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RURAL GUESTHOUSE ATTRACTIVENESS IN CROATIA: A PILOT ANALYSIS USING A MULTICRITERIA APPROACH

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Abstract

The Croatian tourism sector is strongly oriented towards the coastal regions and follows the proven model of "sun and sea". Rural guesthouses, as a new type of tourism offer run by family farms, are a promising way to diversify the Croatian tourism portfolio and revitalize the rural economy. This study introduces a methodological framework for evaluating rural guesthouse attractiveness using a multi-criteria decision-making (MCDM) approach. The model, tested on a pilot sample of five rural guesthouses in continental Croatia, incorporates expert assessments of five key criteria—location, price, equipment, environmental sustainability, and additional services along with 21 sub-criteria. The research assumes that multi-criteria methods provide a clear and systematic way to assess attractiveness and examines the role of price, recognizing that lower prices do not necessarily make a facility more appealing. Findings confirm the usefulness of MCDM for structured evaluation and show that location and equipment rank higher than price. Rather than relying on generic lists of attractiveness factors, the approach identifies and prioritizes key elements that could enhance a guesthouse's appeal to tourists.

Keywords: rural tourism, guesthouse, multicriteria decision making, Croatia

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is an exceptionally important economic sector for Croatia. According to the Croatian National Bank (CNB, 2023), tourism accounted for 19.4 % of Croatia's total gross domestic product (GDP) in 2022, which is by far the largest share in the EU. Unfortunately, the development of tourism is unevenly distributed, both territorially and seasonally. Most tourists spend their vacations in the coastal regions of Croatia, enjoying the sunny weather and beaches, especially between June and August. In other Croatian regions, tourism is still sporadic and underdeveloped compared to the tourism potential of the rural parts of continental Croatia.

A rural area is an area where the natural landscape and traditional way of life predominate. These areas are located outside the cities in the countryside and can be agricultural areas, small towns, villages and the like. Rural areas are often underdeveloped and have a poor economic

and demographic situation. This is also the case in Croatia. To further develop rural areas, one of the drivers of their development is rural tourism, which has gained increasing economic importance in recent years as a form of sustainable economic activity to strengthen rural areas. Diversification into the service sector, especially rural tourism, offers a way to revitalize rural communities. Croatia's natural beauty and cultural heritage make it a prime location for successful rural tourism initiatives. This promotes sustainable development by encouraging the responsible use of these resources, achieving a critical balance between economic prosperity and environmental health (Ćurčić et al., 2021).

Rural guesthouses are accommodation establishments in rural areas that are usually run by family farms. According to the Regulation on the Register of Family Farms (Official Gazette 62/2019), these establishments are among the tourist and gastronomic activities that can be offered by farmers in Croatia.

The question of what attracts a tourist to destination or accommodation unit is an issue of relevance in tourism research for decades. Numerous studies have aimed to identify the determinants of competitiveness and attractiveness, such as the location attractiveness, richness of cultural issues, price, authenticity of experience, hospitality and quality of service (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Crouch, 2011). In rural tourism specifically, tradition, heritage and environmental impact are also significant factors that shape tourists' perceptions (Kastenholz et al., 2012). A few studies show that price is one of the key factors in the attractiveness of tourist destinations. Hefny (2023) finds that tourist arrivals strongly depend on price competitiveness, while evidence from European countries (Radukić et al., 2023) confirms that travelers compare relative prices across destinations when deciding where to go. It is to be expected that accommodation price will be an important determinant of the attractiveness of rural guesthouses in Croatia, given that the purchasing power of domestic tourists is still lower compared to the EU average. However, the sensitivity of rural tourism to price and income fluctuations is lower compared to mass tourism, according to Muñoz (2007, as cited in Fichter and Román, 2023). It is therefore reasonable to assume that price will not constitute the primary determinant of the attractiveness of rural accommodation facilities.

In Croatia, rural guesthouses do not have a long-standing tradition, so their owners often have limited knowledge about which factors most strongly influence their attractiveness to tourists and to what extent these factors justify accommodation pricing.

Despite numerous studies identifying factors influencing tourism attractiveness, the existing literature rarely quantifies the relative importance of these factors for rural guesthouses or provides structured models for comparing alternative facilities. Previous research largely relies

on descriptive lists of attributes and lacks methodological frameworks for ranking rural accommodation options. Furthermore, the Croatian context remains underexplored, particularly regarding how non-price attributes contribute to the perceived attractiveness of rural guesthouses. In this context, application of Multi-Criteria Decision-Making (MCDM) methods offers a disciplined and systematic way to fill this gap.

