

ANALYSIS OF ADVENTURE FORMS OF RIVER-BASED TOURISM ON CROATIAN RIVERS

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims at identifying the types of adventure activities on Croatian rivers and the key features of the current offer. Furthermore, it aims at determining the characteristics of adventure-seeking travelers and analyzing the encouraging and restrictive factors of the development of this type of tourism in Croatia.

Design – The paper explores the existing offer of adventure activities on Croatian rivers through an analysis of business/activities of members of the Adventure Tourism Community.

Methodology – The theoretical elaboration of the described issues shall include the documentation analysis method, the method of analysis and synthesis, and the comparative method, while the method of an interview and the analysis of available websites will be applied for the purpose of collecting primary data.

Approach – The research was conducted on 67 members of the Adventure Tourism Community, with special focus on the issues of the development of adventure forms of river-based tourism in Croatia, its possibilities and restrictions and the current characteristics of the offer of adventure forms of river-based tourism.

Findings – The encouraging factors for the development of adventure river-based vacation forms are clean and preserved environment, biological diversity, safety of the country and the hospitality of local people. However, the research has pointed to many restrictive factors as well, which reduce the competitiveness of the tourism offer on Croatian rivers. These factors include insufficiently attractive rivers in certain market segments, legal regulations, and the lack of a systematic collection of qualitative and quantitative data on the characteristics of adventure-seeking travelers.

Originality of the research – The contribution of this paper includes determining the factual state of the offer of adventure river-based vacation forms and public-political suggestions oriented towards increasing the number of adventure-seeking travelers and achieving economic benefits.

Keywords adventure tourism, river-based tourism, Croatian rivers, special interest tourism

INTRODUCTION

Changes in tourist's affinities, the lack of free time, changes in the environment, a harsher market competitiveness between certain destinations, new vacationing and traveling trends and the adjustment to the new system of market values have conditioned the development of specific forms of tourism. The emphasis is now put on the organization of new forms of vacation, recreational and cultural experiences and other specific contents which strive to adjust the tourist offer and tourist products to the needs of the immediate tourist and to offer other tourists more content-rich tourist products which correspond to their needs, motives and wishes. Following the new trends in the international tourism market, there appeared, among other segments, a new tourism segment with a pronounced interest for taking part in various activities during the

vacation, which resulted in a great number of tourism products such as cyclotourism, canoeing, rafting, trekking and mountain-climbing. Adventure tourism has grown rapidly in Europe and the rest of the world and the adventure-seeking tourists are becoming aware of the environment and the nature by exploring the destinations through various physical activities. The growth of the market of adventure tourism has a significant impact on destinations and the traveling industry. Destinations and tourist professions that have the capacity of reviving the adventure experiences with a great diversity of unique activities will be the most successful ones in seizing the opportunities of the profitable market of adventure tourism. The understanding of the needs, tendencies and behaviors of this segment will thus be crucial for attracting the adventure-seeking travelers and achieving the economic benefits.

1. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

According to the Dictionary of Tourism, „adventure travel is motivated by experiencing something new and unknown, and according to the typology of tourist travels, it belongs to the first organized travels (Grand Tour, 17th and 18th century), while in the recent years it implies the travels motivated by the experience of something new, dangerous and different from everyday life (for example rafting on wild rivers)” (Vukonić and Čavlek 2001, 29). To meet the definition of adventure travel, “a trip must take an individual outside of his or her regular environment for more than 24 hours – and for no longer than one consecutive year – and include at least two of the following three aspects: participation in a physical activity, a visit to a natural environment and a culturally immersive experience” (ATDI 2016, 4). According to Morrison (2000,11) adventure tourism involves trips with the specific purpose of exploring a new experience, often involving perceived risk or controlled danger associated with personal challenges, in a natural environment or exotic setting. Therefore, Buckley (2010,7) argues that adventure tourism can be defined in various ways and from the perspective of the individual tourist – anything that they personally consider adventurous can be counted as adventure tourism. Thus, it could be claimed that different individuals, or even the same individual at different ages, may have widely different perceptions of how adventure-driven a particular activity may be, depending on their prior experience, skills and interests. Considering the term from another perspective – the supply-side – a wide range of different commercial tourism activities may be marketed as adventure tourism (Buckley 2010, 7). Swarbrooke et al. (2003, 9) emphasize this problem of defining adventure tourism by suggesting that there are ten core characteristics of adventure (Tables 1) which, when combined, can be related to tourism, thus creating an expectation and fulfilment within the adventure tourism context.

