

THE ROLE OF RECEPTIVE TRAVEL AGENCIES IN PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE RURAL-SPA DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: The aim of this research is to determine the role of receptive travel agencies in the promotion of sustainable rural spa tourism and to evaluate their overall significance for the sustainable development of rural tourist destinations in Serbia, with a specific focus on the spa town of Sokobanja. This study examines how receptive agencies influence the flow of foreign tourists, facilitate deeper visitor engagement, and contribute to the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental sustainability of these destinations. A particular emphasis is placed on their role in preserving, interpreting, and communicating the value of local natural and cultural heritage to visitors. To achieve these objectives, a mixed-method research design was employed within an interpretivist epistemological framework, prioritizing the subjective experiences of tourists and the perspectives of key tourism stakeholders. The first phase of the research consisted of a structured survey conducted with 318 foreign visitors to Sokobanja between March and October 2024. The data obtained were analyzed using factor analysis to identify underlying dimensions, followed by Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to explore the relationships between key constructs. The second phase involved qualitative methods, including desk research and semi-structured interviews with staff from the Tourist Organization of Sokobanja and representatives of the local receptive travel agency “DM.” The findings highlighted the agencies’ essential role in creating value-added experiences for tourists by offering personalized services, cultural interpretation, and logistical support. Four key factors were identified—Unique Experience, Immediate Involvement, Getting to Know, and Mediation—which collectively explain the ways in which receptive agencies enrich tourist experiences and contribute to destination competitiveness. The study concludes that the strategic integration of receptive agencies into destination management plans can significantly improve the visibility, inclusivity, and sustainability of rural spa tourism in Serbia. Their proactive engagement not only supports the local economy but also encourages responsible tourism practices aligned with long-term destination stewardship.

Keywords: receptive travel agencies, promotion, sustainability, rural tourism, spa tourism, Sokobanja

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INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly interconnected world, the dynamics of travel have evolved, ushering in a new era of tourism that emphasizes local experiences and personalized services (Kim et al., 2025). Among the key players in this transformative landscape are receptive travel agencies, pivotal entities that bridge the gap between international visitors and local destinations (Liu, 2024). These agencies not only facilitate travel arrangements but also provide in-depth knowledge and insights that enhance the overall travel experience (Moll-De-Alba et al., 2016; Jocić et al., 2024). Receptive travel agencies are specialized entities that act as intermediaries between international tourists and local service providers (Ho et al., 2024). They are characterized by their profound understanding of the destination’s culture, attractions, and logistical nuances, which allows them to curate tailored experiences for visitors (Choi & Hyun, 2022).

Typically, these agencies offer a wide range of services, including itinerary planning, accommodation booking, transportation arrangements, and guided tours (Vujko et al., 2017). According to MacKenzie & Dominic (2023), a receptive agency in Thailand might provide not only standard hotel accommodations but also unique experiences such as cooking classes with local chefs or guided tours through hidden temples. By focusing on the needs of international travelers, these agencies enhance the visitor experience, ensuring that tourists engage deeply with the local environment (Hossain et al., 2024). According to (Allan, 2025), receptive travel agencies play a vital role in facilitating seamless travel for international visitors by handling the complexities of language barriers and local customs. They often provide crucial support in navigating the intricacies of a new environment, thus allowing travelers to immerse themselves fully in the local culture without the stress of logistical challenges (Demirović et al., 2020).

One of the standout features of receptive travel agencies is their unmatched local knowledge and expertise, which significantly enriches the travel experience (Pebrianto et al., 2024). These agencies are equipped with insights that only locals possess, such as hidden gems, cultural practices, and off-the-beaten-path attractions that mainstream tourist guides

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may overlook (Yeboah & Ashie, 2024). According to Nesto & Di Savino (2016), a receptive agency operating in Italy might recommend a lesser-known vineyard in Tuscany that offers authentic wine tastings away from the usual tourist traps, providing visitors with a genuine taste of local life. Moreover, the partnerships that receptive agencies cultivate with local businesses, artisans, and tour operators further enhance the quality of the experience for travelers (Gubarenko et al., 2020). These collaborations not only benefit the visitors but also promote sustainable tourism practices by supporting local economies and preserving cultural heritage (Addai et al., 2024).

Receptive agencies often advocate for responsible travel, encouraging visitors to engage in eco-friendly activities or community-based tourism initiatives (López-Sanz et al., 2021). This commitment to sustainability not only enriches the travel experience but also fosters a deeper connection between tourists and the destinations they visit, ultimately leading to a more responsible form of tourism that respects and honors local traditions (Rainero et al., 2020).

By attracting visitors to rural-spa areas, these agencies help enhance local economies through increased tourism revenue. According to Knežević et al. (2024), every dollar spent by a tourist generates an additional 1.5 dollars in the local economy, underscoring the multiplier effect of tourism. This influx of revenue can be pivotal for rural communities, providing funds for infrastructure development and public services. Moreover, receptive travel agencies contribute to job creation and skill development in these regions (Rajpal, 2024). As tourism expands, there is a growing need for trained professionals in hospitality, spa services, and tour guiding, leading to the establishment of training programs that empower local residents (dos Santos et al., 2024; Gautam & Bhalla, 2024). Additionally, these agencies often prioritize partnerships with local artisans and service providers, ensuring that the economic benefits of tourism are distributed within the community (Lapuz, 2023). By fostering a symbiotic relationship between tourism and local culture, receptive travel agencies not only enhance the visitor experience but also help preserve the unique heritage of rural destinations (Vujko et al., 2024). By engaging stakeholders in the planning process and emphasizing the shared benefits of sustainable tourism, these agencies can help mitigate resistance and promote a more inclusive approach to destination development.

