Safety and destination choice in a post-pandemic period: A study of Opatija Riviera

Sigurnost i odabir destinacije u post-pandemijskom periodu: studija Opatijske Rivijere

Suzana Bareša[a]*, Vladimir Prebilič[b], Siniša Tatalović[c]

[a] University of Rijeka, Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Opatija, Croatia
[b] University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences, Slovenia
[c] University of Zagreb, Faculty of Political Science, Croatia

A r t i c l e   i n f o

A b s t r a c t

Safety is one of the fundamental elements in the tourist´s decision-making process when choosing a holiday destination. Over the years numerous destinations were faced with challenges how to function and survive on the tourist market. To plan future developmental activities, it is mandatory to observe how tourists perceive safety of a destination, and what are the motivational factors that are connected with safety, that influence their decision-making process the most, and in post-pandemic period in particular. Empirical research was conducted with the use of a structured questionnaire to examine what are the safety motivation factors that influence tourists to choose Opatija Riviera as a holiday destination in the post-pandemic period. Descriptive statistics was used for data analysis. The results indicate that tourists pay significant interest for communication with service providers, general information about the destination, what is the current criteria for entering the country, organization of health insurance and health protection during their stay, and possibility of doing a simple test for COVID. Moderate relevance was given to Opatija Riviera belonging to the "green region" and keeping the social distance during stay. Determined findings represent a good basis for formation of developmental activities which will improve the level of Opatija Riviera´s safety and its competitiveness on the tourist market in the future.
Keywords: safety, decision-making process, tourist destination, Opatija Riviera

S a ž e t a k

Sigurnost je jedan od osnovnih elemenata u procesu donošenja odluke turista pri izboru destinacije za odmor. Tokom godina brojne destinacije su se suočavale sa izazovima kako funkcionisati i opstati na turističkom tržištu. Za planiranje budućih razvojnih aktivnosti obavezno je posmatrati kako turisti percipiraju bezbednost destinacije, i koji su motivacioni faktori koji su povezani sa bezbednošću, koji najviše utiču na njihov proces donošenja odluka, a posebno u postpandemijskom periodu. Empirijsko istraživanje sprovedeno je korišćenjem strukturiranog upitnika kako bi se ispitalo koji su to bezbednosni motivacioni faktori koji utiču na turiste da izaberu Opatijsku rivijeru kao destinaciju za odmor u postpandemijskom periodu. Za analizu podataka korišćena je deskriptivna statistika. Rezultati pokazuju da turisti posevećuju značajno interesovanje za komunikaciju sa pružaocima usluga, opšte informacije o destinaciji, koji su trenutni kriterijumi za ulazak u zemlju, organizaciju zdravstvenog osiguranja i zdravstvene zaštite tokom boravka, kao i mogućnost jednostavnog testiranja na COVID. Umerena važnost data je pripadnosti Opatijske rivijere „zelenoj regiji" i održavanju socijalne distance tokom boravka. Dobijeni rezultati predstavljaju dobru osnovu za formiranje razvojnih aktivnosti koje će unaprediti nivo sigurnosti Opatijske rivijere i njenu konkurentnost na turističkom tržištu u budućnosti.
Ključne riječi: bezbednost, proces odlučivanja, turistička destinacija, Opatijska Rivijera

