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From Activities to Satisfaction: Analysing Cruise Tourism and Tourist Experiences in Rijeka, Croatia

Abstract

Croatia is becoming a significant cruise destination. The impressive Adriatic coast, historic towns as well as cultural attractions make Croatia a very attractive destination for cruise tourists. Ports such as Dubrovnik, Split, and Zadar are popular cruise stops that have registered an increase in the number of tourist arrivals. Cruise tourism not only enriches passengers' experiences but also helps local economies, i.e., it stimulates tourism development as well as other related industries. In this regard, significant positioning of the city of Rijeka on the cruise market has started recently.

The paper analyses the level of development of cruise tourism in Croatia. The authors give an overview of the current situation with special emphasis on the city of Rijeka. The main focus of the research are the activities of cruise passengers in Rijeka. The analysis includes passenger satisfaction as well as identification of their needs and expectations. The questionnaire results show that, despite some aspects that need to be improved, the passengers were mostly satisfied with Rijeka as a cruise destination.

The aim of this research is to show that Rijeka has the potential for further development on the cruise market. A more specific goal is to indicate the importance of improving services and increasing the attractiveness of Rijeka as a cruise destination.

Keywords: cruise, Rijeka as the cruise destination, passenger activities and satisfaction

1. Introduction

Cruise tourism represents a specialised form of travel and leisure [21]. This type of tourism includes passenger transport by ship according to a predetermined schedule and itinerary. Passengers are offered accommodation, food and beverages, as well as a wide range of entertainment, sports and other activities and services focused on relaxation, entertainment and recreation. The latest trend of mega-ships (or mega-liners), carrying over 6000 passengers and crew, with shopping malls, several restaurants, theatres and various sport facilities, may tempt a casual observer to synonymise “cruise tourism” with “floating resorts” [17]. The advantage of cruise tourism is the possibility of seeing more than one city or one country on a trip, and not feeling annoyed because of organization of hotel, transportation for every each of destination [3].

Tourists expect to have diverse and unique experiences while travelling that will enrich them and that they will remember for an extended period [14]. Cruise tourism enables the passengers to explore different destinations while enjoying the comfort and luxury of ship facilities.

The tourism phenomenon of cruises on passenger ships has transformed into a significant socio-economic activity, which has a deep impact on the global tourist industry. This form of tourism not only contributes to the economic development of visited destinations but also creates numerous business opportunities and jobs in various sectors. The tourism product offered on ships and to tourists on cruises consists of a wide range of services including numerous economic and non-economic subjects (ship agencies, tourist agencies, port operations, ship supplies, etc.) [2, 10]. The growth rate of global cruise tourism has consistently increased over the recent years by as high as 20.5% [7]. The cruise industry has achieved a growth of 2,600% since 1970 [14].

Apart from economic benefits, cruises have a significant social impact. They stimulate cultural exchange and enable passengers to experience new cultures and customs. They often include humanitarian initiatives and environmental projects that contribute to the protection of the environment and sustainable development [20]. Furthermore, the cruise industry is investing increasingly in innovations and sustainable technologies to reduce its environmental footprint. Finally, cruises on passenger ships represent a complex and important activity that integrates tourism, economy and social responsibility, continuing to grow and adapt to contemporary challenges and passengers' needs. Data show a significant level of cruising popularity; 12% of cruise travellers cruise twice a year, and 10% of cruise travellers take three to five cruises a year [4].

Croatia is becoming a popular cruise destination thanks to its outstanding combination of natural beauty and cultural heritage. Following popular destinations like Dubrovnik, Split and Zadar, Rijeka is also registering a growth in the number of cruise ship arrivals and an increase in the number of tourists.

The paper is structurally divided into five main parts. Following the introduction, the second part analyses cruise tourism in Croatia. Natural resources are the basis for

the development of cruise tourism, and they are particularly emphasised. In the third part of the paper, special attention is given to the positioning of the city of Rijeka on the cruise market. The research on the cruise passengers' activities in Rijeka is presented in the fourth part of the paper. The methodology is outlined and the research results are analysed. The final, fifth part, consists of the final remarks.

