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Articles and Statements

Development of Religious Tourism in West Herzegovina Tourist-Geographic Region

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Abstract

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a place of meeting of different peoples and religions, which has contributed, according to the religious and cultural heritage, to be one of the richest countries in Europe. Four large religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina have significant shrines that are visited by tourists from all over the world, although neither the entities nor the states have a strategy for promoting religious tourism. In this paper we will present the representation of religious objects and manifestations of West Herzegovina tourism-geographic region, their tourist valorization and proposal in order to improve this specific form of tourism.

Keywords: West Herzegovina; tourist-geographical area; tourist valorization; religious tourism; tourism development.

1. Introduction

"The concept of religion or faith implies conviction, trust and reliance" (Kesar, 2013). Historical development of tourism shows that religious travels are one of the oldest forms of tourism that arose from the increase of knowledge about the world, which was caused by the fact that people moved to different places where they could learn and inherit the aspects of other cultures, and they themselves find something about reality, spirituality, self-esteem and self-realization (Geić, 2002).

Religious tourism is one of the fastest growing segments of the travel industry. The UNWTO estimates that 300 million tourists visit the world's major religious sites each year (one fourth of all international tourist arrivals) and that 600 million national and international religious voyages are undertaken annually (UNWTO).

„Religious tourism is a key agent of peace. It is a transformative force that breaks down cultural barriers and builds bridges between people, communities and nations. Leveraging the growing interest in religious tourism is crucial in building cultural dialogue, mutual understanding and peace“ (Taleb Rifai, Secretary-General, UNWTO).

Belk and Yeh (2011: 345) refer to Belk and Costa (1995) and Urry (1990) to state that historically at the highest strata of society people have been travelling for explicitly religious reasons but at the same time indulging in “pleasure seeking and cultural” activities.

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Religion has always been a powerful force that has attracted many tourists to destinations around the world and tourists believe that religious destinations are too adapting to global tourism and thus religious sites lose their primary importance. The importance of tourism in West Herzegovina tourist-geographical region has been noticed for years, however religious tourism has not used its full potential in this region. There are numerous religious attractions and cultural, historical and natural sites in them that attract numerous religious tourists. The problem of religious tourism in these region is the lack of sufficient accommodation capacities, the discordance of religious tourism with cultural tourism, and the lack of a detailed strategy for the development of religious tourism. The reason for the absence of a strategy of religious tourism in these regions is the lack of importance to religious tourism as it should be given, which would certainly enable the development of different branches of economy, and thus improve the living conditions at both the local and regional levels.

2. Materials and methods

The aim of this paper is to give an overview of all tourist potentials West Herzegovina tourist and geographic region and the possibility of their valorization which would contribute to the development of religious tourism, as well as the overall economic development of the same. The resource basis for modern religious tourism in West Herzegovina tourist-geographic region must be methodologically processed on the basis of geographical, economic and socio-cultural research, in order to be able to make a complete tourist offer in where the focus would be on the development of religious tourism. In this paper, the following general and special methods of regional geographic research will be used: the method of regional geographic analysis and the synthesis of tourist-geographic factors, the method of homogeneity in the spatial distribution of tourist-geographic parameters in order to identify the tourist-geographical potential of all three tourist-geographical regions, then the method of determining spatial-functional connections and relations primarily driven by tourism activity in order to develop the ones in the best possible way and be less harmful to the environment.

In the process of evaluating anthropogenic tourism potentials related to the development of religious tourism, different tourist-geographical methods and valorization factors will be applied, with a very complex classification procedure (identification and analysis of attractive properties, spatial coverage, distribution, etc.) and categorization/ranking of tourist potentials (according to importance, seasonality, complementarity, etc.), whereupon the general tourist value of each selected tourist potential will be given. These anthropogenic tourist potentials are then divided into two groups: real and potential tourist potentials, and due to a large number, only the real ones will be shown in this paper. In the evaluation itself, special attention was paid to their complementarity, the convenience of their tourist-geographic location in relation to emitting markets, tourist routes and competitive reception areas, then existing and potential roads, which enable accessibility from emitting areas, etc.

This detailed and complex analysis, classification and categorization of anthropogenic tourism potentials were made possible through the use of professional and scientific literature, which consisted of spatial plans at the state, entity, cantonal and municipal levels, then development plans and strategies (economic and tourism) of the cantons and municipalities, official websites of municipalities and tourist communities, as well as their own field research.