---

1. Introduction

Tourism industry has been registering growth of tourist turnover for years, which made it one of the most developed industries worldwide. Throughout time it has been influenced by various crises, however the strongest one ever so far was actually the pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus. The effects caused by this pandemic have proven quite clearly just how tourism industry actually is sensitive to such type of stimulations. These occurrences placed a challenge on tourist destinations on how to survive on the tourist market (Alkier et al., 2021; Alkier, 2021; Podovac & Milojica, 2021). Fast progress of the development of the pandemic in 2020 had strong effects on the world economy due to the fact that human interaction had to be reduced severely in order to put the spread of the virus under control. Economic indicators have shown a decrease of European Union GDP of 6.6%, and the GDP of the Republic of Croatia decreased 8.4%. According to the UNWTO World Tourism Barometer for 2020, tourism industry registered the worst result ever, a decrease of 1 billion of tourist arrivals (-74%) in comparison to the year before. International tourist revenue also registered a decrease of 1.3 trillion of US dollars in relation to the previous year which is in accordance with the decrease of tourist arrivals (Mikulić et al., 2022 according to Eurostat, 2021 and UNWTO, 2021). Data published by the UNWTO (2023) indicate that in 2022 international tourism registered better results than previously imagined, all as a result of reducing the travel restrictions. Approximatelly over 900 million of tourist arrivals was registered in 2022, a double increase in relation to 2021, although when compared to 2019, there was still a decrease of 37%. Europe registered a total of 585 million of arrivals in 2022, respectively it reached nearly 80% of the arrivals from the pre-pandemic period. However, when compared to 2019, there was still a decrease of 21%. Middle East registered the biggest relative increase among the world regions in 2022 by achieving 83% of tourist arrivals in relation to the pre-pandemic period (in relation to 2019 there was still a decrease of 17%). Africa and both Americas achieved approximately 65% of the international tourist arrivals in relation to the pre-pandemic period, and Asia and the Pacific only 23%. Forecasts for 2023 state the possibility of Europe and Middle East reaching 80-95% international tourist arrivals in relation to the pre-pandemic period. It is expected that in the upcoming period tourists will be searching to experience value for money more than ever before, and that they will be visiting destinations that are closer to home due to the challenging economic environment. Taking into consideration the effects of the pandemic caused by the virus COVID-19 as well as previously stated forecasts, it can be justifiably considered that in the upcoming period tourists will be paying attention more to safety during their stay in a destination, respectively, that safety as an element of a tourist product will be one of the key factors of their decision-making process when deciding where to go on a holiday. In order to achieve success, destination stakeholders need to be aware what safety motives can be of crucial importance when trying to successfully win over the tourists and stimulate them to visit a particular destination. The

purpose of this paper is to determine which are the exact factors that visitors pay attention to when choosing Opatija Riviera as a holiday destination. The paper is structured as follows: after the introduction, the authors will present the theoretical background of the relevance of safety as a motive for tourists when choosing a holiday destination, used methodology, results of the empirical research with a brief discussion, and finally concluding remarks.

2. Theoretical Background

Safety and security in tourism have been an important topic of many research papers in the last couple of decades. The reason why was the actual nature of tourist services by which we mean intangibility, and of course provision of experiences for tourists. The world has experienced numerous crises in the last few decades, but the most recent and most impactful was the one caused by COVID-19 (Alkier, 2022; Preko & Gyepi-Garbrah, 2021) which resulted in tourists changing their way of perception of tourist destinations, traveling and tourism in general (Van Vuuren & Slabbert, 2011; Kesić & Jakeljić, 2012). In order to be able to plan future activities and form developmental strategies for safety improvement in the post-pandemic period, destination stakeholders will have to monitor tourist´s behavior, with a particular accent to determining what are the safety factors that tourists consider important in their decision-making process when choosing a holiday destination. This is supported by the research of Carvache-Franco et al. (ahead-of-print) who focused their research on determining tourist´s motives for traveling in the post-pandemic period, establishing a demand segmentation in the post-pandemic period, and determining the relations between post-pandemic segments and loyalty. The results of their empirical research determined four motivational dimensions in coastal cities of Lima, Peru: novelty & escape, learning and culture, destination safety, and service safety. Two post-pandemic segments that were determined were "safety seekers", respectively tourists who wish to feel during their stay in a tourist destination, and who wish to enjoy the services in a safe way, and "multiple motives" which are motivated by safety, novelty and escape, and learning and culture. Multiple motives have proven to have influence on tourist´s loyalty respectively higher return intentions in the post-pandemic period. Aebli, Volgger, Taplin (2022) focused in their research on determining both motivators and demotivators that influence travel in the period of pandemic caused by COVID-19 virus. The results have shown that primary motives for traveling were socio-psychological needs for achieving mental wellbeing as well as social connections. Furthermore, the results determined health and safety risks, as well as risk of traveling experience being the dominant travel motivators. Balakrishnan Nair & Sinha´ research (2020) emphasized a strong impact of COVID-19 on people´s way of functioning and forced them to adapt to the "New Normal". This had a significant impact on ways how tourists make travel choices. Focus of this research was placed on getting an insight into current ways how tourists make travel decisions, as well as speculations about potential decision-making choices in

