

DEVELOPING SPECIAL - INTEREST TOURISM OFFERINGS IN THE ISTRIA REGION

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***Abstract:** Istria is the westernmost county and largest peninsula of the Republic of Croatia. It is the closest Mediterranean destination to Central European countries. Possibly the greatest efforts are being made in tourism, the most important and fastest growing market on which the greatest hopes for the region's development have been placed. Daily during the summer season, there are about 200,000 tourists staying in Istria.*

Over the past fifteen years, Istria as a tourist destination has been undergoing a process of repositioning and restructuring aimed at making it a distinctive, competitive and prestigious lifestyle destination in the next short-term period. Ambitions focus exclusively on product and service quality capable of providing guests a unique, unforgettable experience and arousing positive, warm emotions. In this context, various types of special-interest tourism are a vital tool in achieving the above objectives. Staying abreast of the trend of designing special-interest tourism offerings, in recent years Istria has begun to develop certain types of special-interest tourism – in particular, agritourism, sports and recreational tourism, health tourism, food and wine tourism – with the aim of prolonging the tourist season. In keeping with the trends of demand, Istria will need to intensify this development.

***Keywords:** tourism, tourist destination, destination repositioning, types of special-interest tourism, prolonging the tourist season*

Introduction

Istria is the westernmost county and largest peninsula of the Republic of Croatia. It is the closest Mediterranean destination to Central European countries. In the north Istria borders on the Republic of Slovenia, and it shares its western, maritime border with the Republic of Italy.

Istria has a mild Mediterranean climate with hot, dry summers and mild, pleasant winters.

Possibly the greatest efforts are being made in tourism, the most important and fastest growing market on which the greatest hopes for the region's development have been placed.

1. Forms of special - interest tourism in Istria

Over the past ten years, Istria as a tourist destination has been carrying out a repositioning and restructuring process with the aim of presenting itself, in a next mid-term period, as a distinctive, competitive and quality lifestyle destination. Ambitions are focused exclusively on the quality of products and services that are capable of offering guests a unique adventure, unforgettable experiences and positive and warm feelings. In this context, special-interest forms of tourism are key tools in achieving the above-mentioned goals. Therefore, in this part of the paper, we will look more closely at the forms of special-interest tourism Istria has to offer at the present.

In Istria's tourism industry, seaside tourism – sea and sun holidays along the coast – has always been the most important. In addition to this kind of stationary tourism, Istria also offers a variety of other tourism products, such as *nautical tourism, conference tourism, excursion tourism, hunting and fishing tourism, cultural tourism, health (medicinal) tourism, sports and recreational tourism, dive tourism, water sports, biking and hiking trails, wining and dining tourism, rural tourism (agritourism), event tourism, equestrian tourism, cave tourism, adventure tourism, theme tourism, golf tourism, bird-watching tourism and ecotourism.*

Seaside tourism is the most developed in destinations that stretch from the northwest, towards the south and east of Istria. These destinations are Umag, Novigrad, Poreč, Vrsar, Rovinj, Pula, Medulin, Rab, Lovran and Opatija to the east. The *sun and sea* tourism product can be defined as travelling motivated by a desire to spend leisure time in destinations along the coast, at a time when it is desirable (pleasant) to make recreational use of the sea, which is this product's key attraction. This aspect of tourism is still the dominant form in Istria.

Nautical tourism represents one of the more important products that Istria has to offer, and it has developed in the following destinations: Umag, Poreč, Vrsar, Rovinj, Pula, Rabac and Opatija.

Thanks to its abundance of coves and islands and the vicinity of affluent European countries, Istria was recognized as a nautical destination early on. Nautical tourism accommodations have developed simultaneously with the development of hotel complexes. A well-indented coastline and clear seas have made Istria an appealing nautical destination.

Today, Istria has 11 marinas stretching over 445 km of sea coast with a capacity of 3,571 berths at sea and on land. The marinas are open year round and are equipped with the required service facilities. Istria is

the starting point for cruises through the Adriatic islands and is the closest spot for continental Europeans to safely moor and service their yachts.

One of the problems with nautical tourism is that what is referred to as chartering in Istria and Croatia is not the same as what is meant by chartering in Turkey, Greece or Spain, for example. Unlike these countries in which charter includes food and beverage services and the services of cooks and waiting staff on board, in Croatia it refers exclusively to renting vessels which guests use with or without a skipper (Pauček 2010: 39). Nevertheless, despite this problem, a visible step has been made in Istria towards improving the quality of marina offerings and augmenting the level of facilities and services offered. Awards won by Istria's marinas, such as the award given to the marina in Vrsar, prove this point. The specialized German Web site *Skippertipps* (<http://www.skippertipps.de/>) named Vrsar the best marina of 2005, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012.

Conference tourism is an important segment of Istria's year-long tourism operations. Most of the hotels that traditionally organize conferences and business meetings have at their disposal spacious top-quality conference halls equipped with state-of-the-art video systems, slide and film projectors, as well as demonstration rooms. After having invested in conference halls, equipment and other facilities, many hotels throughout Istria received recognition and became well-known for their capabilities in conference tourism. Simultaneous translation services are also provided in the conference halls of many hotels. The best known hotels that stand out for their ability to organize conferences are *Elite Koralj* and *Kristal* in Umag, *hotels Pical*, *Neptun*, *Laguna Materada*, *Laguna Park*, *Parentium*, *Plavi* and *Zorna* in Poreč, *hotels Eden*, *Park*, *Istra* and *Lone* in Rovinj, *hotel Neptun-Istra* on the Brijuni Islands, *hotel Valamar Sanfior* in Rabac, and *hotels Histria* and *Brioni* in Pula. From the above it is clear that Poreč and Rovinj are the largest centres of conference tourism in Istria.

