

## Local perceptions of cultural heritage and tourism development – case study Bač, Serbia

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**Abstract:** This paper presents a part of the wider research of a case study on Bač – a small town in the north-west of Serbia, inscribed on the UNESCO's Tentative List – whose aim was to explore if cultural heritage in Bač can be the driving force for the development of cultural tourism and in that way be an engine of local community development. Moreover, it explores if the value and potential of cultural heritage in Bač were recognized by the local community, since the residents are significant actors and can influence the success or failure of the local tourism industry. The results implied the absence of local initiative and their involvement in the tourism development. Although the local community is aware of significance and attractiveness of cultural heritage, it does not recognize cultural heritage in a more beneficial way, as an economic resource.

**Key words:** cultural heritage, cultural tourism, local community, tourism development, Bač, Serbia.

### Percepciones locales a cerca del patrimonio cultural y el desarrollo del turismo: Bač, Serbia, como caso de estudio

**Resumen:** Este trabajo representa parte de una investigación más amplia sobre el caso de estudio de Bač – un pequeño pueblo al noroeste de Serbia que se encuentra inscrito en la Lista tentativa de la UNESCO – cuyo objetivo es explorar si el patrimonio cultural de la localidad puede ser considerado una fuerza impulsora para el desarrollo del turismo cultural y de esa manera funcionar como un motor para el desarrollo de la comunidad local. Por otra parte, explora si el valor y potencial del patrimonio cultural en Bač ha sido reconocido por la comunidad local, dado que los residentes son actores significantes que pueden influir tanto en el éxito como en el fracaso de la industria de turismo local. Los resultados muestran la ausencia tanto de iniciativa local de implicación en el desarrollo del turismo. Aunque la comunidad local tenga consciencia del significado y el atractivo del patrimonio cultural, no lo percibe de una manera beneficiosa, como un recurso económico.

**Palabras clave:** patrimonio cultural, turismo cultural, comunidad local, desarrollo turístico, Bač, Serbia.

### Introduction

Tourism has assumed a vital role in the development of destinations around the world and, in many cases, culture is a major asset for tourism development (OECD, 2009). Cultural tourism is particularly attractive because of the spectrum of benefits it can deliver to local communities developing them at a considerable speed and diversifying continuously in a multifaceted way. Thus, Donovan Rypkema emphasizes in his studies the connection between heritage conservation and the local economy, giving examples of how good practices of cultural and heritage tourism influence the local community (Rypkema, 2008). Guided by many studies (Lehtimäki,

2008; Rypkema, 2008; OECD, 2009; UNESCO, n.d., World Heritage Sustainable Tourism Program; Günlü, et al, 2009) which have shown that cultural tourism can insure the benefits to the heritage sites and to the community, the research of case study Bač has been conducted with the aim to explore if cultural heritage in Bač can be an agent of cultural tourism development and thus instigating the development of local community as well. As a part of this wider research, the important section was to examine local perceptions and attitudes, considering that sustainability and community involvement concepts are the first and foremost agents in the development process within development paradigms, and giving local people central position in the development (Singh, et al., 2003).

The town of Bač is the centre of the municipality with the same name, in the south-west of Bačka – a sub-region in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, the northern part of Serbia. The preserved architectural heritage, built in the vast period from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, represents a definite testimony to the cultural diversity, including the Bač Fortress (XIV century), a unique example of a “water town” with a fortified castle, reflecting Gothic and Renaissance influences, with suburb which presents a system of houses from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The whole area has environmental values because of urban-regulatory characteristics of the settlements from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which have been preserved. A plane where the fortress is located is a significant archaeological site with multi-layered historical remains from Neolithic period, Bronze and the older Iron Age, to Celtic traces and traces of life in the Classical period during III and IV centuries. Among the main heritage sites are also the Franciscan monastery (XII century), as a sacral architectural complex under the influence of Byzantine and subsequent Islamic art, with the final touch of Baroque and Classicism; the remnants of hammam from the period of Ottoman domination, as well as the Serbian Orthodox Monastery of Bođani (XVIII century) whose paintings, dating from 1737, displaying both Byzantine and Baroque artistic tendencies, represent a crucial point in Serbian art and some of the most valuable frescoes in the first half of the 18th century in South-East Europe. This combination of multi-layered cultural heritage classified as heritage of outstanding value, whose segments of diverse types are presented as parts of a body of a cultural landscape, was the reason why the Historical place of Bač and its surroundings were put on the UNESCO’s Tentative Lists in 2010 and what makes it unique and very attractive for cultural tourism (UNESCO, n.d) [figure 1].