Table 1: **Characteristics of adventure**

	Characteristics
1	Uncertain outcome
2	Danger and risk
3	Challenge
4	Anticipated rewards
5	Novelty
6	Stimulation and excitement
7	Escapism and separation
8	Exploration and discovery
9	Absorption and focus
10	Contrasting emotions

Source: Swarbrooke, J., Beard, C., Leckie, S., Pomfret, G. (2003), *Adventure Tourism. The New Frontier*. Butterworth-Heinmann, Oxford, p. 9

Adventure tourism also involves a growing number of specialized tour operators who provide the equipment, experienced tour guides and itineraries (Morrison 2000, 11). The adventure tourism operators need to achieve a balance within their particular adventure tourism niche, where the paying client can have their expectations met whilst remaining within their accepted envelope of safety and risk (Shephard and Evans 2005, 202). An important issue can be seen in respect of the safety of certain activities and a need for rigorous training for the staff of adventure tour operators (Morrison 2000, 11), since the spectrum of adventure activities ranging from non-hazardous to high-risk activities has led to the concept where adventure tourism can be categorized as either „Soft adventure“ or „Hard adventure“ (Shephard and Evans 2005, 203). Soft adventure would involve a very low risk and might be undertaken by anybody who is physically fit and able, yet they would not necessarily need to have any previous experience in their chosen holiday and motivation since they would undertake this activity more for the experience rather than the expectation of an encounter with some sort of risk. On the other hand, hard adventure would require previous experience, recognized levels of competence, the ability to cope with the unexpected and the skills associated with that type of holiday.

According to ATDI (2016, 4), adventure travel may include any of the following 34 activities: joining an archaeological expedition; attending local festivals/fairs; backpacking; bird watching; camping, caving; climbing; taking a cruise; participating in cultural, educational or environmentally sustainable activities; fishing/fly-fishing; getting to know the locals; hiking; horseback riding; hunting, kayaking; whitewater rafting; learning a new language; orienteering; joining a research expedition or safari; sailing, scuba diving; snorkelling; skiing and snowboarding; surfing; trekking; walking; visiting friends and family; visiting a historical site; and participating in a volunteer tourism program.

Among the mentioned adventure activities, it is possible to identify the ones that are typical for river-based tourism, i.e. the ones that take part on the river itself or in the immediate proximity of the river so they can thus be considered a part of river-based tourism as one of the special forms of tourism. In its essence, the river-based tourism includes the tourist activities that take part on the river and the river paths connected to them or in the area of the river bank. These activities include the use of personal or rented

vessels while the vessel is floating on the river or is located in the port/the berth. They also include the stay in tourist ports or outside of the ports and the stay in other facilities of supra and infrastructure next to rivers for resting, fun, recreation, leisure, sports, meeting the cultural, educational, health and other motives, but they also include all other relations stemming from the mentioned tourist activities (Bosnić 2015, 60). Considering the mentioned definition of river-based tourism, the use of the phrase “adventure forms of river-based tourism” can be considered justifiable for all adventure activities, i.e. adventure forms of vacation which take part on rivers and/or river banks, and/or in the immediate proximity of the river.

According to the mentioned criteria, the following activities may be included in the group of adventure forms of river-based tourism: activities that take part on the river itself (canoeing, kayaking and rafting) and activities that take part on the river banks and/or in the immediate proximity of rivers (fishing, fly fishing, camping, cycling, horseback riding, bird watching, trekking, hiking and research expeditions).

2. ADVENTURE FORMS OF RIVER-BASED TOURISM IN CROATIA

The river network of the Republic of Croatia encompasses all river systems within Croatian borders (rivers and smaller streams that supply the river with water), which mutually differ according to size, shape, topography, geological features (including soil features), climate and ecosystem. Šafarek and Šolić (2010, 87) divide Croatian rivers in two main groups according to their most significant features, i.e. according to the hydrogeological features of the rocks in the area where the river flows: lowland rivers and karst rivers. Karst rivers are further systematized so we distinguish three subgroups of karst rivers: green karst rivers, mountain rivers and rivers of high karst fields, and Mediterranean rivers (Table 2).

