

## **SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DESTINATION PREFERENCES: DESIGNING A SURVEY FOR DOMESTIC TOURISTS IN SERBIA**

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### **Abstract**

*This study focuses on designing a survey to explore the factors affecting the domestic tourists' preferences and motivations in Serbia. The research, conducted with the participation of 750 individuals using the CAWI method, has yielded significant results. We found that factors such as the availability of attractions and personal preferences play a crucial role in destination selection. Our findings suggest that affordable accommodation, promotional travel packages, and cost-effective access opportunities encourage tourists to choose new destinations, aligning with sustainable tourism initiatives. Therefore, achieving the goal of sustainable tourism requires balanced management of local tourism dynamics, active involvement of local decision-makers, and concerted efforts to mitigate adverse environmental impacts.*

*Key Words: sustainable tourism initiatives, destination preferences, economic contribution, financing methods*

*JEL classification: Z32*

### **Introduction**

Serbian tourism has recently stood out due to the cultural riches and natural beauties the country possesses. Serbia hosts a wide range of tourism activities at its popular destinations and is making intense efforts to transform tourism into a driving force for the local economic dynamic. Efforts to promote domestic tourism and overcome the preference of the population for foreign travel play a significant role in achieving the

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country's growth targets in the tourism industry. Infrastructure improvements, investments, and branding efforts stand out as prominent steps in this direction. The tourism industry is a significant economic actor operating in a global environment (Hudson, 2008). Domestic tourism markets balance economic growth by maximizing economic performance during crisis periods.

Tourism expenditures have the potential to impact both the micro and macro dynamics of national economies. They are expected to contribute to the local economic activity levels of preferred destinations. Direct income, indirect microeconomic and macroeconomic impacts, infrastructure development, growth of local industries through the protection of cultural and natural heritage, and the emergence of new employment opportunities accelerate the impact process. However, excessive tourism activity carries a number of risks in terms of environmental damage and negative externalities. Risks such as the potential for tourism activities to put pressure on ecosystems and natural resources, traffic and air pollution, inadequate infrastructure, and loss of biodiversity require the tourism industry to focus more on sustainability principles. Domestic visitors' travel behaviors, motivations, and perceptions may significantly differ compared to international visitors (Teodorović et al., 2019).

It is noteworthy that Serbian domestic tourists prioritize international tourism plans, while natural beauty and historical sites are top priorities for Serbian tourists. Additionally, factors such as tourism expenses and destination accessibility hold significant importance for tourists. Affordable accommodation, promotional travel packages, and cost-effective access opportunities encourage them to choose new tourism destinations according to sustainable tourism initiatives. Therefore, achieving the goal of sustainable tourism focuses on the balanced management of local tourism dynamics, emphasizes the participation of local decision-makers, and aims to reduce the negative effects of environmental impacts.

This study contributes to the existing literature by shedding light on the motivations of domestic tourists in Serbia to travel, as well as the potential of tourism activities to activate local dynamics within the context of sustainable tourism policies. Since there are a limited number of studies conducted in this area, it serves to enhance our understanding of sustainable tourism practices.

## **Literature Review**

Tourism has the potential to positively contribute to both the local and national economies of countries. Local job opportunities, income growth, support for small businesses, infrastructure improvements, cultural exchange and understanding are ways through which tourism can positively impact the local economy. However, alongside these benefits, tourism also brings challenges, including environmental damage and negative externalities. Sustainable tourism policies have thus gained importance in mitigating these adverse effects and promoting responsible tourism practices. Sustainable tourism policies are valuable in supporting local economic decision-making units and mitigating the potential negative impacts of tourism. The preventive nature of these policies, especially in terms of preventing negative environmental externalities and promoting alternative energy sources, ensures the widespread distribution of the social and economic benefits derived from tourism. The concept of sustainability is considered a fundamental element in the effective branding of destinations (Kovačić et al., 2022). Dimitrovski et al. (2012) highlight the importance of correct marketing strategies in promoting sustainable local tourism development. Similarly, Sekulovic (2015) emphasizes the need for strategies that focus on improving the quality of tourism products to attract new customer segments.

## **Data and Methodology**

Our sample consists of individuals aged 18 and above, residing in Serbia. Taking into account the demographic structure and province participation, the sample was determined with a margin of error of 4%. In the study conducted through social media, all healthy data received were evaluated in a way not to distort the demographic and provincial weight. For the calculated sample size, the Computer-Aided Web Interviewing (CAWI) method, has been chosen. CAWI is a quantitative data collection method. It is one of the survey methods where respondents answer the prepared questions online via internet communication (Wójcicki, 2012). According to this method, the researcher conducts their survey via a web page and social media without the assistance of any interviewer or robot. In this study, data were obtained using social media channels. The answers obtained from social media were compiled with the help of the Qualtrics system. Formun ÜstüA total of 750 individuals, living in Serbia were randomly surveyed using the CAWI method. The data was processed using SPSS 25.0 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software package program.

## Findings

This section provides the obtained results from the survey. We surveyed 750 participants comprising 371 men and 379 women. Table 1 reflects the demographic characteristics of the participants in the survey. According to the table, the majority of the sample comprises individuals over 56 years of age, and there is nearly equal participation from men and women in the sample.