The need of tourists for an authentic and remarkable environment has created a new form of tourism. This has opened opportunities for the development of many rural spa destinations that previously did not attract a large number of foreign visitors. It is evident that spa destinations that embrace and recognize these changes have a competitive advantage in the tourism market. According to Arsić et al. (2024a), rural-spa tourism is developing as a result of the specific demands of tourists, and consequently research has been conducted to understand the motives behind their visits and the way they choose certain destinations. There are various reasons why tourists visit rural spa areas, leading to different types of tourism in these regions. Rural tourism is a key factor in the revitalization of spas, and its development plays a crucial role in addressing the economic and demographic challenges faced by the local population (Joppe, 2010).

The main stakeholders in the development of spa destinations are the local population, as well as the private and public sectors (Arsić et al., 2024b). Their engagement and motivation can significantly influence the promotion of a tourist destination (González-Rodríguez et al., 2023). Receptive travel agencies play a pivotal role in this paradigm, acting as intermediaries that promote sustainable rural-spa destinations. These agencies facilitate the integration of eco-friendly practices, foster stakeholder collaboration, and face the challenges of balancing economic growth with environmental conservation. In Serbia, there are over 1,100 travel agencies, but the majority are outbound-oriented, while only a few focus on inbound tourism (Ilić, 2024). The initial hypothesis (H) states that receptive travel agencies play a crucial role in promoting destinations and attracting foreign tourists. The aim of this research is to determine the role of these agencies in promoting sustainable rural-spa tourism and their significance for the sustainable development of tourist destinations in Serbia.

The research highlighted four key factors influencing tourists' choices regarding receptive travel agencies: unique experiences, immediate involvement, getting to know the destination, and mediation. These factors significantly impact tourist satisfaction and loyalty, emphasizing the role of receptive travel agencies in promoting sustainable development by aligning tourism activities with environmental, economic, and social sustainability practices.

Mediation plays a key role in improving the tourist experience in Sokobanja by addressing the cultural, social and informational gaps between tourists and their destinations. The local tourism agency, which employs 50 people, cooperates with the Bulgarian agency to attract foreign tourists, especially during the winter season, and has identified active recreation as the primary motive for visits. Despite a drop in revenue during the Covid pandemic, the agency has seen a resurgence in tourist arrivals, especially foreign visitors, and aims to diversify its offering to sustain business growth while facing challenges related to seasonal fluctuations in demand and increased operating costs.

Receptive Travel agencies and their role in promoting sustainable rural-spa tourism

Receptive travel agencies are an important tool for promoting local culture, enhancing the attractiveness of tourist destinations, and contributing to the positive development of local businesses and the environment (Page, 2011). Their role in sustainable tourism is reflected in the implementation of policies that promote all principles of sustainability (Chen et al., 2025). Receptive agencies, especially in the context of tourism, play a key role in facilitating travel by acting as intermediaries between foreign travel agencies and local service providers (Deng & Athanasopoulos, 2011). They are responsible for ensuring that tourists receive the services promised in travel packages while managing the logistics and quality thereof (Wang et al., 2024). By focusing on the destination and tourist satisfaction, they influence tourist behavior at the destination, which is often the biggest challenge in preserving natural sites. These types of agencies are beneficial in terms of the economic and social status of the local population, as they help create jobs and play a crucial role in bridging the gap between local tourism services and international tourists (Inmor et al., 2025). Receptive travel agencies contractually guarantee the provision of high-quality services to tourists. They manage the expectations of foreign travel agencies and

ensure that the services provided meet the agreed-upon standards. They utilize digital marketing strategies to expand their reach and are increasingly focusing on sustainable tourism practices (Da Silva et al., 2024). According to Buhalis & Ujma (2006) their role as intermediaries requires them to adhere to high standards and fulfill all their contractual obligations.

According to Montenegro (2015) receptive agencies are increasingly using digital marketing strategies to promote tourism products. His study, which focuses on agencies in Praia da Pipa, Brazil, highlights the importance of digital presence and the effectiveness of marketing strategies on platforms such as Instagram. Receptive agencies face challenges such as maintaining service quality and adapting to digital transformations in the tourism industry (Talwar et al., 2020).

The coexistence of traditional and online distribution channels suggests that agencies must balance both to meet the diverse preferences of consumers (Law et al., 2004). As the industry evolves, receptive agencies must continue to innovate and adapt to changing consumer behavior and technological advancements. In the digital era, social media has become an essential tool for promoting tourism destinations. Given the changes in the needs and behavior of modern tourists, integrating social media into promotional strategies is one of the key prerequisites for the successful development of tourism destinations (Podovac, et al., 2019). Breitsohl & Garrod (2016) highlight the growing interest in sustainable tourism within the inbound market, particularly in the United States. A feasibility study for a virtual travel agency specializing in sustainable tourism indicates market demand for environmentally friendly travel options.

According to these authors, there is a noticeable shift toward more responsible tourism practices that consider both environmental and social impacts. Rural tourism in the Gurghiu Valley, Romania, can preserve local uniqueness and contribute to sustainable socio-economic development when local entrepreneurs engage in new practices and sustainable approaches (Crăciun et al., 2022). Žunić (2016) emphasizes the importance of hospitality and the quality of tourist experiences as key cultural factors influencing the attractiveness and sustainable development of tourism in Sarajevo.

The challenges faced by receptive travel agencies relate to the quality of service they provide and managing customer expectations. As the tourism industry develops, these agencies are adapting to new marketing strategies and technological advancements to remain competitive. In Serbia, agencies rarely opt for operating solely through receptive tourism (Stanić et al., 2022). The reason for this is insufficient support from the state and lower profit margins, so agencies operating in the Serbian market are mostly outbound-oriented. The overall content of their operations largely depends on the characteristics of the tourist market they serve (Dramićanin, 2019).

