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THE PROSPECTS OF RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE CONTINENTAL TOURISTIC REGION OF CROATIA: A SURVEY CONDUCTED AMONG YOUNGER AND MORE EDUCATED RESPONDERS

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ABSTRACT

The paper represents a product of mentor-graduate student cooperation, developed at the graduate study of Business Economics, major Tourism. The destinations and types of tourism are listed that exist in this area but also have room for improvement and further development. The goal is to prolongue the season and not only focus on the coastal part of Croatia, following the examples of neighboring countries.

The final goal of the research is to examine the behavior and opinion that participants have about Croatian tourism, what are their preferences when it comes to the choice of destination, on what grounds, how much are they familiar with rural tourism offer, and whether they think that further development would be crucial for rural tourism improvement. The research was conducted through a questionnaire on 203 responders residing in the Republic of Croatia.

Key words: *rural tourism, offer expanding, decisive factors in the choice of destination, seasonality, tourism in Croatia.*

1 INTRODUCTION

The paper represents a product of mentor-graduate student cooperation, developed at the graduate study of Business Economics, major Tourism. The authors studied rural tourism and its sub-categories, posing two main research questions:

- Which are the most interesting categories of rural tourism among tourists?
- What part of continental Croatia has the most potential for the development of rural tourism?

It is visible that as the world evolves, the tourist offer evolves and expands as well. Tourists do not travel only for the journey but they travel with a motive. They have desire to try something new, get to know the culture, history and the way locals live, try out something that friends or family suggested, be in popular destinations where their peers and idols travel, etc. All these factors affect our decision when we choose a destination. This paper is about key elements of rural tourism development. The goal is to extend the season and not only focus on coast part of Croatia, following the example of our neighboring countries. The final goal of the research in this work is to examine the behavior and opinion that participants have about the tourism in Croatia, what are their preferences when it comes to choosing a destination, on what basis, how much are they familiar with rural tourism offer and do they think that further development is crucial for rural tourism improvement. The research was conducted through a questionnaire on 203 responders residing in Croatia.

2 METHODOLOGY

To know more about what tourists need, love, and what they want to be improved, as well as how they are generally satisfied with Croatian tourism, we found out with a questionnaire.

The survey was conducted through a questionnaire that consists of 23 questions. Responders were randomly picked and they answered through online questionnaire. A total of 203 responders participated, of which 71% were female, and 29% male responders.

The majority of responders, 38.4% of them have university diploma or a master's degree. Only 1.5% responders are specialists of their profession or have a doctorate degree. While the responders with secondary education 28.1% and more professional qualifications or professional or university bachelors 32%. We did not have any responders with finished elementary school as the highest level of their education.

Most responders were between 26-30 years old, 45.3% of them, while only 4.4% of responders were 45 or more years old. There were no responders under the age of 18, while 18.2% of responders were between 18-25 years old. Responders aged 31-45, 32%. Such results were expected as most active tourists ranged between 26 and 45 years. The reason for this is financial independence that is most common in this age. In this range, most tourists are also interested in special forms of tourism. The reason for this is maturing, getting acquainted with personal preferences.

Fifth question of this questionnaire was about the monthly income of responders. Most responders earn between four and six thousand kunas per month, 31% of them. 24.6% of responders earn between six and ten thousand kunas. Only 11.8% earn more than ten thousand kunas. The income of maximum of two thousand kunas is earned by 15.3% of responders, while 17.2% earn between two and four thousand kunas. Given the standard of most citizens and the average Croatian wage of HRK 5 475 kunas, such results were expected.

3 RESULTS

TRAVEL PREFERENCES:

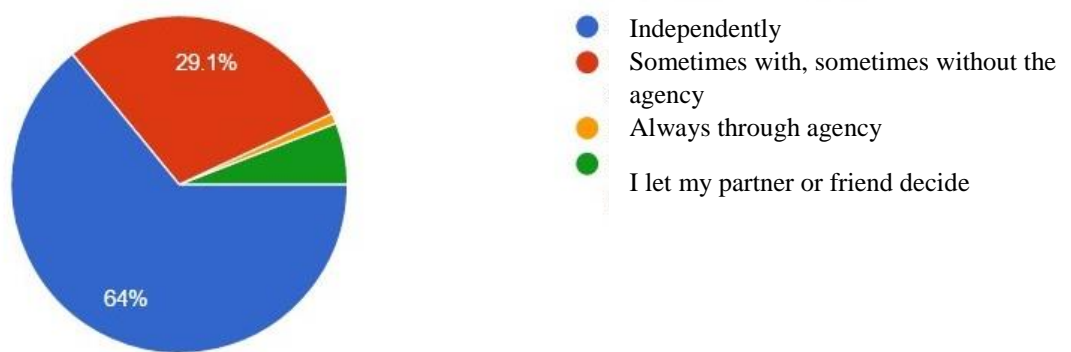


Figure 1: How do you organize your journey?