Table 1: *Characteristics of the participants*

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Male	49.5	371
Female	50.5	379
<b>Age</b>	<b>Percent</b>	
18-25	12.9	97
26-35	14.9	124
36-45	16.5	124
46-55	16.5	124
56 and above	39.2	294

Source: *Authors' own calculation*

Table 2 shows the tourism habits and frequencies of tourists living in Serbia. Roughly 7 out of 10 individuals state that they make travel plans for the near future. 45.7% of those planning a holiday are planning domestic tourism activities. Increasing this rate depends on the strategic marketing policies adopted by all stakeholders in the tourism sector. Also, 79.3% of local tourists indicate that they undertake 1-2 domestic trips per year.

Table 2: *Domestic tourism behavior codes*

<b>Question</b>	<b>Respond</b>	<b>Percent (%)</b>
Do you currently have any plans or intentions to travel in the near future?	Yes	68.7
	No	31.3
What type of travel do you typically engage in domestic or international?	Domestic	45.7
	Abroad	54.3
Frequency of domestic travel	Rarely (1-2 trips)	79.3
	Occasionally (3-5 trips)	14.3
	Frequently (more than 5 trips)	6.4

Source: *Authors' own calculation*

Table 3 illustrates the types of holidays that domestic tourists intend to pursue. In Serbia, domestic tourists prioritize attraction types in the following order: natural landscapes, historical sites, urban/city destinations, and spa and wellness resorts. The motivation of local tourists living in Serbia to visit destinations with multiple opportunities containing cultural and natural assets is quite high (Božić et al.,2017). This motivation is also reflected in the research results.

Table 3: *Type of attractions*

Question	Respond	Percent (%)
What type of attractions do you prefer in Serbia? (Select all that apply)	Natural landscapes	59.1
	Historical sites	40.2
	Urban/city destinations	21.4
	Spa and wellness resorts	21.2
	Cultural events and festivals	21.0
	Adventure activities	13.7
	Other	5.1

Source: *Authors' own calculation*

Tourists' personal interests and preferences, budget considerations, timing of vacations, family structure, health and activity levels, as well as advertising and promotional efforts, collectively play a significant role in determining the types of holidays individuals will take. Table 4 illustrates the importance placed on various factors in the selection of a destination. For domestic tourists, the availability of attractions and activities stands out as the primary factor in destination choice. The factors that encourage people to choose new destinations or deter them from going on vacation can vary. Sometimes it can be about seeing new places, other times it may be about seeking a unique experience, sometimes it could be related to business travel, and sometimes it could simply be an action to escape the chaos of life (Ritchie et al.,2010; Chiang et al., 2015; Jovičić, 2016).

Table 4: *The factors influencing choice of destination*

	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)	Average (out of 5)
Cost of travel	10.7	5.1	33.4	19.1	31.8	3.56
Availability of attractions and activities	7.8	7.6	16.5	28.2	39.9	3.84
Cultural richness	8.7	10.7	20.5	21.5	38.6	3.70
Accessibility (transportation)	12.0	12.9	18.6	14.6	41.9	3.61

Accommodation options	5.3	11.9	24.1	25.1	33.6	3.70
Recommendations from friends or family	18.2	18.2	18.2	18.2	18.2	2.94
Online reviews and ratings	14.8	12.4	30.1	21.1	21.6	3.22

Source: *Authors' own calculation; Note: Scale: 1-5, 1 being not important, 5 being very important*

Table 5 reflects the communication channels that are effective in destination selection. Online travel websites stand out as the most preferred channel, followed by social media. This highlights the significant impact of digital platforms in shaping travel decisions. The pandemic experience and the intensifying digitalization have made consumers more experienced. Consumers now have access to more information than before and they also trust social networks and word-of-mouth information more (Sekulovic, 2015).

Table 5: *Promotional channels*

Question	Respond	Percent (%)
How important are the following factors in influencing your choice of destination? (Select all that apply)	Online travel websites	56.5
	Social media	38.1
	Word of mouth	27.7
	Television	16
	Print media	1.6

Source: *Authors' own calculation*

Table 6: *The impact of the overall cost of travel on destination choice*

	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)	Average (out of 5)
How do you rate the impact of the overall cost of travel on your choice of domestic destinations?	1.7	9.6	43.5	33.1	12.0	3.43
How influential are discounts, promotions, or special offers in your decision to visit a particular domestic destination?	17.2	13	28.8	30	11.0	3.04

Source: *Authors' own calculation; Note: 1 being negligible, 2 minor, 3 moderate, 4 considerable 5 being extremely influential*

The overall cost of travel is a significant factor that heavily influences domestic destination selection. Table 6 emphasizes the importance of

travel cost in the selection of a destination. Domestic tourists find the cost of travel moderately influential, with an average rating of 3.43 out of 5. Additionally, the table reflects the effect of discounts, promotions, or special offers on their decision to visit a particular domestic destination.

