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THE CONTRIBUTION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE TO CULTURAL TOURISM IN ISTRIA AND KVARNER: THE STARTING COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE

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Starting from the outset is the crucial and most important step in the research of cultural resources, especially when their role and importance in cultural tourism need to be determined. Hence, the objectives of this paper are offering a systematic review of the basic concepts of cultural tourism in recent research, clarifying the concepts of cultural resources, heritage and cultural identities – with an emphasis on their implementation in tourism, and presenting the characteristic features of Istria and Kvarner – with the intention of gaining an insight into the contribution of cultural heritage to tourism in the analyzed destinations. Although cultural tourism has been extensively researched, this paper focuses on two specific Croatian regions, concretizing thereby their tourism results achieved so far, with the intention of determining the importance of cultural resources in the overall tourism results of the selected destinations. The findings of this paper may serve as a starting point for further research of cultural resources in the development, presentation and communication of the destination brand of the Istria and the Primorje–Gorski kotar Counties. In conclusion, this paper points out the importance of cultural resources in the two observed regions and opens space for further research – not only on heritage interpretation, but also on the preservation and sustainable use of cultural resources in the analyzed destinations.

Keywords: cultural resources; Istria; Kvarner; cultural heritage; cultural tourism.

Introduction

The main goal and motivation behind this research are twofold: first, to provide an overview of the existing studies on the contribution of cultural heritage to tourism; and secondly, to highlight the cultural value of the Croatian regions of Istria and Kvarner. Besides the main goal, this paper tends to form a starting point for further empirical research on how and in which fashion culture, cultural identities and cultural heritage influence the destination; how to properly use and interpret such resources for tourist purposes; and how to use them in the presentation, communication and branding of the destination itself. Two research questions are formulated in this paper:

RQ1: What do previous studies reveal about the contribution of cultural heritage to tourism?

RQ2: Can cultural resources contribute to the development and promotion of the tourist destinations of Istria and Kvarner?

Building on selected desk research elements of Noel B. Salazar's analytical framework of tourism imaginaries (2012), this paper seeks to examine whether cultural heritage can serve as a foundation for representing and communicating the tourism destinations of the Istria and Kvarner regions. The concept of tourism imaginaries, as developed by Noel B. Salazar (2012), refers to collectively produced and culturally shared representations that shape how destinations are perceived, experienced, and marketed. These imaginaries are not fixed, but are constantly negotiated and reinterpreted through discourse, media, and interpersonal interactions, particularly by key actors, such as tour guides, tourism professionals, and travelers themselves (Salazar, 2012). Furthermore, Salazar (2010) argues that tourism imaginaries function as "mobilizing narratives", enabling movement, both physical and ideological, by projecting idealized versions of places. These imaginaries contribute to the creation of tourism spaces by aligning global desires with local realities, often mediated through globalized interpretations. In this sense, imaginaries are essential tools for understanding how tourism practices are embedded in broader socio-cultural and political processes (Salazar, 2010; Salazar & Graburn, 2014).

Additionally, through the desk research method elements of cultural resource mapping, the aim is to identify the existing potential of the destinations. Cultural resource mapping is a participatory method used to identify, document, and analyze the tangible and intangible cultural assets of a specific community or region. It serves as a foundational tool for cultural planning,

heritage conservation, and place-based tourism development. According to Duxbury, Garrett-Petts, and MacLennan (2015), cultural mapping not only catalogs resources, but also reveals the relationships between people, places, and cultural expressions, providing a deeper understanding of community identity and cultural dynamics. Although the method encompasses a wide range of research tools (Abdullah et al., 2024), for the purposes of this study, the mapping was conducted through the existing literature and previous research, as the aim of the paper is to provide a starting point for further investigation of the tourism imaginaries of the Istria and Kvarner regions. The ways in which cultural resources are presented and interpreted can be empirically examined in future fieldwork through Salazar's analytical concepts and various methods of cultural resource mapping.

Previous research shows important role of cultural resources in tourism (Skoko, Frka-Petešić, 2023; Liang, Pan, Gu, Guan, Tsai, 2021; Jelinčić, 2010), and problematizes the commodification and commercialization of culture and its inadequate and unsustainable exploitation (Jelinčić, 2010; Valičić, 2018; Dujmović, 2019; Dabo, 2023). Therefore, in the process of understanding the relationship between culture and tourism, it is important to point out some of the key scientific results that may be a starting point for further research.

Cultural tourism is a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions/products in a tourism destination. These attractions/products relate to a set of distinctive material, intellectual, spiritual and emotional features of a society that encompasses arts and architecture, historical and cultural heritage, culinary heritage, literature, music, creative industries and the living cultures with their lifestyles, value systems, beliefs and traditions (UN Tourism General Assembly, 22nd session, 2017). Cultural tourism has recently been re-affirmed by the UNWTO as a major element of international tourism consumption, accounting for 39% of tourist arrivals. It is important to highlight that these trips are secondarily motivated by culture, whereas according to the same study, approximately 3–4% of tourist arrivals are primarily motivated by cultural experiences. This suggests that cultural tourism remains a niche segment, yet one with strong growth potential. As culture often serves as a secondary motivation, enhancing the visibility and integration of cultural resources into broader tourism offerings might considerably enrich visitors' experiences and extend their engagement with local heritage. The amount of research in the field of cultural tourism has also grown rapidly, particularly in areas such as cultural consumption, cultural

motivations, heritage conservation, the economics of cultural tourism, and anthropology. Major research trends include the shift from tangible to intangible heritage, more attention for locals and other minority groups and a geographical expansion in the coverage of cultural tourism research. Furthermore, research trends also reflect a few 'turns' in social science, including the mobilities turn, the performance turn and the creative turn. One of the biggest challenges will be to chart the rapidly changing meanings and interpretations of the term 'culture', which in turn offers significant implications for the definition of cultural tourism. The increasing application of technology in cultural tourism and the resulting overlaps between real world and virtual experiences will undoubtedly be one important area of investigation. At a much more fundamental level, however, there are significant challenges in understanding how broader social changes, such as the increasing mixing and mobility of different cultural and social groups, will impact the production and consumption of culture by tourists (Richards, 2018).