Most responders organize their own journey, and do not use agency services, 64%. 29.1% of responders combine agency services and their own organization. For 5.9% of responders, friends or partner organize their journey, and only 1% of responders travel with agency only. Traveling in our own arrangement can be less expensive than the one with an agency, and they can decide how much time they want to spend at some destination.

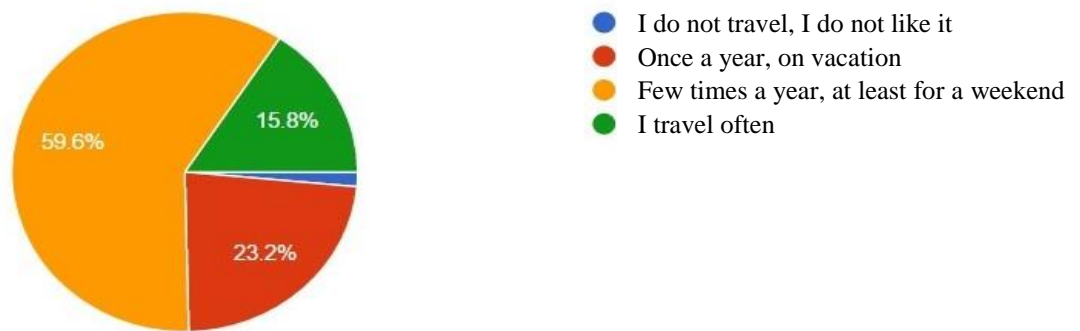


Figure 2: The frequency of travel

59.6% of responders travel few times a year, at least for a weekend. Only 1.5% of responders do not like to travel so they do not travel at all. Only once a year travel 23.2% of responders during their vacation. Responders who travel often make up 15.8% of all responders. By often we mean 2-4 times a year. When we sum the number of responders who travel few times a year, and the ones who travel often we have the number of responders who are employed and have monthly income. Frequent trips are in many cases related to business travel and these results are expected.

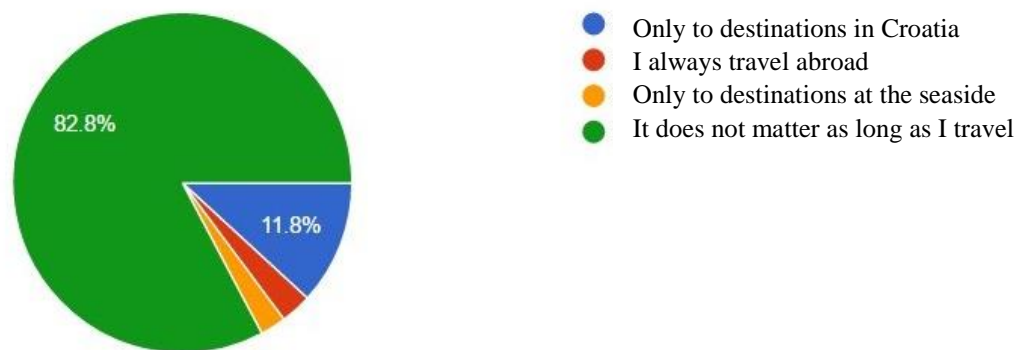


Figure 3: When I travel, it is usually:

82.8% of responders do not care about destination. It is most important for them that they travel somewhere. 11.8% of responders travel only within Croatian borders. Only 3% of responders travel abroad only. They are not interested in traveling to destinations in Croatia. And 2.5% of responders travel only in a destination that is one the seaside.