The aim of this study is to develop and demonstrate a multi-criteria evaluation model for assessing the attractiveness of rural guesthouses and to test its applicability using a pilot sample of accommodation facilities in continental Croatia.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Croatia's accession to the European Union (EU) in 2013 brought changes to the country's economy, including progress in rural development. While coastal tourism remains crucial to the Croatian economy, contributing around 19.4 % to Croatia's gross domestic product (CNB, 2023), the tourism offer has diversified in recent decades. This includes the development of sectors such as rural tourism, health tourism and transit tourism (Grgić, 2017). The universal definition of rural tourism is still the subject of ongoing debate, with no agreed definition yet (Pearce, 1989; Bramwell, 1994; Seaton et al., 1994, de Sousa and Kastenholz, 2018). Rosalina et al. (2021) conducted a literature review that included 125 academic and professional references in the field of rural tourism. They found that only 36% of the articles studied explicitly defined rural tourism, while the rest conceptualized rural tourism without providing a definition. One way to better understand what rural tourism means is to describe the range of tourism products and services offered in rural areas.

This study focuses on rural guesthouses, a type of accommodation in non-urban areas. These guesthouses, usually run by local family farms, offer tourists unique and authentic experiences. According to the Regulation on the Classification and Categorization of Establishments Providing Hospitality Services on Family Farms (Official Gazette 54/16), a rural guest house is an establishment where a family farm provides accommodation and use of the farmyard and is equipped to allow guests to prepare and eat their own food.

Joshi et al. (2024) conducted a meta-analysis in the field of rural tourism, which included 78 selected scientific publications after careful selection. Among other things, the authors identified the predominant themes. The analysis led to the identification of 10 main themes of which 27% are focused on the study of tourist preferences and aimed to understand the factors

that influence tourists' choices and desires. Choosing a destination is a complex process that often requires time and careful consideration for tourists (Kyriakaki et al., 2020). Tourists choose a destination based on a variety of factors that influence their decision-making process. These factors can be categorized into several key aspects, including personal preferences, travel motivations, destination characteristics, accessibility, and external influences (Jansen-Verbeke, 1986; Ritchie and Crouch, 2003; Vareiro and Ribeiro, 2005; Li, M., & Cai, L. A., 2012; Seyidov and Adomaitienė, 2016). Many authors have divided the destination decision factors and analyzed them as "push and pull" factors". "Push" factors are those that encourage tourists to leave their familiar surroundings and take a trip. These can be factors such as: Boredom or routine in everyday life, the desire for relaxation and recreation, the need for adventure and new experiences, the desire to get to know other cultures and sights. “Pull" factors are factors that attract tourists to a particular destination. These can be factors such as natural beauty of the destination, climatic conditions, cultural offerings and attractions, availability and infrastructure, prices and accommodation options. The decision for a vacation destination is usually the result of a combination of "push" and "pull" factors. Analyzing push and pull factors in isolation without considering the broader context of Expectancy-Value Theory limits our understanding of their influence on decision-making (Crompton and Petrick, 2024). Expectancy-value theory (Vroom, 1964) states that people choose vacation destinations based on their expectations of how well the outcomes will match their desired needs. Taking the Romanian region of Vrancea as an example, Stănilă and Barbu (2016) conclude that the possibility of hiking in the park, relaxing while admiring the surrounding landscape, visiting historical and cultural destinations, and making the cost of accommodation and food affordable, but also getting to know a new area, are, in roughly equal parts, the factors that determine the choice of a tourist location. Albaladejo-Pina & Díaz-Delfa (2009) used discrete choice modeling to identify the factors that influence tourists' preferences for staying in rural guesthouses in the Region of Murcia, Spain. The authors identify several factors that influence the attractiveness of rural guesthouses. These include traditional architectural style, location in the countryside, number of rooms, possession of the 'Q' quality certificate and the possibility of renting horses. In addition, certain features can increase the attractiveness for certain groups of tourists. For example, families with children might be attracted to properties with a mini-farm, while frequent travelers might prefer the flexibility of booking single rooms. On the other hand, sharing a bathroom could be a disadvantage for some guests. The fact that the house is a new

building, located in an orchard or only rented as a whole house can also have a different impact depending on individual preferences.