3. Results and discussion

Western-Herzegovinian tourist-geographic region, as its name suggests, is located in the western part of Herzegovina. Its tourist-geographical position is very favorable because it is located only 30 km from the Adriatic coast, also located on the border between Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Croatia, which also increases the importance of its position. It consists of the following municipalities: Čitluk, Ljubuški, Grude, Široki Brijeg and Posušje with an area of 1,544 km². The tourist center of this region is the Čitluk municipality (Bidžan, 2015).



Fig. 1. Čitluk ([Local Internet portal Brotnjo](#))

According to preliminary data from the 2013 census, there are 97,893 inhabitants, and the population density is 63.4 residents/km² ([Institute for Statistics..., 2013](#)).

The western-Herzegovinian tourist-geographic region is connected via the main road M-15 to the southwest Bosnian area, and the main road M-6.1 connects it to the Mostar region, while the main road M-6 connects it to the Coastal region ([Bidžan, 2015](#)).

As far as tourist traffic is concerned, the tourist-geographic region of West-Herzegovina in 2017 had a number of tourist arrivals of 9,449, of which 33.2 % were domestic tourists and 66.8 % foreign tourists. They made 17,689 overnights, of which domestic tourists participated with 29.9 %, and foreign tourists with 70.1 %. Most tourists come from Croatia, France, Slovenia, Germany, Serbia and Montenegro. As far as accommodation capacity is concerned, this region offers 1,219 beds in various types and categories of accommodation (hotels, motels, small boarding houses, house accommodation and more), which is very low and one must make an effort to increase it, if this tourist-geographic region wants to be more serious about tourism ([Institute for Statistics..., 2018](#)).

The western-Herzegovinian tourist-geographic region belongs to, for its functionality, a group of cognitive, educational and religious tourism-geographic regions. It has a very modest significance for defining the tourist offer of Bosnia and Herzegovina, out of a total of 626 national monuments in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in its territory there are 19 national monuments ([Commission for Preservation..., 2000](#); [Bidžan, 2015](#)). But due to the natural resources and religious facilities in it, the following specific forms of tourism can be developed: religious, cultural-manifestational, mountainous, ecotourism, rural, fishing, caving or speleology tourism, sport-recreational etc. In Table 1 we will show tourism valuation of the highest rated, and at the same time, the most important sacral objects and religious-cultural manifestations of this tourist-geographic region, while the complete list can be viewed in doctorate of A. Bidžan (2015), where all objects were processed.

Table 1. Tourism Valorization of Sacral Objects and Religious Events in the West-Herzegovina Tourism-Geographical Region

Anthropogenic tourist potentials	Tourist-geographical position	Ambience	Attractiveness	Compatibility	Uniqueness	The level of utilization for tourist purposes	Access to anthropogenic tourist motives	Two-season possibility of exploitation	Construction /equipment	The representativeness	Aesthetic / artistic value	Tourist attendance	General tourist value
1. Church of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Posušje	3	3,5	3,5	3,5	3,5	3	5	5	3	3	3,5	3	3,5
2. The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church, Posušje	4,5	3,5	3,5	3,5	3,5	3	5	5	3	3	3,5	3	3,7
3. Church of St. Ivan Nepomuk, Posušje	4	3,5	3,5	3,5	3,5	3	5	5	3	3	3,5	3	3,6
4. Crkva sv. Mihovila, Grude	3	3,5	3,5	3,5	3,5	3	5	5	3	3	3,5	3	3,5
5. Franciscan monastery with the church, Široki Brijeg	5	4	4	4	4	3	5	5	4	4	4	3	4,1
6. Parish church of St. Paskval, Ljubuški	4	3,5	3,5	3,5	3,5	3	5	5	3	3	3,5	3	3,6
7. The Nesuh Age Vučjaković mosque, Ljubuški	4	3,5	3,5	3,5	3,5	3	5	5	3	3	3,5	3	3,6
8. Church of St. Jakov, Čitluk	4	3,5	3,5	3,5	3,5	3	5	5	3	3	3,5	3	3,6
9. The sanctuary of the Queen of Peace, Međugorje	5	4,5	4,5	4,5	4,5	5	5	5	4	4,5	4,5	5	4,7
10. "Peace March and prayer for peace in the world", Grude-Ljubuški-Međugorje	5	4,5	4,5	4,5	4,5	5	5	3	4,5	4,5	4,5	5	4,5