2. The analysis of cruise destinations in Croatia

The composition, richness and attractiveness of Croatia's natural resources place it ahead of many European tourist destinations [1]. The major advantage of cruise tourism in Croatia is its geographic position on the Adriatic Sea, which makes it easily accessible for cruise ships in the Mediterranean and attracts a continuous number of cruise passengers. The proximity to source markets and good traffic connections further enhance Croatia's attractiveness. Croatia offers a mild climate, environmental preservation, beautiful beaches, intact islands and picturesque towns like Dubrovnik and Split. National parks such as Mljet and Brijuni, as well as nature parks such as Kornati Islands, Telašćica and Lastovo Nature Park additionally attract cruise tourists. In addition to its natural beauty, Croatia prides itself on rich historical and cultural heritage [16] including UNESCO World Heritage Sites such as the Old City of Dubrovnik and Diocletian's Palace in Split, which enhance tourist experience. The safety of stay and navigation, and a long maritime tradition are also significant advantages Croatia offers.

Croatian cruise tourism is an increasingly important component of the economy; however, a large amount of work is still required on its development and attracting new and current guests [12]. As early as 2007, the Sustainable Development Study of Cruise Tourism in Croatia indicated that the overall offer of Croatian destinations for international cruises combines ports suitable for accommodating cruise ships, destinations with ports that must be attractive enough for tourists to visit, and other services at these destinations, with excursions and organized city tours being the most important for cruise organizers and passengers [8].

Today, around twenty Croatian ports open to public traffic are involved in international cruise tourism. According to data available from the Croatian Bureau of Statistics, in 2023, 85 foreign cruise ships entered Croatian seaports, making a total of 646 cruises. These ships accommodated a total of 869,000 passengers. The number of cruises realized in coastal counties is graphically represented in Figure 1.

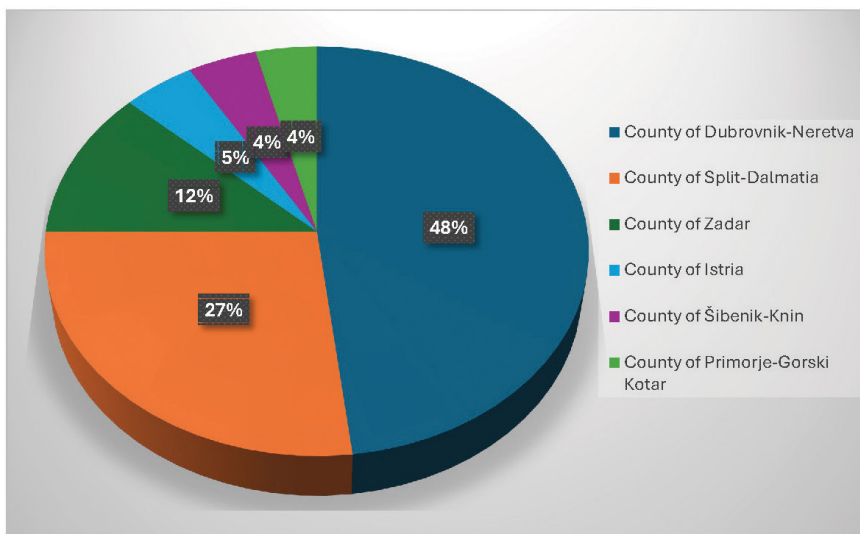


Figure 1. Number of cruises realized in coastal counties in 2023.

Source: Authors according to [5]

Figure 2 provides a graphical representation of the most visited seaports in Croatia over the past two years.

