



# THE IMPORTANCE OF THE INTERNET IN DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURISM IN SERBIA

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## Abstract:

The Internet presents one of the most important media in data transferring and its use is constantly growing. Almost 40% of the Serbian population uses the Internet and more than 3 million inhabitants have active profiles on Facebook. Serbia has been registered on the Internet since 1996. According to numerous research, tourism, just like a Serbian tourist offer, is part of that service category whose presentation, distribution and purchase are greatly carried out on the Internet. At the early beginning of the rural tourism development, a limited number of households were involved in this type of tourism and later it has grown massively due to the Internet and tourism associations advancement. During 2014, Serbia made 2200 overnight stays showing its position in the first phase of the rural tourism development. The National Tourism Organisation of Serbia has included this type of tourism, which has been neglected for over the past fifty years, giving it priority in its programme. Due to the website [www.selo.rs](http://www.selo.rs), National Association of Rural Tourism of Serbia has become an active representative in the European Federation of Rural Tourism Development. Today, many social networks have great importance in promoting tourism services.

## Key words:

rural tourism, the Internet, social networks, websites.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Today, the Internet is a very important media in transferring data that is in continuous expansion. It has no limits in using time, topics, frame and effects. Its additional value is pretty great: it offers direct approach to information and documents. According to some research in Serbia, there are about 1,5 million people connected to the Internet [7]. The market is huge if we take into account that there are around a million Serbian people currently living abroad that look for the information on the Serbian web sites. Over the past ten years, Internet promotion has triggered numerous positive changes in rural tourism of Serbia.

### *The role of the Internet*

The target group are young, educated, business people as well as children. Some of the preferences of the Internet is that it is never closed and it is available to the users all around the world, every day of the

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week. It covers the whole world and it can also transfer the color photos [3]. The Internet has brought transparency to many organizations. Without transparency the organizations lose their credibility, that influences their image which is also very important. It is estimated that there are currently around three billion Internet users worldwide [6].

When we are talking about the usage of social media, it is necessary to know all the possibilities they offer, to follow the trends, to have continuous interaction and to create proper image on the Internet according to the collected information. The presence of the organization on the Internet implies first of all the creation of the web site. Tourism web site should not be a brochure or a flyer posted by the organization on the Internet to inform future tourists about the destination and prices of travel arrangements. The site should offer complete presentation of the destination, give relevant information and reply to every single tourists' question about the destination, its offer and content. The site should be creative and well imagined. It can contain some records, reports and experiences of tourists who have already visited the destination. That material is very useful to the media. The pictures give us very interesting information, especially if it is about the attractive destinations and Serbia has plenty of such. The Internet is not used only to give us tourism information but also for selling the travel arrangements. According to numerous research, tourism and trips are the main categories of products/services being bought on the Internet. Prospective tourists can refer to Internet tools to obtain all necessary information about the tourism product and all the elements regarding the trips: price, currency exchange, area attractions. The consumers can make trip reservation and credit card payment too. The role of travel agencies has decreased recently as the travel arrangements are directly bought on the Internet. Every serious organization in tourism sector has its presentation on the Internet.

Tourism forums have a considerable importance in establishing interactive communications, as they offer the possibility of general discussion on trips, destinations and experiences. Through distribution of different content regarding the proper trip adventures and reading of someone else's experiences, the visitors of forum discover important information that can help them make future decision. Website of numerous travel agencies or online reservation systems imply forums and photo galleries that the visitors put on in order to promote certain destinations or travel arrangements.

