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**TOURISM  
IN FUNCTION OF DEVELOPMENT  
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**Spa Tourism in Serbia and Experiences of Other Countries**



**THEMATIC  
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**I**



**UNIVERSITY OF KRAGUJEVAC  
FACULTY OF HOTEL MANAGEMENT  
AND TOURISM IN VRNJAČKA BANJA**



# THE AVAILABILITY OF RESTAURANTS OF THE MOST VISITED SPAS IN SERBIA ON TRIPADVISOR

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## Abstract

*When visiting a particular destination, modern tourists are trying to gather as much information about this destination, which is possible thanks to many internet portals. One of the most popular is Tripadvisor. The research is conducted with the aim to check availability of restaurants of ten most visited spas in Serbia on Tripadvisor. Different parameters about restaurants presented on this on-line portal are analyzed, including the number of restaurants per spa, type of cuisine, comments of visitors, average traveler rating, etc. Information about thirty-two restaurants from the ten spas are found, only. The type of cuisine is shown for twenty restaurants. Contrary to restaurants from other countries (several hundreds or thousands comments per restaurant), the number of comments of visitors per restaurant is very small (1-30). Based on those comments, average traveler ratings are very high, mostly above 4 (highest score is 5), with a few exceptions.*

**Keywords:** *on-line portal, restaurant, spa.*

## Introduction

There are numerous thermal and mineral springs in the area of the Balkan Peninsula. The hydrogeothermal energy from those springs represents natural treasure and a part of that energy has found the application in Serbian spas where waters of different qualities (temperature and chemical composition) are used in balneal therapy and recreational purposes. Namely, many mineral spas (Figure 1) are developed around naturally occurring mineral water springs. In the region and, in particular,

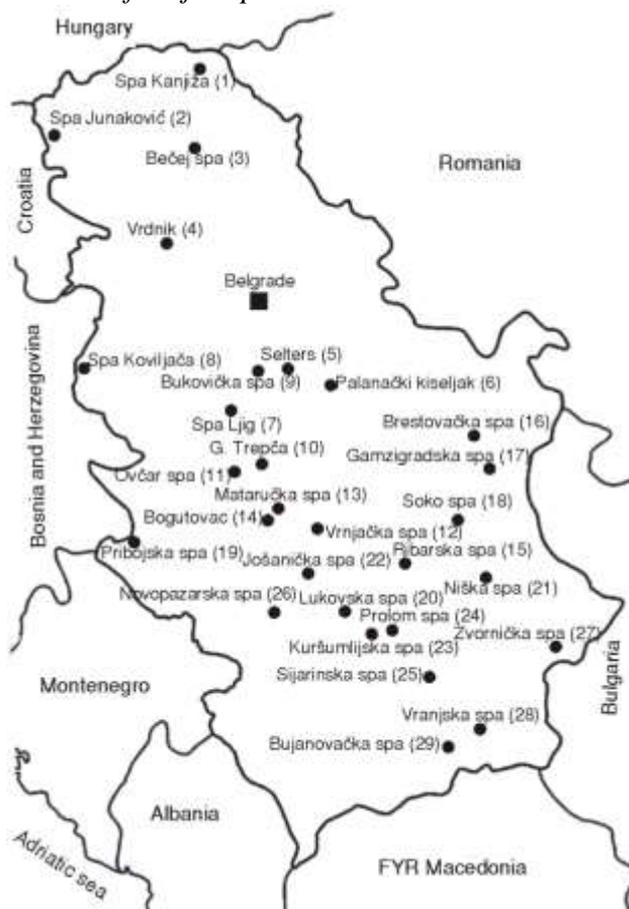
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in Serbia, the spa tradition dates back to the Roman age. In that period hot and mineral springs were used as Roman baths called “terme”. Tradition of using warm and mineral springs continued after the Slavic invasion of the Balkan Peninsula, then in the period of Turkish domination (Dokmanović et al., 2012), etc. According to data of the Association of Spas and Air Resorts of Serbia (Banje u Srbiji) there are 29 registered spas, although Serbia has 250 natural springs (Milivojevic et al., 2005).