The significance of conference tourism is all the greater when we take into consideration the fact that it occurs mostly during the low season of leisure travels, making it of crucial importance for year-round tourism operations. Without the MICE segment, it would be impossible to imagine year-round hotel operations or a prolonged tourist season. Hence, a commitment towards developing offerings and services that would enable the competitiveness of Istrian hotels on the conference market goes without saying.

Excursion tourism is also well developed in Istria. Short excursions to Istria and its cultural and historical sights (Euphrasius Basilica in Poreč, the amphitheatre in Pula, Brijuni National Park, the

Lim Channel, Rovinj, Motovun...) are organized, as well as one-day excursions to Venice, the Postojna Caves and the Plitvice Lakes.

On average, 180,000 holiday-makers visit Brijuni National Park on a yearly basis. They account for about 33,000 overnights and, in Istria's excursion tourism, they hold the longest tradition (Čabaravdić 2009: 34). Brijuni National Park, with its preserved natural environment, its cultural and historical wealth, as well as the proximity of tourist generating countries, is the perfect place to spend a vacation, take inspiring trips or hold conferences. Thanks to the fact that Brijuni Park is located on an island, isolated from the rest of the world, it is also a place to get away from everyday life. Among the many activities offered in Brijuni National Park, tourists can visit the Archaeological Museum, the Ethnographic Museum, the safari park, the Mediterranean garden and an 18-hole golf course. The following services are also provided: a horseback riding school, a coach ride, a miniature train ride, an electro-mobile ride, a tour of the islands by boat, as well as bird-watching in the Saline Cove, which is home to about 140 species of birds. Photographic exhibitions and theatrical performances are also held here (Čabaravdić 2009: 35). Visitors and guests can enjoy a number of cultural and historical monuments such as the Byzantine Castrum, the remains of a Roman villa at Veriga Bay, the Basilica of St. Mary (there are only three such basilicas in the world), the Church of St. Rocco, the Gothic Church of St. Germaine, and the old panoramic point from the time of Kupelwieser. Over the last decade the renowned Ulysses Theatre has been organizing plays on Brijuni Islands, the first of which was "King Lear".

Učka Nature Park is a well-known site for excursion tourism in Istria. In addition to Mount Učka, the Ćićarija mountain range also has a number of peaks affording panoramic views. In the valleys between these peaks are Istria's most valuable forests, making this an ideal spot for outdoor recreation.

Hunting and fishing tourism has a long-standing tradition in Istria. Because of the diversity of its climate and relief and its well-developed vegetation, Istria supports a diversity of wildlife. Throughout Istria there are well-kept hunting grounds mostly visited by Italians, Germans and other guests. Although hunting tourism is still in its infancy, it has great opportunities for further development because of Istria's natural resources. Involved in its development programme are many hunters and hunting associations, as well as other actors, in particular, travel agencies. Today, hunting in Istria is spread over 366,000 hectares of hunting grounds in which does, red deer, fallow deer, boars, hares, pheasants, partridges and Greek partridges breed.

Istria has all the preconditions necessary for it to become an ideal destination of well-organized hunting tourism. In Istria hunters can enjoy small game and feathered game hunting, as well as trophy hunting (deer, wild boars, etc.). Italian hunters prevail because of the type of hunting available and the vicinity of hunting grounds.

Učka Nature Park is rich in various forms of natural wildlife and wildlife that can be bred (pheasants, rabbits, quail, etc.). Here, big game and small game hunting can be organized all year round. The Učka area is a hunting ground and destination for many hunting enthusiasts from Italy, Austria, Slovenia, as well as Croatia. Istria also provides hunters with a variety of services such as the keeping and training of hunting dogs, the keeping of killed game, renting and keeping weapons, and providing hunting guides. To ensure the enhanced performance of hunting tourism, significant investment is required in the breeding and protection of game animals, together with greater marketing effort.

Sport fishing has been present in Istria for a long time due to the abundance of fish in the Adriatic Sea. Special competitions (professional and amateur) for tourists in angling and fishing are organized by the Sport Fishing Associations of Istria. Sport fishing is offered in all of Istria's coastal towns.

Cultural tourism is one of Istria's most attractive and most interesting tourism products targeting tourists who wish to broaden their horizons. Many towns and villages in Istria are teeming with rich cultural offerings dating from various historical epochs. Through Istria's cultural offerings, tourists can learn about the region's indigenous cultural heritage, its visual arts and sculptures, and its indigenous music, musical instruments and dances. The number of offerings is so numerous that it would be impossible to mention them all in this short passage. The best known cultural destinations are: *Umag* (the Town Museum), *Poreč* (Euphrasius Basilica, the Poreč Native Museum), *Vrsar* (the Park of Sculptures by Dušan Džamonja, the old town and churches), *Rovinj* (the Church of St. Euphemia, the Rovinj Native Museum), *Vodnjan* (the Church of St. Blaise), *Pula* (the Roman Amphitheatre Arena, the Archaeological Museum of Istria, the Temple of Augustus, the Naval Library, the History Museum of Istria, the Collection of Medieval Art), *Pazin* (the Ethnographic Museum of Istria, the Museum of Pazin), *Buzet* (the Native Museum), *Beram* (the Church of St. Mary *na Škrilinah*), *Dvigrad*, *Hum* (the Glagolitic Avenue), *Labin* (the National Museum of Labin, the Matija Vlačić Ilirik Memorial Collection, Dubrava Sculpture Park, the Collection of Sacral Art from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century), *Brijuni National Park* (the Archaeological and the Ethnographic Museums), *Grožnjan*, and many others.