As a term, cultural tourism is used for travel that includes visiting cultural resources, regardless of whether they are tangible or intangible, and of the primary motivation too. The wealth of tangible and intangible cultural heritage of Croatia represents a resource for the development of the Croatian cultural tourism in all its forms. Cultural tourism is a generator of sustainable development, it enables places that are not exclusively touristic to become interesting for tourists, as well as for the local population, with designed strategies based on local cultural and artistic potential. Cultural tourism products, as key components of cultural tourism, contribute to the enrichment of the image of the destination, increasing consumption, length of stay and satisfaction of tourists, adding thereby to the sustainable development of the place or region where these products are consumed. Ultimately, cultural tourism gives tourism a long-term competitive advantage as one of the most important economic branches in Croatia (Demonja & Gredičak, 2014).

Croatia defined cultural tourism in its Cultural Tourism Development Strategy (2003), and in accordance with the Cultural Tourism Development Action Plan by the Institute for Tourism (2015), the key development programs are focused on the development of cultural tourism infrastructure and products, cultural tourism marketing, as well as partnerships and education for the development of cultural tourism.

The Role of Cultural Heritage in Shaping and Communicating Destination Identity

At the very beginning, when trying to define the concept of culture and identity, i.e. their interpolation and mutual influence, many authors start from different positions. They nevertheless agree that, being concepts and phenomena characterized by different influences, they cannot be defined synonymously, and ought to be observed from different perspectives (Cipek, 2004; Duda, 2006; Markus, 2011; Bauman, 2011; Ulrich, 2003; Appadurai, 1996; Barry, 2006). For example, Labus (2014) explains that cultural identity is considered a dynamic and dialectical phenomenon within several simultaneous and intersecting tendencies of the modern world at the global level – the process of globalization, modernity and postmodernity, in all their essential manifestations: spiritual, valuative, economic, aesthetic, technological, political, and others. At the same time, cultural identity is no longer defined only as a choice from what is offered, but also as a creative search with others for a new cultural identity. It is a dynamic, creative term as a bearer of temptation and freedom.

The creation and maintenance of identity always presuppose a border, the demarcation of norms and values that are within the identity from those that do not belong to it, that are outside it, claims Gvozdanović (2010). Identity presupposes alterity, a limit to what does not belong to it. Identity is not given naturally, nor does it exist forever within the same boundaries. It is, as has been said in literature in recent decades, a construct. The term “construct” should not be understood mechanically or arbitrarily, the author explains, but only as result of spiritual activity. Individual norms and values that together make up identity are also constructs, which can be demonstrated by their variability in time and space. Identity as a sum of norms and values is less subject to change, as it is tied to one social group and serves the self-awareness of that social group and the determination of its behavior in relation to other social groups. Speaking about identity, Logan and Reeves (2009) explain that heritage is a social and political construct that includes all those places, artifacts and cultural expressions inherited from the past, considering that they reflect and confirm our identity as nations, communities, families and even as individuals, and thus deserve a form of respect and protection.

Moreover, the future of intangible cultural heritage in the context of tourism will undoubtedly come down to how much economic benefit the local community gets from protecting something that is relevant to their lives. The

forces of development are inexorable. Preserving something as a symbol of place, time, or foundation of knowledge will require an understanding of its relative importance to community pride, way of life, and future earning potential (Garcia-Almedia & Gartner, 2021). Although specific forms of tourism are considered forms of tourism that are attractive to a smaller number of tourists, cultural tourism is an important form of tourism, whose revenues make up a considerable share of total tourism revenues at global level (Tubić, Knežević & Kovačević, 2023).

It is commonly believed that being listed on the World Heritage List results in attracting more tourists. However, this assumption has generally not been subject to rigorous econometric approach in the existing literature, say Huang, Tsauro and Yang (2012). Overall, they found no significant impact of the World Heritage List inscription on inducing more tourist arrivals in Macau.

On the contrary, some research shows that the importance of the World Heritage Sites List is essential for the preservation of local heritage. Domestic tourism demand has a positive sign, while incoming tourism has a negative effect on regional resilience. Nevertheless, the joint domestic effect of tourism and cultural World Heritage sites as regards regional resilience is negative, while the joint effect of inbound tourism and cultural sites is positive. These results confirm the indirect role of cultural World Heritage sites on economic resilience as demonstrated through incoming tourism demand (Muštra, Škrabić Perić & Pivčević, 2023).

Cultural heritage has a multiple impact on contemporary development processes, says Obłąkowska (2020). It provides values and benefits spanning the dimensions of science and knowledge, arts and aesthetics, collective memory, social identity, solidarity, utility and economy, to the entire contemporary society and future generations. It is multidimensional in each of these perspectives. It includes historic palaces and castles, as well as museums that study, display and care for such places.

Cultural heritage is a potentially important determinant of international tourism flows, claim Panzera, de Graaff and de Groot (2020). Apart from being an enrichment for both individuals and communities, and an opportunity for different cultures to meet, tourism represents a significant industry for the European economies. Researchers find that UNESCO cultural World Heritage Sites are associated with an increase of 6,000 (one site) to 60,000 (eight sites) international tourists from each European country to an average European region. On the other hand, regionally or nationally defined tangible forms of heritage

play a more limited role as pull-factors for international tourism. Moreover, authors show that the presence of UNESCO sites reduces the distance decay effect. International tourists are willing to travel longer distances if a destination is endowed with UNESCO cultural World Heritage Sites.

Furthermore, scientific results indicate that the number of UNESCO Heritage Sites have no significant influence on the number of tourism overnights, whereas there are significant positive effects on international tourism receipts and tourism employment. Moreover, the additional cultural sector specifics considered in the analysis – government expenditure on culture and employment in culture – proved to have considerable positive influence on all three tourism indicators tackled in the research. In addition, the research results indicate that the real GDP per capita and the level of human capital are important drivers of tourism development (Škrabić Perić, Šimundić, Muštra & Vugdelija, 2021).