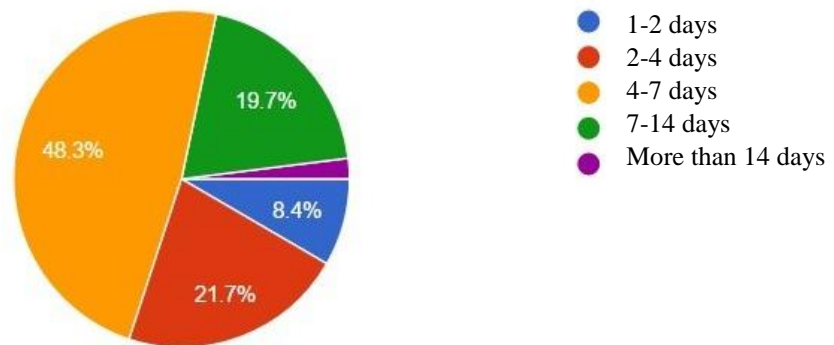


Figure 4: When I travel, I usually stay (how many days):

Most responders spend 4 to 7 days on their journey, 48.3% of them. 21.7% usually stay 2 to 4 days, 19.7% between 7 and 14 days. One or two days spend 8.4% of responders and only 2% of them spend more than 14 days. Croats are famous when it comes to enjoying free days and usually connect the whole week when it has one holiday in it, so this result is as expected.

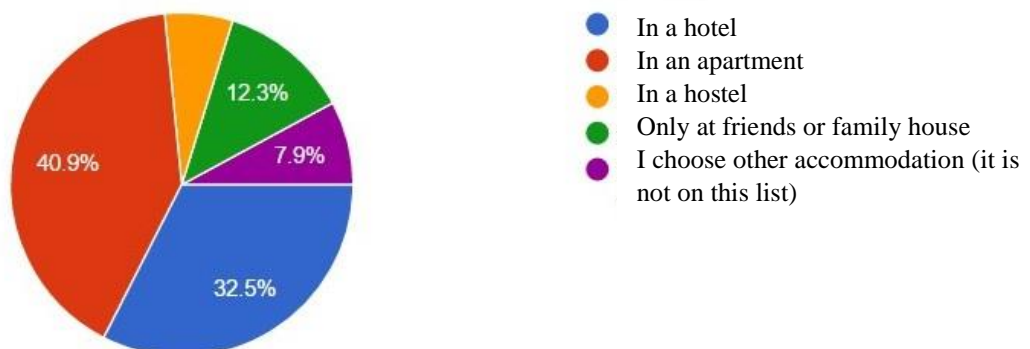


Figure 5: When I travel, I am usually staying at (accommodation preferences):

Accommodation in apartments is the most popular one among responders. 40.9% prefer this kind of accommodation on their holiday. Hotel is number one choice when it comes to accommodation for 32.5% responders and 12.3% of responders are accommodated in a friend's or relatives house. 7.9% of responders are more likely to choose accommodation that was not suggested when answering this question (camps, bungalow, holiday house, hotel, B&B, etc.). Only 6.4% of responders tend to choose hostel as their preferred accommodation on holiday. Results are expected due to most popular accommodation among Croats (hotels and apartments).

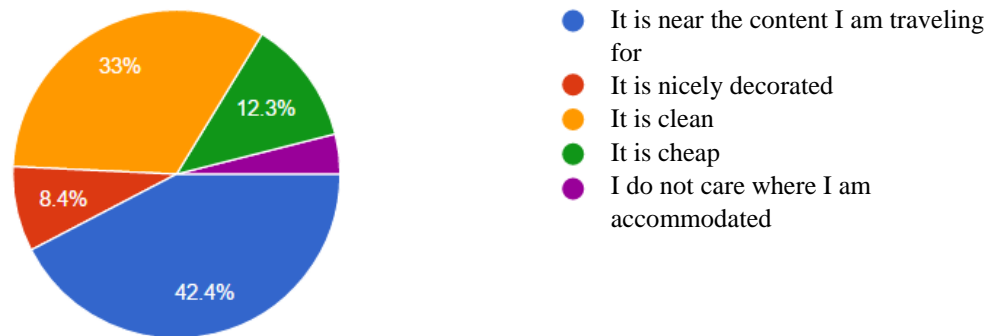


Figure 6: The most important thing when choosing accommodation:

Most important thing when choosing accommodation for 42.4% responders is nearby content that they are travelling for. Clean accommodation is the most important factor for 33% of responders, and 12.3% of responders choose their accommodation based on low price. Only 8.4% choose their accommodation based on nice interior design, and 3.4% of them do not really care where they are situated. Author expected this result. People on their holiday do not want to spend more time on travelling. It causes waste of time, money and nerves and that is definitely something we want to avoid on our holiday.