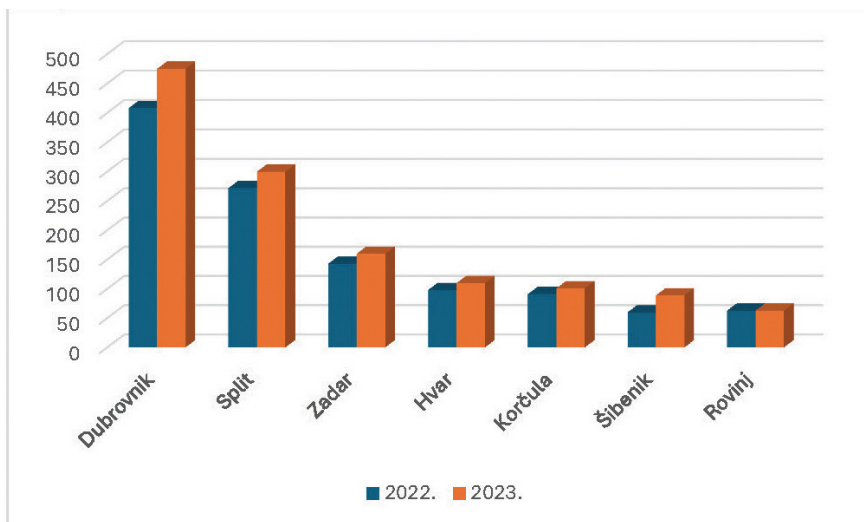


Figure 2. The most visited seaports from 2022 to 2023.Ž

Source: Authors according to [5]

Cruise mooring plans and schedules are developed up to three years in advance. This long-term approach allows ports to better position themselves on the cruise tourism market, which can significantly increase their traffic and attractiveness. To successfully achieve this goal, the implementation of effective tourism promotional activities is crucial, including marketing campaigns, participation in trade fairs and the organization of promotional events. Furthermore, close cooperation with tour operators and agencies specialised in cruise tourism is very important, as they have a crucial role in defining new cruise destinations. It can be very beneficial for the port to actively participate in this process to ensure visibility and attract a greater number of ships and tourists. Establishing strong relationships with key stakeholders in the cruise industry, as well as monitoring market trends and needs, can help to adapt the offer and optimise port capacity, which can result in better utilisation of the existing resources and better passenger satisfaction.

3. Port of Rijeka as a cruise destination

Rijeka, situated on the Croatian Adriatic coast, is one of the most important port cities in the region and the third largest city in Croatia. It has an exceptional economic and cultural importance and stands out as the centre of trade and maritime traffic. The town prides itself on the rich maritime heritage that goes centuries back, and that makes it a vital transport hub connecting Croatia to the wider European region. The port of Rijeka, known for its transit role, is of crucial importance for the surrounding countries. It allows a continuous flow of goods and services and is an important element in the European logistics network.

In addition to its economic role, Rijeka is also a cultural centre rich in history and a dynamic cultural scene [19]. It was the European Capital of Culture in 2020, which has additionally strengthened its importance in the European cultural landscape. The city of Rijeka in Croatia has recently been included on the cruise map [9].

The study on the possibilities of Rijeka's development as a tourist destination (with a focus on cruise tourism) has produced strategic guidelines to significantly enhance Rijeka's position on the cruise market (Figure 3).