Spasić (2011) notes that receptive agencies in tourist destinations, in addition to their regular operations, engage in selling tickets for cultural events, making accommodation reservations, selling maps and postcards, offering souvenirs, and providing currency exchange services. It is evident that receptive agencies operating in tourist areas have been influenced by various factors, and they have undergone numerous changes in their business orientation, evolving from representatives or agents of tour operators. One of the better examples in Serbia is the association of receptive agencies (URA), which was founded in 2019 with the goal of positively influencing legal regulations in the country and improving the treatment of this type of travel agency in Serbia. The association includes 25 tour operators whose primary activity is receptive tourism (Ilić, 2023).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research consisted of two parts. The first part referred to a survey among 318 foreigners who visited Sokobanja in the period from March 2024 to October 2024. The authors visited the destination on several occasions and surveyed foreign visitors. The second part of the research was desk research, as well as the interview technique with employees of the Tourist Organization of Sokobanja and the owner and employees of the travel agencies for receptive business, "DM" in Sokobanja. These stakeholders were able to see their statistical data on the number of overnight stays by foreign tourists, the offer, the services they provide to tourists and the trips they organize. Initial hypothesis H states that travel agencies with a receptive character are an important link in the promotion of the destination and the attraction of foreign tourists. The goal of this research is to determine the role of these agencies in the promotion of sustainable rural spa tourism and the significance that such agencies have for the sustainable development of tourist destinations in Serbia.

In our research paper, we adopted a **interpretivist epistemological approach**. The theoretical framework of interpretivist epistemology is grounded in the belief that knowledge is constructed through social interactions and subjective experiences. Unlike positivist approaches that prioritize quantifiable data and objective truths, interpretivism seeks to understand the meanings individuals assign to their experiences. This epistemological stance is particularly relevant in tourism research, where human interactions, cultural exchanges, and individual perceptions significantly shape the tourism experience. The Sokobanja study employed interpretivism to attain a more profound comprehension of the experiences of tourists, yielding nuanced insights into the ways in which motives affect sustainable practices. By concentrating on subjective understanding, interpretivism enables researchers to investigate the motivations, beliefs, and values that direct both individuals and organizations toward sustainable development. This focus on context and meaning is essential within the tourism industry, where the varied expectations of stakeholders necessitate a comprehensive understanding of human behavior.

In order to verify the initial hypothesis of the paper, it was necessary to provide answers to two questions:

- Why is it important that there are receptive travel agencies in tourist places? and
- What do receptive travel agencies mean for tourist destinations?

In order to answer these questions, it was necessary to set the sub-hypotheses of the paper:

- Sub-hypothesis h1 - Receptive travel agencies enable tourists to get to know the destination better and create positive impressions that influence the positioning of the tourist destination;
- Sub-hypothesis - Receptive travel agencies contribute financially to the strengthening and development of the tourist destination.

The subsequent task required was the execution of factor analysis, which identified four distinct factors. Specifically, between March and September 2024, tourists were presented with a set of 30 questions that necessitated ranking on a five-point Likert scale. Upon analyzing the collected data, the categorized responses highlighted the following four factors as particularly representative: Unique Experience, Immediate Involvement, Getting to Know, and Mediation.

- **Factor 1.** Unique experience

v4 They possess an in-depth knowledge of local culture, attractions, and logistics that is difficult to replicate.

v16 They create opportunities for immersive activities, such as participating in traditional cooking classes or local festivals

- **Factor 2.** Immediate Involvement

v1 Their financial savvy, combined with their extensive knowledge of the area, allows travelers to enjoy a richer experience without breaking the bank

v6 They offer travelers an unparalleled opportunity to engage deeply with their chosen destinations.

v9 They are suggesting the best times to visit to avoid crowds.

v11 The ability to adapt to individual desires and needs exemplifies the expertise of receptive travel agencies

- **Factor 3.** Getting to know

v2 Their partnerships with local vendors often translate to cost-effective options, as they can negotiate better rates that are unavailable to individual travelers.

v7 Receptive travel agencies enable travelers to not only visit a place but to truly know it.

v12 They are invaluable partners in crafting memorable journeys

v17 They allow travelers to appreciate the destination's history and traditions in a way that mere observation cannot achieve.

- **Factor 4.** Mediation

v10 These agencies maintain strong relationships with local service providers, such as hotels, restaurants, and tour operators, which ensures that travelers receive the best services and insider access.

v14 They often provide access to off-the-beaten-path destinations and hidden gems that are typically overlooked in mainstream travel guides

v15 These agencies also facilitate authentic interactions with local communities, promoting cultural exchanges that enrich both the traveler's experience and the lives of the residents.

v20 They significantly enhance the overall travel planning process. After factor extraction, this study applied Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), a methodology of multivariate analysis of causal relationships among variables based on a structural model that interprets the path coefficients as indicators of strength of relationship clarifies how dependent data are related. SEM is a powerful tool capable of handling multicollinearity, which would be created in case three of the independent variables selected showed a high degree of correlation. An important advantage of SEM over multiregression and factor analysis is that every element of SEM should be justified by theory and, accordingly, the building-up and modification of models depend much more on the theory. A significant misuse of SEM happens when data is just modified to fit an appropriate SEM. This can result in a build-up of the theory based only on the findings from the analysis.