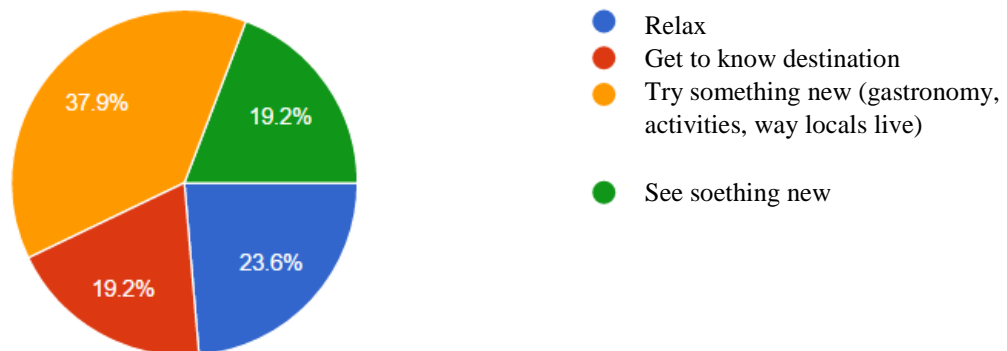


Figure 7: When I travel, I want to:

When it comes to reasons for traveling, highest number of responders, 37.9% of them say that they want to try something new, like: local specialties, see how locals live, spend their holiday actively. Responders who want to get the know destination is 23.6%. 19.2% of responders only want to relax on their holiday and the same number of them travels because they want to see and experience something new.

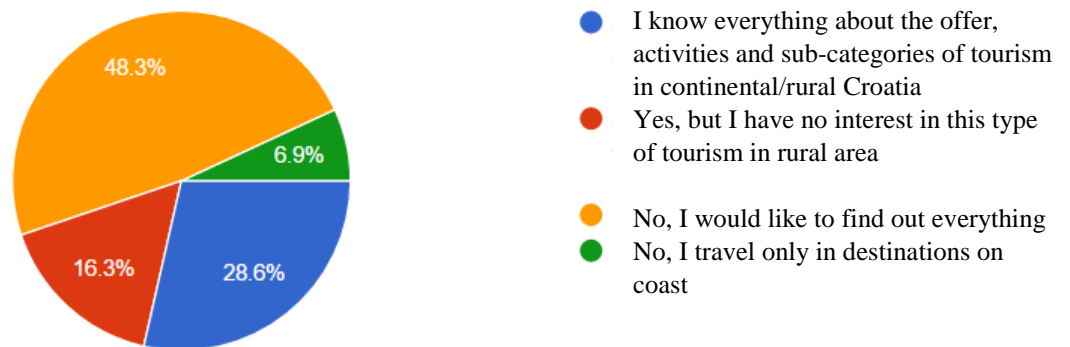


Figure 8: Are you familiar with the offer of continental/rural destinations in Croatia?

Results of this question were as expected. This is proof of insufficient advertising and promotion of rural tourism and its offer in Croatia. 48% of people do not know much about rural tourism offer in Croatia and would like to find out more. 26.6% of responders claim that they know everything about the offer. 16.3% of responders claim that they have no interest in this type of tourism, and 6.9% of them travel only to the coast.

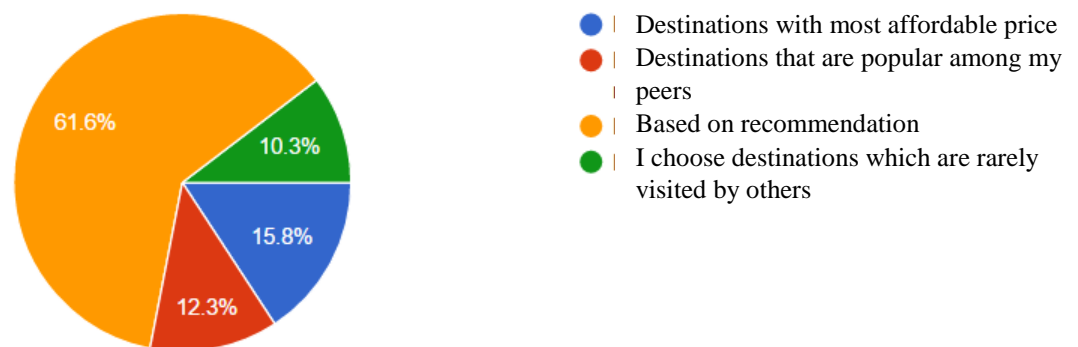


Figure 9: I choose destination based on:

Most of responders value recommendations the most, 61.6% of them. Based on recommendation and personal experience of their acquaintances, friends or family they choose their destination. Destinations with most affordable prices tend to choose 15.8% of responders. Interest in destinations that are rarely visited by others was shown by 10.3% of responders. Destinations which are popular among their peers were chosen 12.3% of responders.