Last decade, the significance of mentioned cultural monuments was recognized and the notable incentives and investments were undertaken under the jurisdiction of the Development project of integrative protection “Centuries of Bač”. It was derived from explorative excavations on the Bač Fortress site which later expanded into direction of conservation of the other cultural goods in Bač – the Franciscan monastery, the Lower Town, the Entrance gate and the Calvary, and afterward the Monastery of Bodjani. Hence, cultural heritage on the territory of Bač has become a part of national strategies and international projects, such as HEROMAT<sup>1</sup> and Realization of the rehabilitation of the Franciscan monastery project, supported by the Council of Europe and the European Commission through the “Ljubljana Process”. Moreover, tourism has been seen as a potential niche and an agent of development in the future. Nevertheless, the needs and interests of local communities are the most important factors of local development and without taking them into account, it is not possible to plan a successful development of tourism. Likewise, it was significant to examine if such value and potential of cultural heritage in Bač was recognized by the local community, focusing on the following research questions: What are the attitudes of locals towards the tourism industry? Is the attractiveness of the Bač Fortress and the Franciscan monastery a sufficient motive for the local community be involved in providing complementary services to tourists?

Local communities are increasingly being drawn into tourism not only from the demand side, but also from the supply side, as communities are becoming aware of the potential of the products they can offer to tourists and the economic gains that can be made (Telfer & Sharpley, 2008). Irrespective of how tourism is introduced and developed



Figure 1.- Bač fortress, photo by Lana Gunjić.

in a community, residents are important players who can influence the success or failure of the local tourism industry. Residents may contribute to the well-being of the community through their participation in the planning, development, and operation of tourist attractions, and by extending their hospitality to tourists in exchange for the benefits obtained from tourism. In developing and attracting tourism to a community, the goal is to achieve outcomes that obtain the best balance of benefits and costs for both residents and tourism actors, which is argued in the theory of social exchange that evaluates the expected benefits or costs obtained in return for the services supplied. Hence, it is assumed that the host residents seek tourism development for their community in order to satisfy their economic, social, and psychological needs and to improve the community's well-being. As long as residents discern these benefits of tourism, there is enough reason for them to perceive it approvingly (Ap, 1992).

### Methodology

So as to conduct this research, semi-structured interviews were held, face to face, as it was important to get the exact answers and due to focus of this research on obtaining insight and understanding. This method was chosen because of its ability to vary the sequence of questions and to ask further questions in response to what is seen as significant responses (Bryman, 2012). Interviews were conducted from 4<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> June 2015 in Bač with a duration ranging from 14.5 to 60 minutes, answers were tape recorded, using dictaphone and were later transcribed. There were no refusals and all respondents were willing to participate in the survey.

The sample of survey was chosen using purposive and non-probability sampling method which resulted in 14 local community representatives being divided in two groups. The division in groups was based on the following criteria – the experience in tourism activity so far in terms of providing complementary services/products to tourists. Hence, the first group of interviewees (group A) consisted of local community representatives who are already involved in tourism activity and this group includes: restaurant owner, owner of accommodation facilities (who was involved in serving the hunters), woman who creates and sells souvenirs (craftswoman), president of non-governmental organization which is dealing with tourism development, and a couple who owns an ethno house and rents rooms.

In the second group (group B) were interviewees who do not have previous experience in tourism activity, but have some potential to be involved as some of them are involved in certain associations: two women who are in non-governmental women's organization which deals with old crafts and preservation of tradition, one of which owns old national costumes; the president

of Folk dance ensemble; women from the City choir association; individuals such as a woman who makes and sells handmade jewellery; a painter; a couple who have renovated the floor of their house and have the possibility to rent it. Thus, the heterogeneous survey sample was used with the aim to have an insight from various aspects and obtain a broader picture. The respondents answered two sets of questions – the first one, same for both groups, questioned their familiarity with the cultural heritage and the attractiveness they associate to it. The second set, related to tourism, evaluated their opinion, experience and motives for participation in tourism activity.