Table 7 reflects whether domestic tourists take their holiday by purchasing holiday packages or plan their holidays individually. Additionally, it presents the thoughts of respondents about the proposition of tourism expenditures stimulating the local economy. According to the table, despite budget considerations, only 47.8% consider all-inclusive travel packages for domestic trips. Also, most believe their tourism spending positively impacts local economies. Local job opportunities and income growth, support for small businesses, infrastructure improvements, and cultural exchange and understanding are ways through which tourism can positively impact the local economy. However, over-tourism can lead to environmental issues and negatively affect the quality of life of local residents. Therefore, it is important to manage tourism sustainably and in a balanced manner. The process of encouraging new investments lies in the correct marketing and advertising strategies axis for sustainable local tourism development (Dimitrovski et. al., 2012). A strategy that adapts to changing consumer behaviors and focuses on improving the quality of tourism products to target new customer segments will yield better results (Sekulovic, 2015).

Table 7: *Foreseeability and economic contribution of vacation*

Question	Respond	Percent (%)
Do you often consider all-inclusive travel packages for domestic trips due to budget considerations?	Yes	47.8
	No	52.2
Do you believe that your tourism spending positively contributes to the local economy of the chosen destination?	Yes	67.8
	No	32.2

Source: *Authors' own calculation*

Table 8 reflects the factors that influence consumers in this process. Affordable accommodation options rank highest at 39.6%, followed by promotional travel packages at 13.5%. Other significant factors include accessible adventure activities (10.4%), sustainable tourism initiatives (8.5%), and transportation cost savings (6.9%).

Table 8: *Factors that encourage exploring new destinations in Serbia*

Affordable accommodation option	39.6
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Promotional travel packages	13.5
Accessible adventure activities	10.4
Sustainable tourism initiatives	8.5
Transportation cost savings	6.9
Availability of affordable local cuisine	6.5
Incentives for repeat visits	4.6
Special discounts for locals	4.2
Government subsidies or incentives	3
Cultural exchange programs	1.2
Local economic support initiatives	1
Community engagement programs	0.5

Source: *Authors' own calculation*

Table 9 emphasizes the influencing factors in destination selection such as the trustworthiness of facilities, personal preferences and loyalty. A substantial majority of respondents prioritize their own preferences and interests when selecting a destination, followed by trust in the destination's facilities and services, with loyalty based on previous positive experiences being a lesser factor.

Table 9: *Determining factor in destination choice*

	Percent (%)
Trustworthiness of the destination's facilities and services	26.1
Personal liking for the destination's attractions, culture, and ambiance	59.3
Loyalty to a destination based on previous positive experiences	14.6

Source: *Authors' own calculation*

## Discussion

The findings from this survey provide valuable insights into the behavior and preferences of domestic tourists in Serbia. Firstly, a significant majority of respondents express intentions to travel in the near future, with a notable preference for domestic destinations. Natural landscapes emerge as the most preferred attraction type, indicating a high motivation among local tourists to explore destinations rich in cultural and natural assets. This result reflects the fact that the motivation of local tourists living in Serbia to visit destinations with cultural and natural assets is quite high (Božić et al., 2017). Regarding factors influencing destination selection, the availability of attractions and activities stands out as the primary consideration. Serbians prioritize the availability of activities

over the cost of travel. Moreover, online travel websites and social media platforms emerge as influential channels in shaping travel decisions, highlighting the increasing importance of digital platforms in the tourism industry. Affordable accommodation options, promotional travel packages, and accessible adventure activities are significant influencers in exploring new domestic destinations, aligning with sustainable tourism initiatives. Furthermore, personal preferences for destination selection take precedence over the trustworthiness of facilities and loyalty to previous choices. Sustainable tourism initiatives, by factors such as preserving natural attractions, supporting local cultures, ensuring community involvement, and emphasizing environmental sustainability, encourage the exploration of new domestic destinations in Serbia. These initiatives focus on providing unique experiences that attract tourists while strengthening the local economy and minimizing environmental impacts. Additionally, the use of innovative tourism approaches and sustainable transportation and infrastructure systems facilitate the discovery of new destinations, contributing to the growth of the tourism sector.

### **Conclusion**

In this study, we designed a survey to evaluate the dynamics of domestic tourism in Serbia and the factors influencing decision-making among local tourists. We aimed to provide valuable insights to understand the diverse factors driving domestic tourism behavior in Serbia. Our study sheds light on domestic tourists' preferences and motivations in Serbia, emphasizing the importance of factors like attraction availability and personal liking in destination selection. Also, our study contributes to a deeper understanding of domestic tourism trends in Serbia and emphasizes the importance of strategic planning and sustainable initiatives in maximizing the sector's potential while preserving Serbia's natural and cultural heritage. Developing innovative policies and strategies such as environmental protection and natural resource management, community participation and conservation, education and awareness-raising, sharing experiences of local products and cultures, providing social and economic benefits, and strengthening planning and management processes have the potential to make significant contributions to the development of sustainable domestic tourism activities in Serbia. Future research could explore the effectiveness of sustainable tourism initiatives in promoting local economic development and mitigating environmental impacts. Additionally, investigating the

evolving role of digital platforms in destination marketing and the impact of changing consumer behaviors on tourism patterns would be valuable subjects for further exploration.

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