Table 2: **Division of rivers according to the relief, i.e. according to hydrogeological features of rocks in the area where the river flows**

Systematization of Croatian rivers	Common features	Most significant rivers
LOWLAND RIVERS	constantly change their riverbeds; create typical river landscapes with meanders, sediment deposits, i.e. sandbars (most commonly made of gravel or sand), sandy beaches, backwaters, swamps and floodplains (e.g. Kopački rit)	Drava Dunav Mura Sava
KARST RIVERS	rich in karst cascades and rapids; are the most significant for creation and development of karst phenomena: cascades, tuffs, abysses, wells and karst springs	

Systematization of Croatian rivers	Common features	Most significant rivers
Green karst rivers	located at the meeting point of the upland and lowland parts of Croatia; most of them emanate from mountains, but their estuaries are located in lowlands; flow in deep canyons between hills in karst terrains covered in redde that is covered in vegetation; they are an example of rivers with two faces: cascades on one side and lake parts of river on the other side of the river flow	Dobra Korana Kupa Mrežnica
Mountain rivers and rivers of high karst fields	rivers and streams with many rapids, but with a short flow; many of them are undercurrents, i.e. rivers that end their overground flows by drifting into karst underground	Čabranka Gacka Lika Una
Mediterranean rivers	mostly flow through deeply cut canyons; form cascades on one side of the river and lake parts on the other side of the river like green karst rivers; are rich in endemic fish species (15 units)	Cetina Krka Neretva Zrmanja

Source: Adjusted according to Šafarek, G., Šolić, T. (2011), *Rijeke Hrvatske*, Veda d.o.o., Križevci, pp. 10-11,85,147,187, 223,241

Each of the mentioned groups and subgroups of rivers have certain common features, i.e. common characteristics which, among others, condition their tourist potential and determine the possibilities of their tourist exploration.

2.1. Metodology

In order to comprehend the current trends in the market of adventure forms of river-based tourism in Croatia, the key encouraging and restricting factors of the development of adventure forms of vacation on the rivers, the current state of the offer and the characteristics of the demand for adventure forms of river-based tourism, the authors have analyzed the secondary data, as well as conducted a research with the aim of collecting primary data.

To determine which adventure activities are present on certain Croatian rivers, the authors of this paper have analyzed the data available on the Internet sites of economic entities, tourist agencies and destination management companies specialized in adventure tourism which are also members of the Adventure Tourism Community of Croatian Chamber of Economy, i.e. the companies registered in offering services in the field of adventure tourism.

Besides the mentioned method of documentation analysis, the authors have implemented the method of interviews with key stakeholders and holders of the offer of adventure forms of river-based tourism to collect primary data. The research was conducted in the period from February 19 2018 until May 15 2018. The interview topics encompassed the issues of the development of adventure forms of river-based tourism in Croatia, its possibilities and restrictions, the current characteristics of the offer of adventure forms

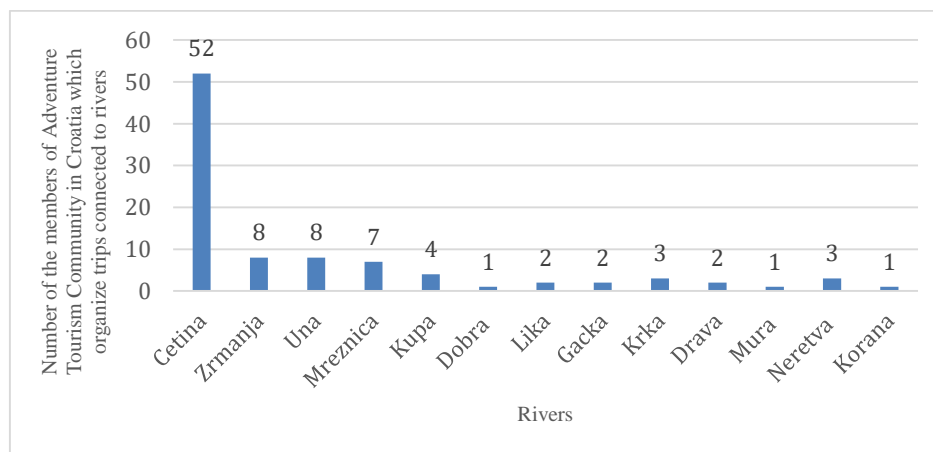
of river-based tourism, the characteristics of tourist demand and the trends in the offer and demand of adventure forms of river-based tourism.

