time for himself, and he was increasingly consumed physically and mentally. Such alienation negatively affects his working but also psycho-physical morale. Hence, there were various protests by workers, who wanted to increase their rights. There was a need for recreation. A large number of countries were introducing various forms of recreation for their workers in order to achieve their psycho-physical recovery and rest. In the former socialist countries, which include our country, Serbia, various social and trade union organizations were the initiators of a massive recreational movement (Čomić et al., 2008). In Serbia,

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after the Second World War, spa and mountain centers were activated massively, and the most famous are Vrnjacka Banja, Sokobanja, Kopaonik, Zlatibor, and an increasing number of people took part in this form of touristic movements.

Active vacation is a specific type of tourism that involves a large number of leisure and recreation activities that are directly related to healthy life, fun and entertainment, in order to restore and recover human psycho-physical strength. Modern way of life and work, as well as life in urban surroundings, affects contemporary society, so, more and more people accept an active way of resting (Blagajac, 1992). A man uses various sports-recreational activities whose contents represent natural forms of movement, in accordance with their health condition, abilities, needs and interests. Given that some basic human needs such as movement, fun and play can be satisfied with sports and recreation, active holidays represent a new trend in the development of tourism, which differs from the traditional content of the holiday. Active vacation includes numerous activities in an attractive natural environment, which are different from everyday work. It is essentially a way of resting with various activities in order to maintain and improve the psycho-physical state of the organism in an attractive natural environment (Bartoluci, Andrijašević, 2006).

Sokobanja possesses natural potentials that are extraordinary for active rest. A large number of activities that contribute to the establishment or maintenance of biological and psychological balance, can be practiced in the attractive surroundings of the Sokobanja basin, some of which include hiking, running, swimming, cycling or rollerblading, sailing and rafting.

Sokobanja basin is located in the central part of eastern Serbia. It covers an area of 525.5 km². In the morphological view of the Sokobanja basin, it is part of the mountain-valley macro-region, and the part of eastern Serbia (Pavlović, 1995). From all sides it is surrounded by mountains of middle height: Rtanj (1,567 m) in the north, in the east are Slemen and Krstatac, in the southeast is Devica, in the south is Ozren, and in the southwest is Bukovik. It is 60 km away from Niš and 30 km from the highway E-75, the main tourist route in our country. It is 240 km away from Belgrade.

The possibilities of development of recreational tourism in Sokobanja are based on the richness of natural tourist values such as climatic characteristics, vegetation, thermo-mineral springs and favorable tourist-geographical position. Complementarity of development of spa tourism with mountain tourism is of fundamental importance for further development of tourism in Sokobanja. The possibilities of developing recreational tourism in Sokobanja are considerably higher than the current situation, material base, the content and the length of the tourist stay. The proximity of the city of Nis, as the main emitting area and proximity to the airport "Car Konstantin", increases the tourist value of Sokobanja.

NATURAL RESOURCES IN THE FUNCTION OF RECREATIONAL TOURISM IN SOKOBANJA

The nature of the Sokobanja region is a good base for the development of tourism. In spite of that, a good part of the tourist potentials is not sufficiently and adequately presented to the tourist market. Therefore, due to the poor economic conditions (both at the level of Serbia, and especially in the area of eastern Serbia), the tourist potentials of the Sokobanja basin have not been sufficiently valorized, which is a limiting factor for further development. The stay of tourists in this area should be based on an optimal combination of attractive natural attributes that will directly enable active vacation (Radivojević, 2010).

Sokobanja has numerous and varied natural tourist values that represent the basis of tourism development in this region. Climatic characteristics, direct mountain environment, thermo-mineral springs and watercourses provide excellent conditions for psycho-physical rest and recovery of human.