Rural-spa destination Sokobanja

Sokobanja is a standout tourist destination in the Pomoravlje region (Nikolić & Stanković, 2008). The issuance of a tourist voucher on June 8, 1837, marked a turning point for Sokobanja and the beginning of organized tourism. The tourism services provided have evolved over the years. The destination developed from a spa and rehabilitation center to a recreational and sports hub, and today, it is a wellness and spa tourist destination. Sokobanja has resisted changes, crises, wars, transitions, and new trends for years. The mineral springs under Ozren were used by the Romans and Turks (Stanković, 2012). From 1933 to 1939, Sokobanja was visited by a significant number of guests, ranking second among the spa centers in Serbia at that time (Arsić et al., 2024a). Sokobanja is located in eastern Serbia, on both sides of the Moravica River, in a vast basin with gently rolling terrain, nestled between the mountains of Rtanj, Ozren, Devica, Slemen, and Bukovik (Stanković, 2009). The favorable traffic-geographical position is enhanced by its proximity to the E75 highway, just 30 km away. Sokobanja is rich in archaeological, monumental, and ethnographic tourist values, all of which are significant for the development of tourism.

The most significant anthropogenic attractions in Sokobanja include Sokograd, the remains of the archaeological site Trebič, the Amam bath, the Monastery of St. Archangel, the residence of Prince Miloš, the Latin Town, and the Sesalac Cave. The development of tourism has been facilitated by the presence of numerous thermo-mineral springs, the climate, the mountainous surroundings of Rtanj and Ozren, as well as the location of the town in a basin. The canyons, caves, Bovan Lake, Lake Vrmdža, and the Moravica River contribute to the value of this destination and form the base for tourism development in this area, making these natural resources the primary tourist assets of the region (Arsić et al., 2024b). Thermo-mineral springs are found along the Moravica River and at the foothills of the Ozren and Devica mountains. Their temperatures range from 22 to 46.5°C. These springs are located at six sites, where they have been captured and transformed into modern baths. Some of the thermal springs include Park Bath, Preobraženje Spring, Banjica I and Banjica II, Lemon Spa, and the springs in the village of Jošanica. The thermo-mineral water is used for medicinal purposes, suitable for drinking, inhalation, and bathing. It is also used to treat various diseases as well as for their prevention. The richness of the air, with negative ions, contributes to the general well-being of the body and promotes quick recovery from various ailments, particularly respiratory issues and stress, which are prevalent in today's world (Milenković, 2011).

Tourists receive information about excursions from the tourist organization, local residents, and smaller receptive agencies. They can provide recommendations for routes, tour guides, or group excursions. With the help of printed itineraries based on daily planners classified by location, tourists can independently explore both anthropogenic and natural

attractions. The first destination is Mount Ozren, where visitors can see the Rupaljka Waterfall, the natural lake Mala Rupaljka, and the Jezerce restaurant. For those seeking more activity, a suggested walking tour is to the medieval Jeremenčić Monastery. Other suggestions include visiting the Kalinovica Park and the Barudžija spring, as well as the "Love Stone," where, according to legend, Hajduk Veljko and Čučuk Stana would meet, and dining at the traditional restaurant Kalinovica. The second route is to Mount Rtanj, including a visit to the village of Vrmdža, the ancient Latin Town, a stop at Lake Vrmdža, and a break at "Naša Vodenica," which produces homemade flour ground in the traditional way, with an opportunity to learn about the craft. The next stop is the foothills of Mount Rtanj, with a hike to the summit, lasting about three hours, for those who are adventurous. Visitors can also explore the remains of the St. George's Chapel.

For others, the suggested visit is to the Ledenica Cave. The final recommendation is "Tomićeva Koliba," an ethno-restaurant with a view of Mount Rtanj. The third route includes a visit to Župan Beach on the Moravica River, a tour of the Lepterića picnic area, the Church of the Holy Mother of God, which dates back to the 12th century, and Hajduk Veljko's Cave. For those interested in more dynamic experiences, the suggestion is a hike to Sokograd, followed by a relaxing break at the "Pećina" restaurant, which can be reached along the Moravica Riverbank. The fourth route includes a visit to the source of the Moravica River, Vrelo, and the Čitluk Cave. After that, the tour continues to the village of Seselac and the Seselac Cave, where visitors can take a short break and enjoy the specialties prepared by the locals. The itinerary then leads tourists to the northern side of Mount Rtanj, to visit the ancient spring of Vrelo, believed to be a bioenergy source.

At this location, visitors can also explore the Rtanj traditional household, which offers homemade teas made from medicinal herbs found on the mountain. This mini itinerary includes detailed descriptions of these sites, but it is only printed in Serbian and there are no digital versions or ways for tourists to learn about the excursions electronically.

Table 1. Total variance explained

Factor	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	3.588	23.918	23.918	1.770	11.803	11.803	3.098	20.656	20.656
2	3.372	22.478	46.396	3.137	20.914	32.717	2.948	19.650	40.306
3	2.684	17.891	64.287	3.028	20.188	52.904	2.746	18.304	58.610
4	1.891	12.605	76.891	1.485	9.902	62.806	1.674	11.160	69.770
5	1.087	7.248	84.139	2.030	13.532	76.338	.985	6.568	76.338
6	.484	3.225	87.364						
7	.384	2.559	89.923						
8	.333	2.218	92.141						
9	.302	2.013	94.154						
10	.229	1.528	95.682						
11	.216	1.441	97.123						
12	.175	1.169	98.292						
13	.132	.880	99.172						
14	.082	.543	99.715						
15	.043	.285	100.000						

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study involved 318 foreign tourists who visited Sokobanja, with the following distribution: the highest number of foreign tourists came from Romania (13.2%), Montenegro (12.9%), Ukraine (11%), Croatia (10.7%), and from Bulgaria and Austria (both 10.1%). A smaller percentage of foreign tourists came from Hungary, France, North Macedonia, and Greece. Approximately 66% of foreign tourists come from countries bordering the Republic of Serbia. The data obtained from the Sokobanja Tourist Organization confirms this with statistics on travel routes, where 75% of arrivals are by car, 20% by bus, and 5% by plane. Tourists choose this destination because of its good connectivity with tourist demand centers and international travel routes in this part of Europe. Isolated responses show the main factors for four groups of answers from respondents regarding the posed questions. Tables 1 and 2 present the results of the factor analysis. In this manner, a model was obtained that groups the variables into four factors explaining a total of 76,892% of the variance.