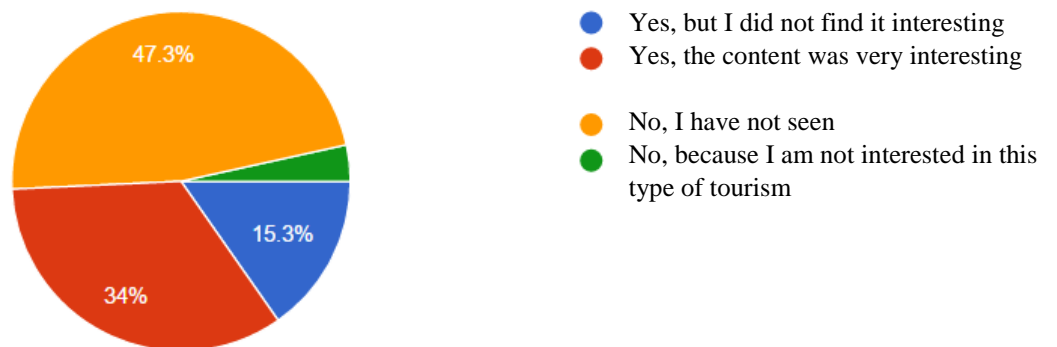


Figure 10: Have you seen some advertisement for a destination in rural/continental area of Croatia in last couple of months?

The highest number of responders has not seen any advertisement that refers to offer in rural destination in Croatia, 47.3% of them. 34% of responders have seen some advertisement and find it interesting. The responders, who have seen this type of advertisement but are not interested, make for 15.3%. Only 3.4% of them did not notice any type of advertisement due to lack of interest in this type of tourism.

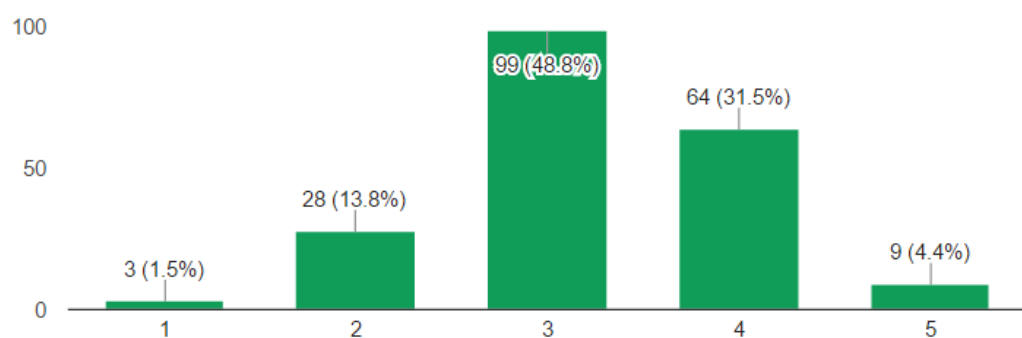


Figure 11: How do you rate your satisfaction with elements of offer in Croatian tourism? (Grade from 1-5: How you are satisfied with the offer: 1-not satisfied at all, 5-very satisfied)

Most responders valued offer and quality of excursions with grade three, 48.8%. Grade four

was given by 31.5% of responders. Only 1.5% of responders graded this offer with insufficient (grade one).