The combination of climate factors in the territory of Sokobanja enables the development of healthcare tourism and recreational tourism. The favorable climatic features that characterize the Sokobanja basin are classified into the ranks of the spa-climatic sites, that is why Sokobanja carries the epithet of the air spa. Analyzing the condition of certain climatic elements, the climate of Sokobanja is defined as climate of pleasant feeling zone. This is confirmed by the fact that the mean annual air temperature is 10,29 °C. The coldest month is January with an average temperature of -1.25 °C, and the warmest July is 21.4 °C (Maćejka, 2003). The average number of days in a year with an air temperature above 18 °C, which is suitable for tourist movements and is considered as a tourist season, is 92 days. The average temperature in the winter part of the year is -0.6 °C, in the spring 10.6 °C, in the summer is 20.2 °C and in the autumn 12.0 °C. The annual amount of rainfall is 599 mm, and based on this, Sokobanja is ranked in the spas with a minimum amount of atmospheric precipitation, which does not affect so much on tourism movements (Maćejka, 2003). Relative air humidity is the highest in winter months with a maximum in december of 83%, and the lowest in august is 68%. The annual insolation value is 1,861.5 hours, or an average of 5.09 hours per day (Radivojević, 2008). The combination of climatic elements of this space sedately acts on the organism of human. Climate of Sokobanja can occur as direct and indirect tourism value. If it occurs as an element of climatotherapy, which is, in the function of recreation, it is considered as a direct tourist value. As an indirect tourist value, the climate of Sokobanja is reflected in its activity on the flora and fauna, hydrogeological objects and relief, emphasizing their tourist attraction.

The possibilities for the development of different types of recreational tourism are closely related to the morphological features of this region. In the touristic view, the most interesting mountains are Rtanj and Ozren. Rtanj, a strict nature reserve, is the highest mountain of the Sokobanja basin with the peak Šiljak (1,565 m). This mountain is characterized by exceptional landscape and pleasant mountain surroundings. Rtanj, with its attractive potential, opens the possibility of developing recreational tourism. Well-marked trails leading from the bottom to the top allow for a longer-term climb in the preserved natural environment. There are traditional trekking actions such as Christmas or Night Rise, but there are many other trekking actions that mountaineers

and other lovers of this mountain perform, independently, or in groups. It is interesting that the approach to Rtanj is practically possible from all sides, and depending on the current interests and possibilities of individuals, the desired path is chosen. Numerous points of view on Ozren and Devica make these mountains interesting for tourist movements, especially for trips and walks. The attractive potential of Ozren is also contributed by the stimulating sub-mountain climate, on the basis of which, according to the functional classification of the mountains, Ozren is also included in the group of recovery mountain resorts (Stankovic, 2000). A large number of arranged paths lead from the foot of these mountains to the peaks, and one of the most interesting peaks for mountaineers are the Oštra čuka, Čapljinac on Devica mountine. Organized climb to the top of the Oštra Čuka (1,074 m), the Mountaineering Association of Serbia included this route in the calendar of its regular activities, which is held on September 24th each year.

As an exceptional convenience for the development of recreational tourism in the municipality of Sokobanja, are various biogeographical tourist values. The ambient value, recreational and landscape values of this area are increased by the rich mountain vegetation that covers the entire Sokobanja basin. Large areas of deciduous and coniferous forests, meadows and pastures, arranged parks and rest areas are good for long and light walks by marked paths through unspoiled nature, or riding a bicycle along the mountainous terrain. Arranged parks in Sokobanja and in the surroundings contribute greatly to the psycho-physical recovery of tourists. Some of the parks are the Central city park, park "Banjica", park on Vrelo (Borici), park "Cuka 1" and "Cuka 2". Picnics areas located along Sokobanja basin are very attractive for tourists, which is possible to reach on foot. These are Lepteria, Ocno, Kalinovica, the spring of the Moravica River. Special biogeographical values are medicinal herbs. Sokobanja region has been known for a long time by the medicinal herbs: rtanj tea, kantaron, thyme (Marić, Radović, 1997). More than 200 different types of medicinal herbs were found on the territory of the municipality of Sokobanja. Picking of medicinal herbs and collecting of forest fruits are activities in which tourists can actively participate during their stay.

Thermo-mineral springs of the Sokobanja basin are primary tourist resource, which basically determines the health function of the spa. Based on the hydro-analysis and the chemical analyzes, they are classified into radioactive acratotems with the character of alkaline waters. All waters are characterized by increased radioactivity, which gives them a special balneological significance. In the area of the basin, thermal water is emptied into six localities, the spring Park, the thermomineral spring Preobrazenje, the spring of Banjica I and Banjica II, the spring of Moravica and the spring of Lepteria (Jovanović, Radivojević, 2006). Thermo-mineral potential of Sokobanja has not been adequately exploited. The development of the spa should be focused on the opening of wellness & spa centers, as one of the leading trends in spa development in the world. Thermo-mineral potential should be partly focused on filling existing pools and constructing new pools with thermomineral water, steam baths, and the other part should be used for heating them, and the activation of existing infrastructure should be a priority in further development (Košić et al. , 2011). The artificial lake Bovan, and the Moravica river are hydrological facilities that enable the development of recreational tourism in this area. Due to their purity, rivers of the Sokobanja basin (Moravica, Seselacka river, Žlezovac), are suitable for differ-