Effective methods for upgrading individual destinations at the level of pull factors are multi-criteria decision analysis (MCDA) methods. They have the advantage that they do not negate the often-contradictory selection criteria, but integrate them into a logical, hierarchical model. The databases of scientific works contain numerous studies on this topic whose authors have used one of the multi-criteria methods in the evaluation of tourist destinations. Botti and Peypoch (2013) state that their application of the multi-criteria ELECTRE method for the purpose of comparative assessment of four Hawaiian Islands is the first application of ELECTRE I in this area. Göksu and Kaya (2014) used the Fuzzy Analytic Hierarchy Process to compare six tourism destinations in Bosnia and Herzegovina. When analyzing 13 tourism destinations in four cities in Turkey using multi-criteria AHP and TOPSIS methods, Önder et al. (2013) identified "safety and security", "health and hygiene" and "price" as the three most important criteria in provider selection. Ali et al. (2012) present a fuzzy MCDM approach for evaluating social attributes of Malaysian islands. Their results show that the two most important aspects for a destination are attractiveness (0.331) and environment (0.254), while the least important aspect is souvenir (0.013). Rozman et al. (2009) used a combination of questionnaires and expert brainstorming to create a DEXi multi-criteria model for the evaluation of service quality at seven tourist farms in Slovenia. Prevolšek et al. (2023) analyzed the efficiency of a sample of 45 tourism farms from different regions of Slovenia using a combination of Data Envelopment Analysis (DEA) and Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP).

The hypotheses of this research are: (a) multi-criteria methods allow a simple and explicit assessment of the attractiveness of rural guesthouses, (b) accommodation price is an important determinant of rural guesthouse attractiveness; however, lower-priced facilities are not necessarily perceived by experts as more attractive.

DATA AND METHODS

In 2017, the Croatian Ministry of Economy published a guide describing a step-by-step procedure for selecting the most economically advantageous tender in public procurement (MEAT). In this article, we adapt this procedure, which is based on multi-criteria decision analysis, for the evaluation of most economically advantageous private business projects. Specifically, we use the same framework to evaluate rural guesthouses on the Croatian

mainland, considering both price and non-price attractiveness factors. To do so, an approach based on an Additive Value Function (AVF) was used. The AVF applies a weighted scoring system where each alternative receives a score for each award criterion and the criteria themselves have different levels of importance (Lehtonen and Virtanen, 2022).
This can be represented by the following formula:

$$V(x) = \sum_{i=1}^{n} w_i v_i(x_i)$$

where
$V(x)$ is the overall value (or score) of alternative x,
n is the total number of criteria considered in the evaluation,
w_i is the weight of criterion i, representing its relative importance,
$v_i(x_i)$ is the partial value function of award criterion i, and
x_i is the performance (or measurement level) of alternative x on the scale of criterion i.

Two similar multi-criteria methods based on AVF were used in the paper - Simple Multi-Attribute Rating Technique (SMART) and Fixed-Point Allocation. SMART was developed by Edwards in 1971 and is used in this study to evaluate the criteria for rural guest houses. It is classified as a compensatory method, meaning that strong performance on one criterion can compensate for weaker performance on another. The SMART technique is based on the Multi-Attribute Utility Theory (MAUT). It uses a simple scoring system in which each factor (e.g. location or price) is scored from 0 to 100 points depending on its importance. The total score for an option is then calculated by adding up the weighted scores for each factor. In Fixed-Point Allocation weighting method, the decision maker assigns the weights directly by assigning a predetermined sum of points to the options (Zardari et al., 2015). A higher point allocation means that a sub-criterion is more important. In the study, the fixed point allocation method was used to assess the relative importance of the sub-criteria. Experts allocated 15 points to three groups of sub-criteria and 10 points within another group.

In the introduction, there is some research given which listed criteria for assessing the attractiveness of a tourist destination. Additionally, the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (2019) identified 38 factors that characterize a tourist destination. Having so many criteria make it difficult to ensure accuracy and consistency in using MCDM (Pamučar et al., 2018).

In this study, five main criteria were selected to measure the attractiveness of rural accommodation: location, price, equipment, environmental sustainability, and additional

services. These criteria were selected because previous research consistently highlights them as key factors influencing tourist decisions. Studies emphasize the importance of *location* (Crouch, 2011; Dwyer & Kim, 2003), *price competitiveness* (Hefny, 2023; Martin, 2014; Radukić et al., 2023), *facility equipment* (Albaladejo-Pina & Díaz-Delfa, 2009), *environmental sustainability* practices (GSTC, 2019; de Sousa & Kastenholz, 2018), and the added value of tradition and heritage in the form of *additional services* (Kastenholz et al., 2012).