The appreciation of heritage is not limited to local environments, states Petkovski (2023), but is attractive for the whole of Europe, as many countries have invested in programs dedicated to the research and preservation of heritage, using heritage to harmonize with the process of Europeanization. Countries like Croatia, Serbia and Macedonia strive to achieve such recognition, because it legitimizes their culture in the international arena, and contributes to the development of the local and national economy, especially tourism.

In order to preserve the identity and culture of the local community, it is necessary to systematically work on the preservation and revitalization of cultural heritage so that it does not disappear. The cultural and creative industries create the path towards not only development, but also the preservation and urban regeneration and revitalization of cultural heritage. With its repurposing, industrial cultural heritage might become not only a reminder of its former glory, but also daily inspiration for new entrepreneurs, creatives, and all the other citizens (Borić Cvenić, Mesić & Poljak, 2022).

So far, it has been shown that the most effective way of taking care of cultural heritage is its economic valorization through tourism, since it enables economic sustainability and protection. Cultural heritage is largely dependent on budget funds. The amount of these funds is very often insufficient, so that cultural institutions are forced to look for other ways of financing. Successful examples have proven that cultural heritage can be profitable, especially when combined with the tourism sector. Hence, it ceases to be a passive cultural resource and begins to actively participate in its own financing and the economic development of the community (Slunjski, 2017).

Heritage is closely related to authenticity, which is of great importance in the destination branding process. Buhl Hornskov (2015) explained that authenticity is closely related to concrete, unique objects, such as, for example, historical buildings and monuments. Such objects are proof of authenticity, and the experiences of tourists depend on them; that is to say, their interpretation and representation. Crespi (2006) explained this in a similar way, saying that culture becomes important for an individual only when it has some meaning.

Destination branding is a strategic process aimed at shaping and managing the identity, image, and reputation of a place to attract tourists, investors, and global recognition. Anholt (2007) emphasizes that competitive identity encompasses not only marketing communications, but also policies, culture, and people, suggesting thereby that branding is about managing a destination's overall narrative on the global stage. Skoko (2017) argues that many countries, particularly those in transition, lack systematic brand management, which hinders their ability to present a cohesive and appealing image. Without strategic planning and coordination, branding efforts remain fragmented and ineffective, especially in the tourism sector. Paliaga and Oliva (2012) point out that regional branding can be successfully built on authentic, local products that embody a region's cultural and environmental identity. This bottom-up approach contributes to recognizability and differentiation in the global market, making the destination more attractive and credible. Karamehmedović (2018) further stresses the importance of aligning destination marketing with cultural heritage through holistic strategies. She advocates for marketing models that are based on understanding tourist motivations (e.g., push-pull factors) and ensuring sustainable management of heritage sites to meet visitor expectations while preserving authenticity. Destination branding is a structured and long-term process that involves defining, communicating, and managing the identity and reputation of a place to enhance its appeal and competitiveness. Anholt (2007) emphasizes that the starting point is a clear definition of identity, which involves articulating what the destination truly stands for – its values, distinctiveness, and long-term vision. Without this foundational clarity, branding efforts risk becoming superficial or misleading. Following the identity phase, strategic positioning is essential. As Kotler and Gertner (2004) point out, destinations must differentiate themselves in a crowded global marketplace by offering a compelling and credible value proposition. This positioning must resonate with target audiences and reflect the destination's authentic character. The next step involves creating a brand architecture, which includes visual identity elements and narrative frameworks that communicate the

brand in a consistent and engaging way. Anholt (2007) argues that branding is not about slogans or logos alone, but about coherent behavior and communication that align with the destination's core identity. An equally important phase is communication and implementation, where the brand is actively promoted through marketing, public diplomacy, and visitor experience. Finally, evaluation and adaptation are necessary to ensure the brand remains relevant and effective. Regular assessment of public perception, economic indicators, and brand performance helps refine the strategy and maintain consistency over time.

As mentioned before, cultural heritage gives the destination authenticity, i.e. due to its specific characteristics, it makes it recognizable and enables it to diversify in the world tourist market and achieve a competitive advantage compared to other tourist destinations. Connecting culture with tourism is a logical strategic move, since cultural tourism is currently one of the most widespread and lucrative branches of tourism. The developed countries of the world have made the most of the heritage in the tourism industry and have invested great effort to understand it. It is very important to perceive culture as a process, because tourism is a dynamic phenomenon too; both are continuously changing. The dimension of their non-static nature is what makes it difficult to define them, because the concept, values and understandings are continuously changing (Farac, 2024).

The marketing of tourist destinations today requires the reevaluation of heritage to add special value to each of the tourist sites. Natural and cultural heritage is equally valued. Today, the need to protect and present heritage is encouraged not only by conservators and institutions for the protection of cultural monuments, but also by tourist agencies and marketing experts, who have more influence on local communities than conservators. While the work of conservators is slow and the results thereof are almost invisible, the needs of the market are experiencing a huge shift. Interpretation of the past and tradition has become almost the most important task of all tourist agencies and associations. Interpretations go beyond scientific or professional explanations that might be a burden to the content offered to the average consumer, i.e. the tourist. The emphasis is on myths, legends and aesthetic appeal, in which every scientific truth is diluted. The economic reasons for returning to tradition in a new context are furthermore related to some socio-political problems of countries such as Croatia, in which any economic competition with the rest of the developed world has very little chance of succeeding. Small nations like Croatia, disoriented in globalization processes and pressed by recession, are facing a loss of identity, which is closely related to a decline in the sense of pride (Mayhew, 2011).

The Importance of Cultural Heritage for Cultural Tourism

When explaining the sustainable exploitation and interpretation of heritage for tourism purposes, Krajinović and Gortan-Carlin (2017) claim that sustainable tourism should be one of the key goals of every developing tourist destination. One of the biggest challenges is the question of how to manage the complex system of a tourist destination in a way that satisfies the needs and interests of three key stakeholders – occasional visitors, business entities in tourism and the local community. Solutions are sought in the application of the so-called stakeholder theories, which are based on network partnership and cooperation of stakeholders in the tourist destination at all levels – micro, mezzo and macro. Sustainable development of cultural tourism brings many benefits to the cultural sector too. Tourist valorization of cultural heritage increases the number of visitors to cultural institutions, creates new revenue sources and alternative sources of funding. Financing sources open opportunities to find new partners for the implementation of marketing activities (Demonja & Gredičak, 2014).