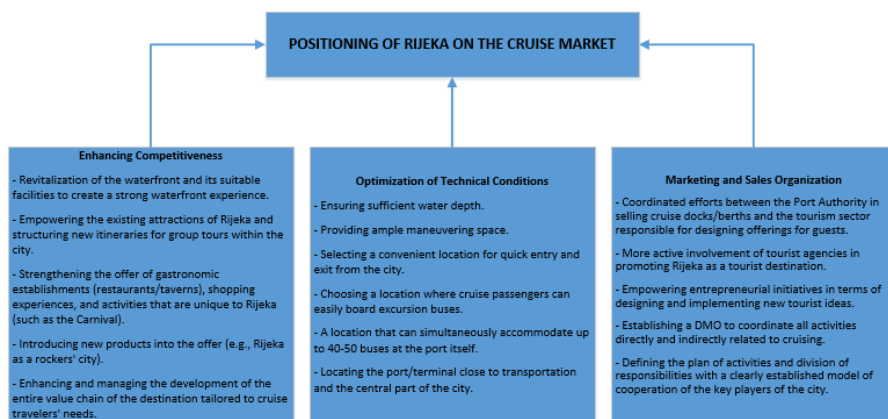


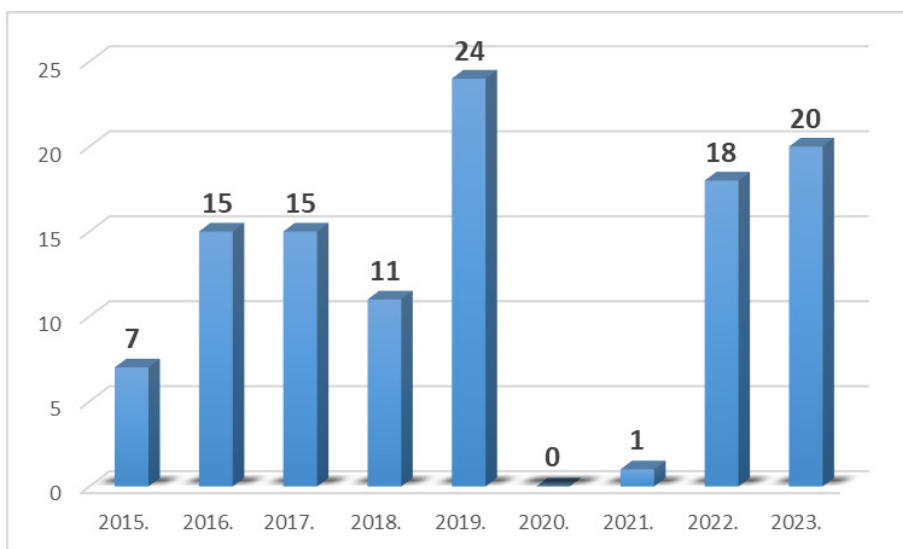
Figure 3. Strategic guidelines for positioning Rijeka as a cruise destination
Source: Authors according to [6]

Since 2012, cruise tourism has been developing more intensively in Rijeka, which presents a new challenge for the city. It should be mentioned that Rijeka does not have the appropriate terminal with accompanying infrastructure to accommodate cruise ships. However, cruise ship mooring is enabled at two locations, within the container terminal and at the passenger terminal in the city centre. Rijeka is visited by a few cruise ships each season; however, the number is slowly growing every year [11].

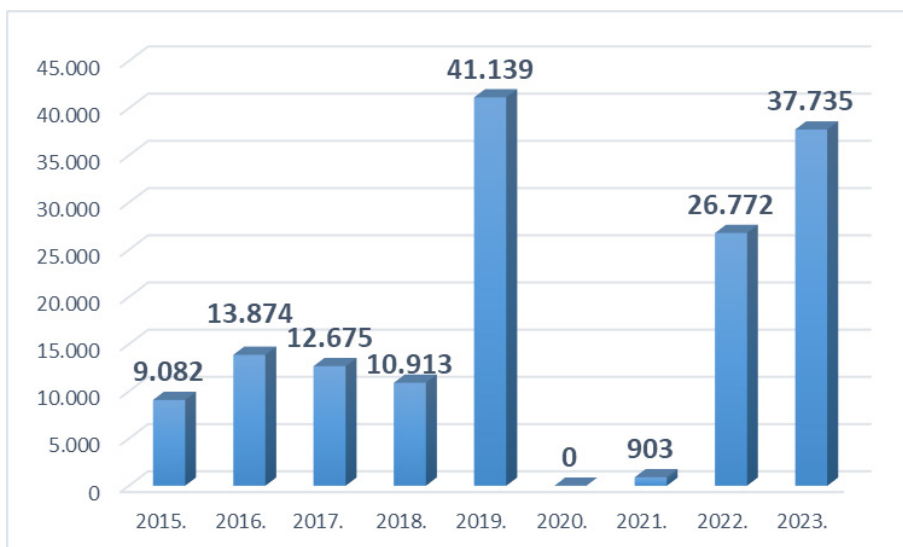
After 2015, when Rijeka first registered the arrivals of two cruise companies, Crystal Cruises and Thompson Cruises, with the ships *Crystal Serenity* (three calls) and *Thompson Majesty* (four calls), the town became recognized as a new tourist destination. In the following years, an increasing number of cruise lines recognized Rijeka's tourism potential, including it in their itineraries.