Eight interviews were conducted which makes the sample of 11,94% of representatives of receptive tourist agencies and destination management companies, the members of the Adventure Tourism Community in Croatia which organize trips (package tours) connected to rivers. Specifically, in 2018, the list of economic entities of the Adventure Tourism Community of Croatian Chamber of Economy encompassed 175 entities (tourist agencies, destination management companies and other economic entities) specialized in adventure tourism, i.e. economic entities registered in offering services in the field of adventure tourism. In this moment, 67 members or 46,52% of members out of the overall number¹ of members of the Adventure Tourism Community organize certain trips (package tours) which include activities on rivers or in the immediate proximity of the river. Also, when determining the sample, the geographic distribution of subjects was taken into account and subjects that organize excursions on the following rivers were selected: Cetina, Zrmanja, Mreznica, Una, Kupa, Korana, Danube and Drava.

2.2. Analysis of research results and discussion

An analysis of the offer² of 67 members of the Adventure Tourism Community that organize trips on the rivers, has shown river Cetina as the most popular for adventure activities (mostly rafting), then the rivers Zrmanja, Una and Mreznica (Graph 1).

Graph 1: **Representation of rivers in the Adventure Tourism Community members offer**



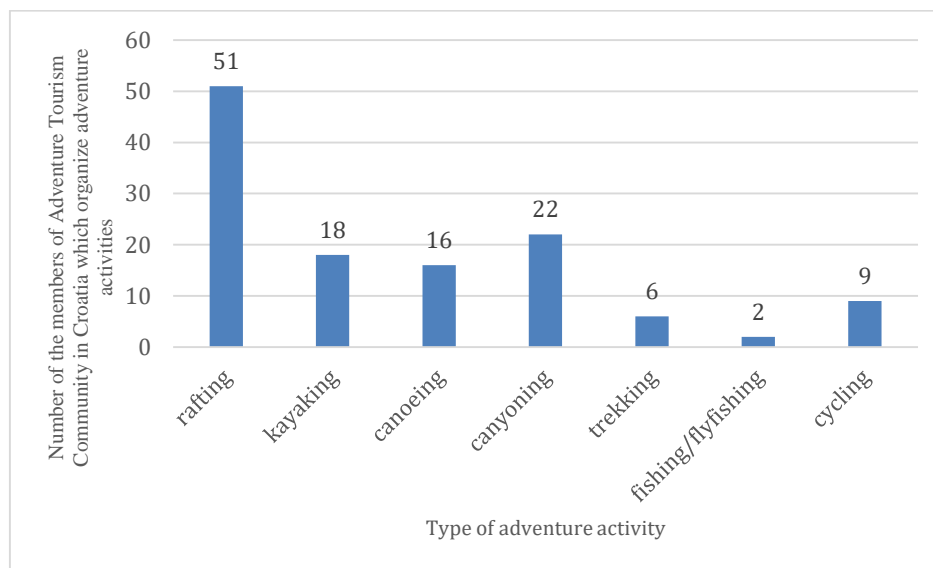
Source: Authors – based on 67 members of the Adventure Tourism Community at the Croatian Chamber of Commerce website content analysis in the period from February 19 2018 to May 15 2018

¹ 31 agencies that lack websites or whose websites are under construction were excluded from the analysis

² Made by analysis of the members website content

The possibilities of carrying out certain tourist activities in the area of the river depend on the water level of the river. Generally, the season lasts from April until October and the water level determines the suitability for organizing certain activities (rafting, kayaking or canoeing). Next to traditional water activities such as rafting, kayaking and canoeing, the recent years have seen the rise in the popularity of activities such as canyoning (Graph 2).

Graph 2: **List of adventure activities represented by the Adventure Tourism Community members offer**



Source: Authors – based on 67 members of the Adventure Tourism Community at the Croatian Chamber of Commerce website content analysis in the period from February 19 2018 to May 15 2018

Furthermore, adventure activities such as „zipline“ (going down the cord over a river canyon), cycling tours, trekking and horseback riding on marked paths are being organized along the area of certain rivers, especially along Cetina and Krka, while the rivers Gacka and Drava have popularized the birdwatching.

