

## SPECIALISED HOTEL AS A TOURIST ATTRACTION<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – The paper researches aspects of specialised hotels in culture and tourism destinations and their perception as tourist attractions. The goal of the research is to determine in what measure cultural and historical characteristics affect specialised hotel competitiveness and in what way and to what extent hotel management includes cultural and historical heritage in the tourism destinations' total product. The paper examines aspects of organisation of hotels as tourist attractions, the level of their attractiveness, as well as their positioning among tourism destinations.

**Methodology** – Using scientific quantitative and qualitative methods, the aspects affecting the positioning of hotels as tourist attractions are researched in the paper; international examples are presented using analytical methodology, hotel management's attitudes are examined using the interview method, while tourists' opinions on hotels as tourist attractions are researched using survey methodology, accompanied by statistical methods. Conclusions which point to new scientific knowledge are formed by combining the creative thinking technique with different scientific methods.

**Findings** – The research results have an impact on the formation of scientific knowledge in the area of organisation of specialised hotels as tourist attractions, as well as on the identification of key core competences such facilities should possess in order to be perceived as tourist attractions in tourism destinations.

**Contribution** – The paper represents a valuable contribution to the investigation into the impact of organisation and marketing activities of hotel and destination stakeholders in tourism destinations. The concept of considering specialised hotels as tourist attractions is a new approach to designing the destination offer and requires further research and development.

**Keywords:** specialised hotels, cultural attractions, social resources, competitiveness

### **INTRODUCTION**

The international hotel business recognises different forms of accommodation facilities, which are categorised and equipped for the provision of catering and hotel services. Through different classification and categorisation systems, it valorises cultural and historical heritage structures, as well as buildings with various initial functions, which are organised into specialised, themed hotels and positioned in selective tourism niches in the tourism market, achieving new competitive advantage. They meet modern tourist demands that require new experience and valorise special characteristics of accommodation facilities and tourism structures.

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The Croatian tourism economy recognises the relevance of monitoring international tourism development trends regarding differentiation and specialisation of the hotel industry, and adapts the institutional framework to the modern demand requirements through law and regulations. The special labelling system in the hospitality business and the classification of heritage hotels contribute to the valorisation of social resources and enrich diversification of the hotel industry.

Cultural and historical heritage, 'storytelling', awareness of historical functionality and of economic activities contribute to the appeal of different accommodation structures. Tourism valorisation and a sustainable hotel industry also contribute to the preservation and attractiveness of the resource basis, providing it with a new value in the form of tourism attractions. The research of market positioning potentials and consideration of hotels as tourist attractions was conducted from two aspects in the paper; the attitudes of international specialised hotel business management were researched and the demand market's responses to current positions and future potentials of marketing hotels as tourist attractions were considered. The interview method was chosen because the hotel management communicates with all three core segments of tourism: the hotel owners pursuing profitability, the tourist demand requiring new services and experiences and the destination organisation supporting development of new innovative tourist products aimed at achieving competitiveness. In the second part of the research, attitudes of stakeholders who perceive hotels as tourist attractions were examined using qualitative and quantitative research methodology, the interview method and Likert scale research. The methodology included ranking the scores according to the importance level of each attitude quote, which suggested the issues about potential and future development described in the discussion.

## **1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

In recent years, tourist attractions have become a part of not only tourism, but also of hotel offer. A series of factors affect the choice of a tourism destination, and consequently of a hotel facility. These factors can be defined as attributes or tourist attractions of a destination which, with their specific features, attract and motivate tourists to visit a certain place (Krešić & Prebežac 2011, 499). Numerous authors: Murphy, Pritchard and Smith (2000), Gunn (1998), Lew (1987), Gartner (1996) have recognised tourist attractions as one of the most important determinants of tourist offer competitiveness. A tourist attraction can be defined as a characteristic of the tourism destination which motivates tourists to visit a particular tourism receiving area due to its specific features (Krešić 2007, 47). There are various tourist attractions and we can therefore distinguish between natural or built beauty, cultural or social attractions. Cultural attractions encompass museums, theatres, and historical presentations of traditional customs. Social attractions provide guests with the possibility to meet people from different destinations, as well as to familiarise themselves with the national population, their culture and customs. Activities associated with attractions are the elements within the destination's environment which, individually and combined, serve as the primary motivation for tourist visits (Salazar, Chang and Girard 2001, 34).