The development of cultural tourism also has great potential in Istria's rural areas based on the number of existing historical monuments, galleries, museums and cultural events. Throughout the interior of Istria, history has left numerous cultural monuments that attract enthusiasts of this kind of tourism. Istria's inland region boasts well-preserved, indigenous natural environments, together with authentic old towns, medieval churches built in distinctive ways, villages, houses, and the remains of old medieval fortresses and castles.

Many small towns in the heart of Istria hide miniature masterpieces. The walls of tens of old Istrian chapels are covered in Medieval frescoes by old masters, true works of art of priceless cultural, historical and artistic value.

Health and medicinal tourism in Istria is centred on the health resort Istria Thermal Springs, and the Dr Martin Horvat Hospital in Rovinj. Medicinal tourism in Istria began to develop as early as the nineteenth century.

Istria Thermal Springs is well-known for its high sulphurous and optimally radioactive warm waters rich in minerals. It has been scientifically and practically proven that these waters precipitate the healing of chronic rheumatic diseases, dermatological diseases, diseases of the upper respiratory organs, gynaecological diseases, and post-operative rehabilitation. The Romans were the first to discover the healing properties of the St. Stephen Spring and make use of them in balneotherapy. *Balneotherapy* (spa therapy) refers to the use of mineral water in the healing process. The spring was already being used in times of antiquity. The first written document concerning the healing qualities of the waters of St. Stephen dates back to 1650. The water's natural healing properties separate it from other thermal springs in Europe. Based on the quality and healing properties this water possesses, it is ranked third in Europe. The health resort consists of 350 beds and two holiday flats. Istria Thermal Springs has enriched its offering by opening a wellness centre and the St. Stephen Polyclinic, the first in the continental part of Istria, operational since 2008. The Polyclinic provides all specialist healthcare services for which sulphurous thermo-mineral waters are indicated. It also provides hydrotherapy as part of physical medicine and rehabilitation. Hydrotherapy involves therapeutic procedures aimed at reinforcing the functions of bodily organs through the use of water. The Polyclinic boasts state-of-the-art equipment and skilled specialists. Its specialist medical services include otorhinolaryngology focusing on treatments using natural, medicinal sulphurous water and mud, aesthetic head and neck surgery, stomatology with implantology and dental prosthetics, and gynaecology for the treatment of secondary sterility.

Dr Martin Horvat Hospital was initially called the Maria Teresa Naval Hospice, when opened in 1888 by the Austro-Hungarian Archduchess and the Archduke Karl Ludwig. From the early twentieth century to the start of the First World War, it operated as a hospital of the city of Vienna. Extensions to the hospital were built from 1906 to 1908 at the initiative of Lueger, the mayor of Vienna. Later, it was turned into a hospital for orthopaedic surgery. Today, tourists from many European countries come to the hospital to use its rehabilitation programmes.

Sports and recreational tourism in Istria has been offering activity holidays for decades now. Numerous tennis courts, football fields, mini-golf courses, handball and basketball courts, sports halls, bowling alleys, trim cabinets, swimming pools, and the like have been built in Istrian villages and towns along the entire coast. Various schools for mastering sports skills on land and at sea are organized. Hundreds of tennis courts are available in early spring, when continental Europe is still experiencing winter.

Sports tourism includes walking, hiking and recreational jogging, bicycling and horse-back riding. Through sports tourism, nature lovers will come across landscapes untouched by industrialization and pollution. They will discover the beauty of miniature Istrian creek canyons and waterfalls, steep mountains, deep valleys, beautiful vistas, and places that are ideal for regaining inner peace through meditation.

Professional bikers, soccer players and other athletes regularly come to Istria to practise for competitions. Recreational athletes have, at their disposal, an endless number of sports grounds and requisites needed for various sports on land, at sea, in the sea, and in the air. It is hard to find a tourist settlement or camp without a sports and recreation centre.

Dive tourism is present in most coastal tourist towns (Poreč, Vrsar, Umag, Novigrad), and there are 27 diving centres along the coast of Istria. Most of them have their own diving clubs and summer schools that provide diving lessons for tourists.

Because of Istria's diverse marine flora and fauna, and appealing and preserved marine environment, diving tourism is steadily gaining in popularity among European tourists from season to season. Divers can explore sunken vessels at 23 locations and underwater reefs at 47 sites (Popović 2010: 8, 36). Diving to explore ship wrecks (for example, the wreck of the *Baron Gautsch* near Rovinj) is very popular.

Water sports are also popular in the coastal regions of Istria. Along the coast, tourists can rent beach canoes, pedal canoes, motor boats, speed boats, or go banana-boat riding, windsurfing, water skiing or jet skiing.