Apart from economic benefits, the growth of cruise tourism has contributed to the promotion of Rijeka as an attractive destination on the Adriatic. The town has seized the opportunity to show its rich historical, cultural and natural heritage. Therefore, it has enhanced its reputation and attractiveness among global passengers.

The number of cruise ship arrivals in Rijeka from 2015 to 2023 is graphically represented in Figure 4, whereas the number of passengers for the same period is presented in Figure 5.



*Figure 4. Number of cruise ship arrivals in Rijeka from 2015 to 2023.
Source: Authors according to [18]*



*Figure 5. Number of passengers arriving in Rijeka on cruise ships
from 2015 to 2023.
Source: Authors according to [18]*

It is evident from the chart that the highest number of cruise ships and cruise passengers arrived in Rijeka in 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic stopped the growth of cruise ship arrivals in 2020. In 2020, there were 35 cruise ship arrivals scheduled, with a total of 60,462 passengers and 25,589 crew members. However, since 2022, a recovery has been noticed.

The Port of Rijeka Authority has been keeping statistics for small tourist ships since 2007. The statistics are mostly about traditional tourist sailing ships and passengers departing from the port of Rijeka on seven-day cruises, primarily in the northern Adriatic region. The number of arrivals and the number of passengers are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Small ship cruises from 2007 to 2022.

Year	Number of arrivals	Number of passengers
2007	199	8,120
2008	230	7,066
2009	231	7,250
2010	219	6,584
2011	212	7,560
2012	216	7,781
2013	220	7,124
2014	247	9,026
2015	222	7,971
2016	281	9,942
2017	263	10,583
2018	298	12,188
2019	345	12,759
2020	149	4,402
2021	227	9,093
2022	320	14,585
2023	286	12,471

Source: Authors according to [18]

It can be noticed that the traffic of small tourist ships has risen with the exception of the pandemic year. Although traffic existed during the pandemic year, its volume was

significantly reduced. The highest number of arrivals was recorded in 2022. Comparing the number of tourist ship arrivals in 2007 with 2022, there is an increase of 60.8%. The number of passengers in the same period grew by 79.6%.

According to estimates, 30 cruise ships with 43,000 passengers should visit Rijeka in 2024. As far as small tourist cruise ships are concerned, it is estimated that their numbers will be greater than in the previous years, i.e., 300 small tourist cruise ships with 13,000 passengers are expected in 2024.

Based on all the above, it can be concluded that Rijeka, as a cruise destination, has the potential for further development. However, its more extensive positioning on the cruise market can only be expected in the future.

4. Activities of cruise passengers at the destination

An overview of the research on the activities and satisfaction of cruise passengers in Rijeka is given in the following text.

4.1 Research methodology

The research methodology consists of surveying the cruise passengers who visited the port of Rijeka in 2023 using a questionnaire. A total of 37,735 passengers arrived at the port of Rijeka out of which 218 were surveyed.

The main content of the research included the passengers' sociodemographic profile, their activities at the destination, destination satisfaction, and excursions outside the destination, as well as suggestions for the improvement of the quality of services.

Responses to satisfaction were rated using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 to 5 (1 – very satisfied, 2 – moderately satisfied, 3 – dissatisfied, 4 – very dissatisfied, 5 – I don't know).

4.2 Research results

The research results are divided into three interrelated parts. The first part focuses on the passengers' sociodemographic profile. The second part refers to identifying the types of activities undertaken by passengers at the destination, destination satisfaction, and excursions outside the destination. The third part focuses on suggestions for the improvement of services at the destination. The final results and remarks should help in directing the activities, capacities and resources towards the development of the cruise business in Rijeka.

According to the country of origin, the majority of the respondents were from the United Kingdom. The other respondents were from the USA, Austria, France, Germany, Sweden, Belgium, Switzerland, Turkey, the Netherlands, Ireland, Spain, Brazil, Finland, Australia, Argentina, Denmark, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Serbia, Taiwan,

the Philippines, Slovenia, Israel, Italy, Estonia, Greece, Island, Canada, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Hungary, Mexico, North Macedonia, the United Arab Emirates, Taiwan, and Ukraine. The respondent structure was mainly consistent. However, most of them were male, accounting for 54%. Furthermore, 43 of the respondents were under 30 years old representing 20% of the total. There were 77 respondents aged 30 to 50 years, i.e., 35% of the total, whereas 98 were more than 50 years old (45%).