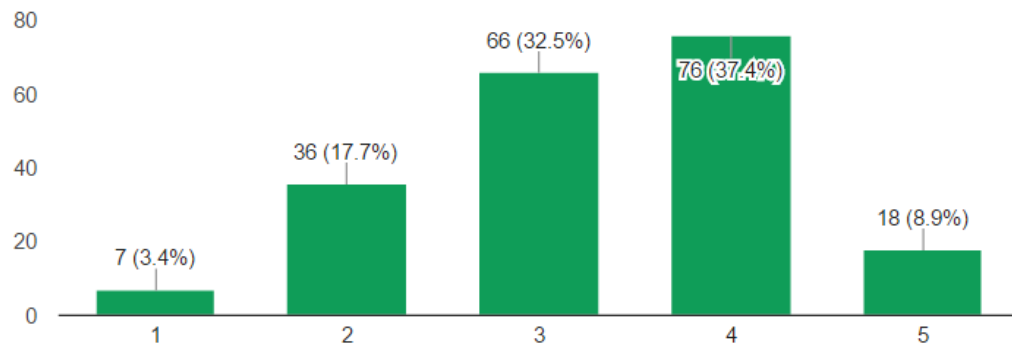


Figure 12: How do you grade the hospitality of local population?

The most people graded hospitality of locals with four (4). 32.5% or 66 responders think that hospitality of locals deserves grade 3 (three). Only 8.9% of them gave the best grade (five) to hospitality, and 3.4% think it deserves insufficient grade (grade one).

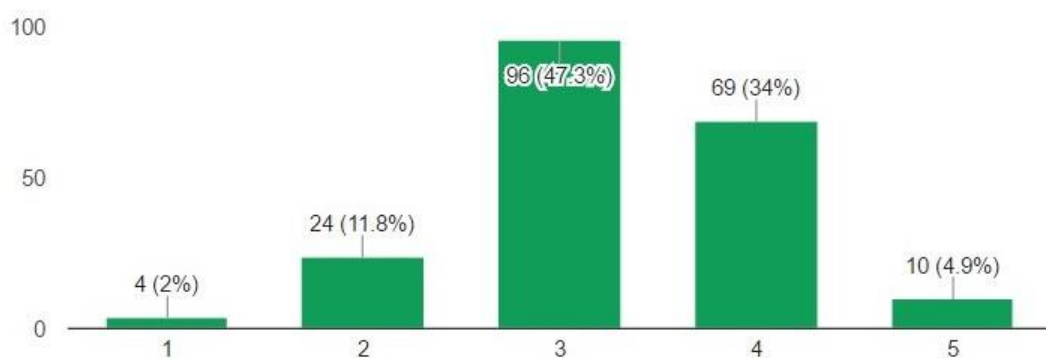


Figure 13: How do you grade tourist information in the destination:

Most responders graded availability of information in a destination with three (grade 3) and 34% of them with grade 4. This result shows that there is place for improvement.

GRADED BY RESPONDERS (highest percentage):

- a) Historical & cultural heritage (4-satisfied, 45.8%)
- b) Cultural and entertaining program (3-it could be better, 45.3%)
- c) Quality of accommodation (4-satisfied, 42.9%)
- d) Interior design and offerings in accommodation (4-satisfied, 43.8%)
- e) Gastronomy offer (4-satisfied, 47.8%)
- f) Public transfer (3-it could be better, 44.8%)
- g) Taxi transfer (3-it could be better, 38.4%)
- h) Shopping (3-it could be better, 45.8%)
- i) Safety (5-very satisfied, 41.4%)
- j) Total cost and quality ratio (3-it could be better, 50.2%)
- k) Overall rating of Croatian tourism (3-it could be better, 48.8%)

GRADED BY RESPONDERS (highest percentage):

Rate from 1-5 following statements:

(1- I disagree, 5-I completely agree)

- a) Rural tourism should not be developed in Croatia (1-I disagree, 68.5%)
- b) Rural areas are unattractive to visitors (1-I disagree 54.2%)
- c) In Croatia, we should focus only on the coast (1-I disagree, 69.5%)
- d) Offer of continental Croatia is not sufficiently developed (4-I agree, 35%)
- e) Accommodation prices in rural areas are too high (3-Nor do I agree nor disagree, 46.3%)
- f) There is not enough content to stay longer than 2 days (3-Nor do I agree nor disagree, 35%)

1. How important are the following items in your opinion?

(1- it is not important at all, 5- it is very important)

- a) Marketing in tourism (5-very important, 64%)
- b) Additional content offer (5-very important, 71.4%)
- c) Prices of services and accommodation (5-very important, 58.6%)
- d) Connecting more craftsmen/caterers to be able to offer more (5-very important 59.1%)
- e) The hospitality of the caterers (5-very important 85.2%)
- f) Additional benefit if you are a regular customer/visitor (5-very important 66.5%)

2. What type of offer or what are the missing elements when it comes to tourism offer in Croatia?

The following elements were suggested to responders: Restaurants, Concerts, Local Entertainment, Local Animation, Family Parks, Adventure Parks, Wine Roads, Theme Trails (Honey, Gold...), Cultural Events, Agro tourism and Museums.