ent types of recreational tourism, especially for the development of sport fishing. Moravica is particularly prominent in this area, where there are favorable conditions for the development of bathing tourism (Aleksić, 2005). Artificial lake Bovan, formed by the rebuilding of the Moravica River to supply with water the Municipality of Aleksinac, is a potential touristic motive. The arranged beaches, water sports, sailing, and sport fishing are just some of the activities that tourists can enjoy during their stay.

Beside recreational, some formations also have attractive aesthetic and curiosity attributes such as waterfalls, caves and ice pothole. Waterfall Ripaljka is located on the river Gradašnica. It is 17 m high and is an accumulating type of waterfalls. It is the first monument of nature in Yugoslavia protected by the law in 1948 (<http://www.sokobanja.travel/vodic/izletista/ripaljka>). The Sesalačka cave is located near the village of Sesalac, fifteen kilometers east of Sokobanja. It is not touristic arranged, but it is illuminated in the length of 200 m, and it is nice to look on cave jewelry in abundance. The ice pithole at the foot of the Rtanj mountain has a depth of 30 m and a constant temperature of - 2 °C.

ACCOMMODATION CAPACITIES FOR RECREATIONAL TOURISM IN SOKOBANJA

In the middle of the 19th century the development of Sokobanja started with the construction of the first accommodations - commercial villas, private rooms, and consequently the development of its accommodation receptive. The first villa, a commercial type, was built for the accommodation of spa guests in 1932. It was a villa "Macedonia", a year later, two more villas were built, but more western than the villa Macedonia. It was the villa "Nada" and "Bota". During the following 1933, three more villas were built: "Milanovo", villa "Serbia" and villa "Ozren". The last built villas in the period before the Second World War were: villa "My Holiday", "Mišić" and villa "Stojanović" (Aleksić, 2005). The greatest progress in development, Sokobanja is experiencing in the period 1975-1987, when it grew into one of the largest and most important spa and tourist centers in former Yugoslavia (Marić, Radović, 1997).

Today, Sokobanja does not have sufficient capacity for accommodation of guests in hotel facilities. All Sokobanja hotels were built in the mid-70s of the 20th century. For many years, hotels have been in the process of ownership transformation, which greatly complicates and stretches excessive investments for the adaptation and maintenance of facilities. There are no high category hotels in Sokobanja, and for the serious development of any type of tourism, the basic tourist facilities should satisfy the needs of a modern tourist. Such capacities are necessary, especially considering the interest of Sokobanja to enter the international market and to become one of the leading congress and health centers of Serbia (Master plan of tourist destination Sokobanja, 2007). Hotel "Sunce" is in the process of ownership transformation and is currently under reconstruction. Adaptation of this hotel will significantly affect the quantity and quality of hotel offer of Sokobanja. In recent years, the Zdravljak hotel has been open to visitors only during certain periods of the year, and during important holidays, thus significantly reducing the offer of hotel accommodation throughout the year.

Table 1. Number of beds in hotels and medical facilities in Sokobanja

Name of the facility	Category	Number of beds
Hotel "Zdravljak"	3*	512
Hotel Moravica	3*	210
Hotel Turist	3*	105
Hotel Sunce	2*	184
Wellnes & Spa Center Sokoterme	3*	35
In total		1046

Source: Organization for tourism, culture and sport, Municipality of Sokobanja

The special category of accommodation capacities consists of health facilities, Special Hospital "Banjica" with 270 beds, Special Hospital "Sokobanja" with 530 beds, and special hospital "Ozren" which does not have a commercial part for tourists.