The activities at the destination have a crucial role in creating the tourist experience. Data on the places visited by cruise tourists at the destination are graphically represented in Figure 6.

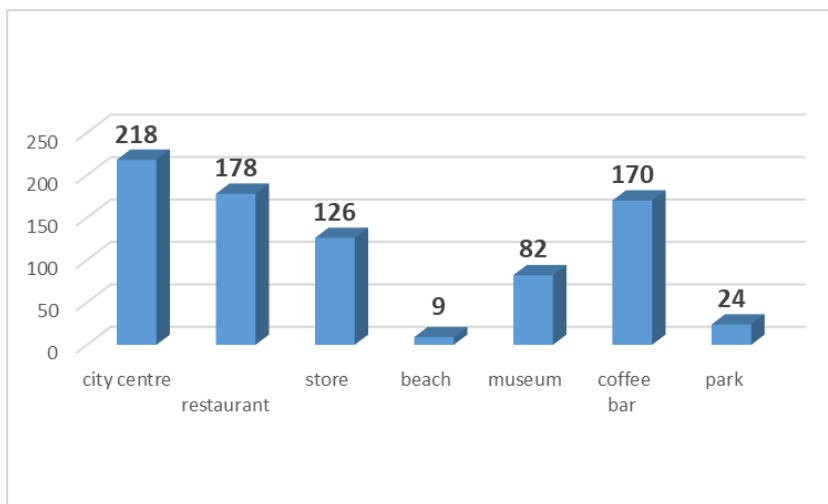


Figure 6. Activities at the destination.

The analysis of the most visited destination sites reveals that most respondents stay in the city centre. This is expected, given that the city centre is located in the immediate vicinity of the disembarkation point, making it accessible and attractive for short visits.

Alongside the city centre, many respondents frequented restaurants, suggesting a keen interest in the local gastronomic scene. Next are the shops, where visitors likely bought souvenirs or other items typical of the destination. Tourist visits to coffee shops were high also, suggesting a need for relaxing breaks during sightseeing.

Museums rank among the most frequented destinations, reflecting the interest of certain travellers in cultural and historical sites. Respondents frequented parks with pleasant walking and relaxation areas, as well as beaches, which are appealing during warmer months. The results suggest that visitors prefer a variety of experiences, including sightseeing, shopping, relaxation, and culinary enjoyment, with accessibility and proximity to the attractions influencing their choices.

Furthermore, destination satisfaction was also analysed (Figure 7).

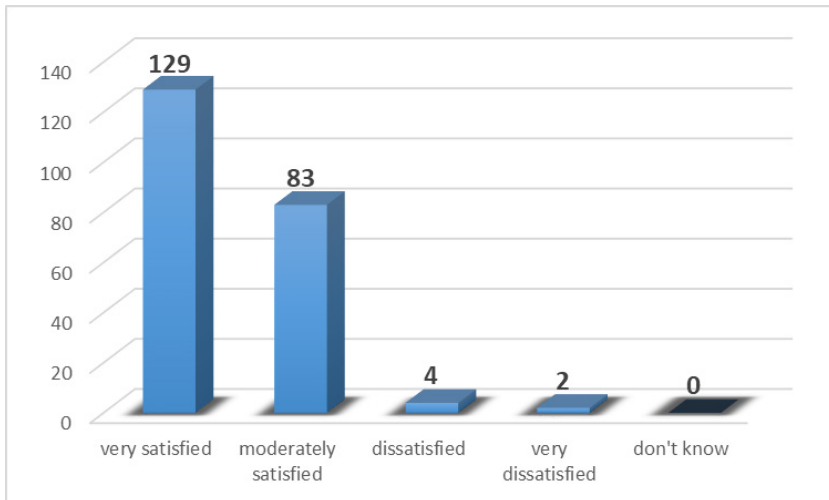


Figure 7. Destination satisfaction.