For more than ten years, cultural tourism has been trying to be one of the key determinants of development of the Croatian tourism, claims Demonja (2013). It has been given special attention at the highest levels. While cultural tourism is not a new concept in Croatia, in the Croatian scientific and professional community, minor publishing activities relating to it are conducted, and its effects are not evaluated properly. The Croatian cultural tourism is rarely researched in scientific terms, the evaluations of the Croatian culture and tourism resources are rare, and cultural tourism is still encountering many problems. The reasons for this are the inadequate and not systematic inter-sectoral cooperation of tourism and culture, insufficient numbers of the conducted research results of the measures after ending of their cycles and, in general, difficult possibility of obtaining the few existing official data from government institutions. Jelinčić (2008) emphasizes that cultural tourism is crucial for diversifying Croatia's tourism offer, particularly in continental regions. She highlights the importance of systematically valuing cultural resources and strengthening collaboration between the cultural and tourism sectors. Special attention is given to developing authentic and creative cultural tourism products that can attract visitors year-round. According to the author, successful cultural tourism development requires a decentralized approach, support for local initiatives, education of cultural managers, and the integration of international standards into domestic practices. Jelinčić (2008) stresses the need for a stronger

institutional framework and a greater presence of cultural tourism in national tourism development strategies. Tomljenović (2006) analyzes cultural tourism through three primary approaches to its definition: motivational, experiential, and technical. The motivational approach focuses on tourists' reasons for travel, the experiential approach highlights the cultural experiences gained during travel, while the technical approach centers on the activities related to cultural tourism. Furthermore, Tomljenović (2006) categorizes cultural tourism into several forms, including heritage tourism, art tourism, urban and rural cultural tourism, ethnic tourism, and creative tourism, where tourists actively participate in cultural activities. She emphasizes that cultural tourism plays a vital role in diversifying Croatia's tourism offer, extending the tourist season, and promoting the sustainable use of cultural heritage. Finally, she highlights the need for better cultural interpretation, stronger cooperation between the cultural and tourism sectors, and the development of local cultural identities.

In the first strategic objective of the Strategy for the Development of Sustainable Tourism until 2030, adopted by the Croatian Parliament in 2022, entitled "Year-Round and Regionally More Balanced Tourism", it is stated that "Croatia is rich in cultural heritage, well-preserved historical assets, and developed cultural and creative industries, all offering significant potential for further tourism utilization and valorization. However, there are currently substantial discrepancies among destinations in terms of promotion, management, and the quality of experience delivery. The identified strong resource base represents considerable potential that can be activated through an investment cycle. It is necessary to valorize key attractions for tourism purposes by employing modern technologies for interpretation, preservation, market introduction, and the delivery of unique experiences, with the aim of achieving competitive advantages in the international market. Furthermore, it is essential to more actively involve the local community in most planning activities to ensure the quality of plans and their implementation, as well as the proper interpretation of cultural heritage" (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2023).

Gluvačević and Periša (2022) especially emphasize the role of culture in destination branding, explaining that destinations use different resources and communication channels to become a brand. They use natural resources, cultural heritage, creative industries and numerous other elements, with which they want to create or strengthen an existing brand. Given that culture and cultural heritage are quite unique to each destination, regardless of what they may have in common with the environment, culture is an almost ideal means

of distinguishing one destination from another. However, the mere existence of cultural heritage in a certain destination is not the only prerequisite for building a brand of a tourist destination through culture; it requires the cooperation of the local population in the context of accepting the idea of cultural heritage as something that will be commercialized for the benefit of the local community. In other words, it is the residents who will be the bearers of a new brand based on cultural heritage. Without uniting the local population with the vision of developing the destination and creating a common story, the tourist destination brand cannot be created in this sense.

For successfully developing its product based on cultural heritage, a destination needs to know the motives and desires of visitors. It is therefore important to know the relationship between cultural goods like buildings, monuments, legends and customs, and expectations of visitors. Therefore, storytelling plays a crucial role in helping visitors understand and imagine both the function of a building and the broader historical context in which it was created (Gluvačević, 2016).

Furthermore, one of the possible ways of presenting culture are artistic and heritage manifestations. This type of event is based on audience interaction with artistic creation at a specific time at a specific venue, defined by Knešaurek and Carić (2018). They state that the criterion of uniqueness is the most important for a good cultural event, in addition to the artistic criteria and the criteria of the audience, place and time, and that tourism events try to respond to the needs of today's post-consumerist tourists by offering them learning and entertainment about local culture.

Cultural tourism is clearly about more than built heritage, immovable installations and museums, or other permanent attractions. Yet even the temporary confronts issues of sustainability in the context of cultural tourism, as festivals may return, and investments may outlive or extend beyond the event itself. Cultural economists may have much to contribute to our understanding of these intangible and temporary tourist attractions (Noonan & Rizzo, 2017).

Silvar (2017) also agrees with this, stating that the main bearers of cultural marketing are cultural institutions, and that with such marketing, the emphasis is not only on making a profit, but also on creating relations with the public. To make successful contact with the target groups, it is important to create memories and emotions for the guests, which is done by creating an experience. Pine and Gilmore (1998, 2013) explored the concept of experience economy, arguing that guest involvement and active participation are the key to creating a meaningful connection with a destination. Arts and culture events can do just that.

