

ATTRACTIVE POTENTIAL OF SOKOBANJA WITH THE FUNCTION OF TOURIST DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract. *Sokobanja represents one of the most important places on the tourist map of Serbia. The advantages of its tourist-geographical values such as thermo-mineral springs, climate characteristics, variety of flora and fauna as well as a great deal of cultural values, are the basis of the tourist development of Sokobanja basin. Then aim of this paper is to present geographical basis of the tourist potential of Sokobanja basin and to emphasize natural tourist values which determine the tourist function of this spa -resort.*

Key Words: *Sokobanja basin, tourist values, tourism, attractive potential*

The tourism in Serbia has a long and rich tradition, which is based on Serbia's favourable geographical, traffic and tourist values, as well as the variety of natural and cultural tourist values (Stankovic, S., 2000). As a distinctly continental country, Serbia bases its tourist development on its spas, mountains, favourable geographical values as well as its important cities and towns. The most important place in Serbia's tourist offer belongs to the spa-resorts. The habits and inclinations of the people in Serbia to go to the spas and spend one part if not their whole holiday there, are manifested as a long-term tradition in Serbia (Comic, Dj., 1997.). Having this context in mind, Sokobanja has an important place on the tourist map of Serbia, not only because of its level of tourist appeal, but also because of its tourist traffic.

The advantages of its tourist-geographical values, variety of natural tourist values, above all thermo-mineral springs, climate characteristics, variety of flora and fauna as well as a great deal of cultural values, are the basis of the tourist development of Sokobanja basin. The previous tourist development of this region has pointed out the fact that, with further planned and guided development, tourism together with other complementary activities, such as traffic, trade, catering industry, agriculture, could be the main link in the economic development of this region. By researching regional priorities for tourist

development in Serbia, Sokobanja is a part of Nis-Sokobanja tourist region, which holds the second place with 2534 points, just after Djerdap region, which has 2772 points (Nikolic, S., 1984).

TOURIST – GEOGRAPHICAL VALUES

The advantages of tourist-geographical values of Sokobanja basin lie in its favourable position with respect to larger town centres and areas with higher population density, as well as more important tourist destinations and competitive tourist regions (Comic, Dj., 1997). Sokobanja basin has transit characteristics as it is situated between the River Morava basin on one side and the River Timok basin on the other. The main communication line represents the regional road Knjazevac – Sokobanja – Aleksinac with an entrance to the motorway of international importance – E 75. The Timok direction and the east-European international tourist direction are the two most important communication directions which contribute to the favourable tourist-geographical values of Sokobanja basin. The east-European direction is connected to Sokobanja basin at its furthest southwest part. If we consider the position of Sokobanja basin with respect to the larger urban-industrial centres in our country, where a large number of potential tourists live, we can conclude that in that respect this region also has favourable tourist-geographical values. Aleksinac, Nis, Zajecar and Bor belong to the first zone of road distance, which means that they are up to 100 kilometres away from Sokobanja. The second zone is made up of towns and industrial centres which are up to 200 kilometres away: Vranje, Leskovac, Jagodina, Paracin, Kraljevo, Cacak. The third zone is made up of urban-industrial centres, which are from 200 to 500 kilometres away: Belgrade, Novi Sad, Sombor, Subotica.

NATURAL TOURIST VALUES

Relief. An important characteristic of the relief of Sokobanja basin region is that in the regional geographical terms it is a part of the vast Carpathian-Balkan mountain system, while its smaller part, in the west, belongs to the old Rodopi mass. In the wider sense, Sokobanja basin belongs to the Mountain – valley – basin macroregion, and the mesoregion of East Serbia (Markovic, Dj.J., Pavlovic, M., 1995.). The complex morphological evolution of Sokobanja basin region contributed to the formation of several relief types, which are very different as far as tourism is concerned, not only in the sense of their level of tourist appeal but also in the sense of their shapes. The mountains of Sokobanja basin region represent its most widely spread tourist value, which springs from their genetic and physiognomic variety, their indirect influence on the climate of this region and the variety of flora and fauna.

Rtanj, with its highest peak (Siljak) at 1560 metres, represents one of the highest mountains in Serbia. Its limestone massif is rich in above ground and subterranean limestone formations which have different tourist appeal.