Source: Commission for Preservation..., 2000; Bidžan, 2015

Key:

▪ **0 to 1,5** (inadequate quality and low market attractiveness) – are not suitable for tourist presentation and use;

- **1.6 to 2.5** (satisfactory quality and medium market attractiveness) – local tourist significance (L);
- **2.6 to 3.5** (good quality and good market attractiveness) – regional tourism significance (R);
- **3.6 to 4.5** (very good quality and very good market attractiveness) – national tourist significance (N) and
- **4.6 to 5** (excellent quality and high market attractiveness) – international tourist significance (M).

Below we will give a short description of religious objects and events, which have the highest total value in tourist valorisation: Franciscan monastery with the church in Široki Brijeg and the Sanctuary of the Queen of Peace in Međugorje, as well as the religious event "Peace march and prayer for peace in world", which are held through the cities of Grude, Ljubuški and Međugorje.

➤ **The Franciscan monastery with the church in Široki Brijeg** is respected as a sacred place, Our Lady's sanctuary, the main Marian shrine in Herzegovina. In recent years, related to Međugorje, it represents an important pilgrimage place for Catholics from all over the world who gather here for the religious holidays of the Great and the Little Lady. Since 1975, the last Saturday in July has become the Catholic pilgrimage to Our Lady in Brijeg (Lubina, 2005).

The construction of the church in Široki Brijeg is the time of the fall of the Ottoman Empire. In 1844, the Franciscans of Herzegovinian origin moved from Kreševo to Herzegovina and settled in Čerigaj. Since they did not find a suitable space for the construction of the church and monastery, they moved to Široki Brijeg where they would build them. This area was without a fertile land and without a forest, but it was on the hill and its position suited for the construction of the monastery and the church. The land was purchased from Ahmed-aga Kurt for 145 gold ducats. The first head of the Široki Brijeg fraternity was the guardian without a monastery, Fr. Angelo Kraljević. No church or monastery has ever existed in Široki Brijeg. Ali Pasha wrote to the Sublime Porte in Tsargrad at the request of the Franciscans to issue a ferman (approval) for the construction of the church and monastery. The building was approved by Sultan Abdul-Medžid by a ferman from 1845. The dimensions of the church were exactly determined by the ferman. The church was of smaller dimensions. In 1870 started the construction of a bell tower which was finished in 1871. The church was connected to a monastery, to which strict measures were not strictly imposed. The first part of the monastery consisting of several rooms was built in 1848 on the west wing. There was a school for Franciscan students where four lower grades of grammar school were taught. The old church was demolished in 1905, and in its place, Bishop fra Paškal Buconjić laid the foundations of a new church devoted to Blessed Virgin Mary. The church was built from the Herzegovinian gray limestone, stone that was excavated from the quarry near the monastery (Group of authors, 1984).

The Spatial Plan of Bosnia and Herzegovina (1980) evaluated and categorized the Franciscan monastery with the church in Široki Brijeg as a monument of the I (first) category of national importance (Spatial Plan of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1980). The Commission for the Preservation of National Monuments placed this complex on the List of National Monuments of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Commission for Preservation..., 2007).

In tourist valuation, the highest rating (5 – excellent quality and high market attractiveness) of the Franciscan monastery with the church in Široki Brijeg was obtained from criteria: tourist-geographic position, access to antopogenic tourist motives and two-season exploitation opportunities, and the lowest grade (3 – good quality and good market attractiveness) from the equipment / construction criterion. The overall tourist value of this complex is high and amounts to 4.1, which means that it has a national tourist significance (Table 1) (Bidžan, 2015).