the post-pandemic period. Empirical research was aimed on researching destinations selection motivation as well as to determine the differences among travellers when discussing motivators that are based on choosing a holiday destination in post-pandemic period. As a result, three motivators were determined for choosing a holiday destination: accessibility of the destination and getting discounts, health and hygiene, as well as low frequency of incidents caused by the COVID-19 virus. Research results have also shown interrelations among tourist´s history of travelling and previously mentioned motivators for selecting a destination, respectively, it was determined that those tourists who were quarantined for a long period of time were very motivated by accessibility and possibility of a discount, as well as health and hygiene. Also, those tourists who had less travelling experience going abroad have shown greater concerne for the factor of lower incidents caused by the COVID-19 virus. Gupta, Shukla, Pandiya (2022) also emphasize changes in the motives for traveling. Focusing in their research on observing tourist´s motives for traveling in the post-pandemic period, they determined that for tourist the most important factors related to choosing India as a holiday destination are health and hygiene, safety and security, accessibility and connectivity, information about destination, travel risk perception, and value for money. Ivanova, Ivanov & Ivanov (2021) analyzed travel intentions of tourists in the post-pandemic period on the example of Bulgaria. Findings indicated reliable health system, hygiene as well as disinfection being the most relevant factors in the decision-making process of touirsts. Also, female respondents as well as the older respondents have proven to be having higher preferences in terms of health and safety in relation to male and younger respondents.

3. Methodology

Empirical research was conducted in the period from end of August until mid November 2022 by using the structured questionnaire adapted according to the methodology of Alkier (2021). The questionnaire was distributed online through e-mail and social network Facebook. A total of 108 respondents accepted voluntarily to participate in research. The respondents were asked to evaluate the relevance of safety factors when choosing Opatija Riviera as their holiday destination. For the data analysis the authors used the methods of descriptive statistics.

4. Results of the empirical research and discussion

Within this chapter the authors will present the results of the empirical research. Table 1 provides an overview of the basic features of the sample.

The data indicate that the majority of the respondents were female (71,29%), while 26,85% of the respondents were male. One respondent marked belonging to other gender (0,93%), and one respondent expressed the preference of not expressing the belonging to a specific gender (0,93%).

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

Gender	N	%
Male	29	26.85
Female	77	71.29
Other	1	0.93
Prefer not to say	1	0.93
Age	**N**	**%**
up to 17	2	1.85
18-24	27	25.00
25-34	19	17.59
35-44	32	29.63
45-64	27	25.00
65 and more	1	0.93
Level of education	**N**	**%**
High school degree or less	26	24.07
Undergraduate	22	20.37
Graduate and more	60	55.56
Country of your origin	**N**	**%**
Slovenia	20	18.52
Austria	3	2.78
Italy	4	3.70
Bosnia and Herzegovina	15	13.89
Serbia	19	17.59
Northern Macedonia	0	0
Germany	5	4.63
Croatia	41	37.96
Spain	0	0
Portugal	0	0
Poland	1	0.93
Your employment status	**N**	**%**
Employed full time	76	70.37
Employed part time	7	6.48
Temporarily unemployed	0	0
Retired	1	0.93
Student	24	22.22
Your current marital status	**N**	**%**
Unmarried/single	37	34.26
Married	52	48.15
Widowed/Widower	0	0
Separated/Divorced	5	4.63
Domestic partnership	14	12.96
Monthly income (in EUROS)	**N**	**%**
up to 500	20	18.52
501,00-1.000,00	21	19.44
1.001,00-1.500,00	20	18.52
1.501,00-2.000,00	30	27.77
2.001-2.500,00	13	12.04
2.501,00-3.000,00	3	2.78
3.001,00-3.500,00	1	0.93
3.501,00 +7	0	0
Travel frequency	**N**	**%**
Hardly	1	0.93
Rarely	9	8.33
Sometimes	71	65.74
Often	26	24.07
Generally	1	0.93

Source: Authors´ research

In terms of age, most of the respondents belonged to the age group 35-44 (29,63%), followed by 18-24 (25%), 45-64 (25%), 25-34 (17,59%), up to 17 (1,85%) and 65+ years of age (0,93%). When observing the education level, most of the respondents were highly educated (55,56%), 24,07% had a high school diploma or less, and 20,37% had a bachelor´s degree (20,37%). According to the country of origin, most of the respondents from Croatia (37,96%), Slovenia (18,52%), Serbia (17,59%), Bosnia &

Herzegovina (13,89%), Germany (4,63%), Italy (3,70%), Austria (2,78%), and Poland (0,93%). Most of the respondents (70,37%) were fully employed, followed by students (22,22%), part-time employees (6,48%), and retired (0,93%). No temporarily employed respondents were registered. According to the marital status, 48,15% of the respondents were married, 34,26% were unmarried or single, 12,96% live in a domestic partnership, and 4,63% were either separated or divorced. No widowers were registered. The information about the respondent's monthly income in EURO show that 27,77% of the respondents have a monthly income of 1.501,00-2.000,00 EURO, followed by the ones having 501,00-1.000,00 EURO (19,44%), up to 500,00 (18,52%), 1.001,00-1.500,00 (18,52%), 2.001-2.500,00 (12,04%), 2.501,00-3.000,00 (2,78%), and only 0,93% have a monthly income of 3.001,00-3.500,00 EURO. No respondents were marked having a monthly income of 3.501,00 +. When observing the frequency of traveling, most respondents travel sometimes (65,74%), 24,07% often, and 8,33% of the respondents travel rarely.