Ozren, a lot lower at 1174 metres, is a symbol of Sokobanja and the most important mountain of this region. The slightly wavy relief of Ozren makes this mountain interesting for different tourist activities (walking, picking herbs, etc.). Ozren's stimulating sub-mountain climate also contributes to its attractive potential, and it is on the bases of this

climate, and in terms of functional classification, that Ozren is classified as a rest and recuperation mountain (Stankovic, S., 2000). Seselacka cave and Ledenica cave on Rtanj are interesting geomorphologic units, which can be attractive for tourist activities because of their curious and aesthetic attributes. Seselicka cave is located in the east part of Sokobanja basin. It belongs to the village of the same name and it represent an impressive natural bridge 70 metres long, 10 – 12 metres wide and 15 metres high (Petrovic, D., Petrovic, J., 1997.). Ledenica cave is located on the south slopes of Rtanj. It is 57 metres deep and filled with ice and icy ornaments. There is ice in this cave throughout the year (Cvijic, J., 1912.).

Climate. The climate characteristics of Sokobanja basin are determined above all by its position in the south half of the northern mid-latitude climate zone. The wider area has *moderate continental climate*, with a tendency of turning into the mountain type (with higher altitudes). According to Köppen climate classification, Sokobanja basin belongs to the *CfWax* variant of the moderately hot climate. This area has the Danube climate variant of the moderately hot and humid climate (Dukic, D., 1981). The basic climate characteristics include cold, snowy and harsh winters and hot and dry summers. Autumns are warmer than springs. Sokobanja basin has an average of 1816 hours of sunlight a year. The Kosava wind is the dominant wind and it usually blows in the north and east part of the basin. The second most common wind is the south-west wind.

The *hydrography* of Sokobanja basin is very interesting, varied, and thus there are different tourist values which are of great importance for the overall potential of this region. It is represented by thermo-mineral springs, rivers and Bovan accumulation lake. The thermo-mineral springs of Sokobanja basin are conditioned by a varied tectonic structure and geological built-up. They represent Sokobanja's basic tourist resource. According to the hydro-geological region division, they belong to Carpatho-Balkans region (Filipovic, B., 2003.) and in tourist – geographical terms, they belong to the East Serbian spa zone (Stankovic, S., 2000.). The thermal water is of the $\text{HCO}_3 - \text{Ca, Mg}$ type, with total mineralization of 0.38 – 0.45 mg/l, and the pH value of 7.5. The medicinal components present in these waters include: lithium, calcium, rubidium, strontium, iodine. The medical treatments with these thermo-mineral waters are done through inhalation and bathing with the use of modern balneotherapy procedures. Isolated or as a part of special programmes, the thermo-mineral springs of Sokobanja basin can be used not only in procedures for fast recuperation of sick people but also for healthy people as prevention from illnesses related to poor conditions of work environment and, above all, living environment. Rivers represent the second group of hydrographical tourist values of Sokobanja basin region. The River Moravica is the most important river, with 33.6 kilometres of flow through Sokobanja basin and the total length of 606 square kilometres (Filipovic, I., 2004.). In its course, the River Moravica has different levels of tourist attraction. The part from the fortress Sokograd to the entrance to Sokobanja basin is the most attractive part for tourist activities. It possesses aesthetic and curious characteristics, which have tourist appeal and it opens up possibilities for the development of other types of tourism: bathing, sport, hunting, fishing and recreation tourism. Ripaljka waterfall is a part of the hydrographical network of the River Moravica. It belongs to the group of accumulative waterfalls, and with the height of 17.5 metres, it represents the highest waterfall of that kind in Serbia (Dukic, D., 1982.). The lake Bovan, situated in the southwest part of Sokobanja basin, also has a great tourist value. The lake has a favourable tourist – geographical position, as

it is located on the regional road Aleksinac – Sokobanja – Knjazevac. The lake is about 5 kilometres long and the basin can hold 16,000 m³ of deposit (Stankovic, S., 2000). Apart from bathing and fishing, which are already active types of tourism, the lake can be used for sailing, as gentle winds from the surrounding mountains constantly blow over the surface of the lake.