Hotel guests' expectations have increased and hotel managements follow current trends, implement innovations and new technologies in order to be as competitive as possible. Hotels tend to specialise in a specific type of offer in order to attract a certain segment of service consumers. As a trend of an innovated hotel offer, specialisation has been studied for some time both in domestic and foreign literature. The authors Pavlinović (2013), Sloan, Legrand and Chen (2013), Henderson (2011, 2013), Cantell (2005), Koncul (2012), Cvikl and Mekinc (2010), Ifko (2010), as well as Littlejohn (2003) wrote on the topic of specific themed hotels and the potential of their perception as tourist attractions. Kušen (2002, 17, 92) explains that the accommodation facilities are considered as a tourist resource and could be valorised in tourist attraction. Within detailed classifications related to cultural and historic heritage, tradition and crafts the specialised, themed hotels are recognised as potential tourist attractions.

Tourists for whom social tourist attractions, including culture and gastronomy, are a main motivation for coming to a specific tourism destination will certainly look for accommodation in hotels which have adapted their offer to this segment of tourism offer. Cultural tourist attractions are the main content of cultural tourism which exists because tourists want either to experience living places and cultures other than their own or to gain access to foreign cultures, different in time and space (Rosendahl 2009, 271). Cultural tourists travel out of the need to experience something new and precious and not to merely tour historical sites, thinking about the past. Cohen (2001) believes tourist experience can be viewed as something that has the structure of a spectrum - tourists decide on their choice of destinations from nature-related tourism to cultural tourism, both being the opposite ends of the colourful continuum of tourism categories, with many other possible choices in between.

Cultural tourism destinations should have all the infrastructural and service facilities necessary for developing selective, sustainable tourism (Pavia, Floričić 2015, 124). An adequate accommodation infrastructure themed using specific historic facilities is a development factor for every tourism destination; it is necessary to promote the partnership between the hospitality sector and cultural tourism. Using such a strategy, the aim is to create a differentiated and heterogeneous tourism product, specialised in the services of a selected market segment. Cultural tourism destinations and cultural routes organise hospitality facilities according to the spirit, ambience, atmosphere and characteristics of a particular culture. They include: hotels, restaurants, accommodation, agricultural facilities, hostels, campsites or any other type of service which ennobles the route and supports the theme using buildings, design, furnishing, gastronomy and the marketing label (Horvat and Klarić, 2012, 24).

An example of the hospitality business in cultural and historical heritage structures are heritage hotels<sup>2</sup>, which are divided into 2-5-star categories and which include old, original, traditional, historical, rural and urban structures and buildings that provide services of accommodation and breakfast, as well as other catering services. Hotels valorise their cultural and historical attributes as elements of attractiveness and are

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<sup>2</sup> Regulations on the classification, categorisation and special standards of catering and hospitality facilities in the group of hotels, [http://www.mint.hr/UserDocsImages/131128-pr\\_hoteli-edit.pdf](http://www.mint.hr/UserDocsImages/131128-pr_hoteli-edit.pdf) (accessed on 24/11/2015).

market positioned, attracting demand with their special historical, cultural and architectural characteristics.

The attractiveness of the specialised hotel industry can also be achieved by market theming, i.e. by implementation of innovative themed services, attractive themed arrangements of the interior, as well as by market channelling towards market niches. By conducting the research on specialised hotels, the authors confirmed the theory that some specialised hotels are perceived exclusively as tourist attractions and the primary motivation of visitors is to stay in them and experience their special themed characteristics. Some Croatian examples are the Palace Lešić Dimitri on Korčula, the Saint Cross Hotel in Bol on Brač, while international ones encompass the spectrum of various accommodation structures from sea forts to priories and abbeys, construction pipes, and floating platforms. Researched properties comprise: the Priest House Hotel (Castle Donnington, UK), The Crazy Bear (Baconsfield, UK), Spitbank Fort (Solent, UK), the Paper Factory Hotel (New York, US), the Amberley Castle (UK), Abbaye de la Bussiere (France), Chateau Rhianfa in Wales, (UK), the 4 Rivers Floating Lodge (Cambodia), Hotel de Glace (Canada), Dasaparkhotel (Austria).

Some hotels developed such an innovative concept that investments were too high and feasibility couldn't be met (Igloo City, Alaska, USA). Other examples prove that specialised themed hotels are a successfully operated business and that tourist attractions have an impact on the growth and marketing of a tourist destination.