### Findings

The results of the interviews suggest that there is the absence of local community initiative for tourism development, as well as a lack of willingness to be more actively engaged in tourism activity. The reason for that can be found in their attitude and opinions towards tourism. Although there are opposite beliefs, generally, people are not against the idea of tourism development, but apparently they are dissatisfied with the organization level and the current results of tourism development. Following statements illustrate this point:

The woman who sells jewellery: *"Tourism is at a starting phase, but I stay positive"*

The president of the Folk dance ensemble: *"What has been happening and is being done now, I do not think is the right thing"... "A lot is moving in the positive direction, but that is still insufficient, and a lot of things are done just to be done, there must be a thorough approach, more serious and better work to be done"*

The couple with the renovated room: *"That would not be bad, just if we had some support, a little bit more open door, both from municipality and tourist office..."*

*"It is possible, but, unfortunately we do not have something else to offer, except the sightseeing, so we have only the summer season. That would be just the additional source of income, it cannot be relied on"*

Restaurant owner: *"That must be improved totally, people are not informed..."*

Craftswoman: *"It is present to some extent, tourism exists, but somehow, that is not it...neither is it advertised enough. There are a lot of flaws...tourists, when they come, they see nothing...nothing is full of life here."*

Furthermore, when they were asked about tourism development, each person related their attitude/perception with some of the hindrances. Even when they are in favour of tourism development, there is always a "but". Mentioned problems concerned the lack



of accommodation and hospitality amenities, limited access to the Tower, insufficient promotion, organization at planning level (regarding the Tourist Office and municipality), lack of human resources (tourist guide) and experts in tourism field.

The president of Folk dance ensemble: *"Tourists would come, see, leave, and spend nothing...he will go to sleep somewhere else."*

President of NGO which deals with tourism development: *"Lack of interest, and attention to set up a higher level of organization...there is no initiative from the top."*

The owners of ethno house: *"There are very few tourists. Tourists in Bač are coming on their own, not so much through the Tourist Office, but they see on the map, think it would be interesting, visit and leave. That is what I am talking about, more promotion is needed...and Bač is not ready for the guests because we in Bač, we have maybe fifty beds."*

The woman from City choir: *"In order to attract more visitors, our municipality needs more capacity, such as accommodation facilities, which are very poor, and a better, more complex and different program is needed, not just to guide tourists to the Fortress...it should organize more events..."*

In addition, in the answers of the respondents it is noticeable that any incentives in terms of support for their potential involvement are welcomed. Even representatives of group A state that: *"there is no initiative from the top" or "if Municipality, Province or State had given the incentives for old buildings, as it did in the case of couples from Vojvodina, well if only interested in tourism would get some subsidies like that"*, or that political situation is such that every time is a new beginning, hence, they are always in the same position without any progress. It seems that local community does not have motivation or sufficient reason to think about provision of complementary services to tourists or to be a part of tourist offer, because of the stage of tourism development in general. It is obvious that the local community have expectations from the authorities to deal with that issue, regarding content and offer improvements as well as infrastructure improvements. In addition, people who are already involved in tourism activity did not start because of tourists, but had other reasons, and they accidentally entered tourism activity. Hence, the hobby was transformed to the creation of souvenirs and later selling, the ethno house became one of the main tourist offers, started initially as an idea to maintain tradition; renovation of the rooms was not intended for providing accommodation to tourists, but rather a necessity at that moment. Only two interviewees from group A entered deliberately into tourism. On the other side, respondents think that cultural heritage is significant and also attractive to visitors, but seems like it is not a sufficient motive for their involvement in the provision of complementary services as they see more obstacles and problems than benefit from

it. In addition, people compared and said that before it had been much better, there had been more tourists, and now the activity has stalled. Consequently, the local community does not see any progress in tourism development, and if we add the strong influence of external factors such as the economic crisis and the turbulent political situation, which are often stated in the interviews, it can be concluded that people are demotivated, so that until they see any tangible results, it will be hard for any initiative to be undertaken. Moreover, local community is not educated in terms of the benefits of tourism, which is one more factor that influences their perception, besides financial reasons. This conclusion derives from the interviews in which it can be noticed that some individuals from the group B are not well informed about possibilities to categorize the accommodation facilities, sell handcrafts as souvenirs via Tourist Office, or for instance, to offer national costume in private possession for exhibitions, tourist presentation or similar use.