➤ **The Queen of Peace sanctuary in Međugorje** is nowadays one of the most famous and most visited pilgrimage places in the whole of the Catholic world. In the village of Bijakovići in the Međugorje area, the Lady is shown daily since June 24, 1981 according to the testimony of six children. Following the interest of pilgrims from all over the world for coming to Međugorje, great tourist facilities were built. Today, Međugorje has about 10,000 beds in various accommodation categories with exceptionally high standards of hospitality, commerce and other services. Since then, thousands of pilgrims from all over the world have come to Međugorje every

day and so far, according to general estimates, more than 15 million pilgrims have visited it, far more from abroad than from the country. According to the claims of tourist representatives and news correspondents around the world, Međugorje has become the most famous and most prominent place in this part of Europe. With the apparition of the Queen of Peace, Međugorje has developed touristically and has become an inevitable destination with rich religious and prayerful content for millions of pilgrims from around the world. Throughout the year many seminars and festivals are held in Međugorje, and among them, it is important to emphasize the Festival of Youth that has been held for 20 years. The Festival of Youth is held every year in the first days of August and during this time, this place is a world center of youth from which messages of peace, love and faith are sent to the world. The most significant events throughout the year are: Anniversary of the Apparition, Youth Festival, Peace March and Prayer for Peace in the World, the Assumption of Mary celebration, Mass at Križevac, Easter, Christmas and New Year celebration ([Tourist Board Herzegovinian-Neretva Canton; Bidžan, 2015](#)).

In tourist valuation, the highest rating (5 - excellent quality and high market attractiveness) of the Queen of Peace sanctuary in Međugorje came from the criterion: tourist-geographic position, degree of utilization for tourist purposes, two-season possibilities of exploitation and tourist attendance, and the lowest rating (4 - very good quality and very good market attractiveness) from the criterion of the degree of utilization for tourist purposes and tourist attendance. The overall tourist value of this complex is high and amounts to 4.7, which means that it has an international tourist significance ([Table 1](#)) ([Bidžan, 2015](#)).

▪ Religious event „Peace March and Prayer for Peace in the World“ are held every year in the last week of June, on Saturdays and Sundays. On Saturday at 6 am in front of the monastery of St. Anto on Humac begins the International Peace March. Arrival in front of the parish church of St. Jakov at Međugorje is scheduled for at 10 o'clock. A large number of parishioners and pilgrims attend each year in this prayer of peace. Holy Mass is held in the parish church that day at 7, 8, 11a.m, and 1 and 7 p.m. At 10 p.m. begins adoration to Jesus in the Blessed Shrine Sacrament. The joint adoration lasts for up to 11 p.m, and continues in silence to 5 a.m. Priests from Bosnia and Herzegovina and other countries perform confessions during both days in the courtyard of the confessional church in all world languages ([Local Internet portal Ljubuski](#)).



Fig. 2. „Peace March and Prayer for Peace in the World“ ([Regional portal Megamedia](#))

In the tourist valuation this event received the highest rating (5 – excellent quality and high market attractiveness) from the criterion: tourist-geographic position, degree of utilization for tourist purposes, access to anthropogenic tourist motives and tourist attendance, and the lowest rating (3 – good quality and good market attractiveness) from the criterion of two-season

exploitation opportunities. The overall tourist value of this complex is high and amounts to 4.5, which means that it has a national tourist significance (Table 1) (Bidžan, 2015).

3. Conclusion

Although there are religious sites and objects with a long tradition, spirituality and interesting architecture of all three constituent peoples and national minorities in the areas of all three tourist-geographical regions, which can be very attractive for the development of religious tourism, there is more to be done in promoting it. In all three regions there is an exceptional potential for the development of religious tourism, but it is not adequately tourism-valued. It is a major problem that sacral objects and religious events are not sufficiently presented at the world level. The tourism of West Herzegovina tourist-geographic region has not been sufficiently represented so far and is poorly presented on foreign markets, suggesting that tourism is not approached in the right way because the arrival of foreign guests depends on tourist operators. It is also necessary to create web presentations in several languages, as well as brochures in foreign languages, then to establish effective co-operation between representatives of religious communities and the tourism industry, which would help promote these holy objects and sites. If we look at the world-famous religious tourism centers, which annually receive millions of tourists and which became a real commercial paradise for domestic entrepreneurs, then we can see how much religious tourism can be significant for the development of tourism, catering industry and the economy in general in that area.

Some of the guidelines for promoting religious tourism in this tourist-geographic region would be: increasing accommodation capacities, improving traffic infrastructure, improving cooperation and communication between the religious communities – the local community – the tourist community of West Herzegovina region, as well as revitalizing and putting into full function of religious and cultural events, furthermore building a system that would keep track of the arrivals of believers – tourists coming for religious tourism, and boosting marketing (especially internet marketing) that would promote religious tourism and connect with cultural tourism.

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