Most responders chose:

Adventure Parks, 61.1%

Agro tourism, 50.7%

Local Entertainment, 46.3%

Local Animation, 42.9%

Family Parks, 40.4%

Restaurants, Museums and Wine roads have received least of votes.

**3. Rate the following services and offers in Croatian tourism from 1-5.
(1-bad, 5-great)**

- a) Accommodation offer (4- very good) 44,8%
- b) Content offer (3-good) 49,3%
- c) Quality of content offer (3-good) 48,8%
- d) Educated hospitality staff (3-good) 45,8%
- e) Accessibility and courtesy of employees in tourism (3-good) 36,9%
- f) Tracking global trends (3-good) 41,9%
- g) Availability of content on the Internet (3-good) 40,4%

**4. The biggest problems of the Croatian tourism offer:
(Multiple answers possible)**

Responders could choose between following answers: Too much information; Not enough information; Missing site with all information united in one place; Bad web sites of individual accommodation and services providers; Bad reviews; Uninteresting offer; Not enough content; Too expensive offer when comparing to other European and world destinations.

Responders think that following things are the ones that are the biggest problem regarding the Croatian tourism:

- 1. Missing site with all information united in one place (119 answers or 58.6%)
- 2. Bad web sites of individual accommodation and services providers (115 answers or 56.7%)
- 3. Too expensive offer when comparing to other European and world destinations (108 answers or 53.2%)

**5. This is how the following things affect responders when they choose their destination:
(1-it does not affect me at all, 5-has the most effect on my decision)**

- a) Satisfaction of my friends and acquaintances who were in the destination (4-it affects my decision, 52.2%)

- b) Reviews on forums (3-it affects me and does not affect me, 37.9%)
- c) Rating on booking.com and tripadvisor.com (4-it affects my decision, 42.4%)
- d) Commercials (3-affects me and does not affect me 36%)
- e) Special offers (discount) (4-it affects me, 40.4%)
- f) Famous people who promote the destination (1-it does not affect me at all, 42.4%)
- g) Pictures published by a famous person on social networks in these destinations (1-it does not affect me at all, 40.4%)

We can conclude that word of mouth is the best commercial a destination can have. If you treat your guest right, they will come back and bring their friends, acquaintances or family.

6. *Is there something you have experienced outside of Croatian borders and would love to add to Croatian tourism offer?* (This was the last question of the survey. Below are some of the most interesting responses, by authors' choice).
- "Wider offer of adrenaline sports, greater availability of information".
 - "Sauna Park. There are plenty of different saunas in one place surrounded by the nature. In the rural area it would be ideal. But of course with the pool, showers, dressing cabinets and free use of closets. Because I have experienced that the use of cabinets is also charged, for example the aqua park in Budva".
 - "It does not matter if it is outside the borders of Croatia. There is a huge difference between Istria and Dalmatia. My answers are related to Istria. The rest of the Republic of Croatia cannot be compared with Istria".
 - "Artistic fairs/districts, active and open for tourists throughout the year".
 - "Experience tours".

CONCLUSION

Based on conducted research, we can conclude that most responders believe that Croatian tourism is good but there are many opportunities for improvement. Expanding the offer, linking tradesmen, the possibility of additional benefits and developing the offer of rural areas that would be accompanied by quality marketing are some of the important conclusions that this research gave us.

Through the survey we can also see how popularity of rural areas is growing and that the responders are interested in more information related to the same. Greater interest for rural destinations tourists showed due to today's more mass tourism on the Croatian coast, which for many is no longer appropriate and it is not the way they want to spend their holiday.

Items that were outlined through this form of research, rated the Croatian tourism with grade three (3). Besides the countryside that is full of natural beauty, the human factor in tourism is also very important. We need to know how to upgrade it, place it on tourism market but we also have to work on sustainable development so these resources will not be exhausted or destroyed.

REFERENCES

Hence this paper presents only the results of the research that was performed in order to show the opinion towards rural tourism in Croatia among the more educated and younger population as a target group, no external sources were needed, and therefore were not cited.