The results of the destination satisfaction analysis show that most respondents had a positive experience during their stay in Rijeka. Specifically, 59% of respondents showed a very high level of satisfaction, demonstrating that the destination fulfilled their expectations. This notable percentage shows that Rijeka leaves a strong positive impression on most of its visitors, confirming its potential as a cruise destination.

An additional 38% of respondents reported moderate satisfaction, suggesting potential for improvement. These visitors likely did not have a negative experience. Further investigation into the causes of moderate customer ratings is necessary to identify key areas for improvement and increase satisfaction.

On the other hand, 2% of respondents were dissatisfied, while 1% of respondents expressed significant dissatisfaction with the destination. While this represents a smaller percentage, analysing the factors contributing to their dissatisfaction is crucial. Recognizing their dissatisfaction can help enhance tourist experience and prevent similar issues in the future.

Overall, visitor satisfaction continues to be elevated; however, to achieve an increase in the number of highly satisfied tourists, additional enhancements are necessary. Efforts should focus on improving the quality of stay for moderately satisfied visitors and resolving issues resulting in negative feedback, thus reinforcing Rijeka's reputation as an attractive cruise destination.

Although the percentage of passengers going on excursions and guided tours varies from destination to destination, some sources suggest that 50 to 80% of passengers go on excursions in the destination [13]. There were 44 respondents who visited places outside the city centre. Satisfaction with this type of visit outside the city centre is shown in Figure 8.

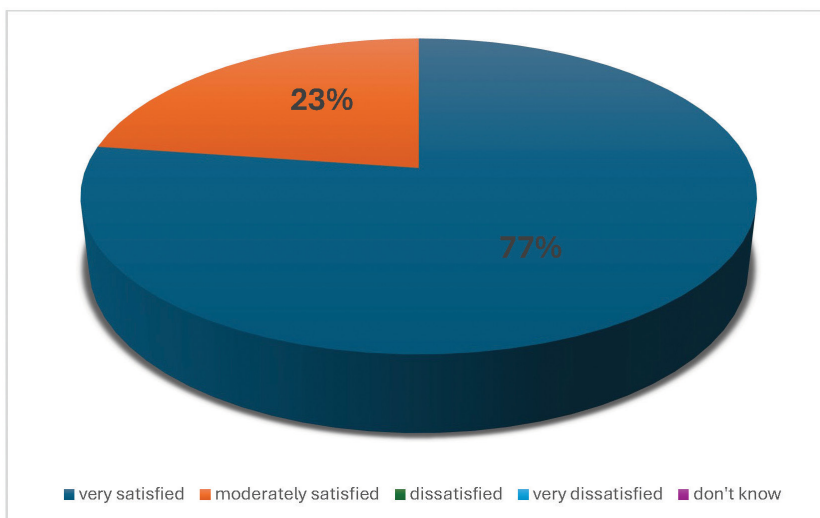


Figure 8. Satisfaction with the visit outside the city centre.

The survey results show high satisfaction among respondents who took part in tours outside the city centre. Specifically, 34 respondents, or 77%, expressed very high satisfaction with this type of tour, while the remaining 10 respondents (23%) reported being moderately satisfied.

These findings suggest visitors prize the experience of exploring locations outside the urban centre. A significant percentage of very satisfied respondents implies that the excursion content, attractions and organisation met their expectations. Factors such as natural beauty, cultural and historical landmarks, an authentic atmosphere, and fewer crowds may have contributed to their positive impressions.

While no respondents reported dissatisfaction, a notable number (23%) rated the tour as moderately satisfactory. This suggests areas for improvement, such as better organisation, more content, or a more targeted approach to visitor interests.

Overall, the results show a positive visitor response to excursions outside the city centre, signifying potential for the enhancement and expansion of tourism services in these locations.

To understand visitor needs and expectations, respondents suggested improvements to tourism offerings and infrastructure. The suggestions address several aspects of tourist experience, focusing on better information management, infrastructure upgrades and improved content accessibility.

A frequent suggestion of free tourist guides points to a need for improved information on the destination's cultural and historical attractions. Visitors would have a better experience with free guides providing supplemental information and context on the sites they visit.