## **2. RESEARCH, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The research is divided into two parts. The first part of research includes benchmarking of three specialised Italian hotels and involves eleven questions posed to hotel managers concerning cultural and historical features of hotels, as well as in what way the described features affected the hotel's positioning on the market and its inclusion in the tourism destinations' total offer. Due to the lack of theme hotels which represent the main destination attractions in Croatia, three Italian hotels were researched for the purpose of the paper. Through this research the authors would like to emphasize that Croatia has in its immediate surroundings a competitor that has already recognized the potential of this form of hotel and destination offer. This implies that there is an interest in this market niche, but that it has been insufficiently developed in Croatia. There are some attempts at this type of offer in the form of eco hotels, but there remains a large percentage of unused potential in old town centres, on islands, and especially in the mountain and continental areas of the country. The first part of the research presents managers' attitudes towards aspects of hotels as tourist attractions, collected using the interview method. The research was conducted in March 2015, at the International Travel Trade Fair ITB in Berlin, which represents the world's largest gathering of supply, demand and associated stakeholders and which determines future trends and potentials of international tourism development.

The example of the Italian hotel industry<sup>3</sup> regarding the development of specialised and thematic hotels is presented, as well as the coordinated marketing with destination companies. The researched hotels are the following:

- Locanda Don Serafino, Sicily, Italy – a historic boutique hotel situated in Baroque, Ragusa's historic centre, which is under UNESCO protection as a heritage site. The hotel is situated in a stone building with special architecture and interior design, with 10 rooms and suites and a Michelin starred restaurant.
- Relais Monaco, Treviso, Italy – a historic countryside villa from 1800 with 79 rooms, a restaurant and a wellness centre. With its interior decor, the hotel combines historical and modern elements of contemporary design and, due to its specific qualities, it was used as a set for numerous Italian movies and many famous actors stayed there.
- Hotel Gio Wine & Jazz Area, Perugia, Italy – a themed modern hotel specialising in wine and music, with 206 rooms divided into two thematic areas: Jazz and Wine. The Wine and Jazz Areas are linked by a musical arcade with secluded listening points. In the Jazz Area there is a grand piano, ancient pianos, listening points, vinyl collections and pictures of authors. The Wine Area is an original place with themed furnishing and an exhibition of bottles.

The research results, obtained interviewing managers of the three small specialised hotels follow below:

Tables 1: **Attitudes of managers towards aspects of hotels as tourist attractions**

Locanda Don Serafino	Relais Monaco	Hotel Gio Wine & Jazz Area
1. What was the original purpose of the building where your hotel operates now?		
The hotel is a 19th century mansion, built from stone and with design value.	It was a villa owned by a count.	The hotel is a new building with special design and services; we carry an innovative concept.
2. How does your hotel promote cultural tourism?		
Through design, interiors and gastronomy.	Through the Internet and by association with local stakeholders.	Through gastronomy and music (jazz), we organise events and promote them.
3. Does your hotel have original historic details?		
Yes, the furniture.	Yes it does, they are valorised through the film industry.	Not much, it is a new building, we have old pianos.
4. How does the market respond to the special characteristics of your hotel?		
They love it; they are enchanted with our rooms in rough stone.	They are interested in the history of the hotel. They like to stay in a hotel where famous actors have also stayed.	The guests are very satisfied, interested and they come back.
5. Do you implement historic gastronomy offer (traditional food) in your restaurant?		
Yes we do; traditional and modern food, we have a passion for food.	Of course we do; it is a part of our tradition and we are a countryside hotel.	Wine and related menus, traditional Italian food, chocolate from Perugia.

<sup>3</sup> Locanda Don Serafino – personal communication with Giuseppe and Antonio dela Rosa,  
 Relais Monaco, Treviso – personal communication with Michele Prete,  
 Hotel Gio Wine & Jazz Area – personal communication with Lavinia Pagnotta.