On the other hand, tourism is an inevitable phenomenon of cultural contact that has its positive and negative consequences. The contact of two different identities, tourists and hosts, brings numerous changes both in the local community itself and in the tourists' understanding of the destination. At the same time, there are frequent occurrences of stereotyping, questioning authenticity and inventing traditions. The dangers that such phenomena hide, if they are not recognized and possibly removed, can have an extremely negative impact on various aspects of the tourism business (economic, social, cultural, psychological). Cultural identity answers the question of man's place in the world. Residents and tourists are aware of their own identity, and from their meeting, new identities are potentially created. This encounter can renew ties with traditional roots, that is, with the past, but also introduce new knowledge about other cultures while it presents the expression of modernity. Tourists are usually privileged in this contact, as they have what others do not: freedom of travel, free time and financial superiority. Thus, tradition, heritage, or culture changes in accordance with the needs of tourism. What proportion of originality is due to the change caused by tourism is a question that must be researched on a case-by-case basis. Efforts should be made to focus on the most original form of tradition to present the most authentic tradition of the receiving country. It is the credibility and originality of the traditional presentation in tourism that ensures the quality of the tourist offer to the receptive country, making it different from the others. However, it is often the case that the traditional offer tends to "get modernized" because of tourism. In the sphere of interpretation, borrowing and inventing traditions, it may result in negativity for the receiving country, as it relies on traditions. Changing traditions is a characteristic of our time; whether the phenomenon is bad or good is revealed from case to case through its application. The curiosity of future research represents the share of creativity that participates in inventing tradition in relation to the exact presentation of what is offered in tourism (Jelinčić, 2006).

Numerous initiatives and measures have been taken to meet the problems of the development of the Croatian cultural tourism. These measures represent a very important encouragement for the creation and development of cultural and tourism projects; however, they have not resulted in any permanent or systematic solution to the existing problems. Today, tourism in general is characterized by the decentralization of tourist activities; the same should be done with cultural tourism. Cultural tourism should be developed at local level, and the government should oversee their cooperation, fusion of cultural and tourism

projects, promotion and encouragement, development and maintenance of the partnership between the public and the private sector (Dujmović & Vitasović, 2016).

The Key Aspects of Istria and Kvarner as a Cultural Destination

This review paper presents a systematized presentation of recent research on the topic of cultural tourism, as well as a presentation of the basic tourist and cultural characteristics of Istria and Kvarner as a destination. In the following chapter, the main characteristics of these destinations will be presented. Furthermore, the motivation of tourists for the cultural offer will be highlighted, as well as the recent research results in the field of cultural tourism in Istria and Kvarner. To sum up, this paper aims at paving the path for deeper and more complex research on the role of cultural resources in tourism, and at offering an overview of information on the form and function of cultural tourism, with an emphasis on Istria and Kvarner as tourist destinations.

The Istria County covers 2,813 km² with 195,000 inhabitants, which means a population density of 69.41 capita/km². There are 10 cities in the territory. Istria is one of the most important tourist regions in Croatia, with 4,969,522 arrivals and 30,132,143 overnight stays in 2023 (the Istria Tourist Board, 2024). The types of tourism that prevail here are: bathing and active tourism, based on nature.

Together, the Istria and Primorje–Gorski kotar Counties cover an area of 6,401 km² and number approximately 460,000 inhabitants. The area of these two studied counties includes a total of 24 cities and 53 municipalities. Observed together, these two counties achieved almost 8 million arrivals and over 43 million overnight stays in 2023 (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2024). The dominant form of tourism is bathing (Tomas, 2022/2023).

By strengthening the growing role of cultural tourism and in line with the UNWTO guidelines on sustainable tourism, efforts have been made to reduce overtourism and mitigate the negative environmental impacts of tourism. Economically, Istria and Kvarner rank among the best developed counties in Croatia in terms of gross domestic product and GDP per capita. Nevertheless, there is plenty of room for improvement, especially for extending the season and expanding the cultural offer. Considering the geographical characteristics of these two counties, the dominant forms of tourism are: bathing on the Kvarner islands and along the Istrian coast; nature activities and rural tourism in central part of Istria; and cultural tourism in the cities and on archaeological sites. These

counties have an island-studded coast, mild climate and a favorable geographic position – in the proximity of the Central European traffic flows.

While tourism on the one hand provides an incentive for economic growth and development, primarily through service activities, on the other hand, it represents a danger to the environment. Excessive tourism is a great danger for biodiversity and the quality of soil and air, as well as for the quality of life of the local population. The consequences of tourism are visible through the economic, social and environmental components. However, such a study is not included in this analysis, but our focus is on the analysis of the current state of the tourist offer, the number of arrivals, as well as the possibility to expand the offer in the domains of cultural and active tourism.

Istria and the Kvarner have favorable geographical positions being located near Italy, Slovenia, Austria, Hungary, and other Central European countries. The administrative seat of Istria County is Pazin, while Rijeka serves as the administrative center of the Kvarner region. Road transport dominates as regards tourist arrivals, with approximately 95% of visitors arriving by car, which reflects the well-developed road infrastructure. Unfortunately, other modes of transport, particularly rail, remain considerably less developed (Istria Tourism Board, 2024).

Istria preserves an extraordinary wealth of ancient monuments that reveal its integration into the Roman world. According to Buršić-Matijašić and Matijašić (1996), key sites include Nesactium (Nezakcij), once the Histri tribal center, and later a Roman settlement with a forum, baths, and monumental architecture. Pula (Pola), the leading Roman city in the region, hosts iconic structures, such as the Amphitheater (Arena), the Temple of Augustus, the Arch of the Sergii, the Twin Gates, and Hercules' Gate. Beyond urban architecture, the funerary heritage of the Roman Istria is particularly notable. As presented in *The Splendor of Ancient Necropolises of Istria* (Girardi Jurkić, 2003), the Roman necropolises reveal sophisticated burial practices and monumental tomb structures across the sites as Pula, Nesactium, and Fažana. In addition, *Archaeology and Art of Istria* (Arheološki muzej Istre, 1986) highlights the artistic and architectural richness found across the region, from luxurious villae rusticae on the Brijuni Islands and Vižula to civic structures in Poreč and Rovinj, reflecting both urban and rural Roman lifestyles. Many of these monuments are protected under the Register of Cultural Goods of the Republic of Croatia, underscoring their exceptional historical, cultural, and artistic values (Ministry of Culture and Media of the Republic of Croatia, n.d.).