Factor 1. Unique experience: Leveraging local expertise through knowledgeable guides is fundamental in crafting immersive cultural experiences that resonate deeply with travelers. These guides, equipped with a profound understanding of their destinations, provide essential insights into local culture, history, and customs, thereby enhancing the authenticity of the travel experience. A significant aspect of their role is community engagement, which is crucial for designing meaningful activities that reflect the true essence of the locale. For instance, guides can lead cooking classes that not only teach travelers about local culinary practices but also foster connections with the chefs and local ingredients, creating a richer understanding of the culture. Additionally, participating in cultural events or volunteering within the community allows travelers to delve deeper into local traditions and customs, further enriching their journey. This engagement with local expertise not only enhances the travel experience but also enables the formation of lasting connections between tourists and the communities they visit, promoting mutual understanding and respect. As a result, knowledgeable guides serve as vital conduits for authentic experiences, facilitating activities that allow travelers to explore off-the-beaten-path destinations and interact with locals in meaningful ways. Ultimately, their expertise is instrumental in ensuring that travelers leave with unforgettable memories and a deeper appreciation for the cultures they encounter.

Factor 2. Immediate Involvement: In the evolving landscape of travel, immediate involvement has emerged as a pivotal factor in enriching travelers' experiences. As the demand for immersive experiences continues to rise, travel industry

players have an opportunity to cater to this desire by providing engaging activities that connect travelers with their destinations on a deeper level. One effective strategy is to focus on optimal visit timing, which can significantly influence the quality of the travel experience. For instance, visiting attractions during off-peak hours may lead to a more enjoyable and less crowded experience, allowing travelers to fully appreciate their surroundings and engage with local culture. Furthermore, cost-effective opportunities that promote deeper engagement are increasingly prevalent, enabling travelers to participate in unique experiences without breaking the bank, such as local workshops or community events. Additionally, the implementation of personalized adaptability in travel offerings can transform a standard trip into a tailored adventure, ensuring that travelers can make choices that resonate with their interests and preferences. This level of customization not only enhances satisfaction but also fosters a sense of connection with the destination. By leveraging these strategies, the travel industry can create more fulfilling and memorable journeys that resonate with the modern traveler's quest for meaningful engagement.

Factor 3. Getting to know: Leveraging partnerships with local vendors through receptive travel agencies can significantly enhance traveler experiences while simultaneously providing cost-effective travel options. Receptive travel agencies possess a unique negotiating power that enables them to secure favorable rates on venues, services, and logistics, which can lead to substantial cost savings for travelers. This ability to negotiate effectively stems from their established relationships with local vendors, which not only allows for better pricing but also minimizes last-minute issues that can disrupt travel plans. Furthermore, the expertise of receptive travel agencies in travel planning contributes to streamlined processes, saving valuable time for both travel organizers and participants, ultimately enhancing the overall traveler experience. Their in-depth local knowledge equips them to offer insights into the best options available, from accommodations to dining and activities, ensuring that travelers appreciate the local culture and environment more deeply. By integrating local vendors into travel plans, receptive travel agencies foster an enriching experience that goes beyond the surface, allowing travelers to connect with the essence of their destination while enjoying the benefits of reduced costs.

Factor 4. Mediation: Receptive travel agencies are pivotal in creating enriching experiences for travelers by establishing robust partnerships with local service providers. By fostering these connections, agencies can facilitate access to quality services that reflect the authentic culture and offerings of the community, thus enhancing the overall traveler experience. Engaging with local communities in a meaningful way not only helps build strong partnerships but also enriches the travel experience through cultural immersion and genuine interactions. For instance, when receptive travel agencies collaborate with local tour operators, they can curate unique and immersive experiences that go beyond typical tourist attractions, allowing travelers to connect more deeply with the destination. This collaboration is essential, as it creates comprehensive travel packages tailored to diverse interests and preferences, making trips more attractive and engaging for potential customers. Additionally, the networks that established travel agencies maintain with local businesses, accommodations, and attractions can lead to exclusive access and better deals for travelers, further enhancing their experience. Thus, through effective partnership building and authentic community engagement, receptive travel agencies unlock the full potential of the tourism industry, resulting in a travel experience that is not only enjoyable but also respectful and enriching for both visitors and the local community.