Bike and hiking trails, a growing trend on the tourist market, have been a well-known and distinctive part of Istria's tourism product for some years now. This is a trendy product on the tourism market. Istria as a region places special emphasis on biking. Bike tourism is a tourism development project that has developed into one of Istria's leading tourism products. As such, it plays an important role in the strategic development of a new concept of Istrian tourism. The project is an excellent supplement to Istria's tourism offering that comprises small accommodation facilities (Bike & Bed), bike-boutique hotels, wellness centres, as well as the gourmet segment of Istrian tourism (rural and wine tourism, olive oil tourism). Throughout Istria, old and new bike and hiking trails have been built or renewed, and are charted in the bike and hiking maps issued by county, municipality, city and town tourist boards. In Istria bike lovers can melt into its unique landscapes, untouched nature, vineyards, olive groves, idyllic villages and small towns perched on hilltops.

Today, Istria has 65 marked bike routes with a total of 2,600 kilometres. Each route has an average length of 40 – 50 kilometres. Routes through fields account for 70 per cent, and paved roads for the remaining 30 per cent. The most challenging routes are found in the Ćićarija mountain range.

Interest in bike trails is growing from year to year, as is the number of nature lovers and recreation enthusiasts who ride on them. Today, a part of the narrow-gauged historical railroad track called Parenzana has been transformed into a route for bikers. Other parts of the track are also being restored as part of the tourism offering. The sections from Vižinada to Motovun, from Vižinada to Poreč, and the Lama-Dekani section have already been completed. The Web page www.istria-bike.com of the Istria County Tourist Board is a window into the bike offering that leads to a number of projects and attractive offerings (Zorić 2010: 72). The aim of this Web page is to promote Istria's bike offering. Further activities will include integrating bike trails all over Istria into a single network, marking them in a proper way, and putting up signs on existing bike and hiking trails.

Hiking is a new but also interesting attraction for tourists in Istria because of the peninsula's many beautiful, untouched and unexplored places. Hiking enthusiasts have at their disposal hundreds of kilometres of marked paths that range from less to more demanding. Istria has some 10 hiking trails, the oldest being the *St. Simon Trail* in central Istria (Gračišće Municipality) that runs through pristine nature, past the Sopot Waterfall, and the Churches of St. Simon and St. Mary

Magdalene. Two trails are located near Pazin: *Zelengrad* (about 15 km long) and *Beram*, which are more challenging due to rough terrain and require expert guides. The most attractive and most visited trail in Istria is the one from *Brguč to Korita* that leads towards the Čićarija mountain range. In the Labin region, hiking trails are mostly located on the very border between the region's coastal and continental parts. These trails stretch from *Crna Punta* in the south to *Brseč* in the north and cover over 45 kilometres.

Wining and dining tourism is one of the newer alternative forms of Istria's tourist offering. In recent years, much effort has been invested into this segment of tourism in order to additionally profile Istria as a gourmet destination. The following section takes a closer look at wine and food tourism that is based on Istria's gastronomy and wine offering.

The wine and food tourism of Istria is based on the region's gastronomic and wine offering. Every year since 2008 the Administrative Department for Tourism of Istria County, together with the Istria County Tourist Board, has published a wine brochure, in addition to other gourmet brochures dedicated to olive oil and truffles. Information in these brochures, as well as a list of the best Istrian restaurants and konobas, can also be found at Istria's specialized gourmet portal www.istria-gourmet.com.

The aim of the gastronomy offering is to raise the level of Istria's overall gastronomy culture for tourism purposes. The County of Istria was Croatia's first county to become a member of the Association of Wine Regions of Europe. Today, Istria's wine roads are a common sight, as are quality wines that can be tasted in a hundred Istrian wine cellars. Istria's wine roads can now be considered a destination and a well-designed tourism product, extended and perfected, year after year. The Wine Roads of Istria Project was the first tourism development project of a special-interest character, and the first tourism project that was not connected with the sea and beaches. The project's main mission and idea was to revitalize the most attractive resources, enrich them and use them as a tool for enhancing tourism development. The primary task of any wine itinerary is to promote and present the region's wines, and it involves revalorizing, developing and cultivating winegrowing and wine production. Today wine tourism is rapidly developing as a dynamic segment of tourism. A variety of regional and local events organized along Istria's wine roads help to support Istria's image as a top-quality wine destination.

The most important and most wide-spread variety of wine in Istria is Istrian Malvasia, a synonym for Istrian white wine. This variety of grape accounts for almost two thirds of the entire number of grapevines

in Istria. The typical Istrian variety of red grape is Teran, which produces wine of an intense ruby-red colour. Young Teran wine is used to make *supa*, a traditional dish consisting of toasted bread soaked in a jug of red wine. Recognizing the advantages of a brand, Istrian winegrowers are united in marketing their product in the market and have successfully integrating it with the region's tourism offering. The Vinistra Association, in collaboration with the Istrian Development Agency (IDA), has developed the IQ (Istrian Quality) label to facilitate the creation of a distinctive, top-quality product. Each year the best wine producers of the region are awarded the IQ label.

Alongside the wine offering, Istria has in recent years also developed its offering of original brandies, such as Biska, Medenica and Rude.