Today in tourism services marketing many social networks are extremely important. Some of them are perfect to share information about the rural tourism offer. Facebook is a very important communication mean. If we want to open a profile on the network promoting the destination, we have to act strategically. The best option is fan page opening that shows us the number of fans who visit or leave the page, like following their activities too. Globally, Facebook is the largest social network and almost everyone uses it. It is an extremely strong marketing strategy, so it is often used in promotion. Tweeter belongs to the group of micro blogs where the length of the message is limited to 140 characters. Towards those short messages we place some idea, news, thoughts. We can also share the photos, links or can call someone to certain event. Tweeter provides open communication where we can hear everyone's suggestion or reaction, as there is no friend request. It is suitable for rapid information sharing where the users do not expect strict and official communication. It is especially characteristic note to tourism as it is the industry based on vacation, fun and leisure time. Instagram is a social network dedicated to photos sharing and can be used on smart transferable devices, mobile phones, tablet computers and so on. From the marketing point of view, it can also be an excellent mean for making good communication with the guests as for the image creation of the households. Pinterest is a social network based on visual content – photos and pictures. It is well known that the man is a visual being, that we pay much more attention to the photos than to texts or information. As it is based on the photos, the tourist use it for the photos research of the destinations they would like to visit. In this way, they decide where to go and where to stay. Foursquare is a location social network. The tourist can see the places they want to go, find the information about the accommodation, restaurants, attractions, events, interesting locations, hidden places and to get some advice from other users. Such kind of advice is very important to the tourist as they present real, personal experiences of the people that have already visited those places, which is much more objective than any other paid commercial. Tourists can share their locations even on other social networks, so they can get advice about the location even from the friends on Facebook. The tourists can announce their friends on other social networks that they currently are in certain rural household, so the others will find out on that way about that place and those who are not far away from that place can also join them. Thus, one household can get more guests in that period thanks to the Foursquare [2].



## 2. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE INTERNET IN TOURISM OF SERBIA

As the time goes by, the number of web sites presenting the tourism and hospitality offer of Serbia on the Internet is increasing. Our country was connected on the Internet in 1996. When we are talking about the tourism of Serbia, significant level of implementation of information technology is an important aspect of its development: hotel business, travel agencies and tour operators and all other tourism economy entities; tourism products and services distribution; tourism presentation of Serbia and in the way of tourism services purchase. During the rapid development of the Internet in developed countries, Serbia had been suffering bad economic and political situation, that caused the problems in information communication technologies adaption. Today, we also have Internet presentation of the tourism destination no matter if they present the whole country, region or particular places and locations. The National Tourism Organization of Serbia, [www.serbia-tourism.com](http://www.serbia-tourism.com), has the greatest importance in this presentation, like the regional and municipal tourism organization (Tourism Organization of Vojvodina, [www.vojvodina-tourism.com](http://www.vojvodina-tourism.com)). The Web portals present the tourist potential of Serbia, attract Serbian and foreign tourists and offer all useful information. The most famous Web portals of Serbia are: [visitserbia.org](http://visitserbia.org) and [serbiatouristguide.com](http://serbiatouristguide.com). The purchase of tourism services on the Internet is not at the adequate level, but the data is encouraging. Therefore, we can expect that the number of people purchasing tourism services over the Internet will continue to increase [4].

### *Rural tourism development in Serbia*

Rural tourism in Serbia, like an organization activity, started its development more than twenty five years ago. The only beginning of rural tourism development refers to the spontaneous movement of tourist, who wanted to escape from cities and polluted areas at least for a while and spend some time in the nature. At the beginning, only few householders were engaged in such kind of tourism. As the time went by, motivated by the tourism organizations, the rural tourism got massive character. For the purpose of rural tourism development, tourism associations had were founded, especially in the hill – mountain areas (Devići, Brankovina, Studenica), Municipal Tourism Associations (Kosjerić, Ivanjica, Knić).

Even the agricultural organizations and tourism - hospitality industry were engaged in this activity. According to the Tourism Association Archive information, in the end of eighties of the last century, 50 villages were engaged in tourism. They had around 3.000 beds in 800 households, distributed in almost 70 municipalities, generating annually about 10 billion dinars of accommodation incomes and contributing approximately 5 billion RSD more direct incomes for the tourism sector. Furthermore, these incomes do not take into account visitors that do not stay at least for one night or stay with friends or relatives, although they also spend money on tourism services, therefore generate additional income for the rural areas [7].