Biogeographical tourist values of Sokobanja basin are very varied. Its development was determined by a favourable geological substrate and a heavy precipitation. The ever-green woods contribute to the landscape, aesthetic, ambiental and medical-recreational value of the vegetation of this region. The best preserved parts of nature of Sokobanja basin are also protected by law, among which are the regional park Lepteriya and Ozren's meadows. The protection and improvement of nature is a crucial prerequisite for the preservation of the recreational attributes of the natural tourist values of this region, and thus the competitiveness of the tourist offer. The variety of fauna of Sokobanja basin region represents the motif value for the development of hunting tourism. The woods, scattered on the brim of the basin, represent the natural habitat of the following types of game: deer, doe, wild boar, fox, rabbit, etc., which are interesting for hunting and are valuable trophies. The lake Bovan, abundant in fish, the most dominant of which are: carp, pike, catfish, perch, etc., takes up the first place in terms of the attraction value for the development of fishing tourism, as a separate sports discipline.

CULTURAL TOURIST VALUES

Sokobanja has a long continuity of settlement. During its existence this settlement has been known by the following names: Banja, Banjica, Varos-Banja, Velika Banja, Aleksinacka Banja and Sokol-Banja (Dakic, B., 1967.). Sokobanja basin is characterized by a large number of archeological sites as well as items of material culture, which testify to the tumultuous events that happened here in the course of history. The most important and the most presented in tourism are Sokograd and the Turkish bath Amam. Sokograd is located in the southeast part of Sokobanja basin, in the River Moravica gorge, the natural and ecologically preserved ambience of the well-known attractive tourist site Lepteriya. It was determined by archeological excavation that Sokograd was built in the period of the Roman conquest of this region (in the first century AD). The fortress contains two parts: the Upper and the Lower town. The Upper town has walls of the defense towers and a high bulwark with the openings for cannons. The Lower town is shaped like a pentagon and it has two domes. Sokograd has undergone some partial restoration and conservation works. The town is protected by law so that it couldn't have been more efficiently valorized in terms of tourism.

The Amam bath is located in the central park of the spa. It originates from the Roman times, which can be concluded from the remains of the ancient bricks found during the restoration of the central pool. The special value of this cultural monument is the bath-tub which belonged to Prince Milos Obrenovic. The bath has been restored a number of times so as to keep its significant historical value, tourist appeal and medical-recreational function. Apart from these cultural monuments, which are best-known to the tourists and the public, there are other monuments in Sokobanja basin which should be mentioned, mainly the Church of Lord's Conversion, the monastery of St. Archangel Gabriel on Ozren and Milosev konak.

Especially interesting for tourists are cultural-tourist manifestations. The most important manifestation in this region is The Best Accordion Player of Yugoslavia, which represents the only music manifestation at the national level.

MATERIAL BASE OF TOURISM

Sokobanja's tourist development, as well as its accommodation capacity development began in the middle of the twentieth century, by building the first accommodation objects in Sokobanja. Depending on the political and economic situation, that development was uneven and the biggest progress in creating the material base was made between 1975 and 1987. During that period, six hotels were built, which is the number of hotels today. In those days the material base of tourism in Sokobanja gained certain traits which have been kept to this day. Today, Sokobanja has 12,844 beds. The structure of the accommodation capacity is characterized by the large disproportion between the basic and the complementary accommodation objects and it amounts to 89:11 to the advantage of complementary accommodation objects.

Apart from the accommodation capacity and traffic, the catering capacity represents the third category of the material base of tourism. The biggest concentration of the catering capacity is in the central part of the spa. The spa has 19 catering units and 5,451 seat in the public sector. The number of catering units in the private sector is twice as large.

TOURIST TRAFFIC

Tourist traffic in the spas in Serbia is one of the most important indicators of their tourist appeal, the degree of development and the utilization of their material base, the advantages of their tourist-geographical values and their competitiveness on the tourist market. The tourist statistics mark the traffic in around 30 spas, out of which, the four leading ones realize from 53% to 55% of the total tourist traffic. Sokobanja holds the second place with 14% of the total tourist traffic, just after Vrnjacka banja which realizes 26% of the total tourist traffic in the spas.