In addition to strong support in the literature, these criteria frequently appear in the descriptions and offers of rural guesthouses on specialized booking platforms, confirming their practical importance for the evaluation model.

Each of these criteria was further divided into sub-criteria, 21 in total. The selection of sub-criteria was guided by their frequency in rural tourism literature and their consistent presence in booking platform descriptions, ensuring both scientific grounding and practical relevance. Since expert-based evaluation in the MCDM approach is, to some degree, dependent on subjectivity, highly arbitrary considerations such as host friendliness were excluded from the model.

Eight experts from the rural tourism sector took part in the group decision using the SMART multi-criteria decision-making method. Among them were four university experts specialized in rural tourism. The other four experts were the head of the Tourist Board of the Northwest Croatia region, the head of the Local Action Group (LAG) responsible for rural tourism development in the local administration, a representative of a rural development consultancy and the owner of a rural guesthouse (his rural guesthouse is not one of those evaluated in this paper).

Five rural guesthouses from different parts of Croatia that offer their services on the Booking.com platform were selected for the MCDM assessment. To ensure comparability, the following filters were applied: price per night in June 2024 between 150 and 300 euros, a minimum guest rating of 9.0, and suitability for a family of four (two adults and two children). The selected guesthouses do not represent a statistically representative sample of rural tourism facilities in Croatia, but rather a purposive pilot sample chosen to test the applicability of the developed MCDM model. The guesthouses were located within approximately 100 km of each other to minimize the influence of differing climatic, geographic, and environmental conditions on the evaluation. Additionally, the selection was limited by the availability of publicly

accessible information on environmental sustainability, which is still provided by only a small number of facilities in Croatia.

RESULTS

Selected Rural Guesthouses

Ninety-five (95) rural guesthouses on the Croatian mainland matched the search filters set on Booking.com. Five of them were specifically selected to provide information on all review criteria in the description of their offer. To avoid a promotional tone in this article, their names are not mentioned in this research. Instead, they are referred to as Rural Guesthouse (1-5)

Rural Guesthouse 1 (RGH 1)

The house is located in Međimurje County, has a total area of 150 square meters and has a garden and terrace, has 3 bedrooms, a separate kitchen and living room, and a bathroom with toilet. Near the house there is volleyball and handball court, adrenaline park, sports park Kerman, street workout and labyrinth of love. Zagreb airport is 83 km away. The house has been awarded the level 2 label for sustainable travel by Booking and has the European Ecolabel certificate (the official eco-label of the European Union). The house uses solar energy, offers homemade organic products, is built from natural materials - mainly wood - and recycles waste. Additional services offered to visitors include free breakfast and a transportation service. The price per night is € 285.

Rural guesthouse 2 (RGH 2)

Like the previous one, this rural guesthouse is located in Međimurje County, has an area of 350 square metres and consists of 3 bedrooms, a kitchen, a dining room and a bathroom. The house is located 2.6 km from the thermal baths and 109 km from Franjo Tuđman Airport in Zagreb. There are two restaurants and a park near the guesthouse. The facility has been awarded the level 2 sustainable travel label by Booking. There are special containers for recycling waste in the property. The guesthouse has air conditioning in all units, a coffee machine and dishwasher in the kitchen and offers a grocery delivery service and a transportation service. The price per night is €194.

Rural guesthouse 3 (RGH 3)

This guesthouse is located in Zagreb County, 35 minutes by car from Zagreb. The surface of the house is 150 square metres and it contains 3 bedrooms, a living room, 3 bathrooms and a

kitchen. The entire facility is air-conditioned. The house has a garden and a terrace with outdoor dining area. There is a restaurant in the complex that offers local traditional dishes. There are also two cafés near the house. There is also a handball court and many adrenaline and sports parks. The guesthouse uses solar energy, is built from natural materials and recycles waste. It also offers a grocery delivery service, free breakfast and a transportation service. The price per night is €150.