It is expected that rural tourism will have achieved the following results by 2020:

- ♦ increase overnights from 2.7 million to 7.4 million;
- ♦ increase day visitors: domestic, regional and international;
- ♦ increase occupancy rates in rural accommodation to 30%;
- ♦ increase the number of beds in line with expected occupancy rates;
- ♦ close gaps in the rural tourism value chain and increase the multiplier effect of tourism from 1 to 1.6; and
- ♦ increase direct contribution of rural tourism to the economy from 100 million € to 439 million € [1].

According to the data of the Serbian Tourism Organization, the householders living in the municipalities of Kosjerić, Valjevo, Ljig, Čačak, Požega, Knić, Lučani, Mionica, Užice, Sokobanja, Čajetina, Prijepolje, Brus, Šabac, Kraljevo, Ivanjica, Rača Kragujevačka and Gornji Milanovac are engaged in professionally organized tourism. The rural tourism in Serbia should give its contribution to the rural environment protection and cultural heritage protection, but also to motivate local inhabitants economically to stay in the villages and continue their lives there. There has been recently certain increase of the general services in the households. Guests and the householders usually stay in different houses or in separate parts of the houses, adopted for tourists accommodation. The rooms more often have separate bathrooms and some of them also offer whirlpools, Internet and cable TV. Tourism resources diversity and rich cultural heritage are accompanied by extreme hospitality of the local inhabitants that in accordance with tradition accept every tourist as a friend and make him feel comfortable offering him rich traditional cuisine based on



healthy food. Great number of villages is close to precious cultural historic monuments with characteristics of certain areas. There are also more and more tourism manifestations taking place in those villages. Staying in the nature offers to the tourists possibilities to walk, to recreate themselves, do sports, have organized picnics, walk to the caves, spring of water, waterfalls. They also can go hunting, fishing, riding horses, hiking, can collect healing herbs and do other funny activities in the nature. Tourists can also do some agricultural work with their householders. The rural tourism income could be even higher if we had better use of the current potential and if we had more aggressive commercial campaign. It is also an excellent opportunity for the inhabitants to get the job, for the young people to stay in the villages and the villages to get revitalized. Spending holidays at rural destinations in the nature is becoming increasingly popular among both foreign and Serbia tourists. According to the number of rural tourists before the WWII, Serbia was ranked second, right after the Czech Republic, while today it attempts to reach other European countries that are engaged in rural tourism.

Today, over 950 households in Serbia are engaged in rural tourism, having around 5.500 beds, in 67 municipalities. More than 200 households can offer accommodation to the most demanding tourists that had travelled all over the world. Nowadays, according to the number of overnight stays, Serbia is practically at the beginning of its rural tourism development. The new Tourism Law, for the first time, determines the term "rural tourism households" and define formally offering of rural tourism services to the organized tourism groups. Other positive side of the state policy towards this type of tourism are future loans for the rural tourism development – Tourism Development Funds and categorization of facilities. This type of tourism, being neglected unfairly in recent 50 years, has become the priority of the Tourism Organisation of Serbia [11].

#### *The Internet and rural tourism*

Nowadays, the main characteristics of tourism have changed. We cannot talk anymore about the tourist with unified needs, as a part of the massive demand, having the same interest as the tourist in the last century. Today, they have great experience, knowing exactly what they want and what they can expect for the price they pay. They don't have much free time, they want to take rest, to see lot of new things during the short stay in the village. They want to feel the atmosphere, learn new things, try traditional food. Thanks to the Internet, they

have huge choice and possibility to get the right thing. Because of that, rural tourism households, besides they should know how to satisfy all the needs and expectations of the modern tourist, how to make them content and keep them in the village, they must have their own place on the global network. If we type on the Google the key words "rural tourism of Serbia" in Serbian, we get the result of 117.000 links. If we type the same words in English, we have around 180.000 links and if we type "village tourism Serbia" we get 649.000 links. Navigating the Internet the consumer chooses when and which information he/she wants. He is not only a passive receiver of the message, someone who wants to have commercial put in advance. The great number of modern tourists start their trip to the village on the Internet. They choose the destination and plan the trip surfing the Google and social networks. They are interested in price, offer characteristics, information on household, experiences of other people. They want to see the photos of the surrounding and rural tourism households in order to have visual presentation about the village or about the household before they make decision where they want to spend the vacation [10].

