The Positive Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Tourism: A Case Study of the Ribnica Destination

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Abstract: Our analysis aimed to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism industry, with a focus on smaller and less well-known destinations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the world came to a near standstill, and the tourism industry suffered its most significant decline in history. Despite this, there remained a desire for some forms of tourism, and many well-known tourist destinations had already adapted or integrated new routes for visitors even before the pandemic. However, smaller and less well-known destinations were unable to do so due to a lack of funds. In light of these challenges, Ribnica has taken proactive steps to adapt to the pandemic and implement positive methods to support its tourism industry. During the pandemic, Ribnica developed a new tourism strategy, updated its tourist image, and introduced new products to attract visitors. Additionally, Ribnica has integrated tourism best practices to maintain the safety of visitors and locals during the pandemic. It is worth noting that while Ribnica’s efforts have been successful in attracting visitors during a challenging time for the tourism industry, the pandemic has had an overwhelmingly negative impact on travel destinations worldwide. Thus, it is essential to continue implementing positive strategies and best practices to support the recovery and growth of the tourism industry.

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on the tourism industry worldwide, causing a significant slowdown. However, some destinations, like Ribnica, used the pandemic period as an opportunity to implement good practices aimed at reviving tourism.

The objective of our research is to address three main questions:
1. What positive effects did the COVID-19 pandemic have on travel destinations globally?
2. How did Ribnica adopt and implement positive methods to mitigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. In what ways did the integration of best tourism practices benefit Ribnica in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic?

We utilized various online platforms, including Google Scholar, Google Browser, and YouTube, to search for relevant academic articles, industry reports, and expert opinions. The criteria for selecting sources included publication date, relevance, and credibility. Through this analysis, we were able to identify key trends, challenges, and opportunities facing the tourism industry in the aftermath of the pandemic.
2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Through our research, we discovered several articles that explore the positive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism industry. One such article, titled “Coronavirus has changed the travel industry. Here’s how it might have a positive impact,” highlights the pandemic’s positive impact on nature. The authors discuss how improved water quality and increased wildlife sightings are among the positive outcomes of reduced human activity during the pandemic. Additionally, carbon emissions have decreased due to decreased travel and transportation (Kinsman, 2020).

Another paper we analyzed, titled “Positive and negative impact of COVID-19 virus on tourism,” explores the contrasting positive and negative effects of the pandemic on the tourism industry. The authors discuss how lockdown measures have led to an increase in domestic travel, including nature-based tourism, and have stimulated national tourism in some regions (Briconiu et al., 2020).

The lockdowns and travel limitations imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a significant increase in domestic tourism, leading to an uptick in tourist flow to domestic destinations. This shift in travel patterns has led to the emergence of new tourist destinations and has changed the image of existing destinations. Furthermore, the pandemic has led to a sudden increase in family outings to nature-based tourism, driving growth in rural and agro-tourism. This trend has coincided with an increase in health, travel, communication, shopping, and sanitation standards to ensure the safety and comfort of tourists and visitors (Chiranjib, 2022).

Moreover, the pandemic has led to a greater awareness of nature, culture, and ecology, promoting the conservation of biodiversity and discouraging the trade of wild animals. Additionally, there has been a push to promote organic products and change the eating habits of tourists. Overall, the pandemic has stimulated domestic and national tourism, encouraging a greater appreciation for local destinations and the unique experiences they offer. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a decrease in the purchasing power of tourists, with many opting to forego long trips and destinations due to financial constraints. Additionally, the pandemic has caused a sense of fear and anxiety, leading to what some researchers have termed “tourist psychosis.” (Chiranjib, 2022)

Furthermore, the pandemic has led to visibly slow exports and job losses in the unorganized tourism and alternative accommodation sector, which has been hit hard by the decrease in tourism. The negative impact on the balance of payments has been compounded by the increase in domestic tourism, which has not compensated for the loss of revenue from international tourism.

Overall, while the pandemic has had some positive effects on the tourism industry, it has also had negative effects, particularly in terms of the financial impact on tourists, job losses, and the negative impact on cultural diversity and international relations (United Nations Environment Programme, 2020).

In the scholarly article titled “Tourism Sustainability and COVID-19 Pandemic: Is There a Positive Side?”, it is evident that the pandemic has instigated transformative thinking among tourism experts in terms of surpassing ecological thresholds, addressing climate change, and mitigating socio-cultural strains, arising from current economic systems that generate significant disparities and unfairness. The prevalence of such transformative perspectives in academia is also a favorable outcome of the pandemic, which can lead to the discovery of methods and mechanisms to guarantee the comprehensive sustainable development of tourism (Seabra & Bhat, 2022).
In the paper titled “Strategy for the Sustainable Development of Tourism in the Municipality of Ribnica 2022-2028,” it is evident that Ribnica has aligned its tourism strategy with contemporary global trends (picture 1), emphasizing the significant inclusion of boutique tourism and sports tourism in nature in its offerings. The strategy outlines that in 2019, a total of 3,808 overnight stays were recorded in the Ribnica area, while by the tenth month of 2022, there have already been 3,013 overnight stays, reflecting a positive trend towards increased tourism in the region (Novak & Marn, 2022).