Table 2. Relevance of factors when choosing Opatija Riviera as a holiday destination

Factors	$\overline{x}$	SD
Low level of risk of infection with the coronavirus ("green region")	3.77	4.50
The possibility of simple testing for coronavirus in the destination	3.89	3.91
Possibility of social distancing	2.84	6.23
Organization of health insurance and protection of tourists in the destination	3.96	3.52
Information available to the guests before their arrival at the destination about the criteria for entering the country (in accordance with epidemiological measures)	3.98	3.46
Information available to guests about the general safety in a destination	4.01	3.38
Communication between the service provider and the guest	4.14	3.49
The possibility of canceling reservations free of charge	3.71	4.05

Source: Authors´ research

Following the respondents were asked to evaluate the relevance of the offered critetia when choosing Opatija Riviera as a holiday destination with a mark 1 to 5 (1-extremely irrelevant, 2-irrelevant, 3-neutral, 4-relevant, 5-extremely relevant). The highest results were registered for the relevance of tourists being able to communicate with the service provider ($\overline{x}$ 4,14 SD 3,49) and well as tourists being informed about the general safety in a destination ($\overline{x}$ 4,01 SD 3,38). This indicates tourists showing a high level of responsibility considering that they wish to have a normal open communication with the service providers and know how their tourist services will be provided to them. This is also in accordance with the tourist´s interest for information about general level of safety in a destination which can be interpreted by the possibility that in this case we dealt with the first timers who did not stay in Opatija Riviera before, and the destination as such was possibly unknown to them. Tourists also expressed a relatively high interest in learning about the criteria for entering the country before arriving at the destination (whether the entry is in accordance with epidemiological measures in the sense of requiring the proof of having a negative test on COVID-19 virus) ($\overline{x}$ 3,98 SD 3,36), as well as how health insurance and protection of tourists are organized during their stay in the destination ($\overline{x}$ 3,96 SD 3,52) which also indicates that they show interest for their health protection in the case of need. This is in accordance with their interest for learning the information about being able to do a simple test for coronavirus during their stay in a destination ($\overline{x}$ 3,89 SD 3,91) (which is not surprising considering that simple tests can be found easily in a local pharmacy and due to the simplicity of the actual test, tourists can do the test by themselves if they find it necessary, or they can search for a professional to do it for them and issue them a certificate if it is necessary before traveling home). A bit lower mark was given for the information if a destination is a "green region" respectively whether there is a low level of risk of infecting themselves with the coronavirus

($\overline{x}$ 3,77 SD 4,50) and the possibility of free canceling of reservations ($\overline{x}$ 3,71 SD 4,05). Possibility of social distancing was marked as the factor that is the least relevant for the respondents when choosing Opatija Riviera as a holiday destination ($\overline{x}$ 2,84 SD 6,23) which can be interpreted that tourists are not so bothered with keeping the distance among themselves.

5. Concluding remarks

The focus of this study was placed on determining what safety factors do tourists take into consideration when choosing Opatija Riviera as a holiday destination in a post-covid period. The results have indicated quite clearly that tourists who wish to visit Opatija Riviera pay a significant interest to good communication with the service providers in a destination about the actual provision of the tourist services during their, as well as general information about the safety in a destination and the criteria for entering the country before going on a journey. Bearing in mind these high marks, it is the author´s opinion that in the upcoming period attention will have to be placed on active improvements, where necessary, in communication with a goal of providing tourists high quality of information provided in a sincere manner, since this represents an important pre-condition for establishing trust among guests and service providers. They showed an interest for organization of health insurance and health protection during their stay, and ability of doing a simple test for COVID, which indicates that destination management will have to pay attention to this in order to be able to meet their needs for safety. During their stay, tourists can also be exposed to various situations like car accidents, fights, medical situations (asthma attacks, allergic reactions to inhalation or alimentary allergens or insect stings (bees, wasps, etc.), problems related to cardiovascular system, or any other chronic health problems). In these situations, it is normal that they wish to sense safe and know that they have

someone to go to for help. Information whether Opatija Riviera belongs to the "green region" has proven to be moderately important which is somewhat in accordance with the result for social distancing when choosing Opatija Riviera. In the upcoming period Opatija Riviera will have to focus further actions in safety improvement in order to remain competitive on the tourist market.