Within Croatia, Istria is the leader in creating an olive oil brand. The olive oil branding project began in 2003, with various presentations and educational courses (Ivošević 2008: 26). In a very short period (less than four years), the project brought positive results, with clear and measurable indicators. Today new facilities are constantly developing in the olive oil offering; each year at least one new olive oil plant and one or more new tasting rooms are opened, new visual identities and labels are designed, and a new bottled range of olive oil is developed... Olive oil generates great interest, not only as a high-quality product but also as a product possessing a tourism dimension and a narrative of its own which tourists readily embrace. Based on the Regulations of Istrian Olive Oil Roads, some 100 olive growers are involved in Istria's Olive Oil Roads today (Ivošević 2008: 27). Most own more than 500 olive trees but are looking to expand to between 1,000 and 1,500 trees. Increasingly, young olive growers are becoming involved in the project. Istria's Olive Oil Roads are seen as a tourism product of exceptional potential, which some olive growers are capitalizing on. Today Istria's olive oil is considered the region's strongest brand and it has displayed its competitiveness, strength and measurability on the international scene. For seven years running, Istrian olive oils have been well represented in *L'extravergine* (renamed *Flos Olei* in 2010), the only guide of the best olive oils in the world. Each year the guide provides an overview of the world's olive growers and describes the best olive oils produced. Istrian olive oils are ranked second by number of producers.

The largest olive oil producers in Istria, owning at least 5,000 trees, have formed an Olive-growing Cluster to protect the quality of Istrian olive oil and foster its promotion. Istrian olive oil producers were the first to implement new technologies, branding and a comprehensive market approach. Native olive varieties, such as *buže*, *istarska bjelica*

and *žížolera* produce strong-flavoured, fruity olive oils. Continuous efforts are being made to enhance the quality of olive oil, including a laboratory for quality testing and issuing quality certificates.

In Istria, cuisine is recognized as part of the region's cultural identity and a vital element in building its tourist image. The food offering reflects Istria's climate, mindset and rich tradition. Today the region is known for asparagus, a wild-growing plant found throughout the coastal area.

Another well-known Istrian delicacy is *pršut* (air-cured ham). The Municipality of Tinjan seeks to position itself as a destination of the finest *pršut* in the region. Declared the Municipality of *Pršut* five years ago, Tinjan is also the host of the annual International Fair of *Pršut* (ISAP). After 14 years of great efforts, Istria County and the Association of Istrian *Pršut* Producers succeeded in protecting this product in 2011 by winning a designation of origin according to EU standards. Istrian *pršut* was the first indigenous Croatian product to receive a designation of origin.

Istria has had the most success in Croatia in creating a culinary image thanks to the truffle, a mushroom that grows in the wooded and damp forests of the Istrian region, but also in the forests of Buzet, Buje, Labin, and in the area around Raša. A centre for truffle tasting and buying is located in the village of Livade. This is where the first specialized truffle shop was opened in 2000 by the Žigante family, which has for many years been engaged in commercializing truffles. Within a short period, new shops were opened in Buzet, Buje, Motovun, Grožnjan and Pula. The Žigante family also launched the Istrian Truffle Fair which has been held annually in October and November in Livade since 2001. The Fair is well-known for its special events, such as a demonstration of truffle hunting, a truffle auction, choosing the loveliest and the biggest truffle, and a tasting of various home-made products. Hundreds of people from all over the world flock to Livade every year to visit the fair. In 2002, the Žigante family also opened a restaurant of the same name in Livade. Today the restaurant is at the very peak of Istrian and Croatian gastronomy and is listed in a number of world gourmet guides.

Another unique Istrian delicacy that has great potential is the meat of Istrian cattle called the *boškarin*. A few years ago, the Rural Istria Development Agency (AZRRI) set in motion a programme for the sustainable development of Istrian cattle. Since then enthusiasts, who see the potential of this authentic meat of special quality in Istria's cuisine, have been breeding the *boškarin*. The *boškarin* is a great gastro icon and

should, in the future, hold a significant position in the gastro offering of select restaurants. Today, two types of *boškarin* sausages can be found on the market: Gajardi, a semi-dry sausage, and Bakin, a dry sausage to enjoy with good cheese and a glass of select Istrian wine. Other products are being developed, such as salted beef fillet in oil and pate.

Rural tourism (agritourism) plays an important role in the development of rural areas. It affords the local population additional income alongside their regular agricultural production. It has helped to restore the dignity and self-confidence of farmers that was lost over the last fifty years through various schemes of general *urbanization* and *mechanization* of rural areas. Today, rural tourism represents one of the most important forms of alternative tourism in Istria.

Rural tourism in Istria is one of the newer forms of special-interest tourism. It provides the domestic and foreign guest an opportunity to learn about, and help preserve, Istria's heritage. Rural tourism in Istria means spending time outdoors, taking in its natural beauty and attractions, and enjoying the wealth of its cultural heritage and life in a rural environment.

The centre-stage of Istria's agritourism offering is inland Istria, its continental and rural areas. Rural tourism represents a form of elite tourism, bound to nature, outdoor activities and tradition. Authenticity, tradition, heritage, the conservation of nature, and the hospitality of the hosts are all a must for agritourism.

The basic unit of agritourism is the small family farm on which family members live and which provides accommodation and hospitality services largely based on the farm's own agricultural production. The livelihood of the agritourism farm is also based on agriculture. The most valued products of the Istrian village are *wine*, *olive oil*, *Istrian pršut (air-cured ham)* and *cheese*, as well as *top quality Istrian Malvasia (white)* and *Teran (red) wine*.

Lovers of indigenous dishes, native wines and pure water can choose from a number of agritourism oases offering fresh, countryside air, well-preserved nature, healthy farm animals, quality breeds of cattle, as well as numerous opportunities to engage in various types of "domestic" recreation, such as harvesting grapes in vineyards in mid September, picking asparagus or hunting for truffles.