Table 2. Factor matrix

	Factor				
	1	2	3	4	5
v1	.046	.996	.037	-.003	.000
v6	.049	.733	.006	.525	-.099
v11	-.012	.882	.006	.088	-.074
v9	.074	.863	.077	-.110	.011
v2	-.093	-.026	.971	-.187	.048
v7	-.122	-.104	.881	.403	-.129
v12	-.053	-.188	.693	.267	-.156
v17	.071	-.107	.839	-.161	.083
v5	-.031	-.036	.120	.290	.635
v10	.129	.033	.058	.450	.743
v14	.442	.121	-.226	.383	-.242
v15	.055	-.015	.080	.505	.661
v20	.147	.038	.158	.453	.709
v4	.999	-.011	.014	.000	-.001
v16	.702	-.096	.130	-.031	.096

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), as illustrated by the representative graph, reveals the interdependence of the identified factors, both in relation to one another and with distinct isolated attitudes. Tourist experiences positively influence tourist satisfaction and loyalty, forming the core of motivation and satisfaction for travelers in tourist destinations. Experiences, which include excursions, food, culture, history, and the environment, significantly affect consumers' decisions about choosing a destination for their vacation. When integrated into a whole, these experiences encourage the sustainable development of rural spa tourism. The research suggests that unique experiences significantly impact the choice of destination, satisfaction, and loyalty of tourists, which are built through authentic and unforgettable guidance provided by tourist workers at the destination. The interdependence of four indicators, such as unique experience, direct involvement, learning, and mediation, positively affects tourists' psycho-physical state, creating a sense of loyalty toward the tourist destination. The results showed numerous positive influences between the factors. Receptive travel agencies play a vital role in promoting sustainable development in rural spa destinations by managing tourism activities that are in line

with environmental, economic and social sustainability. By implementing strategies such as promoting environmentally friendly practices, supporting local economies and preserving cultural heritage, these agencies can improve the overall sustainability of rural spa destinations. In Table 3 we see the influences that the factors have on each other. A minus sign indicates potentially negative impacts. In the context of sustainable development of a rural spa destination, SEM can help identify key factors and variables that contribute to sustainability and how they interact.

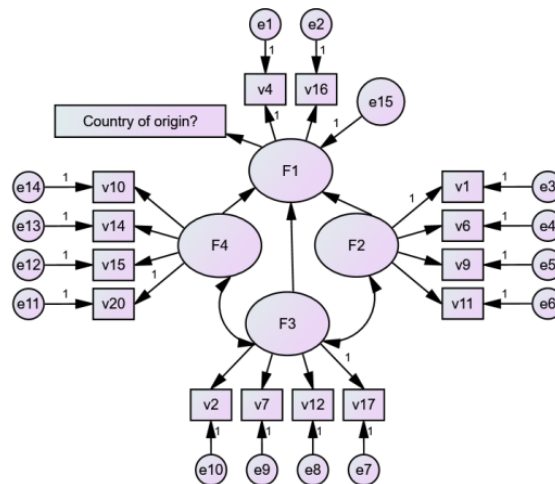


Figure 1. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) (Source: Prepared by the authors (2024))

As illustrated in Figure 1 and Table 3, the following specific strategies are recommended for receptive travel agencies: **Promote environmentally friendly practices:** (Encourage the adoption of sustainable accommodation and services, e.g., v1, v10; Implement and advocate for sustainable transportation options, e.g., v3, v4); **Increase economic benefits:** (Provide support for local businesses and enhance employment opportunities, e.g., v2, v12, Develop and promote local products and experiences, e.g., v5, v6); **Preserve socio-cultural aspects:** (Promote cultural heritage and traditions, e.g., v7, v13, v17, Engage with local communities to ensure that tourism development aligns with their needs and values, e.g., v9, v11, v14; **Monitor and evaluate:** (Continuously assess the impact of tourism activities on sustainability indicators, e.g., v9, v11, v14, Utilize feedback and data to inform decisions and adapt tourism strategies accordingly, e.g., v15, v16, v18, v19, v20). This answers the question Why is it important that there are receptive travel agencies in tourist places? Which confirmed Sub-hypothesis h1 that Receptive travel agencies enable tourists to get to know the destination better and create positive impressions that influence the positioning of the tourist destination.

Table 3. Standardized regression weights: (Group number 1 - Default model)

			Estimate				Estimate
F1	<---	F3	6.100	v17	<---	F3	.932
F1	<---	F4	-.593	v12	<---	F3	.854
F1	<---	F2	6.485	v7	<---	F3	.978
v4	<---	F1	.138	v2	<---	F3	.993
v16	<---	F1	.076	v12	<---	F4	.866
v1	<---	F2	.131	v15	<---	F4	.932
v6	<---	F2	.005	v14	<---	F4	-.012
v9	<---	F2	.114	v10	<---	F4	.862
v11	<---	F2	.050	Country	<---	F1	1.000

Receptive agency business of Sokobanja

In the tourism development program of Sokobanja, the number of people employed in tourism in Sokobanja is 3,000. Of that, 50 are employed in agencies. The agency "DM" from Sokobanja is part of the research, has a receptive business model, and has been operating in the Sokobanja area since 2005. Their branch has 4 employees, and the scope of their business, in addition to "travel services," includes guest reception, accommodation reservations, mediation in bookings, mediation in tourist travel abroad, exchange services, insurance, and information services. In collaboration with a Bulgarian travel agency, the agency organizes the arrival of foreign tourists during the winter season. To form a quality service program and tailor it to the needs and desires of tourists, this agency works with the Tourist Organization through joint appearances at fairs and similar activities. In a study conducted in cooperation between these two organizations, five different motives for tourist visits were isolated. Visitors mainly come to Sokobanja for recreational activities (Table 4). From this stance, we can conclude that receptive agencies can ensure the sustainability of their business in the future by organizing excursions and mediating access to certain attractions. The review of the balance sheet of the "DM" agency revealed that total revenues, according to account 1043, were the lowest during and after the Covid-19 pandemic (Table 5). The most successful year was 2022, where the majority of revenue was generated from issuing accommodation vouchers. Given the decline in 2023, additional sources of income should be sought in organizing excursions and creating new offers.