The Kvarner Tourist Board (Kvarner.hr, 2024) states that in the Croatian Littoral, cultures have exchanged in a historical sequence and created a priceless treasure that permeates and unfolds in front of you in the entire area of Kvarner. From prehistoric, ancient and medieval monuments, from the Romanesque, Hellenic, Slavic, Germanic and Hungarian cultures up to the present, and local artistic achievements, cultural expressions and monuments based on them are interwoven, creating a space whose values are captivating. In this area, there is *Bašćanska ploča*, the oldest monument of the Croatian Littoral, and *Vinodolski zakonik*, the oldest entirely preserved monument of customary law in the Croatian language. In a long historical sequence, there are many monuments, valuable sacred and secular collections, as well as cultural expressions that make everyday life in the Kvarner region extremely interesting.

Furthermore, the Kvarner Tourist Board (Kvarner.hr, 2024) interprets that the sound of old, folk musical instruments has always been spread across Kvarner. On the island of Krk especially, *sopile* (*sopele*, *roženice*) are voted. This old shepherd pipe is never played alone: there are always two – a large one and a small one, or a large *sopila* accompanied by human voice. In addition to *sopile*, the traditional two-part singing, known as *po domaću* (in the domestic fashion), features two distinct styles: *na tanko* (thin) and *na debelo* (thick). Among other musical instruments worth mentioning are *mih* (a wooden pipe that has a mixture below, with a tube and a valve), and two-barreled wooden pipes called *đvojkinje* (*vidulice*, *volarice*), which are widespread across Kvarner. Many respected musicians come from Kvarner: Vinko Jelić (1596–1636) from Rijeka stands out. Due to his works (*Parnasia militaria*, *Arion primus*, and *Arion secundus*), he earned the honorary title of “master of the chamber spiritual concert” among the European connoisseurs. Ivan pl. Zajc (1832–1914) is best known for his operas *Nikola Šubić Zrinski*, *Mislav*, *Ban Leget*, and *Lizinka*. Zajc also composed operettas, cantatas, orchestral, concert and chamber works, and compositions for the piano. The era in which he was active on the Croatian music scene has been called after him. Ivan Matetić Ronjgov (1880–1960) found inspiration for his creativity in the local musical heritage, such as the two-part *sopile*. He primarily composed vocal music – choral compositions, duets, and solo songs.

The entire Croatian Littoral coast and the islands of Krk, Cres and Lošinj are proud of their unique tradition, emphasizes Grgurić (2024). Its accompanying folklore elements – instruments, dances, costumes – complement the integrity of the story. At the same time, they are an inspiration to many Croatian and European artists. The folklore heritage that the Croatian Littoral share with the

neighboring Istria is traditional and original, comparable to the sound power of other folklore components of the great humming Mediterranean music hall. Another musical rarity from this area is Glagolitic singing. By combining the Gregorian chorale and the Croatian folk song, a unique example of church folk singing was obtained. Live Glagolitic singing can be heard no more; it has however been recorded in musicological writings. The diverse ethnographic influence in this area is also confirmed by Kos-Nalis (2024), who explains how the unique and strange combination of the Mediterranean and the Alpine, like nowhere else on the Croatian soil, has given life to colorful ethnological-anthropological diversity in Kvarner.

A cultural “product” should be formed as an attraction “product” that is offered to tourists who want to get to know the past and present heritage of the destination. The way of interpreting places, history, people, and art is important, as this is the only way to create an experience. In tourist destinations of sea and sun, cultural resources contribute to the quality of the overall offer, offer spiritual well-being, and a lasting memory of a certain destination. Visiting museums, going to theater performances or folklore events complete the experience of tourists, and enable the creation of a more complete picture of a certain country, region or place (Vrtiprah, 2006).

Culture is the basis of the tourism product of many countries, and the main reason why tourists visit them. The desire to learn about other cultures has been a motive for travel since the Greek and Roman times. According to Swarbrooke and Horner (2003, 36), cultural tourism consists of many elements that make up the tourist market and includes:

- “visiting historical attractions and destinations and attending traditional festivals,
- a trip motivated by the desire to taste national, regional and local food and drinks,
- following traditional sports events and participating in local activities on vacation,
- visit to farms, factories, craft workshops, etc.”

From the data presented in this paper, the contribution of culture and heritage to the tourism of the Istria and Primorje–Gorski kotar Counties can be seen. Visitors are looking for different types of content and show interest in cultural attractions. This certainly means that it is extremely important not only to invest in heritage preservation, but also to develop good and sustainable ways of exploiting and interpreting cultural resources.

Dominant reasons for tourist arrivals to Istria and Kvarner

The area of Istria and Kvarner are the most developed touristic regions in Croatia thanks to their favorable geo-traffic position, island-studded coast, rich cultural heritage, and relatively moderate climate. However, like the rest of Croatia, there is a lack of beds in hotel accommodation, especially in the high category, and the off-season offer is very modest. The great potential in presenting cultural heritage is still underutilized.

Istria is the most visited county in Croatia, accounting for 26.3% of all tourist arrivals – domestic and foreign. Kvarner is in third place, behind the Split-Dalmatia County, with 15.62% of arrivals in the total number of arrivals in Croatia. More precisely, these two counties together account for as much as 42% of the total number of tourist arrivals in Croatia. According to the available data of the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2024) in 2023, the number of arrivals at the national level was not achieved, while the counties of Istria and Kvarner achieved and surpassed the level in the number of tourist arrivals from the pre-pandemic 2019. The drop in the arrivals due to of the pandemic (2019–2023) is higher at national level (-64%) than in these two counties (-55% in Istria and -61% in Kvarner). The number of tourist arrivals in the period from 1995 to 2019 grew by an average of 10% per year at the national level, while it was slightly lower in the Istria County (7%), and 8% in the Primorje–Gorski kotar County (*Figure 1*). The structure of arrivals is dominated by foreign tourists, while the number of domestic tourists has remained constant. The average number of overnight stays in the Istria County is 10.2, and in the Primorje–Gorski kotar County 8.5, which is higher than the Croatian average of 9.1 (Tomas 2022/2023).