The offerings of these establishments consist of accommodation in rooms or holiday flats located in the rural interior of Istria, and food and beverages made mostly from home-grown food stuff. In terms of geography, agritourism farms are distributed over the entire rural territory of Istria County from 5 to 40 km away from the sea coast.

In addition to attractively designed accommodations, a very important feature of agritourism facilities is the gastronomic offering, rich in traditional dishes and beverages that reveal the typical flavours of Istria.

Besides enjoying food and wine, and assisting hosts in their everyday activities, guests can also spend their time visiting cultural heritage sights, namely old medieval village churches all over Istria. Nature lovers can also find many interesting things to see in rural Istria. The agritourism offering is complemented by other alternative tourism forms, such as pleasant walks or jogging, bicycling, horse-back riding, or by extreme sports, such as free climbing, paragliding, caving and many other outdoor activities.

Rural tourism accounts for less than 1% of all tourist arrivals in Istria. However, from the perspective of services, prices and quality, rural tourism accounts for a much larger percentage. The months from April to mid September see the greatest number of tourist arrivals in agritourism. Although the rest of the year is also appealing, domestic guests (from Istria and the rest of Croatia) tend to make up the bulk of arrivals. Typically staying for weekends, these guests are also good spenders.

Annually the Istria County Tourist Board publishes a catalogue entitled "Istra – Gourmet" featuring the region's entire agritourism offering. Each year more and more new providers of agritourism services are added to the catalogue.

Finally, it can be concluded that the development of agritourism in Istria helps to protect traditional architecture, revitalize villages and stop emigration in rural areas that are still preserved and in which most of the cultural and natural attractions are located.

Event tourism is gaining in importance within the tourism offering of Istria. Although greater funds for promoting this aspect of tourism are gradually being invested, they are still not adequate enough to properly promote and present various events. The best known events are the *Film Festivals* in Pula and Motovun.

The Pula Film Festival is the oldest and the most attended film festival in Croatia. According to The Guardian of London, it is one of the three best and most spectacular open-air festivals in Europe. It is the traditional meeting place of Croatian film makers, numerous reporters and festival managers, but also of great names in the European film industry.

The Motovun Film Festival is a five-day marathon in which films are shown non-stop from ten in the morning till four past midnight. The

Motovun Film Festival is a small festival of “small” films, in the warmest sense of the word.

The Pula Amphitheatre is a popular and spectacular venue for concerts by well-known performers from Croatia and abroad, such as Zucchero, Sinéad O’Conner, Elton John, Norah Jones, Paco de Lucia and many others.

A popular event in Istria is the *Croatian Summer Salsa Festival*, a unique international dance festival held in Rovinj since 2005. The festival’s dance workshops attract dancers, as well as tourists, who are looking to improve their dance skills. Lasting six days, the festival seeks to promote movement, laughter, socializing and entertainment through dance-related activities (Ivnik 2009: 19). While dance workshops are part of the day programme, entertainment is the focus of the evening programme with performances by dance instructors and dancing for participants. The Croatian Summer Salsa Festival is a cultural and entertainment event that brings together salsa dancers from all over the world. It enriches Rovinj and Istria as destinations as well as the entire tourism offering, because it stands out from other large events in Istria. It should be noted that the Salsa Festival represents the inception of dance tourism in Istria and Croatia and it is an ideal opportunity for a theme holiday of dancing and entertainment in a particular Mediterranean setting. .

Rovinj hosts *Photodays*, a national photography festival that brings together the best photographers from Croatia and Europe. The town also organizes the popular *Rovinj Night*, a traditional festivity, held for over two decades. Through this festivity, tourist workers bid farewell to the tourist season and thank their guests and visitors for spending time in the town of St. Euphemia. A spectacular fireworks display, one of the most beautiful and oldest on the Mediterranean coast, is the trademark of Rovinj Night. This experience is made complete by well-known Croatian and world performers.

Legendfest is a festival of Istrian folk tales, legends and myths. It is held in the medieval streets of the little town of Pićan, in which the performances of many theatrical groups and associations reveal the world of Istrian literature and folk tales. During the festivities, Pićan is decorated with old-fashion Istrian fabrics, while witches, giants, ghosts, pirates and other legendary heroes roam its streets.

There are also many events of local character in Istria, the most interesting of which are:

- *Oleum Olivarum*, an olive oil festival held in April in Krasica
- *The Golden Asparagus*, an international culinary competition held in March in Buje

- *Smrčkijada*, a presentation of morel mushrooms held in April in Umag
- *The Golden Sole*, a culinary event organized in November by the towns of Umag, Novigrad, Savudrija, Buje and Brtonigla
- *Vinistra*, an exhibition of wine and wine-making equipment held in April in Poreč
- *Istra Terra Magica Bike*, a mountain bike race held in May in Poreč
- *Giostra*, a historical festival held in September in Poreč
- *Istra MTB Tartufi Tour – Parenzana Cannondale*, a mountain bike race held in September in Poreč
- *Olive Oil Exhibition*, a gastronomic event held in December in Tar
- *Istrian Spring*, a bike race for youngsters held in March in Vrsar
- *Casanova Fest*, a love and erotic festival held in June in Vrsar
- *Montraker Live Music Festival*, a jazz festival held in July in Vrsar
- *BaRoMus*, a festival of Baroque music held in July in Rovinj
- *The Lighted Batana Boat Parade*, held in September in Rovinj
- *Days of Antiquity*, a historical attraction held in May in Pula
- *Pula Superiorum*, an antiquity festival held in June in Pula
- *Days of Young Olive Oil*, a gastronomic event held in November in Vodnjan
- *Vampire Nights*, a horror-literature evening held in January in Kringa
- *Days of Honey*, an international sales exhibition of bee-keeping equipment held in February in Pazin
- *Subotina- the old-fashioned way*, an old-time folk festivity held in September in Buzet
- *Tuberfest*, a white truffle fair held in October in Livade
- *International Pršut Fair ISAP* held in October in Tinjan.