Besides this important relationship improvement with the clients, it is extremely important for the households that the commercial volume and price ratio is pretty favorable than in the paper media or electric media. There are no limits of the letters and the time. The costs are very low if we consider all the benefits that the Internet brings to the household, especially if we take into account that getting loyalty and keeping existing clients is five time cheaper than looking for the new ones. Today, people who offer tourism services are much closer to the tourist than ever before. They don't have to open an office in big boulevards and avenues, they don't have to wait for the clients to come and make reservations. All the tourism facilities, like the rural tourism households, get unlimited market, continuous commercial, low promotion costs, easy results and effects control of all the marketing activities on the Internet by posting the information on services they offer on the Internet. The rural tourism households can promote themselves on the Internet posting their own web site or placing the information about their offer onto some Internet portals for the rural tourism promotion or on the web site of the local tourism organization. The aim of Internet Marketing Strategy from 2011 is that Internet becomes the main promotion instrument of direct and indirect selling of the rural tourism products. There are the following suggestions:



- ◆ creation of the proper rural tourism multimedia web location adopted to users and connected to already existing locations, like web locations of Serbian Tourism Organization, local and regional tourism organizations, rural tourism facilities, rural tourism activities and accommodation.
- ◆ use of the web platform for the improvement of relationships with clients towards adoption of various e-marketing instruments.
- ◆ promotion of just high quality content in order to create identity and increase clients fidelity.
- ◆ Web location should be developed so as to attract the visitors to symbols and colours, liked by the visitors, inviting them to discover Serbian village.
- ◆ providing central portal where all the information regarding village activities and accommodation is centralized.
- ◆ reservation on the Internet providing indirect approach to rural accommodation.
- ◆ providing rural travel tours combining the activities and accommodation.
- ◆ use of chat on social networks connected to the location where the visitors can share their Serbian villages experiences with other people.

The Internet should be used as a strategic measure for client attraction in rural Serbia and relationship development with rural Serbia. Today, tourists can get connected to the Internet 24 hours a day, seven days per week and their leisure time is dedicated to Internet. From this reason, attractive web location with specific content for the target user segments will occupy attention of the users and will increase the number of repeated visits to that location of rural tourism. All the elements that the web location includes should be closely connected between themselves and when the user chooses one option should also see other available options for other main categories. For example, if the user chooses one destination, he/she should see at the same moment all the activities they can participate in and the best accommodation they can get during the trip. Besides being visually attractive, the Internet reservation system should also be simple and intuitive, offering minimum number of necessary steps for making reservation and making the user feel completely sure and safe [5].

In the realization of the project entitled "Promotion of Serbian rural tourism" in 2005, all municipalities and tourism organizations of Serbian municipalities and towns having tourism offer in their villages were involved in it. In 2006, over 200 householders being