Table 2. Number and structure of accomodation capacities in private households in Sokobanja

Total number of categorized rooms in Sokobanja	2.222 rooms	
Total number of categorized beds in domestic work in Sokobanja	4.837 beds	
	First category	1.517 beds
	Second category	1.897 beds
	Third category	1.189 beds
	Fourth category	234 beds

Source: Organization for tourism, culture and sport, Municipality of Sokobanja

Accommodation capacities in private ownership are in the initial phase, without any systemic control and planned development, which affects their categorization (Radivojević et al., 2010). It is believed that there are still about 10,000 beds in the accommodation that is not registered and not categorized. This number is constantly increasing, as many new households are included in the offer. The reduced occupancy of these capacities is influenced by the level of quality of accommodation and services that are offered and which do not meet the standard of modern tourists.

ANALYSIS OF TOURIST TRAFFIC

The best indicator of the development of tourism in some place is tourist traffic. The organized development of tourism in Sokobanja dates back to 1837, when the first guest came to Sokobanja, so, full 180 years. Sokobanja has a tourist and health function, and Sokobanja is ranked among the centers with the longest tradition in tourism development. Sokobanja is among the most visited spas in Serbia and occupies the second place with 14% of the total tourist traffic, just behind Vrnjacka Banja, which realizes 26% of the total realized tourist traffic (Stankovic, 2010).

Table 3. Number of guests, nights, length of stay in Sokobanja 1996-2016

Year	Number of guests			Number of overnights			Average length of stay	
	Domestic	Foreign	In total	Domestic	Foreign	In total	Domestic	Foreign
1996	40836	237	41073	238404	365	238769	5,8	1,2
1997	46872	452	47324	254751	1211	255962	5,4	1,8
1998	64955	586	65541	528099	1614	529713	8,1	2,3
1999	51051	482	51533	374124	1522	375646	7,3	1,3
2000	65434	840	66274	568575	3536	572111	8,7	4,2
2001	67226	894	68120	439529	3650	443579	6,5	4,4
2002	66141	1036	67177	418422	2213	420635	6,3	2,1
2003	60297	1463	61760	396848	5852	402700	6,6	4
2004	63049	1633	64682	408538	6042	414580	6,5	3,7
2005	-	-	65870	-	-	413403	6,27	
2006	-	-	67690	-	-	412393	6,09	
2007	60235	1046	61281	365480	5269	370749	6,07	5,03
2008	63128	1152	64280	376850	4816	381666	5,97	4,18
2009	55686	1263	56949	330901	4959	335860	5,94	3,93
2010	49056	1027	50083	299325	3152	302477	6,1	3,07
2011	54984	959	55943	335458	3882	339340	6,1	4,04
2012	51423	685	52108	317274	2550	319824	6,17	3,72
2013	42134	1293	43427	291978	4312	296290	6,93	3,33
2014	33859	7048	40907	162555	7451	170006	4,8	1,57
2015	31438	3028	33021	162218	5200	167418	5,16	1,72
2016	27119	3158	30277	161598	5024	166622	5,9	1,61

Source: Organization for tourism, culture and sport, Municipality of Sokobanja

Based on the data from Table 3, we can see the number of guests, the number of overnight stays and the length of stay that guests have achieved in the past twenty years on the territory of Sokobanja. It can be noted that the number of guests and realized overnight stays in Sokobanja, both domestic and foreign, was constantly increasing in the period from 1996-2008, when it increased by 50%, but since the year of 2008. there has been a constant decline in the number of tourists. This can be associated with a reduction in capacity in hotel facilities. Hotel “Sunce” has stopped working in 2010, and it is in the process of ownership transformation. The reconstruction of the hotel is in constant progress, and this would mean increasing the capacity of the hotel accommodation. Also, the hotel “Zdravljak” does not work with full capacity, and its work is characterized by seasonality. Since the year of 2012, he only works during the summer months with reduced capacity. We can tell the same for the hotel “Turist”, which is part of HTP Lepteria. The highest number of guests for the past twenty years was in 2001, when 68,120 guests were registered, but the largest number of overnight stays was recorded in

the year before, in 2000, 572,111 nights. The length of guests' stay is in decline, and an increasing number of tourists are coming during the weekend. The big problem of monitoring the traffic of the guests is the negligence of the owners of private accommodation, which avoids the registration of guests, and the picture is not a real number of guests and overnight stays. It is considered that about 30% more of overnight stays are realized in the private sector, also it is related with the number of guests who visit Sokobanja. In recent years, the structure of guests has significantly changed. Even more young and family people visit Sokobanja. They are mostly weekend tourists and their stay is not longer than 3 days. The construction of Akvaparka "Podina" has a great contribution to the increase in the number of guests (Organization for Tourism, Culture and Sports of the Municipality of Sokobanja, 2017).