<b>Locanda Don Serafino</b>	<b>Relais Monaco</b>	<b>Hotel Gio Wine &amp; Jazz Area</b>
<b>6. Do you agree that guests choose your hotel because of its cultural and historic value?</b>		
Yes.	Yes.	Yes.
<b>7. Does your hotel represent a tourist attraction itself?</b>		
Yes.	Yes.	Yes.
<b>8. Do tourists who are staying in other hotels visit your hotel, "just to look around"?</b>		
Yes.	No.	Yes.
<b>9. Do you organise guided tours of your property and at what price?</b>		
No.	No.	No.
<b>10. Is your hotel promoted via DMO (tourism board) promotional materials?</b>		
Yes (in print and online).	No.	Yes (fairs, Internet, brochures).
<b>11. Is your hotel included in cultural events in your tourist destination and how?</b>		
Yes, in events.	Yes, via accommodation and gastronomy (F&B).	Yes, gastronomy events, accommodation.

Source: Authors' research

The managers' attitudes point to the conclusion that, coupled with the development of the destinations' total offer, theming and specialisation of the hotel industry are the prerequisites for achieving new competitive advantages in the market. The managers believe that an adequate marketing combination and the implementation of digital marketing are important for performance and market recognisability. The managers affirm that the hotels they manage are considered as attractions and, while recognising visitors' interest in the touring of the building, they do not organise guided tours or present their hotels as tourist attractions by charging for it. This, in itself, represents a developmental potential, not primarily because of the potential financial benefits, but because, if organised on a voluntary basis, it will be used to create a 'fame story' in order to intensify its recognisability, and, on the other hand, to create a monetary fund for restoration of the attraction or for other socially responsible activities.

The second part of the research pertains to the tourists' perceptions of hotels as tourist attractions, supplementing the first research on positioning potentials. The research examines tourists' attitudes and preferences in their selection of a destination or a hotel in the destination, as well as valorises the relevance of theming of specific hotel services. The purpose of the research was to determine the potential for developing a themed hotel offer in Croatia. Therefore, tourists coming to Croatia were interviewed in order to discover if there is a real interest in this type of offer or if tourists are still exclusively interested in swimming and sunbathing during the summer months. The authors believe that Croatia has a potential to develop a themed hotel offer which could additionally valorise destinations, as well as enrich and significantly lengthen the tourist season still struggling with its limited duration.

The research on the attitudes of tourists who have stayed in the Croatian cluster of South Istria during the holiday season points to the evident recognisability of specialised and themed hotels. Tourists who are currently staying in various accommodation facilities consider hotels to be a tourist attraction which, with the integrity of its product, meets the demand needs. In the system of wider research, a

survey questionnaire was completed by 103 respondents<sup>4</sup>. The questionnaire used the 5 point Likert scale, in which 5 indicated the highest and 1 the lowest level of agreement with a particular statement. The average relevance grade for each hypothesis was then calculated. Using statistical methodology, a sample from the emissive tourist market was collected, including their gender and age, as well as their motivation for coming to the tourism destination and valorisation of SME hotel sector.

According to the research, it is evident that the majority of guests from the sample come from the Italian emissive market (42%), followed by Slovenia with 20%, the German market with 17% and the Austrian and Croatian markets, with a 10% share each. This points to the importance of the vicinity of the market and transport accessibility, given that both northern Italy and Slovenia are close auto destinations. Analysing the respondents' gender, there was an approximately equal percentage of male and female questionnaire respondents, with an evident predominance of female population (55%) over male (45%). Regarding the respondents' age structure, the dominance of older tourists that are 60 - 79 years of age (31%) and middle to older tourists aged 50 - 59 years (21%) is evident. The sample of middle-aged population (from 40 - 49 years of age) constituted 18% and younger to middle age population (20 - 39 years of age) was equal to 14%. The data show that the dominant older population segment has a preference for: excursion and gastronomy (44%), rest and relaxation (32%) and loyalty towards the tour operator (21%). The preferences indicate that this section of population would prefer to stay in specialised, culture and gastronomy themed hotels and would prefer them over the standard tourist attractions. The smallest number of respondents recognises price as a motivating travel aspect, which suggests that price is not a decisive factor when choosing a hotel. In correlation to the answer to question no. 8, this has implications for the research. The research results, which contribute to the formation of conclusions and recommendations, follow below.