registered in data base get 90% of tourist towards this portal, making it one of the most successful business models in Serbian rural development. In 2007, the site was visited by 300.000 visitors, which makes it one of the most visited tourism web sites in Serbia. Promotions of rural households on the site [www.selo.rs](http://www.selo.rs) and its information are completely free. This Association participated in rural households promotion organization on the fair of Serbia rural tourism - International fair of tourism in Belgrade in 2008, 2009 and 2010. Association Members organized more than 30 seminars, round tables and workshops regarding the rural tourism development and promotion in Serbia. The Association participated in organization of the First Rural Tourism Congress of Serbia in 2010. Serbian rural tourism organizes all the project activities for the purpose of development of Serbian rural tourism, being supported by the European Union, Ministry of Economy and Regional Development of the Republic of Serbia, Ministry of Agriculture, Fishery and Water Economy, the World Tourism Organisation, United States Embassy, UN Development Program. Association of Serbian Rural Tourism got the prize of "Tourism flower" from the Tourism Organization of Serbia, the biggest national prize in tourism in category of promotion of Serbia in electronic and press media. Owing to the results of the web site [www.selo.rs](http://www.selo.rs), the national association of rural tourism of Serbia is also a member and active participant of Serbia in European Foundation for Rural Tourism Development [9]. The web site [www.selo.rs](http://www.selo.rs) is the leading website of rural households promotion in Serbia. Publishing information about the rural households tourism offer on the Internet portal [www.selo.rs](http://www.selo.rs) is very simple and available to all the people having the basic knowledge of informatics. The portal includes precise instruction on how to fulfill all the information so the householders can put the photos and information by themselves and if they do not have any conditions to do that local tourism organizations or portal administrator will do that for them for free. When the householder got registered on the portal [www.selo.rs](http://www.selo.rs) he can approach to the panel to fill out some personal data such as the name, location, type of accommodation, household characteristics, prices, structure of accommodation, appliances, tourism programs if they are organized in the place or in the surrounding and it is possible to have all the information in different languages. This precise input of information allows tourist to search the households on the web site [www.selo.rs](http://www.selo.rs) according to location, type of accommodation, type of household, prices, services or additional activities in the village. Various comments left on the site by the people who had already



visited the village can help other people choose the most adequate household. Promotion on this web site is completely free of charge, without commission and membership fee and the householders using this site carry out from 300 to 1.500 nights per year. Experienced householders do not write just about their offer but share useful information about their villages, surrounding, nearby attractions, manifestations and so forth. Less promoting material and more useful material is something that attracts future tourists [7]. Creators of this web site have also opened the pages on the currently most popular social networks such as Facebook and Instagram. Various offers of rural households have been published there and the people just liked it. The interest was pretty big and at the same time the demand has increased and the page got almost 8.000 potential tourists that have been following this portal over the last couple of months. Well created commercial was seen by more than 12.000 users, especially those who wanted to spend their vacation in the countryside. People were interested in every post published, they left the recommendations, asked for the contact of the householder and finally made reservations based on these posts. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is certain number of those who visit such sites and it is necessary to get them well informed and leave an adequate message to them. Knowing well that people spend their free time on the Internet, telephone or computer, the message of rural households should be posted right there where they are. Other social network have also been involved, like email and site commercials, with a total of 8.000 followers and potential tourists. This Association has also developed effective marketing system over email. It means that there are more than 2.000 users in the base wanting to get offers of rural tourism vacation throughout special emails, so called newsletter. The total number of followers and potential tourists on social networks is 8.000, plus 2.000 registered users on mailing lists and the visitors of the website [ww.selo.rs](http://www.selo.rs) [8]. Future activities and site improvements will surely bring even better results, thus making the rural tourism offer much closer to tourists.

## CONCLUSION

Internet promotion has recently brought about numerous changes in rural tourism of Serbia. The Internet moved all the boundaries and established clear connection between the tourism offer and demand with

the efficient two-way communication and exchange of information regardless of the geographical distance. As the time goes by, the number of web sites presenting the tourism and hospitality offer of Serbia on the Internet is increasing. Social networks also play an important role in that process. Some of them are perfect to share information about rural tourism offer. Nowadays, people who offer tourism services are much closer to the tourist than ever before. The aim of Internet Marketing Strategy is that the Internet becomes the main promotion instrument of direct and indirect selling of rural tourism products. We should use the Internet as a strategic measure to attract potential clients to rural tourism destinations in Serbia.

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