**Figure 1:** Locations of major spas in Serbia



**Source:** Dokmanović et al., 2012

According to report of the National Statistics Office (RZS, 2016, *Hotelijeri*, 2016), 10 the most visited spas in Serbia were selected based on the number of overnight stays of foreign tourists (Table 1). In addition, there are several very famous spas which are not included in this list, like Niška Banja, Mataruška Banja, Vranjska Banja, Ovčar Banja, etc.

**Table 1:** *The most visited spas in Serbia based on the number of overnight stays of foreign tourists*

Order	Name of the spa	The number of overnight stays of foreign tourists
1.	Vrnjačka Banja	66.438
2.	Banja Gornja Trepča	18.160
3.	Banja Koviljača	18.093
4.	Banja Kanjiža	14.466
5.	Banja Palić	12.257
6.	Bukovička Banja	12.254
7.	Soko Banja	10.697
8.	Banja Vrdnik	6.833
9.	Prolom Banja	6.758
10.	Banja Junaković	4.591

**Source:** *Hotelijeri, 2016*

Vrnjačka Banja is the most developed national spa, which has almost 20% of the overall spa visits in Serbia (Jovicic et al., 2009). This spa developed due to mineral water which comes out at the base of the mountain of Goč (Božić, 2014). The thermomineral water of this spa was used in a kind of therapeutic centre for Roman legionaries (Dokmanović et al., 2012). It made best results during the 1980s, while during crisis of 1990s, the results were considerably smaller (Jovicic et al., 2009). Nevertheless, this spa has kept dominance in comparison to other Serbian spas. It (Vrnjacka Banja, 2016) has all pre-conditions for development of the following aspects of tourism: health and recreational, hunting, transit, tourism on water (sport and recreation), congress, cultural and manifestation, rural (ethno-eco) and picnic-residential tourism. All listed aspects of tourism can be combined with gastro tourism. Based on the SWOT analysis done by (Ilić et al., 2012), specific aims of Vrnjacka Banja, which the SWOT analysis points to, should be: development of tourism as a branch of economy, involving tourist potential of the municipality into promotion of a broader area as a unique tourism entity and improving quality of services in accordance with international standards. In order to improve quality of services, it is necessary to improve professional practice of hospitality students who will be leaders in the future improvement of hotel and restaurant services (Božić, 2014; Božić & Stojanović, 2016).

Banja Gornja Trepča was used by Roman legionaries just as Vrnjačka Banja (Obradović-Bursać & Stanković-Vasović, 2004). According to tradition, heroes from 1<sup>st</sup> Serbian uprising treated injuries in this spa (Marković, 1980). It became a natural spa officially in 1977 (Blešić et al., 2009a), but it was anonymous until the discovery of radioactivity in its waters. The water from Gornja Trepča has one of the highest Li concentrations (Anonymous, 2006). The present demand overcomes the capacity of the accommodation facilities (Ilić and Simonović, 2015). This spa is the first spa in Serbia which was privatized and after privatization, its advancement is starting (Blešić et al., 2009b).

Banja Koviljača dates back to the Illyrians, Romans and Turks. The first document mentioning the spa was written in 1533 and describes it as a place which the people visit due to healing springs, while the first accommodation facility that was taking guests was built in 1858. This spa is completely built up in the twenties and thirties of the twentieth century, when luxury hotels and villas were built (Specijalna bolnica za rehabilitaciju Banja Koviljača, 2016).

Banja Kanjiža is a spa centre at the north of Vojvodina. It offers wide range of possibilities for the development of spa tourism, which comprises rest, recreation, sports competitions, cultural happenings, scientific and administrative meetings (Košić et al., 2011). This spa uses thermo mineral water for the heating of facilities in installations with low temperature regime of work, for balneo-therapy and recreation. This thermo mineral water has alkali reaction, belongs to the group of hypothermal waters and comprises ions of sodium and hydrocarbonate (Košić et al., 2011).