According to the research conducted by the Institute for Tourism (Tomas 2022/2023), tourists aged 30-49 dominate in Istria, while in the Primorje–Gorski kotar County, they are slightly younger, around 35-45. The average age of tourists of 43.2 years in Istria and 42.1 years in the Primorje–Gorski kotar County is a clear indicator as to the desirable direction of the marketing activities, as well as to the target group.

The age group of people in the younger middle years, 35–50, is a good indicator that employed people for whom vacation is the primary motive come to the observed counties, as even 95% of them stated in the survey (Tomas 2022/2023). The interest in cultural content among this group is extremely high; as such, there is great potential for further expansion and development of the cultural tourist offer.

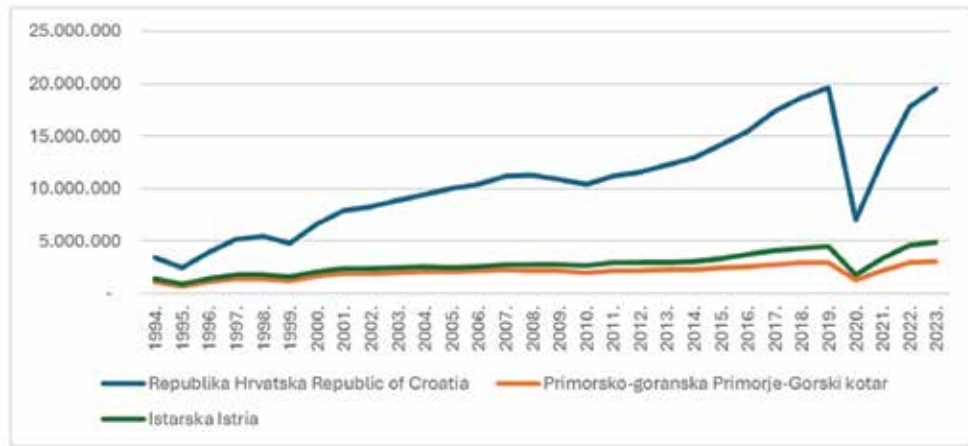


Figure 1 Tourist arrivals, total, 1994–2023

Source: Processing by the author according to data from the National Bureau of Statistics, 2024

In addition, and in favor of the above, the fact that the share of highly educated visitors is 39.3% in the Istria County and 45.1% in the Primorje-Gorski Kotar County is a further factor. The monthly income of visitors in these two counties is on average higher than €3,000, while their average daily consumption is around €112. The main motive of vacation tourists, about 70% of them, is the sea. It may therefore be said that in these two counties, bathing tourism dominates, followed by nature (19%). Culture and art present an almost negligible reason for tourists coming on vacation (only 0.1% in the Istria County and 0.3% in the Primorje-Gorski kotar County), as well as do entertainment and festivals (1.4% and 0.4% respectively). In addition to vacation tourists, there are those who arrive to Croatia on business, to visit relatives and friends, or who own real estate here. Same as in case of vacation tourists, the main reason for arriving to the Istria and Primorje-Gorski kotar Counties for this group of tourists is the sea (86%), followed by nature (73%). Furthermore, culture and art motivate 4.8% of tourists in Istria and 6.2% in the Primorje-Gorski kotar County, whereas entertainment and festivals account for 9.9% and 5.4% of tourists in these two counties respectively.

The frequency of visits indicates satisfaction with the destination. As many as 25% of tourists have visited the Istria County more than seven times, while in the Primorje-Gorski kotar County, this percentage is 8.5%. Internet sites, social networks, online travel agencies, and recommendations from relatives and friends are the most common manners in which visitors gather information

about the destination. In addition to the motives and structure of tourists in the Istria and Primorje–Gorski kotar Counties, data on the share of tourists who are bothered by crowds at the destination points to the problem of excessive tourism in the destination. Excessive tourism may be affected by activities, policies and strategies aimed at extending the tourist season. Nevertheless, in 2022, only 2.6% of visitors in the Istria County stated that they were bothered by the crowd, while in the Primorje–Gorski kotar County, this figure amounted to approximately 5%. Though this share is not high, expanding the offer and extending the season would certainly contribute to the improvement of this negative indicator.

Tourism is a generator of economic growth in the Istria County. The long-standing tradition of tourism, the developed catering sector and agriculture have made this county a dominant region in tourism not only in Croatia, but also in the whole of Europe. However, tourism mainly refers to vacation tourism, which prevails in the coastal part of the county, while the interior is less developed. The expansion of tourist offers, especially the wine-and gastronomy-related, as well as the cultural offer and storytelling, to the interior of Istria, represents great potential for the further development of tourism in this county. Istria has furthermore got remarkable historical heritage, culture and tradition; this might be well used through cultural tourism. In addition to expanding the offer in the direction of cultural tourism, ecological agriculture and active outdoor tourism have great potential for further development (Istria Tourism Board, 2024).

The Primorje–Gorski kotar County is divided into three micro-regions: Gorski kotar, the islands, and the coast. Gorski kotar is a sparsely populated, mountainous landscape with forest and water resources. Most of the population lives in the coastal area of the county, where the largest economic and industrial activity of the county is located. Active tourism dominates in Gorski kotar: cycling, trekking, mountaineering, free climbing, hiking and other outdoor activities. This type of tourism is available year-round; as such, it has great potential for further development (Primorje–Gorski kotar Tourism Board, 2024).

Though growing interest encourages investments in this region, accommodation capacity, especially hotels that would accommodate larger groups of people, is still not adequate. On the other hand, bathing tourism prevails on the islands in the summer season. Some of the more famous tourist attractions – both natural and cultural – are: *Bašćanska ploča*; the belltower of the church of St. Euphemia in Rovinj; amphitheater in Pula; the path of the seven waterfalls; Rab Fair; Apoxyomenos Museum on Lošinj; Euphrasian Basilica in Poreč; Učka Nature Park; Kotli; Brijuni National Park; Risnjak National Park;

small towns in the interior of Istria; the Lim Channel, the Golden Gate and the Temple of Augustus in Pula; Pazin Chasm; the heritage of the Frankopan family; Opatija as the originator of tourism in Croatia.