References

Aebli, A., Volgger, M. & Taplin, R. (2022). A two-dimensional approach to travel motivation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Current Issues in Tourism*, *25*(1), 60-75. https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2021.1906631

Alkier, R. (2021). Tourism Safety Challenges after the COVID-19 Pandemic. In G. Nikolić (Ed.), *PAR International Scientific and Professional Leadership Conference PILC 2021 Leadership after COVID-19* (pp. 115-128). PAR University College Rijeka.

Alkier, R., Okičić, J. & Milojica, V. (2022). Factors of tourists' perceived safety in the post covid period: the case of Opatija riviera. In M. Laškarin Ažić & M. Cerović (Eds.). *26th International congress Tourism and hospitality industry 2022 Trends and challenges Congress proceedings* (pp. 1-16). Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management Opatija, University of Rijeka. https://doi.org//10.20867/thi.26.13

Alkier, Romina; Mitrović, Đorđe; Milojica, Vedran. Presentation of the state of Croatian tourism in the conditions caused by COVID-19 Pandemic. In T. Đukić, D. Radenković Jocić (Eds.), I*nternational Scientific Conference Emerging Trends in Global and National Economy: Proceedings of the International Scientific Conference* (pp. 147-158). Faculty of Economics, University of Niš.

Bipithalal Balakrishnan N. & Satyajit S. (2020). COVID-19 and Future Travel Decisions: How do the Destination-Choice-Based Motivators Redefine Tourist's Choices?, *Enlightening Tourism. A Pathmaking Journal*, *10*(2), 306-322. https://doi.org/10.33776/et.v10i2.4919

Carvache-Franco, M., Alvarez-Risco, A., Carvache-Franco, W., Carvache-Franco, O. and Del-Aguila-Arcentales, S. (2022). Post-COVID-19 pandemic motivations and segmentation in coastal cities: a study in Lima, Peru, *Journal of Tourism Futures*. Ahead-of-print. https://doi.org/10.1108/JTF-09-2021-0219

Eurostat. (2021). *Real GDP growth rate-volume*. Eurostat database (NAMA_10_GDP,NAMA_10_PC). https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tec00115/default/table?lang=en

Gupta, S., Shukla, V., Pandiya, B. (2022). Tourists' motivation towards destination visit intention post-pandemic: scale development and validation. *International Journal of Tourism Policy*, *12*(2), 160-178. https://doi.org/10.1504/IJTP.2022.122234

Ivanova, M., Ivanov, I.K. & Ivanov, S. (2021). Travel behaviour after the pandemic: the case of Bulgaria, *Anatolia*, *32*(1), 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1080/13032917.2020.1818267

Kesić, T. & Jakeljić, M. (2012). The Influence of Determining Factors on Touristic Destination Image. *Ekonomski Pregled*, *63*(9-10), 486-517.

Mikulić, D., Keček, D., & Žajdela Hrustek, N. (2023). Effects of COVID-19 on Adriatic and Continental Croatia tourism: a regional input-output perspective. *Economic Research-Ekonomska Istraživanja*, *36*(2), 2142811. https://doi.org/10.1080/1331677X.2022.2142811

Podovac, M. & Milojica, V. (2022). Determining the travel risk perception and travel behavior of Serbian residents during the post- pandemic period. In D. Cvijanović (Ed.), *7th Tourism International Scientific Conference. The Seventh International Scientific Conference - The future of tourism: Thematic Proceedings,* (pp. 448-466). Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja, University of Kragujevac. https://doi.org/10.52370/TISC22448MP

Preko, A. & Gyepi-Garbrah, T.F. (2021). Understanding sense of safety and trustworthiness of tourism information among migrant visitors. *International Hospitality Review*. Ahead-of-print, 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1108/IHR-04-2021-0029

UNWTO. (2023, January). *World Tourism Barometer Volume 21, Issue 1*. https://webunwto.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2023-01/UNWTO_Barom23_01_January_EXCERPT.pdf?VersionId=_2bbK5GIwk5KrBGJZt5iNPAGnrWoH8NB

Van Vuuren, C.; Slabbert, E. (2011). Travel Motivations and Behaviour of Tourists to a South African Resort. *Tourism & Management Studies*, 1, 295-304.