During the pandemic, Tourism Ribnica developed new guidelines for the sustainable development of tourism in Ribnica, which were categorized into four sections: traditional, cultural, green, and active tourism (Picture 1). These categories were combined to create a unique, locally-experienced tourism product.

Picture 1. Trip ideas - tourism packages.
Source: Turizem Ribnica, n. d.

Picture 2. The awards ceremony of the “My Country - Beautiful and Hospitable 2022” competition
Source: TZS, 2022.
In the article “Awards ceremony of the competition ‘My country - beautiful and hospitable 2022’” we can observe that the Municipality of Ribnica has been recognized for the first time with the 3rd place award among smaller tourist towns. The competition was conducted via a survey on the website of the Tourist Chamber of Slovenia.

In Picture 2, we can see Mrs. Tina Peček, the director of the Ribnica Handicraft Center, accepting the award on behalf of Tourism Ribnica.

The local tourism agencies have also adapted to the current trend of nature tourism, as demonstrated in the above image of a local travel agency promoting wildlife (Picture 3) viewing experiences in natural habitats.

In the article “Move Over, Sustainable Travel. Regenerative Travel Has Arrived.,” it is explained that the pre-pandemic mass tourism has resulted in nature recovering and reviving during the pandemic. Therefore, sustainable tourism is considered the most suitable for further development, and a new trend called “regenerative travel” has emerged, which aims to leave a positive impact on both the environment and local communities (Glusac, 2021).

In the video “Turizem Ribnica” available on YouTube (https://youtu.be/O9_-1f8ZuLg), it is evident that the Municipality of Ribnica has invested significant time and resources in a new, more locally-focused, and sustainable tourism campaign. The video showcases the tourism strategy that emphasizes green boutique tourism, sports tourism, such as hiking and cycling, and cultural tourism. It also features the production of “SUHA ROBA,” a traditional wooden product of Ribnica.
It can be observed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of overnight stays in Ribnica was significantly lower. For instance, in August 2020, which is typically the busiest month for tourism, there were only 431 overnight stays recorded. However, after the pandemic, the number of overnight stays almost doubled in the same month in 2021, with the total number of overnight stays reaching 790. This represents an increase of over 50% compared to the previous year (Statistical Office RS, n. d.).

3. RESULTS - ANSWERING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following results were obtained in response to the research questions:

Research question 1: What is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism in Ribnica?
The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on tourism in Ribnica. In August 2020, which is considered the peak month for tourism, there were only 431 overnight stays, a sharp decline compared to previous years. However, in August 2021, the number of overnight stays almost doubled to 790, representing a more than 50% increase from the previous year.

Research question 2: How has tourism in Ribnica changed in response to the pandemic?
In response to the pandemic, Tourism Ribnica developed new guidelines for the development of tourism in Ribnica. The guidelines were divided into four sections: traditional, cultural, green, and active tourism. The local tourist agencies have also adapted to the new trend of nature tourism, promoting activities such as wildlife viewing. The municipality has invested in a new, more local and greener tourism campaign, with a focus on green boutique tourism, sports tourism, and cultural tourism.

Research question 3: What is the potential for sustainable tourism in Ribnica?
There is significant potential for sustainable tourism in Ribnica, given the municipality’s investment in green tourism and the natural resources available in the region. Regenerative tourism has been identified as a viable approach to ensure the sustainable development of tourism in the area. Furthermore, Ribnica was recognized in the Moja Dežela – Lepa in Gostoljubna 2022 competition, receiving 3rd place for smaller tourist towns, indicating a positive trend towards sustainable tourism.

4. CONCLUSION

After researching the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism, it has been observed that there are several positive impacts of the pandemic on the industry.

Although there have been both positive and negative effects, the positive impacts outweigh the negative ones. These include the promotion of organic products, rural environments, sports tourism, improving health, biodiversity, and promoting regional tourism.

In the post-pandemic period, the main areas of tourism development are traditional, green, cultural, local, and active tourism. Local tourism agencies have successfully adapted to these new guidelines, as demonstrated by Gizmo Tourism’s offer to see wild animals in nature, which promotes green, carbon-free tourism and encourages the local community.

The Municipality of Ribnica is an example of a region that has followed the new tourism strategy after the pandemic, incorporating the new guidelines and steadily increasing its presence,
earning the visit and overnight stays of tourists, as well as recognition from the Tourist Association of Slovenia for being a hospitable and well-organized small town.

In the future, it would be beneficial to obtain local statistics to compare the changes in the development of tourism guidelines at an international level.

References


Additional reading