Banja Palić is also located at the north of Vojvodina. Visitors of this spa can use medicinal mud (mud from the lake), water from Palić Lake, thermomineral water from bores, climate and quality of the surrounding (greenery, environment, natural and cultural–historical treasures and the others) (Živković, 1998). Also, in this spa there are different recreation facilities: tennis courts, trim track, bowling centre, football courts, handball courts, volleyball courts, basketball courts, athletics court, bicycle-trim track, children’s playground, etc. (Košić et al., 2011). In the Big Park there is women’s bath - Women’s strand and Men’s strand, which are unique according to architecture and represent a special offer for rest and recreation of the guests (Košić, 2004).

Bukovička Banja was first mentioned in written documents in 1811. However, 1836 is considered as the year of its foundation, because the first buildings were built then (Specijalna bolnica za rehabilitaciju Bukovička banja, 2016). After a long period of progress, this spa was deleted as a tourist destination for some period, but thanks to privatization and revitalization of the Izvor Hotel and the new tourist facilities, it has revived and became recognizable (Riznić et al., 2014). The mineral waters of this spa are of special importance as they belong to rare cold and hypothermal (warm) thermal waters (Anonymus, 2013).

Soko Banja represents one of the biggest balneological settlements in Serbia and its basin ranks among larger basins of the central part of the Balkan Peninsula (Radivojević et al., 2015). Like many other spas, this spa was used by Romans and Turks, but the intensive reconstruction and building started at the end of XIX century (Milojković, 2013). Thanks to microclimate characteristics of Sokobanja basin, this spa is treated as climatic health resort (Marković, 1976).

Banja Vrdnik is the youngest spa in Serbia, which has been declared a spa only recently because of the natural beauty and thermal sources (Vrdnik Banja, 2016). Thermomineral water springs at great depths were first observed in former coal mines, which represented a major problem to the miners who worked there. In this spa, there is Ravanica Monastery which has in its possession a case with the saint Prince Lazar's belongings and a tower built by the Romans. This spa is increasingly developing into a true modern spa.

Prolom Banja belongs to the young, but well visited balneological centers of Serbia (Stanković, 2010). Environment of this spa was inhabited in the late New Stone Age and its hot oligomineral slightly alkaline water was used by the Romans (Veselinović, 2013). Additional value of this spa is represented by an immediate proximity of the locality of Djavolja varoš, known as a set of figures emerged as a result of natural processes (Melita & Podovac, 2014).

Banja Junaković is a health resort and a sports and recreational centre, which is located in Bačka and surrounded by Junaković forest. The first well with thermo mineral water was bored in 1913 with the aim to find drinking artesian water. After that, five new wells with thermo mineral water were bored in the period from 1977 to 1985. This spa uses thermo mineral water for heating of spa's facilities, balneo-therapy and recreation

in swimming pools (Košić et al., 2011). But, geothermal resources are still not used to their full potential, which indicates that this energy could be used for the heating of hotels in the future (Tomić et al., 2013).

People look for information about restaurants using different sources including the Internet, newspapers, recommendations of other people, TV advertising, etc. Also, promotional activities play important role in attracting guests to visit restaurants. There are several opportunities for restaurant promotions including the following: television, radio, newspapers, magazines, outdoor advertising, direct mail and internet (Drysdale & Galipeau, 2009). Based on the survey conducted by Rainie et al. (2011), the Internet is the main source of information about local restaurants, bars and clubs. Namely, more than 50% of interweaved people (total number was 592) say they mostly rely in the Internet, including: 1) search engines (38% rely on them), 2) specialty websites (17% rely on them) and 3) social media (3% rely on social networking sites or Twitter).

Global development of the Internet technologies has proven useful for gathering and disseminating various data. Usage of these novel systems typically aims at disseminating information to the public. There are many travel and restaurant web portals, which offer different information about restaurants. Those portals offer the information about menu, specials, happy hours, parking, contact info, etc. Also, many of them have online reservation system and online reviews. Online reviews of users are very important for restaurant reputation. The online travel review writers are mostly motivated by helping a travel service provider, concerns for other consumers, and the needs for enjoyment/positive self-enhancement (Yoo & Gretzel, 2008). Through the Internet, travelers can make their opinions and thoughts easily accessible to other Internet users (Dellarocas, 2003).