According to data from the TIC of the TO Sokobanja, the results of the annual survey conducted in 2024, with a sample of 1,217 tourists (both domestic and foreign), determined the average spending of tourists in Sokobanja. Foreign tourists who stayed during 2024 spent an average of about 80 € per day. More than half of this amount (44 € or 55%) was for accommodation costs, 17 € or 21% for restaurant services, whether in restaurants, bars, or fast food, 9.5 € or 12% was spent on shopping (souvenirs and local products, market), 4 € or 5% on local transportation (taxis, organized transportation in the area), while about 5.5 € or 7% of total spending covered all other services at the destination, such as culture, entertainment, sports, recreation (aquapark), organized excursions, and more. From the obtained data, we can conclude that foreign tourists tend to spend on excursions and other activities, which creates business opportunities for receptive tourism agencies.

Table 4. Reasons for visiting in 2023/2024
(Source: Tourist Organization Sokobanja, January 2025)

Five reasons why tourists visit Sokobanja
Recreational and sports activity holidays
Relaxation, spa, and rehabilitation
Sports facilities and events
Events; Traditional food and specialties

Table 5. Profit and loss statement account 1043 - Year 2020/21/22/23
(Source: Tourist Agency "DM" Sokobanja, January 2025)

Year	Total revenue
2020	5.344.000,00 RSD
2021	4.502.000,00 RSD
2022	11.551.000,00 RSD
2023	7.315.000,00 RSD

Table 6. The number of tourist arrivals from 2020 until 2024 (Source: Tourist Organization Sokobanja, January 2025)

Year	Visitors	JAN, FEB, MAR	APRIL	MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUG	SEPT	OCT	NOV, DEC	Total
2020	Domestic	8223	572	4232	16545	20879	29010	22622	14024	6474	120428
	Foreign	1145	0	24	66	173	397	279	160	170	2414
	Total	9368	572	4256	16611	21052	29407	22901	14184	6647	122842
2021	Domestic	14074	8398	14066	17736	26187	32624	20810	11193	9727	154815
	Foreign	460	208	383	459	814	620	449	452	471	4316
	Total	14534	8606	14449	18195	27001	33244	21259	11645	10198	159131
2022	Domestic	14586	9241	10435	12019	18759	31951	25607	18812	12610	154020
	Foreign	702	806	421	346	638	573	528	831	1644	6489
	Total	15288	10047	10856	12365	19397	32524	26135	19643	14254	160509
2023	Domestic	15886	9399	9076	11649	23583	27749	19316	11531	8999	137188
	Foreign	2593	1593	838	558	924	921	664	955	2673	11719
	Total	18478	10992	9914	12207	24507	28670	19980	12486	11672	148907
2024	Domestic	17029	7785	10152	10969	14312	18001	9993	5849	8774	102864
	Foreign	2936	804	1193	540	873	1353	987	1261	2551	12498
	Total	19965	8589	11345	11509	15185	19354	10980	7110	11325	115362

According to Baum & Lundtorp (2001), the impact of seasonal variations in demand is one of the dominant policy and operational concerns in tourism for both the public and private sectors. There are few destinations where demand does not fluctuate in accordance with clearly defined seasonal patterns. Regarding seasonality, in the 1970s and 1980s, Sokobanja had an intense twelve-month business operation. Today, tourists visit Sokobanja mainly during the summer, and the season lasts from April to October. The highest number of overnight stays was recorded in 1986, with 840,484 stays, after which this number drastically declined (Arsić et al., 2024a). Table 6 shows the number of arrivals from 2020 to 2024, where we observe an increase in the number of tourists following the COVID-19 pandemic. The highest number was recorded in 2023, with approximately 11,000 visitors. The analysis of the table shows a constant growth in foreign arrivals compared to previous years, particularly in relation to 2020. In 2024, Sokobanja was unable to maintain the level of demand and achieve similar results as in previous years for both domestic and foreign tourists. The most significant decline was observed during the summer, even though the number of foreign arrivals remained stable. The total number of recorded arrivals in 2024 was 22.5% lower compared to 2023. The number of overnight stays is influenced by a complex interaction of economic conditions, types of accommodation, tourist demographics, and regional trends. Understanding these factors can help in formulating effective tourism development strategies and efficiently managing tourist demand (Moll et al., 2016).

A similar number of overnight stays was recorded in the accommodation facilities in Sokobanja during 2021 and 2022. In the following years, the average number of overnight stays was around 650,000, leading to the conclusion that Sokobanja maintains stable operations without significant fluctuations in the number of tourists. The current situation indicates that Sokobanja remains an attractive destination, drawing a large number of tourists. In Tables 6 and 7, significant fluctuations are observed due to the state of emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as natural disasters such as heavy rains and floods. In the first eleven months of 2024, the average number of overnight stays for domestic tourists was 4.5, while for foreign tourists, it was 2.8. According to tourism sector employees, an increase in taxes and tourist fees—resulting from the reclassification of Sokobanja from a Category 4 to a Category 1 tourist destination—has contributed to this negative trend. Consequently, the classification was revoked for 4,000 registered beds, leading to a decline in the total number of overnight stays. By the end of December, the total number of overnight stays in 2024 had dropped by approximately 163,000, a decrease of around 25%. The only increase observed in 2024 was in the number of foreign overnight stays, which was 6.6% higher than in any of the previous four years.

Data obtained from the Sokobanja Tourist Information Center show that foreign tourists visiting Sokobanja primarily come for Mount Rtanj. Some of them go hiking to the summit, while others explore the bioenergetic fields at the

mountain's base. Other popular excursions include Sokograd and the Lepterija picnic area, located along the Moravica River. The third most visited site is the village of Vrmdža and its lake, where tourists also could attend cooking classes and participate in food preparation. Additionally, the Ozren Mountain picnic area is a key attraction, along with Ripaljka Waterfall, which holds historical significance as Serbia's first officially registered natural monument, designated in 1949.