SWOT ANALYSIS

Based on the data from the previous text, a presentation of the strengths, weaknesses, chances and threats, or risks related to the further development of recreational tourism in the territory of Sokobanja municipality, has been made. The principle of action should be based on strengthening the benefits and utilizing the opportunities that exist, as well as on eliminating weaknesses and preventive action on identifying risks.

Table 4. SWOT Analysis

Strength	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Untouched nature, an ecologically clean area • Natural resources: thermomineral sources, direct mountain surroundings, unity of landscapes • Wealth of flora and fauna • Famous hospitality towards guests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undeveloped basic infrastructure • Insufficient care for the protection of the nature of all individuals involved in tourism • Lack of a long-term tourism development plan • The lack of cooperation and the creation of partnerships with neighboring municipalities at the regional level
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The trend of complementary development of spa and mountain tourism in Serbia and the world • Increasing demand for areas with preserved natural resources • Increasing awareness of the importance of recreation and spa tourism in preserving the overall health of people • Creation of tourist clusters with the aim of achieving better recognition of the tourist product • Exchange of experiences with already affirmed European and world spa centers • More and more popular use of electronic media as a cheap way of promotion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existence of other spa with a developed tradition of recreational tourism in Serbia and the environment • Economic recession and poor purchasing power of the domestic market • Poor investment climate and long depreciation periods are limiting factors for investors • Unstable political situation in the world and the region

Natural resources, and especially thermal mineral resources, can be used as the main strength, which will be improved by adequate use and modernized by the tourist offer of Sokobanja. Using the thermal potential for filling the pool in spa centers, as well as heating the rooms, would improve the development of tourism. The main weakness is the lack of basic infra and suprastructure, as well as the lack of a long-term development plan. Complementary development of spa and mountain tourism, as well as cooperation with other economic entities in the surrounding area are the main chances for further development. Given that the funds allocated for the promotion of tourist destinations in Serbia are very limited, the popularity, the wide spatial coverage and the low price of advertising through the electronic media should be used. The economic recession and the lack of domestic and foreign investors, and fast development of spa centers in the region are the main threats to tourism in Sokobanja.

CONCLUSION

Sokobanja has exceptional natural potential for the development of recreational tourism. The natural environment that gives the opportunity to combine more activities for the purpose of active holidays needs to be valorized and directed towards demand. Tourist valorization is one of the most important steps in planning the future development of tourism in some area. It has great importance in preserving and protecting the environment (the immediate mountain environment, climate, thermo-mineral resources, as well as other hydrological facilities provide the opportunity to organize a large number of activities, which would differentiate Sokobanja offer from a simple spa and health resort. Modern medicine has proven that human recuperation is the fastest and has highest quality in nature. The classic type of vacation slowly loses its primacy, and the new form of active holiday takes its place in the world. The climate and untouched nature of this region sedatively affect the organism of human, the long and light walk through the forest complexes by marked paths, or trekking - mastering the mountain climb, picking medicinal herbs and collecting forest fruits, cycling, sailing or fishing, can definitely offer of Sokobanja on both domestic and international market. Further development Sokobanja should focus on environmental protection and preservation of the ecological potential of the space in the function of tourism, as well as the improvement of material development factors. Sokobanja should base its further development on merging into tourist clusters (eg, the tourist cluster of Eastern Serbia), in order to ensure adequate recognition and positioning on the domestic and foreign markets. Cooperation and exchange of experience with already well-established spa centers in Europe and the world would help to promote and create a unique tourist offer (Jovičić, 2002). The main disadvantage is the lack of quality accommodation capacities. Most of the hotels were built in the 70s and 80s and such a base does not match the quality of the offer that modern tourists expect. The seasonal character of these hotels has led to a decline in the number of tourists in recent years and a reduction in the number of overnight stays, which certainly affects the economy of this region. It is necessary to carry out ownership transformation of these facilities and modernize the offer that will correspond to

the foreign market, as well as to build hotel facilities of high category (4 * and 5 *), which is also the strategic goal of the municipality of Sokobanja. It is also necessary to evaluate the natural potential that this municipality possesses with respect to the principles of sustainable development.

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