At this point, in Republic of Croatia, there is no systematic statistical monitoring of tourist demand for adventure forms of tourism. According to results of the survey TOMAS Summer 2017, 31% of tourists that come to Croatia are motivated by gaining new experiences. This can be considered as an opportunity to make demand for adventure forms of tourism grow. According to Adventure Tourism Market Study 2013 (ATTA 2013, 2), adventurous tourists are the average age of 36, mostly men and loners. They typically read specialized magazines that traditionally have adventurous themes in their content, such as National Geographic, National Geographic Traveler and Men's Health. Compared to non-adventurous travelers, adventurous travelers use more professional services such as guides, instructors, tour operators or other services, and plan their travels by searching the online data and by consulting with friends and family.

They also use social networks, especially Facebook, whether to search for new travels or to share impressions from current travel.

Agencies specialized in adventure tourism create tourist products adjusted to various consumer segments according to the tourist's age, physical predispositions and special interests (family trips, teambuilding arrangement, tours along the river that last for several days), they keep regular records about the visitors and survey the level of satisfaction of consumers with the offered service (mostly by means of reviews on TripAdvisor and Facebook, but also by means of oral recommendations). It is generally possible to identify two different segments of consumers on Croatian rivers suitable for adventure forms of tourism: recreational and passionate consumers (Institut za turizam 2012, 72). The recreationalists form a larger segment of consumers to whom to go to some form of active vacation on the river (eg rafting) is mostly part of the main vacation, while the passionate consumers form smaller segment that is focused on challenges. They make a group of real adventurers who can meet simpler accommodation such as camping in river canyons. On average, Croatian rivers are visited more by foreign tourists, mostly the tourists from the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, France, England and Scandinavian countries. They are consumers from different age groups – from 6 to 76 years of age – who come to Croatian rivers mostly on one-day trips.

Attractive rivers, clean and preserved environment, biological diversity, gastronomic offer, safety of the country and the growing interest of tourist demand for that kind of vacation are the factors that are emphasized as the factors that encourage the development of adventure forms of river-based tourism. On the other hand, the legal regulations and the disorganization of the system for issuing permits and licenses on certain rivers were emphasized as the most restricting factors for the further development of adventure forms of river-based tourism by each research subject. Some additional restricting factors are the insufficient support of authorized institutions and the lack of knowledge about the advantages and possibilities of adventure forms of tourism, as well as the lack of knowledge about some segments of the overall tourist offer. In comparison to other neighboring competitive countries that offer similar tourist products, Croatia does not lack the quality (the quality of service offer, quality of guides and equipment). However, the offer in Croatia is not competitive for the segment of adventure-seeking tourists who seek extreme excitement, i.e. whitewater rafting.

CONCLUSION

The trends present in the international tourism market shape the style of vacationing and traveling, as well as the diversification of vacation activities, and they impose the need for exploring, planning, shaping and managing the tourist product. The main comparative advantages of the development of adventure forms of vacationing on Croatian rivers are the preservation and natural potentials of the environment, which include rivers and their surrounding landscapes, as well as the preserved tradition of local inhabitants, the gastronomic offer, the proximity of generative markets, the well-developed system of cycling and/or riding paths along the river and the existence of the agencies that specialize in adventure tourism. The opportunity for the further development of adventure forms of river-based tourism is seen particularly in contemporary market

trends which are manifested in the rise of the demand for new tourist experiences, adventure and authentic destinations, as well as in regulating the issues of legal regulations and the issues in the system for issuing permits and licenses on certain rivers, in strengthening the cooperation between the providers of tourism services and all key stakeholders (and other authorized institutions) that should be involved in the development of adventure forms of river-based tourism and in the creation of diverse unique tourist arrangements that are adjusted to certain consumer segments by taking into consideration all aspects of the attraction base of the river and its surrounding area. Since the use of marketing instruments has the crucial role in creating a competitive position of certain forms of tourism in the dynamic and shifting market, it is crucial that the upcoming research on this topic encompass the particularities of marketing programs of key stakeholders of the offer of adventure forms of river-based tourism, as well as the implementation of marketing strategies as a means of fulfilling the needs of tourists, but also as a means of making profit and creating the tools for encouraging the development of this type of tourism.

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