Rural guesthouse 4 (RGH 4)

Like the previous one, this rural guesthouse is located in Zagreb County. Has an area of 110 square meters and consists of 2 bedrooms, 3 bathrooms, a dining room and a fully equipped kitchen. The house has an outdoor pool, a garden with a fireplace and barbecue equipment. The nearest airport is Zagreb Airport, 34 km away. The house has been awarded the label for sustainable travel level 1, recycles waste, and natural materials were used in its construction. The house also offers a transportation service and has a dishwasher and coffee machine. The price per night is € 213.

Rural guesthouse 5 (RGH 5)

This rural guesthouse in Varaždin County is about 240 years old and has been renovated in the old style using natural materials. The house has an area of 50 square meters and consists of 1 bedroom, living room, kitchen and bathroom. The house has a garden with an outdoor dining area and a terrace. Nearby there is a well-organized arboretum, two playgrounds and a handball court. The house has a hydromassage bath and is air-conditioned. It also offers a shuttle service and has a coffee machine and dishwasher. The price per night is € 203.

Development of a multi-criteria model for the evaluation of a rural guesthouse

As is common in multi-criteria decision problems, the model used to determine the problem of evaluating and ranking rural guesthouses is based on a hierarchical structure with a certain number of criteria and sub-criteria. Five key criteria for comparison are indicated as:

- Price per night (C1)
- Location of the facility (C2)
- Equipment of the facility (C3)
- Environmental sustainability of the facility (C4)
- Additional services offered at the facility (C5)

The following table shows the individual ratings of the eight experts, the average rating of the group and the normalized weights of the evaluation criteria of the rural guesthouses. The following formula was used for normalization:

$$w_i = \frac{average\ c_i}{\sum_{i=1}^{n} C_i}$$

where

wi is normalized weight of criteria i,

average ci is an average points of criteria i.

$\sum_{i=1}^{n} C_i$ is the sum of the average scores of all n criteria

Table 1 Experts' ratings and normalized weights of the evaluation criteria for rural houses

	Price per night (C_1)	Location (C_2)	Equipment (C_3)	Environ. sustainability (C_4)	Additional services (C_5)
Expert 1	90	100	80	50	80
Expert 2	70	100	90	50	60
Expert 3	90	95	100	70	90
Expert 4	80	100	80	20	60
Expert 5	95	100	85	50	65
Expert 6	60	85	100	60	85
Expert 7	60	85	100	45	55
Expert 8	100	100	60	40	45
Average Points	80.6	95.6	86.9	48.1	67.5
Normalized weights	0.21	0.25	0.23	0.13	0.18

Each of the qualitative criteria (C2-C5) included several sub-criteria for comparison. The importance of the sub-criteria is determined by the method of Point Allocation.

For the location criterion (C2) there is a maximum of 15 points, which are distributed according to the criteria listed in the following table.

Table 2 Sub-criteria for the assessment of Location of the facility (C2)

Distance of Rural guesthouse to:	*less than*	*Points*
Airport	20 km	3
City	10 km	3
Sea, river or lake	10 km	3
Nature park and/or National park	20 km	2
Cultural sights	10 km	2
Park/Playground for children/Sports field	5 km	1
Restaurant	2 km	1
Total		**15**

The same approach was used to structure the sub-criteria that make up the criterion "Equipment of the facility (C3)". Five sub-criteria were used for this purpose, to which points were assigned according to their estimated importance for the selection of visitors.

Table 3 Sub-criteria for the assessment of Equipment of the facility (C3)

Equipment of the facility	*Points*
Minimum of two rooms and one living room	4
Minimum house area of 70 square meters	4
House has a pool and/or hot tub	3
House has 3 or more bedrooms	2
House has Air Conditioning	2
Total	**15**

Six sub-criteria were used to structure the environmental sustainability of rural guesthouses, which, like the previous criteria, add up to a total of 15 points.

Table 4 Sub-criteria for the assessment of Environmental sustainability of the facility (C4)