Sokobanja is among the centres with the longest tradition of tourism development in Serbia. Keeping records and monitoring the number of tourists and the tourist nights in Sokobanja began in the 1930s. According to the files, the first guest who was sent to the spa for medical treatment, recuperation and rehabilitation was recorded in 1837. In 1933 Sokobanja was visited by 1,566 guests who realized 22,265 tourist nights. Two years later, in 1935, the number of registered guests in Sokobanja was 3,889 with the number of tourist nights of 22,210. In the following five years the number of guests decreased. In 1939 there were 1,745 tourists who realized 8,295 tourist nights. The difference between the small number of guests and the large number of realized tourist nights points out the greater length of stay of the guests, who, at that time, came to Sokobanja solely for medical treatment. During the same period, from 1933 to 1939, Sokobanja held the second place in terms of the scope of realized tourist traffic, after Vrnjacka banja, and in terms of realized tourist nights in the spas in Serbia, Sokobanja held the seventh place, after Vrnjacka banja, Banja Koviljaca, Mataruska, Vranjska, Niska and Bukovicka Banja.

The intensive development of the spa tourism begins after the Second World War. In the mid 80s the tourism in Sokobanja reached its highest point.

Table 1. The number of tourists in Sokobanja during the period between 1970 and 2005

Year	Domestic tourists	Index	Foring tourists	Index	Σ	Index
1970	34.000	100	146	100	34.146	100
1971	34.256	100	138	94	34.394	100
1972	35.000	102	124	84	35.124	102
1973	37.652	110	156	106	37.808	110
1974	41.028	120	163	116	41.191	120
1975	44.642	131	189	129	44.831	131
1976	41.556	122	287	196	41.843	122
1977	57.105	167	174	119	57.279	167
1978	61.528	180	211	144	61.739	180
1979	69.630	204	326	223	69.956	204
1980	55.519	163	256	175	55.775	163
1981	58.254	171	318	217	58.572	171
1982	57.922	170	447	306	58.369	170
1983	61.014	179	603	413	61.617	180
1984	63.312	186	722	494	64.034	187
1985	67.500	198	893	611	68.393	200
1986	80.466	236	333	228	80.799	236
1987	97.901	287	570	390	98.471	288
1988	80.262	236	524	358	80.768	236
1989	68.178	200	339	232	68.517	200
1990	56.015	164	487	333	56.502	164
1991	45.340	133	368	252	45.708	133
1992	49.184	144	136	93	49.320	144
1993	28.707	84	250	171	28.957	84
1994	40.683	119	471	322	41.154	120
1995	39.436	115	134	91	39.570	115
1996	40.836	120	237	162	41.073	120
1997	46.872	137	452	309	47.324	138
1998	64.955	191	586	401	65.541	191
1999	51.051	150	482	330	51.533	150
2000	65.434	192	840	575	66.274	194
2001	67.226	197	894	612	68.120	199
2002	66.141	191	1.036	709	67.177	196
2003	65.845	193	1.463	1.002	67.171	196
2004	64.245	188	1.633	1.118	65.056	190
2005	66.512	195	1.087	741	67.794	198

Source: Republic Statistical Office, Belgrade, 2005

In 1970. Sokobanja was visited by 34,146 tourists, 146 of whom were foreign. Similar data was recorded in 1971. During the period since 1974 the total number of tourists was

above 40,000. In 1977 Sokobanja was visited by over 57,299 tourists, 174 of whom were foreign. After that, there is a period of frequent annual oscillations of the total number of tourists. For example, in 1976 there were 41,843 tourists, and four years later there were 55,776. After that, there was a period of constant growth of the number of visitors, so that in 1987 it reached 98,471. This kind of tourist traffic has not been reached since and it represents the record number of tourists in Sokobanja. The high number of tourist visits during this period was the result of the previously shaped tourist physiognomy of Sokobanja, as well as the favourable social and economic conditions and the higher living standards of the population of our country.

During the following period the total number of tourists decreased. The tendency of decrease in the scope of tourist visits, caused by the economic crisis and the complex political situation in the country and the surrounding region, was most prominent during the last decade of the twentieth century. Thus, in 1993 only 28,957 tourists were registered in Sokobanja, which is 29% of the number of tourists in 1987. During the period after 1993, the increase of the number of tourists was recorded, so that in the following year, 1994, Sokobanja was visited by 41,154 tourists.