Respondents' requests for souvenir stands show a strong interest in purchasing authentic souvenirs. Improved souvenir offerings can help promote local artisans and their cultural heritage.

Comfort during transit greatly influences tourist satisfaction. In response, many participants suggested that better air conditioning on buses would enhance the overall travel experience, particularly during hot weather.

Besides transport infrastructure, respondents expressed a desire for more greenery in the port, which could improve the visual impression and overall comfort of staying in the area. Incorporating green spaces and thoughtful urban planning has the potential to establish a more inviting environment for tourists arriving from cruise ships.

Besides environmental benefits, the report stressed the need for a larger port with enhanced facilities. This suggests that visitors perceive the port as a key place of arrival and gathering and expect additional facilities, such as catering facilities, shops or cultural and entertainment activities, to make their stay more pleasant and fulfilling.

The concluding remarks of the respondents underscored the imperative of delivering high-quality information, including clearer signage, available information about local attractions and improved guidance for visitors. Improving information points, digital guides or interactive maps could increase visitor satisfaction and make finding their way around easier.

The suggestions herein serve as valuable guidelines for the continued advancement of tourism products and services, allowing relevant stakeholders to optimise their offerings to meet visitors' expectations.

The findings of this research lay the groundwork for future analysis and development of tourism opportunities in Rijeka, especially within the cruise tourism sector. Further research should concentrate on a more detailed review of the activities of cruise passengers, including their preferences, behavioural patterns, and the ways they spend their time at the destination.

Special emphasis should be placed on the level of satisfaction of passengers with Rijeka as a destination, as well as their experiences during excursions outside the city itself. The research could include factors such as the quality of tourist infrastructure, availability of information, diversity of offerings, and the overall accessibility of landmarks and attractions.

Additionally, the respondents' suggestions for enhancing services can serve as concrete guidelines for improving the offerings. Implementing recommendations, such as providing better information for tourists, improving port infrastructure, expanding activities, and ensuring better quality transportation can boost the attractiveness of Rijeka as a cruise destination.

In future research, it would be beneficial to analyse the economic impact of cruise tourism, specifying how cruise ships affect the local economy, including revenues from the hospitality industry, trade and cultural institutions. The environmental aspect of cruise tourism should also be considered, exploring sustainable development methods that will provide long-term benefits for the city and its residents.

Gathered data enables the creation of targeted strategies to improve visitor satisfaction, drive innovative tourism product development, and solidify Rijeka's competitive edge in the Mediterranean cruise market. A systematic approach to research and the implementation of suggested improvements will contribute to the long-term development of Rijeka as an attractive and recognisable destination for cruise passengers.

5. Conclusion

Cruise tourism is becoming more and more important for Croatia. Since 2015, Rijeka has successfully positioned itself on the cruise tourism map. However, there is still great potential for further development. Increasing Rijeka's attractiveness, including the development of new tourist attractions and the improvement of the existing ones, along with strategically organized marketing activities, would certainly enhance Rijeka's position on the cruise tourism market. Apart from large cruise ships, Rijeka has been developing cruise offer on small cruise ships. Therefore, directing the activities, capacities and resources can surely contribute to the development of the cruise business in Rijeka.

As a part of the research, a questionnaire was conducted to find out about the activities of cruise passengers arriving in Rijeka. The questionnaire included several key aspects such as activities undertaken by passengers at the destination, destination satisfaction, and excursions outside the destination. The aim was to gather data that could enable the understanding of the current challenges and opportunities for improving cruise passengers' experiences.

Apart from evaluating the current situation, respondents had the opportunity to provide suggestions for improving the services. These suggestions are of extreme importance as they offer insight into the perspective of the service users. The results provided a range of concrete proposals and suggestions that could serve as guidelines for improving the quality of services. These could have a direct impact on passengers' satisfaction and further increase Rijeka's attractiveness as a cruise destination. Finally, continuous monitoring of passengers' satisfaction, along with regular research and adjustments, will ensure the long-term sustainability and growth of cruise tourism in Rijeka.

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