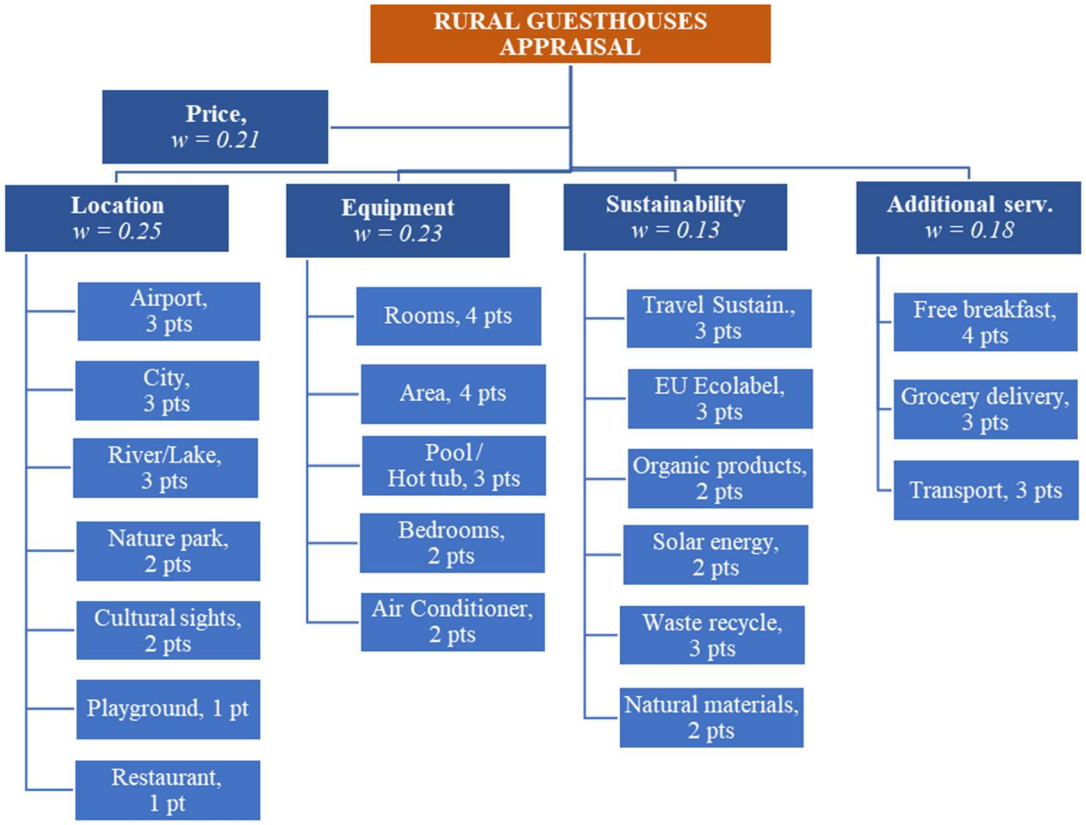
The house is certified with the Travel Sustainability, at least level 2	3
The house is certified with the EU Ecolabel for accommodation	3
The menu consists of local organic products	2
The house uses solar energy	2
Waste is recycled in the house (there are waste containers)	3
House is built from natural materials	2
Total	**15**

As this study looked at rural guesthouses for guests with higher payment options, these guests also expect above-average services. The additional services criterion is made up of three sub-criteria with a maximum score of 10 points.

Table 5 Sub-criteria for the assessment of Additional services offered at the facility (C5)

Free in-house breakfast	4
Grocery delivery	3
House offers transportation service	3
Total	**10**

Figure 1 Rural guesthouses multicriteria model evaluation



Source: Own editing

Rural guesthouses appraisal

In the final step of the evaluation of the rural guesthouses, specific variables were entered for the price and non-price attractiveness factors. For reasons of methodological correctness, their values were normalized on the basis of linear "max" normalization (Mokotoff et al., 2010).

This procedure transforms the evaluation vector, (a1j, a2j,..., amj), of each criterion, Cj, into a normalized one by making:

$v_{ij} = \frac{a_{ij}}{\max a_{ij}}$, in case of benefit criteria or,

$v_{ij} = \frac{min_{ij}}{a_{ij}}$, in case of cost criteria.

Therefore, for each criterion, Cj, the normalized value of the best alternative is 1, and all others are percentages of the maximum value, resulting in the interval $0<vij \leq 1$.

The following table shows the original and normalized variables which, together with the previously calculated weights of the comparison criteria of the rural guesthouses, result in their overall comparative score. Among the evaluated options, rural guesthouse 3 offers the most attractive value for money, scoring 0.81 overall. Although at first glance it

appears that this is due to the significantly lower price of this house, the ranking of the other houses refutes such an opinion. In second place is rural guesthouse 1, whose significantly higher price compared to its competitors did not result in a lower position in the overall ranking.