Online social travel networking, which allow users to interact and provide reviews on hotels, restaurants or on local tourist attractions, include TravBuddy.com, Travellerspoint, WAYN, Woophy, Passportstamp, and TripAdvisor.com (Miguens et al., 2008). Unlike friendship Web 2.0 sites such as Facebook, which social networking base on some kind of former relationship or strong affinity in terms of interests or curiosities, travel networking websites users do not have pre-existing associations (Miguens et al., 2008). Tripadvisor is representative of eWOM (word-of-mouth) portals, which is the largest site in the world which enables travelers to plan and book their trip. On this website travelers can find advice from

other travelers and a wide possibility of travel opportunities. It links to booking tools that check hundreds of websites to find the best hotel prices. Also, it reaches 350 million unique visitors and 320 million reviews per month and covers more than 6.2 million accommodations, restaurants and attractions. Except for other information, the site collects user-generated reviews and recommendations of restaurants in places all over the world. It also features multiple-category restaurant rankings and the online reservation platform.

Very important information for tourists which affects their choice of restaurants in a tourism destination is a type of cuisine in local restaurants. Tikkanen (2007) differs five distinct motivations of culinary travelers. First, they view food itself as an attraction. Second, culinary tourists consume and purchase foodstuffs. Third, they value and seek food experiences. Fourth, they view and value food as a cultural phenomenon. Fifth, they seek and value linkages between tourism and food production.

Visitor reviews/comments are main characteristics of travel networking. Namely, thanks to high level of interactivity and involvement of visitors, presentation of touristic destination, attraction, hotel or restaurant is more realistic than in case when a supplier creates content of an Internet site. On these web portals, visitors express their personal impressions, which sometimes differ from official presentations of the touristic object. Thanks to that, future visitors form expectations based on experiences of others (Sparks & Browning, 2011). It is clear that the image and reputation of a restaurant in modern age is significantly affected by travel portals. Due to that, the aim of this research is to check the availability of restaurants of the ten most visited spas in Serbia on Tripadvisor and analyze visitor comments about them.

### **Methodology of the research**

The research was conducted in March 2016. The selection of the spas for the analysis is based on data from report of the National Statistics Office (*RZS, 2016, Hotelijeri, 2016*). The ranking is done based on the number of overnight stays of foreign tourists and presented in Table 1.

The search of restaurants in selected spas is done on the most popular internet portal for traveling, called Tripadvisor. Different parameters, including the number of restaurants per spa, type of cuisine, comments of

visitors and average traveler rating were collected and analyzed. Based on those parameters we estimated:

1. Restaurants from which spas are visible on the Internet.
2. Which type of cuisine tourists can expect when visiting the 10 most visited spas in Serbia.
3. How many travelers add comment about studied restaurants on Tripadvisor.
4. How tourists evaluate restaurants from the 10 most visited Serbian spas restaurants visible on Tripadvisor.

An average score of tourist reviews/comments was expressed based on a five-point scale. This scale represents a numeric score, which includes evaluation of the food and service quality, price-quality relation and comfort. Numeric score means certain number of laps attributed to restaurant. That number of laps is symbolized by the eyes of an owl, which is present on the logo of portal Tripadvisor (Mašić et al., 2014a). The laps have the following meaning:

1. circle - very bad
2. circles - bad
3. circles - average
4. circles - very good
5. circles - excellent.

### **Results of the research and discussion**

Spa tourism in Serbia has a long tradition and represents a good basis for tourism development generally. But, modern market conditions, rapid development of high technologies and their growing application in tourism and hospitality impose the need to increase competitiveness in order to survive in the world market. Internet and modern technology play important role in attraction of tourists, especially foreign visitors. This is the reason why it is very important to be more active in presenting spas and their capacities on different web portals which offer as much information as possible. The visibility of restaurants on those portals is, also, very important, because gastro-tourism attracts billions in revenue worldwide (Williams et al., 2014). For gastro-tourists, food is the motivation for travel, while the travel locations function as vehicles for gastronomic experiences. Emerging markets in underdeveloped countries can maintain successful gastro-tourism enterprises. The role of Tripadvisor in hospitality and tourism has been studied by several researchers (Miguens et al., 2008; Flores et al., 2014) including some