Equestrian tourism has a tradition in Istria's offering. Tourists can enjoy horseback riding at several locations along the coast and in the interior. Highly-trained horses are also available for riding. Istria has eight equestrian centres and ranches: *Barba Tone's Ranch* in Manjadvorci near Barbana; three in Medulin – *Semy's Ranch*, the Equestrian Club *Beautiful* and the *Libora Team*; two in Umag – the *Goli Vrh Ranch* and the Equestrian Centre *Juricanija*; and two equestrian clubs in Buzet, *Ćicarija* and *Castelium*. Somewhat less-known centres are located in *Poreč* and in *Vrsar*.

Increasingly, as tourists want to spend more time in the clean outdoors, many of them choose to take shorter or longer horse riding expeditions led by experienced guides.

Cave tourism in Istria has, in recent years, been gaining in popularity, and it complements Istria's tourism offering in terms of quality.

Cave enthusiasts can choose from over 1,500 known pits and caves to explore. Each year at least 10 new caves are discovered, because Istria is teeming with caves and pits as a result of its karst terrain. In addition to their natural beauty, the caves are also rich in cave flora and fauna, (fish, frogs, dormice, small crabs and bats).

At present, the *Baredina Pit* is the only show cave and the only existing geomorphological nature monument in Istria that has been valorised in tourism purposes. The cave is 132 metres deep and has five chambers and a siphon lake. It is richly decorated with unusually shaped stalactites and stalagmites. Its subterranean cave life is also very interesting. Alongside the Proteus (an endemic species that lives only in karst), we can find miniature colourless crabs and insects.

The Pazin Pit, one of the best examples of the evolution of karst morphology in Istria, gained world fame after Jules Verne described it in his novel "Mathias Sandorf".

Rašpor, Istria's deepest pit (361 meters deep), is located in the Čičarija range, a separate karst region.

Adventure tourism (free climbing, paragliding, hot-air ballooning...) is the most recent form of alternative tourism within Istria's tourist offering. It gains more and more supporters from year to year because tourists are constantly looking for new ways to actively participate in sports. For this reason, various extreme sports are gaining in popularity throughout the world. In Istria, this calls for improvements in organizing adventure tourism, and for creating better conditions for undertaking these extreme sports for which natural prerequisites already exist.

In Istria *paragliders* have a choice of five maintained take-off sites: Kaštelir, suitable for beginners; Brgud on Mount Učka; Lanišće; Žbevnica and the peak of Mount Učka; and Raspadalica near Buzet, at present the best known and best maintained take-off site in Istria.

Učka Nature Park is an excellent location for other attractive sports, such as free climbing the cliffs of Vela Draga, paragliding, and riding along eight bike routes, from the easiest to the most challenging, totalling 180 kilometres. The Nature Park also offers Istria's first mountain climbing map.

There are eleven maintained climbing sites in Istria for free climbing up short cliffs 10 – 30 metres in height. The climbing sites are

suitable to both beginners and top-class athletes and provide climbing guides, equipment and transport.

Theme tourism in Istria is still in its early stage. The first step on the road to theme tourism was the opening of Dinopark in 2009 in Funtana near Vrsar.

Dinopark Funtana is Istria's first theme and amusement park. The park focuses on dinosaurs because Istria is the only region in which dinosaur remains have been found. The park features life-sized replicas of dinosaurs whose roars sound so real they are as awe-inspiring as they were when these giants walked the Earth. The park's main theme is a journey into the distant past to see these imposing predators that once ruled the Earth. Dinosaurs of all types, some huge and intimidating, some amusing and clownish, move their arms, legs, eyes, heads and tails and, together with the roars and sounds they make, take visitors on a visual and acoustic journey more than a hundred million years into the past. A stroll along the winding path past these imposing giants is an experience and adventure for all nature lovers.

Another praise-worthy attempt at theme tourism is the attractive and permanent *exhibition of antique tractors* close to Baredina Pit, at Novi Vas near Poreč.

A third attempt was the opening of the *Vampire Museum* in Kringa. This unusual museum is dedicated to the Istrian vampire Jure Grando. The external appearance of the museum and the original design of its entrance lure passers-by into its darkened labyrinth to discover the spine-chilling story of Jure Grando and his wife, Ivana. Costumed mannequins, coffins, hawthorn stakes and hammers, together with paintings and sculpture, depict the mysterious vampire legends. The museum also has a small souvenir shop with typical "vampire" souvenirs.

Golf tourism is another form of special-interest tourism that is gradually being developed in Istria to help prolong and extend the tourist season, and to enhance the quality of Istria's entire tourism offering. A project has been designed for the construction of golf courses (golf centres) at 14 locations throughout Istria. Until recently, the best known was the 18-hole golf course in Brijuni National Park. The course is available to all golfers, ranging from recreational to skilled players, and it provides most of the services that today's golfers require. Golf tournaments are frequently organized in Brijuni National Park, and the golf course is marketed as one of the best and, in terms of landscape, most beautiful golf courses. The island's mild climate makes playing golf possible all year round.