According to the data of the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2024), in 2022, in the Istria and Primorje–Gorski kotar Counties, 4,369 business entities were registered in the activity “I” *Activities of providing accommodation and preparing and serving food*, out of which 2,657 were active. More precisely, 20% of all active business entities in the Republic of Croatia, included in the *Activity of providing accommodation and preparing and serving food*, are located in these two counties. In 2023, in these two counties, 38,229 employees worked in the same industry: this amounts to 26.8% of the total number of employees in this industry in the Republic of Croatia.

In conclusion, after the presented theoretical framework, as well as statistical data and characteristics of the two studied counties, a more concrete conclusion can be made in the form of a SWOT analysis.

Table 1 SWOT analysis for the Istria and Kvarner Regions

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long-standing tradition • Proximity to emission markets • Preserved nature 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seasonality • Illegal construction • Insufficient hotel accommodation • Low accommodation quality • Poor public transport, especially in smaller towns, weak railway network • Negative demographic trends – labor force shortage
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educated staff • Development of new forms of tourism • EU funds investment in infrastructure, especially in the railway network • Less climate influence than in south (Greece, Spain, Italy) • Strengthening of related industries (food, wood, chemical, IT...) • Striving for quality growth, sustainability • Changes in the tourist behavior after the pandemic and the growing desire to stay outdoors • Investing in the education of professional stuff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work force • Climate change • Excessive tourism (crowding, noise, pollution/devastation of the environment, impaired quality of life of the local population) • Strengthening of competitive destinations, especially Albania • Increasing demands of tourists • Inflation and growth in business costs

Source: author’s work

Conclusion

This paper sets out to explore two key research questions: (RQ1) What do previous studies reveal about the contribution of cultural heritage to tourism?; and (RQ2) Can cultural resources contribute to the development and promotion of the tourist destinations of Istria and Kvarner? The findings indicate that cultural heritage plays a major role in enriching tourist experiences, reinforcing destination identity, and fostering sustainable tourism development. Numerous studies highlight that both tangible and intangible cultural resources can diversify the tourism offer, prolong the tourist season, and enhance the overall appeal of a destination (Richards, 2018; Demonja & Gredičak, 2014; Škrabić Perić et al., 2021). At the same time, researchers point to risks related to the commodification and superficial interpretation of culture, stressing the need for balanced and locally sensitive strategies (Jelinčić, 2010; Dujmović, 2019). Regarding Istria and Kvarner, this study confirms that both regions are rich in cultural assets, such as the Roman architecture, the Glagolitic script, traditional music, and folklore. Although cultural motivations remain secondary for most tourists, the presented data show that interest in cultural content is present, particularly among repeat visitors and highly educated travelers. These insights suggest that cultural resources hold significant potential to reposition Istria and Kvarner as distinctive and competitive year-round destinations. Consequently, culture should not be viewed merely as a complementary tourism element, but as a strategic foundation for destination branding, sustainable development, and long-term competitiveness of these regions.

History, culture and architecture are often one of the main reasons for coming to a tourist destination on a global level. However, Istria and Kvarner have different tourist motivation for visiting. Bearing in mind the existing situation, the aspiration is to extend the tourist season and to offer tourists attractive cultural events in addition to the sea.

One of the main limitations of this research lies in its exclusive reliance on secondary data and desk research methods, which, though useful for establishing a theoretical foundation, do not provide direct insights into current visitor perceptions, local stakeholder engagement, or the actual effectiveness of cultural resource interpretation and promotion on the ground. Therefore, future research should incorporate empirical methodologies, such as fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and visitor surveys to better understand how cultural heritage is experienced, valued, and co-created by tourists and local communities.

Additionally, comparative case studies with other European regions that have successfully integrated cultural resources into destination branding might provide valuable models and inspiration for Istria and Kvarner. Such approaches would enable a more grounded evaluation of the impact of cultural tourism and inform more targeted, inclusive, and sustainable cultural tourism strategies.

Based on this paper, which scans the current situation, the goal is to start new research. The findings of this paper support the intention to pursue further empirical research in the cultural mapping of Istria and Kvarner, as well as in identifying their tourism imaginaries.

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Doprinos kulturne baštine kulturnom turizmu Istre i Kvarnera – polazišna komunikacijska perspektiva

Sažetak

Krenuti od početka ključan je i najvažniji korak u procesu istraživanja kulturnih dobara, posebice kada je potrebno utvrditi njihovu ulogu i značenje u kulturnom turizmu. Stoga je cilj ovog rada napraviti sustavan pregled temeljnih pojmova kulturnog turizma u novijim istraživanjima, razjasniti pojmove kulturnih dobara, baštine i kulturnih identiteta s naglaskom na njihovu primjenu u turizmu te prikazati karakteristike Istre i Kvarnera s namjerom stjecanja uvida u doprinos kulturne baštine turizmu u analiziranim destinacijama. Iako je kulturni turizam opsežno istraživano, ovaj se rad fokusira na dvije specifične hrvatske regije, konkretizirajući njihove dosadašnje turističke rezultate, s namjerom utvrđivanja važnosti kulturnih dobara u ukupnim turističkim rezultatima odabranih destinacija. Nalazi iz ovog rada poslužit će kao polazište za daljnja istraživanja kulturnih dobara u razvoju, prezentaciji i komunikaciji destinacijskog brenda Istarske i Primorsko-goranske županije. Zaključno, ovaj rad ukazuje na važnost kulturnih dobara u dvije promatrane regije i otvara prostor za daljnja istraživanja o interpretaciji baštine, ali i očuvanja i održivoga korištenja kulturnih dobara u analiziranim destinacijama.

Ključne riječi: kulturna dobra; Istra; Kvarner; kulturna baština; kulturni turizam.