from Serbia (Čačić and Mašić, 2013; Mašić et al., 2014a, b). But, specific role of that portal of offering information on the restaurant availability to visitors, especially to foreign ones, was not studied, although it is evident that web portals play important role in restaurant reputation and have impact on costumer decisions. Results obtained in this study show that *thirty-two restaurants from the 10 most visited spas in Serbia can be found on Tripadvisor (Table 2). The number of restaurants per spa range between 0 and 8. The highest number of restaurants were found for Bukovička Banja (8 restaurants) although this spa is on the 6<sup>th</sup> position, when ranking based on the number of overnight stays of foreign tourists (Table 1). Bukovička Banja was followed by Banja Palic, while the most visited spa Vrnjačka Banja ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> position. Only one restaurant per spa is presented on Tripadvisor for four spas (Banja Koviljača, Banja Kanjiža, Prolom Banja, Banja Junaković), while for Banja Gornja Trepča, which is the most visited spa after Vrnjačka Banja, there is no any restaurant visible on Tripadvisor. Namely, the highest number of restaurants was found for Bukovička Banja, while for Banja Gornja Trepča there is no any restaurant visible on Tripadvisor.*

**Table 2:** Restaurants from the 10 most visited spas from Serbia visible on Tripadvisor

Name of spa	Number of restaurants on Tripadvisor
Vrnjacka Banja	6
Banja Gornja Trepca	0
Banja Koviljaca	1
Banja Kanjiza	1
Banja Palic	7
Bukovicka Banja	8
Soko Banja	4
Banja Vrdnik	3
Prolom Banja	1
Banja Junakovic	1
Total	32

**Source:** TripAdvisor, 2016

The gastro and food tourism is booming in developed countries and has become one of the most dynamic and creative segments of tourism. Over 33% of money tourists spent to food (Quan & Wang, 2004) and food represents essential component for a destination choice (Hall et al., 2003).

Also, in some destinations food and food-related events represent a key source of tourism (Hjalager & Richards, 2002; Rao, 2001). For gastro or food tourists, type of cuisine in the local restaurants is very important. A quick Google search shows thousands of entries which illustrate the interest in restaurants and foods. But, the analysis conducted on Triadvisor show that the type of cuisine is known for only 62.5% restaurants in the most visited Serbian spas. The following types of cuisine were included: International, European, Yugoslav, Mediterranean, Hungarian, Italian, Ethno, Sea food and Grill (Table 3). Some restaurants offer different types of cuisine. Although visitors prefer to eat local specialties during their visit, the restaurants in Serbian spas mainly offer European or International food. Also, some of them offer national food typical for foreign countries. Only one restaurant from Vrnjačka Banja was presented as ethno restaurant on Tripadvisor. Except that, several restaurants offer Yugoslav food, which could be also classified as local food. At the same time, *Williams et al. (2014)* indicates that many tourists flock to France, Italy and Spain as well as to more remote parts of the world to experience traditional foods and local beverages. This indication could be a guidepost for restaurant managers in Serbia, in particularly in restaurants located in spas.

**Table 3:** *Type of cuisine in restaurants from the 10 most visited spas from Serbia visible on Tripadvisor*

Type of cuisine	Number of restaurants
European	12
Yugoslav	10
International	4
Sea food	3
Grill	2
Hungarian	1
Italian	1
Mediterranean	1
Ethno	1

*Notice: Some restaurants offer several types of cuisine*

**Source:** *TripAdvisor, 2016*

Web portals play an important role in dissemination of information to visitors, in offer the possibility of online booking and enabling interactive communication between restaurant management and costumers. Therefore, those web portals represent powerful tool, on which depends

the fate of the restaurant. Visitor reviews can significantly affect image of restaurants and attract or refuse visitors. Based on the reviews, it is possible to monitor competition and improve own offers in accordance with the needs of customers. The number of visitors comments (Table 4) about restaurants from the 10 most visited spas from Serbia visible on Tripadvisor depended on a spa and the number of restaurants visible on that web portal. The total number of comments was 217. The highest number of comments visitors gave for restaurants from spa Bukovicka Banja, followed by Banja Palic and Vrnjacka Banja. There are only few comments (1-10) about restaurants from Banja Kanjiza, Prolom Banja, Banja Junakovic, Banja Vrdnik and Soko Banja. For restaurants from two spas which occupy very good position (second and third) based on the number of overnight stays of foreign tourists, there are not any visitor comments.