The tourist traffic dynamics during the period after 1995 was on the rise. During that period Sokobanja was visited by over 40,000 tourists, and in 2000 there were 66,274 tourists. Such tourist traffic was maintained during the following period, from 2000 to 2005, with the number of tourists of over 65,000.

In Sokobanja, just like in the other centres of balneological tourism, the number of foreign tourists is considerably lower than the number of domestic ones. This points to the regional and national value of the tourist potential of Sokobanja, as well as their relatively narrow contract zone. The foreign tourists who come to Sokobanja (or most of the other spas) are usually there on business, or are participants in different professional and scientific conventions. The number of tourist nights spent by the foreign tourists in the spas confirms this fact.

The tourist traffic in Sokobanja, in general, has all the characteristics typical for all spas in Serbia, and that is distinctly seasonal character, which is absurd having in mind the medical and recreational function that these places can have throughout the year (Comiz, Dj., 1997). This distinctly seasonal character, influences not only the economic justification but also the operation of the whole tourist-catering industry of Sokobanja.

CONCLUSION

The general and specific values of Sokobanja basin point out the significance of research into its tourist potential. The attractive potential of this spa-resort, is based, above all, on the complex of natural tourist values, which is made up of geomorphological, hydrographic, climate and biogeographical tourist values. The thermo-mineral springs and climate play a vital role in the development of the spa as a medical and health resort. The thermo-mineral springs of Sokobanja basin belong to the group of radioactive akrottherms, with the character of weak alkaline earth waters. They are suitable for the medical treatment of different kind of illnesses: diseases of respiratory organs, nerves, high blood pressure, energy and matter exchange problems, eye conditions, bone conditions, etc.

Sokobanja's climate represents its special tourist resource and it is reflected in the values of the special climate elements, especially temperature and humidity. These two elements, temperature and humidity, for Sokobanja basin are within the comfort zone limits. On the basis of this, Sokobanja was defined as a climate rest and recuperation resort. The surrounding mountains, Ozren and Rtanj, represent the special natural tourist values. They enable the development of different kinds of tourist activities, above all recreational. In that respect, special attention should be paid to the mountain Ozren, which according to functional classification belongs to the group of rest and recuperation mountains.

The most attractive cultural tourist motifs of this region are "Amam" – the Turkish bath, konak kneza Milosa, Sokograd, archaeological sites, ambient values of the village settlements, the customs of the local population, as well as different manifestations, some of which, such as The First Accordion Player of Yugoslavia, are at the national level.

The variety of natural tourist values, as well as the variety of cultural values, enables their complementary relationship and the development of different kinds of tourism, the function of which is to form a rich tourist offer and enrich the available tourist activities.

The distinctly seasonal character is the basic characteristic of the tourist traffic. The maximum number of tourists is realized in June, July, August and September, over 70%. The number of domestic tourists compared to the number of foreign tourists throughout the tourist development period is greater by far. The reason for this can be found in the lack of certain marketing actions that would be directed towards the foreign market, as well as the insufficient degree of the material base development, which does not meet the demands of the more and more modern tourist market, both domestic and foreign.

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ATRAKTIVNI POTENCIJALI SOKOBANJE U FUNKCIJI TURISTIČKOG RAZVOJA

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Sokobanja predstavlja jedno od najznačajnijih mesta na turističkoj karti Srbije. Pogodnosti njenog turističko-geografskog položaja, raznovrsnost prirodnih turističkih vrednosti, pre sveg termomineralni izvori, klimatske karakteristike, bogatsvo biljnog i životinjskog sveta, kao i bogatsvo kulturnih dobara, osnova su razvoja turizma Sokobanjske kotline. Cilj ovog rada bio je da prikaže geografske osnove turističkog potencijala Sokobanjske kotline, a pre svega prirodnih turističkih vrednosti, koje u osnovi i određuju njenu turističku funkciju..

Ključne reči: *Sokobanjska kotlina, turističke vrednosti, turizam, atraktivni potencijal.*