## Discussion

Many scholars were exploring interrelationships between local perceptions of impacts and the level of tourism development, interpreting the results in the context of a number of theoretical models (Butler, 1980; Perdue et al, 1990; Ap, 1992; Hernandez et al, 1996; Madrigal, 1993; Teye et al, 2002; Hunta and Stronza, 2014). Most researchers suggest that residents' attitudes towards tourism are initially positive and in later stages of development more negative, such as for example Butler's most influential stage-based tourism TALC (Tourism Area Life Cycle) model implying that attitudes are positive in earlier stages, when cycle starts with the "exploration" stage, where there are very few tourists (Butler, 1980). Furthermore, some authors argued a segmentation approach like Madrigal (1993) who stated that one of the most persistent segmentation variables in research on this subject was employment in the tourism industry (i.e., that those who worked in the industry would have more positive attitudes towards tourism). This was also a sort of criteria for hereby sampling method, however, there is no significant differentiation among respondents' answers between the groups A and B, due to the fact that not only does neither person involved in tourism perceive it positive as a whole, but they are also pessimistic to some extent and dissatisfied. In addition, the other models imply positive perceptions of local residents: embracement (eager welcoming of tourism), (Ap and Crompton, 1993), euphoria (Doxey, 1975 cited in Hunta and Stronza 2014), adoption (Dogan, 1989).

Nevertheless, in terms of this case study, it is obvious that interviewees were not adopting, exploring, embracing or euphoric about tourism and thus not exhibiting attitudes characteristic of the early stages of the models. This is in accordance with the Hunta and Stronza's view that "the initial phases of the stage-based tourism models appears to only have relevance where residents already have

at least some understanding and exposure to tourism prior to its development or consolidation" (Hunta & Stronza, 2014, p. 292). Bač can be considered to be in its pre-development stage of tourism development, when residents have little or no exposure to tourism, for which Miossec (1977) proposed the notion of a "pre-tourism" phase. Moreover, the attitudes towards tourism can be supported by social exchange theory (Ap, 1992) – when the community residents perceive higher benefits than costs, they will have a positive attitude towards the development, which is not certain at present time in Bač, due to the rate of development, a low number of tourists and lack of significant results.

On one hand, there is a positive attitude about tourist potentials and attractions in Bač, and locals see it as very appealing. On the other hand, they are not motivated to be involved in providing complementary services due to: (1) discontent with the level of organization, (2) lack of visible outcomes of tourism development, (3) expectation from others (local authorities) to address it and resolve the difficulties, (4) perceptions that expenses prevail the benefits, (5) lack of knowledge and education with regard to possible gain of tourism and how they can be involved in such activities. Accordingly, despite the potentials around them, people do not find either enough motivation or support to be engaged in tourism activity. For the local community to accept and understand tourism, various workshops on different topics should be organized: on identifying potential tourism activities to be developed and promoted; on developing links with surrounding tourism attractions to determine how the village can be positioned and packaged as part of an attractive tourism destination; on several topics such as conservation, guiding, categorization, homestay and product development. In addition, a study trip "community to community" is effective way of exposing the community to real life situations and examples of good practices, as well as village tours for locals in order to get familiar with all potentials, informed about projects, heritage rehabilitation and plans, allowing them to propose their ideas and suggestions.

In parallel with the conservation works, tourist offer and content should be improved and enriched, involving local community. It is important to identify local labour force and their knowledge as unique resources, using their knowledge, skills, and products in tourist presentation, that would provide, without lots of investments, a real gain to the locals through more employment opportunities and promotion of local products and services, at the same time raising awareness of the benefits they could gain from the direct contact with visitors. Moreover, the locals could be trained to become guides and cultural performers. Likewise, the tourist products should be developed in terms of presentation of old crafts, traditional dances, songs, gastronomy, staging dramas in the Fortress or developing thematic tourist routes, for instance culinary tour, cycling tour, the Traces of Šokci<sup>2</sup>. In pursuance of developing

cultural tourism, local community should recognize and understand cultural heritage as an opportunity and benefit, as an economic, not just as a cultural-historical resource.

### Note

[1] Project HEROMAT is directed towards the development of innovative environmental friendly materials with value added functions aimed to the protection of immovable Cultural Heritage assets. This project concerns revitalization and protection of Bač Fortress. <http://www.heromat.com/> (accessed on Sep 4, 2015).

[2] Ethnic group inhabited in Bač and Serbia, mainly identified as Croats

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