**Table 2: Tourists' perception of aspects of hotel as a tourist attraction**

<b>Tourists' perception survey – statements</b>	<b>Average grade</b>
1. I often stay in small and medium-sized specialised themed hotels.	<b>3.6</b>
2. I choose one destination over another because of specialised, themed hotel where I want to stay	<b>3.9</b>
3. Specific hotel features affect my decision on choosing that very hotel among other hotels	<b>3.8</b>
4. The ambience themed environment contributes to the overall experience of the hotel	<b>4.0</b>
5. For me, it is important that the themed hotel is in line with the overall destination offer	<b>3.9</b>
6. At the hotel, the themed gastronomy is important for me	<b>4.0</b>
7. At the hotel, the themed animation programmes are important for me	<b>4.0</b>
8. I am prepared to pay more for accommodation in a themed hotel than in a standard hotel	<b>3.3</b>

Source: Authors' research

<sup>4</sup> 300 questionnaires were prepared for the survey, out of which 103 were completed, representing a response of 34.3%. The minimal number of survey questionnaires was invalid, 1.9% of them.

The quoted data analysis leads to the conclusion that, when it comes to specialised hotels, guests award the highest grades to the themed hotel offer, which is achieved through the aspects of gastronomy, animation programmes and the ambience, i.e. organisation of the hotel in a themed style, both of which had the average grade of 4. It implicates that specialised characteristics represent a competitive advantage and that they perceive the hotel as a tourist attraction. The second important are the destination's influence on the choice of the specialised hotel and the compatibility of the destination offer with the offer of the specialised hotel, which are graded with the average grade of 3.9. The influence of the relevance of themed hotels' special features on the guests' decision to choose that very hotel as opposed to a competitor is graded with 3.8 and the criterion of the hotel size, (small and medium-sized) and the hotel type (specialised), as a determinant when choosing the accommodation facility in the destination, with the grade 3.6. The guests' preparedness to pay more, i.e. to pay a higher price just in order to stay at a themed hotel was graded the lowest, with the average grade of 3.3.

In correlation with the expressed high level of interest in themed and specialised hotels, the quoted grades point to the conclusion that the themed offer does not represent a part of additional hotel facilities, but has become an imperative by which the hotel competitive advantage is defined. A relatively low guests' grade for their preparedness to pay a higher price for a stay at a themed hotel affirms the previously set premise determining the quality of the hotel offer and competitiveness in the tourism market, with does not define the price as a decisive factor in choosing the destination where the hotel operates as a tourist attraction.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

When considering a hotel as a tourist attraction, the identified problem area are the strict regulations according to which specific facilities in the hotel industry with the potential of valorisation physically do not meet the proscribed assessment standards for construction and technological entities. The solution to this problem appears in the form of thematising and creating a marketing combination within the framework of the official category. However, in that way a certain number of market-attractive accommodation facilities with development potential still remain outside the institutional and regulatory framework and without an official category.

We are aware that apart from the primary services of accommodation and catering, guests actually purchase an experience, which is unique for each hotel, depending on the hotel's themed features (historical, cultural, health, gastronomic, etc.). From that it can be concluded that hotels can build their competitive advantage only by organising their product as a tourist attraction, by looking for new market niches and by profiling high quality specialised offers. In that sense, it is important to emphasise that the themed hotel offer must be compatible with the destination in which the hotel is situated, as the optimum can be achieved by the synergy of these stakeholders.

The additional fact that people have increasingly less time for long holidays, i.e. they more frequently opt for several shorter holidays a year, during which they do not have too much time for touring attractions in the destination itself, confirms the justification



of hotels' investment in the creation of a themed hotel offer, with an ambience and accompanying facilities, in order for guests to be able to experience what is characteristic for that very destination and that very hotel, as much as possible in a single place and in a short time.

Croatia bases a large part of its tourist offer on its historical heritage, gastronomy, culture and customs themselves. The Istrian region, where the survey was conducted, belongs to the category of pioneers in the provision of selective forms of tourism.

By specialising small and medium-sized hotels and organising them as tourist attractions, many benefits are created both for guests and hoteliers, as guests receive services adapted to their desires and needs, next to experiences which are specific to that very hotel and that very destination. On the other hand, hotels which are not exclusively based on the provision of accommodation and catering services, but offer an extra component, such as gastronomy, culture, wellness facilities or similar, are less susceptible to seasonality, which represents one of the main problems of the Croatian hotel industry.

In that sense, it can be concluded that the offer of the themed hotel facilities transforms a hotel from an accommodation facility into a facility which becomes an attraction at the tourism destination level, whether it concerns a historical and cultural attraction (the example of hotels in the old town centres), or an attraction that draws guests to visit the destination precisely due to hotels' themed offers.

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