Table 6 Comparative score of rural guesthouses

criteria	**weights**	**RGH 1**	**RGH 2**	**RGH 3**	**RGH 4**	**RGH 5**	**RGH 1**	**RGH 2**	**RGH 3**	**RGH 4**	**RGH 5**
		original values					*normalized values*				
Price per night, €	*0.21*	285	194	**150**	213	203	0.53	0.77	1.00	0.70	0.74
Location, pts	*0.25*	**12**	10	7	3	3	1.00	0.83	0.58	0.25	0.25
Equipment, pts	*0.23*	10	12	12	**13**	5	0.77	0.92	0.92	1.00	0.38
Sustainability, pts	*0.13*	**15**	6	7	5	2	1.00	0.40	0.47	0.33	0.13
Add.services, pts	*0.18*	7	6	**10**	3	3	0.70	0.60	1.00	0.30	0.30
OVERALL SCORE							**0.79**	**0.74**	**0.81**	**0.54**	**0.38**

DISCUSSION

The author's intention was to show the possibility of a simple but very applicable multi-criteria approach for the comparative evaluation of the attractiveness of rural guesthouses in Croatia. By applying the MCDM approach, they assessed that rural guesthouse number 3 (RGH 3) has the highest potential to attract tourists offering the highest value for money. In this way, they confirmed the first research hypothesis that multi-criteria methods enable a simple and unambiguous assessment framework of the attractiveness of rural guesthouses. Why make a multi-criteria decision about a holiday destination at all? Studies suggest that families prefer to spend their vacations together and that joint decision making is the predominant method of planning these shared experiences (Fodness, 1992; Kang and Hsu, 2005). Although the decision about the holiday destination is dominated by the wife's influence (Srnec et al., 2016), all family members participate in the decision-making process and their preferences often do not match (Jia et al., 2023). Another reason for using MCDA is that not every criterion is equally important in the process of evaluating and ranking the tourism potential of a destination's resources, as Sánchez Rivero et al. (2016) found. Under ideal conditions, in the context of the "democratic family process", the decision to take a holiday can be made using a multi-criteria approach, which has been shown in this paper. There are a variety of factors in the decision to take a

holiday, some of which are mutually exclusive. The results of this paper differ from the conclusions of the paper by author Martin (2014), according to which price is the decisive factor when choosing a holiday. According to the results of this study, price, with its 21% impact on overall attractiveness, is only the third most important of the five decision criteria considered when choosing a guesthouse, according to the experts. Although the "winner" in this study is the rural guesthouse with the lowest price per night, the second place goes to the rural guesthouse with a price significantly higher than all other houses surveyed, and even 90 percent higher than the cheapest house. Thus, the second research hypothesis, which stated that lower-priced facilities are not necessarily perceived as more attractive, is confirmed. However, this assessment should be reconsidered, as the experts surveyed are people with a higher purchasing power than the average consumer in Croatia, and their income elasticity is lower than that of potential tourists.

A key limitation of this study lies in the reliance on expert judgment to assess the importance of attractiveness criteria, which inherently introduces a degree of subjectivity. Although the involvement of eight experts helped to mitigate this issue, it is not possible to eliminate subjective bias entirely. This challenge is common across all multi-criteria decision-making (MCDM) approaches that depend on expert evaluations. For future research, it would be advisable to validate the findings by incorporating the perspectives of actual tourists. Such an approach could enhance the robustness of the model and provide a more accurate reflection of tourist preferences.

CONCLUSION

Given the declining economic importance of agriculture in rural areas across Europe, the service sector, particularly rural tourism, has emerged as a promising alternative for economic development and job creation. Understanding tourists' perceptions of destination attractiveness is essential for effective destination management and marketing.

The study successfully demonstrated the applicability of the multicriteria approach for evaluating the attractiveness of rural guesthouses by implementing it on selected properties in continental Croatia. Instead of relying on generic lists of attractiveness factors, this approach identifies and prioritizes key elements that attract tourists to rural accommodations.

In this context, the research results show that the low price of accommodation is not decisive for the attractiveness of the property, but rather its location and facilities.

This suggests that rural accommodation prices are less sensitive to income fluctuations than those targeting price-conscious travelers and are therefore more resilient to periods of recession, which have had a significant impact on Croatian coastal tourism.

The results of this study provide practical value to researchers, managers, and policymakers by offering a structured and quantifiable MCDM framework for assessing the attractiveness of rural guesthouses. The model also helps rural guesthouse owners optimize their investments, such as improving equipment and location-related amenities, rather than resorting to aggressive price reductions.

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