The first professional championship 18-hole golf course (which has replaced the Brijuni golf course in popularity) was built at Crveni

Vrh near Savudrija and Umag (Škopac 2009: 52). The course is part of the Kempinski Adriatic Hotel complex. Covering 80 hectares, the golf club is the outcome of the strategy to promote tourism in Istria and Croatia. The golf course covers 19 hectares and is open to the public, that is, golfers do not necessarily have to be guests of Kempinski Adriatic Hotel to play. There is also a Golf Academy providing golf lessons. The golf course was designed by the Austrian architect Diethard Fahrenleitner, the author of numerous golf projects in Austria and Italy (Škopac 2009: 52). The German Business Master, the largest German golf tournament, has already been held there. The plan is to organize some 30 tournaments throughout the year, beginning as early as January. For the most part, the tournaments would be linked to tourist arrivals.

Bird-watching tourism in Istria is still in its early stages. Nevertheless, two well-known locations can be found within the bird-watching tourism offering.

One location is Učka Nature Park, in which over 180 different species of birds can be seen, birds that make Učka their temporary or permanent home. The park is the habitat of some of the most threatened bird species such as the golden eagle, the ortolan bunting and bonelli's warbler. In collaboration with Slovenia, Učka Nature Park has applied for EU funding for a bird monitoring project.

The second location is Palud Swamp near Rovinj, which has been declared a Special Ornithological Reserve. The Palud Swamp is the only swamp remaining of many that were dried out and destroyed throughout most of Istria. Today, it is home to numerous swamp species, the most interesting being the purple heron, the Bohemian waxwing and the great reed warbler. The arrival of 206 migrating bird species has been recorded in the Palud region.

Ecotourism is still in its infancy. Ecotourism can be defined as "tourism that focuses on enabling tourists to spend time in a natural and unpolluted environment, in particular, in areas that enjoy a certain degree of environmental protection (national parks). Istria County boasts 30 protected nature areas that fall into six categories of protection.

Učka Nature Park is the centre of ecotourism in Istria. It is an outstanding nature park whose activities are supported by the EU through its accession funds. Učka received its status as a nature park in 1999. The park is a transitory area for a great number of birds. It has been verified that more than 180 bird species choose to make Učka their temporary or permanent base. (Pažanin 2009: 76). In recent years, Učka Nature Park has enriched its offering and today has a souvenir shop

offering indigenous products. Telescopes, which have been placed on the summit, afford a view that reaches as far as Venice on a clear day. Another wood cabin serving as an Info Point and souvenir shop have been opened. Plans for the future include the opening of a visitor centre in the building of a former poultry farm. The centre would provide educational as well as hospitality services and facilities.

The first “classroom in Nature” was opened in the park and has been visited by more than 2,000 children. Educational programmes promoting ecotourism have been developed, special work books and text books designed and printed together with a flora mapping manual and a game for children called *Učkalica*. Four instructional trails through nature have already been designed and several more are planned.

Učka Nature Park was the first institution in the County to receive EUR 126,000 in EU funding for its Karst Associated Management Project. One of the outcomes of this project is the Učka Fair presenting the region’s cultural heritage and visited by some 10,000 visitors each year (Pažanin 2009: 77).

The largest capital project planned for Učka Nature Park is the Visitor Centre. Upon the issuance of all building permits required, documents will be prepared for an application to EU funding programmes.

The Motovun Forest (habitat of the well-known and recognized truffle) and the Kontija Forest are part of a special Istrian botanical and forest vegetation reserve. Special marine reserves encompass the sea and marine life of the Lim Channel. Istria has six forest parks (Zlatni Rt, Pijana, Skaraba, Busoler, the Kasteja Peninsula, and Soline Hill near Vinkuran) and nine protected landscapes (the area around the Istria Thermal Springs; Lim Channel; Pazin Pit; the islands and coastal area; the Gračišće-Pičan Area; the area between Labin, Rabac and Prtlog Cove; Cape Kamenjak; and the Učka area). One of the natural features that attract ecotourists to Istria is Palud Swamp at which the arrival of 206 species of migrating birds has been recorded.

Conclusion

The natural and cultural sights of the Istria region are based on unique Mediterranean natural attractions in combination with rich cultural heritage, a Mediterranean climate and the possibility of developing communication links that would provide Istria with a comparative advantage relative to competition in the Mediterranean.

In recent years, seeking to keep abreast of the growing trend in creating and designing special-interest tourism offerings, Istria has begun to develop various forms of special-interest tourism, in particular,

agritourism; sports, recreational and healthcare tourism; and food and wine tourism, in an effort to prolong the tourist season. Demand trends, however, call for an even faster development of special-interest tourism forms.

The various types of special-interest tourism that have been developed up to date or are still in their early stages contribute to increasing the occupancy rate of accommodation facilities in the off season and, in a lesser extent, to changing the structure of the mass tourism offering.

Because of the vicinity of outbound tourism markets, the region's geo-traffic position, exceptionally rich cultural and historical heritage, specific architecture, many attractions and fairly well preserved environment, Istria has great potential to enrich its sun-and-sea tourism concept with new services and facilities and become a destination possessing the preconditions needed to expand its market. Whether it will succeed in doing so depends on the well-organized and effective cooperation of all providers in the destination's tourism system.

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