**Table 4:** *Visitors comments about restaurants from the 10 most visited spas from Serbia visible on Tripadvisor*

<b>Name of the spa</b>	<b>Number of visitors' comments</b>
Vrnjacka Banja	58
Banja Gornja Trepca	-
Banja Koviljaca	-
Banja Kanjiza	1
Banja Palic	65
Bukovicka Banja	74
Soko Banja	10
Banja Vrdnik	4
Prolom Banja	2
Banja Junakovic	3
Total number	217

**Source:** *TripAdvisor, 2016*

An average score of tourist reviews/comments was expressed based on a five-point scale and focused on food and service quality, relation price-quality and comfort. Generally, average score for all evaluated restaurants was 4.09, which is similar to average score of visitor reviews for Belgrade hotels presented on the same web portal (Mašić et al., 2014a). Only one restaurant called *Bozji raj* in Prolom Banja was estimated as excellent (average score was 5). Average score for more (16) analyzed restaurants was 4 or between 4 and 5, while for 3 restaurants score was 3 or more and

the score below 3 was given to 1 restaurant. For 32% of the restaurants from the most visited spas from Serbia there was no any visitor comment.

**Table 5:** *The average score of restaurants from the 10 most visited spas in Serbia visible on Tripadvisor based on visitor comments*

<b>Name of the spa</b>	<b>Name of the restaurant</b>	<b>Average score</b>
Vrnjacka Banja	Kruna	4.18
	Etno kuca Gocko	4.29
	Dukat	3.86
	Salus Fispond	4.25
	Savka	4
	Kafe bos	2.5
Banja Gornja Trepca	-	-
Banja Koviljaca	Park	-
Banja Kanjiza	Delikates	4
Banja Palic	Gostiona Abraham	4.23
	Majkin salas	4.10
	Carda kapetanski rit	4.25
	Omega disko picerija	4.5
	Riblja carda	4
	Mala gostiona	3.73
	Vila Viktorija	3
Bukovicka Banja	Tarpos restoran	4.56
	Restoran Aleksandar	4.34
	Kod Vladimira	4.81
	Restoran grb	4.33
	San Djordjo	4
	Stari park	4
	Kafe lesa maska	-
	Brestovi i vizija	-
Soko Banja	Marko Polo pecina	-
	Restoran Zupan	-
	Restoran Boni	-
	Restoran Lav kod Dase	-
Banja Vrdnik	Restoran Mines	-
	Lisine	-
	Red Baron pub	-
Prolom Banja	Bozji raj	5
Banja Junakovic	-	-
Average score		4.09

**Source:** *TripAdvisor, 2016*

In order to improve the image of our national restaurants, it is necessary to provide better visibility on the internet portals like Tripadvisor and others. Also it is important to enrich the offer with higher involvement of local food in restaurant menus. To achieve better results, it is possible to offer a variety of specific programs of animation for children, which are very popular in the modern tourism (Božić & Ivkov-Džigurski, 2009).

### Conclusion

Possibility of promotion of restaurants from the 10 most visited spas in Serbia on web portals are not fully used for now. ***Thirty-two restaurants from the 10 most visited spas in Serbia can be found on Tripadvisor, only. The largest number of restaurants was found for Bukovicka Banja, while for Banja Gornja Trepca there is no any restaurant visible on Tripadvisor.*** Serbian spas mainly offer European or International cuisine in restaurants, while only one restaurant is classified as ethno restaurant and 10 as restaurants with Yugoslav cuisine. The number of visitors' comments about restaurants from the 10 most visited spas in Serbia visible on Tripadvisor was 217 and average score calculated based on their comments is 4.09.

The management of restaurants can use portals like Tripadvisor to improve their offers and attract more visitors. It is very important to inform local restaurant managers on possibilities of using web portals for restaurant promotion, online reservations and the improvement of communication with visitors.

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