Table 7. The number of overnight stays from 2020 until 2024 (Source: Tourist Organization Sokobanja, January 2025)

Year	Visitors	JAN, FEB, MAR	APRIL	MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUG	SEPT	OCT	NOV, DEC	Total
2020	Domestic	34288	2874	24381	83932	11551	16123	12725	66307	26757	642568
	Foreign	2680	0	98	145	607	1048	786	336	552	6252
	Total	36968	2874	24479	84077	11618	16231	12801	66643	27309	648820
2021	Domestic	52669	36128	65921	87677	13510	16444	10527	60233	35448	743017
	Foreign	1288	465	995	1380	2969	2236	1357	1208	1174	13072
	Total	53957	36593	66916	89057	13819	16670	10664	61441	36622	756089
2022	Domestic	50044	35204	47320	59399	93566	16981	13950	99788	54798	749430
	Foreign	1802	1859	1317	1239	2397	2264	1759	1926	3732	18295
	Total	51846	37063	48637	60638	95963	17205	14129	10174	58530	767725
2023	Domestic	55881	35284	42188	55930	11312	13763	97474	54134	32450	624176
	Foreign	6842	3981	2559	1879	2887	3944	2021	2479	5721	32313
	Total	62723	39265	44747	57809	11609	14157	99495	56613	38171	656489
2024	Domestic	57615	31571	47479	54890	69706	87916	51094	26342	33578	460191
	Foreign	7869	1803	2937	1705	2813	4641	2494	3238	5850	33350
	Total	65484	33374	50416	56595	72519	92557	53588	29584	39428	493545

In recent years, with changing travel motivations, some tourists seeking an adventurous vacation have started visiting the water park. This excursion is particularly popular among younger visitors. Chen et al. (2014) state that local tourist agencies play a significant role in shaping tourist flows by creating itineraries and providing information, which can impact the occupancy and sustainability of destinations. According to Rizal & Baizal (2023), in Indonesia, these practices are used to manage tourist flows and identify optimal routes. Efficient itinerary design allows travel agencies to offer more personalized and diverse routes, addressing the lack of individuality in traditional itineraries. This answers the question: What do receptive travel agencies mean for tourist destinations? This confirms Sub-hypothesis h2 that Receptive travel agencies contribute financially to the strengthening and development of the tourist destination.

CONCLUSION

Receptive travel agencies are important in tourist destinations because they enhance the visitor experience, provide local expertise, facilitate logistics and support the local economy. This travel agencies play a key role in the tourism ecosystem for several reasons: 1. Enhancing the visitor experience: These agencies specialize in understanding the needs and preferences of tourists. They offer customized services such as guided tours, transportation arrangements and accommodation reservations that specifically cater to the interests of visitors. This personalized approach helps tourists have an unforgettable and enjoyable experience. 2. Local Expertise: Inbound travel agencies possess extensive knowledge of the local culture, attractions and hidden gems of the destination. They can provide insights that tourists may not find in guidebooks or online resources. This local expertise allows them to recommend activities and locations that align with tourists' interests, enriching their overall experience. 3. Simplify logistics: Travel can be complex, especially for those unfamiliar with a new area. Inbound travel agencies help streamline logistics by coordinating transportation (such as airport transfers), managing routes, and ensuring that all aspects of travel run smoothly. This reduces stress for travelers and allows them to focus on enjoying their vacation. 4. Supporting the local economy: By promoting local businesses such as hotels, restaurants and attractions, receptive travel agencies contribute significantly to the economic health of tourist destinations. They often collaborate with local providers to create packages that benefit both tourists and residents, encouraging sustainable tourism practices. In short, inbound travel agencies are vital in tourism areas as they improve visitor satisfaction through personalized service, while simultaneously supporting the local economy and providing valuable insight into the destination's offerings. This confirms Initial Hypothesis H, which states that travel agencies of a receptive nature are an important link in the promotion of the destination and the attraction of foreign tourists.

This paper explores the role of receptive tourism agencies in the development and promotion of rural and spa tourism. Tourism agencies and organizations play a key role in connecting rural areas with potential tourists. They link visitors to destinations by creating package deals focused on authentic experiences, sustainability, gastronomy, local culture, and natural beauty. Receptive tourism agencies help rural and spa destinations become more competitive in the tourism market. The activities of the DM travel agency and the Sokobanja Tourist Organization demonstrate the significance of their role in ensuring the sustainability and promotion of the destination. Future research could explore the integration of advanced digital tools and platforms to further enhance the efficiency of marketing strategies and service delivery, providing tourists with a better and more engaging experience. Upcoming studies should focus on understanding the dynamic nature of sustainable tourist behavior and the factors influencing it. There is a need for more research on actual observed tourist behavior and the application of sustainable itinerary design for travelers. Receptive travel agencies operating at the destination face challenges brought by new trends. Their programs, excursions, and offers must be available in the form of a website, while the future of excursion organization should be sought through the development of their own mobile

applications or integration with existing ones. This approach will further contribute to the sustainable development of tourism in Sokobanja. More effort should be invested in the education of tourism employees who have direct contact with visitors in Sokobanja. The Sokobanja Development Program for 2023–2027 does not mention the advantages of travel agencies operating in the area or the positive market effects they can have as receptive service providers. The reception of tourists is the first point of contact upon arrival, and the advisory-informative role is crucial for the overall experience of the destination for tourists. In many receptive tourism areas, there is often not enough awareness about the importance of sustainability in tourism. Considering environmental, social, and economic aspects during the creation and execution of tourist packages is essential for implementing sustainable development in the operations of tourism stakeholders. A better offer of a given destination is in the interest of all economic entities and reflects their social responsibility in the specific tourism market.

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