

Post-pandemic pursuits: Activity preferences of rural tourists in Western Transdanubia

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Abstract

This study examines the changing preferences of rural tourists in Western Transdanubia, Hungary, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. We aim to uncover how rural tourism has changed and identify the new winners of the shifting demand. In 2021, we conducted a comprehensive survey with 925 participants and introduced a novel activity-based segmentation of rural tourists, revealing a strong preference for complex service packages. Practically, our findings highlight that village caterers who have strategically segmented the market have emerged as winners, successfully attracting different age groups and genders with customized packages. Cluster analysis revealed a segment of rural tourists who, without exception, were enthusiastic about diverse activities. In particular, our cross-cluster analysis points to a significant amount of potential demand among middle-aged tourists. These findings help practitioners develop a targeted product mix and marketing strategy to meet the changing demands of rural tourism.

Keywords: rural tourism, hospitality, crisis, COVID-19 pandemic, post-COVID, family travellers, entertainment, gastronomy, recreation.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic hit the tourism sector the hardest all over the world (GÖSSLING, S. *et al.* 2020), including Hungary. Researchers have pointed out that the COVID-19 pandemic has created an opportunity for the tourism industry to revise its services in terms of community-based, socialized tourism services (HIGGINS-DESBIOLLES, F. 2020; MENON, D. *et al.* 2022). Many mentioned, that in addition to exploring innovative business models that generate new revenue streams (BREIER, M. *et al.* 2021; ŠKARE, M. *et al.* 2021), tourism managers must understand that in today's uncertain world, what are the viable services and attractions provided to domestic tourists in order to keep the business alive if, for ex-

ample, international demand ceases due to a future crisis (TOMASSINI, L. and CAVAGNARO, E. 2020).

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, just as the world was beginning to recover, the war in Ukraine disrupted many parts of the economy, with the tourism sector being one of the hardest hit. This conflict triggered a new cost-of-living crisis, persistent inflation, and soaring energy prices, all contributing to a sharp decline in demand. However, due to its proximity and offering of quieter, healthier recreation options, rural tourism emerged as a viable alternative, providing urban inhabitants with affordable relaxation and recreation opportunities (WANG, J. *et al.* 2022).

This study examines the recovery of rural tourism, focusing on people's attitudes

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in the post-pandemic period, to reveal how rural tourism has evolved and identify the new beneficiaries of this demand. A questionnaire survey conducted in 2021 with 925 respondents examined their motivations for rural travel. The results show that 49 percent of family travellers are open to or actively seeking new experiences and entertainment, whether gastronomic or sporting. In addition, the results indicate that middle-aged families are the most reliable and active participants in rural tourism. Finally, village restaurateurs who have strategically segmented the market have emerged as winners, successfully attracting different age groups and genders with customized packages. The results contribute significantly to informed destination development and management, a better understanding of markets and modern marketing practices, and professional approaches to holistic and sustainability-enhancing management.

The present article is organized as follows: an in-depth literature review of rural tourism is presented, then an introduction to the methodology used, the analysis and discussion of the results. Finally, the conclusions and limitations of the study are included.

Literature review of rural tourism

Consumers' tourism decision is a very complex process, the result of which the decision is the selection of an action alternative. In general, this is influenced by many factors (SHUAI, M. *et al.* 2022), such as age, income, education, family structure, the purpose of the trip, motivation, benefit, or activity etc. Furthermore, it is also important that every decision is made in some environment, which also limits the range of possible decisions (BELÉNYESI, E. and BOKOR, T. 2022). Finally, the images of the destination also play an important part in influencing the decision (WOOKHYUN, A. and ALARCÓN, S. 2021).

The most important driver of profitability in the tourism industry is customer satisfaction. Satisfaction with services results in ei-

ther repeat visits or recommendations that motivate other travellers to visit that destination (HUANG, S. and HSU, C.H.C. 2009).

Rural tourists turn out to be relaxed and hedonistic, they primarily seek facilitated consumption experiences and privacy. Moreover, former research revealed that travel characteristics influence tourism decisions more than sociodemographic characteristics (JUSCHTEN, M. and HÖSSINGER, R. 2021). Rural tourists are assumed to be less interested in crowded, tourist-attraction places. However, it should not be forgotten that there are various niche markets, such as hiking or golf, which are also forms of recreation, but more active ones (FROCHOT, I. 2005).

BOTERO, C. *et al.* (2013) studied 435 beach users and found a significant difference in the motivations of urban and rural beach users: those who preferred water and sand activities preferred urban beaches, while those who preferred better water and sand quality preferred more rural, secluded beaches. As different beaches attract tourists with different motivations, it is essential and incomplete to investigate which local characteristics attract tourists (DODDS, R. and HOLMES, M.R. 2020).

PESONEN, J.A. *et al.* (2011) argued that tourists are driven by their own motivation to places where they expect their needs to be satisfied. These push motivators are recognized as the starting point for travel (LEIPER, N. 1990). Once the desire to travel exists, pull motivators attract people to specific destinations (CROMPTON, J.L. 1979). These are destination-specific attributes such as natural attractions, food, people, recreational facilities, or activities. Thus, pull motivators determine which destination a traveller will select in line with the traveller's push motivators.

Factors determining the demand for rural tourism

Without rural tourism, we cannot talk about tourism or hospitality. Rurality is often defined in opposition to urbanity, while rural tourism is often described as the consumption of an idealized tradition (HELGADÓTTIR, G. and

DASHPER, K. (2021). OECD (1994, 59) defines rural tourism as firmly based on the specific features of the rural world: open space, contact with nature, rural heritage, and society.

The distinguishing elements of rural tourism are the local, authentic gastronomy; the remote landscape with beautiful panorama, animals, as well as renovated and converted farm buildings. Consequently, HELGADÓTTIR, G. and DASHPER, K. (2021) noted that the demand for rural tourism is rooted in tourists' attraction to traditional values and their need for quiet, idyllic domesticity. Moreover, MAESTRO, R.M.H. et al. (2007) highlighted that rural tourism is typically a short stay. ROSALINA, P.D. et al. (2021) found that location is paramount and best understood from a geographic and social perspective; however, the presence of indigenous communities is also essential to providing rural experiences.

Besides closeness to nature, culinary pleasures have also become one of the driving forces of rural tourism. The "foodies" knowledge of local dishes is the determinant for the choice of destination and it is an essential variable in the composition of tourist satisfaction in the travel experience (MARTÍN, J.C. et al. 2020). Because rural areas are inherently very different and unique, hence there is a wide range of needs they can meet and satisfy. Consequently, many scholars urged to segment the market in order to have the right value proposition for the target segment. These segments are closely linked to new trends in rural tourism, where tourists show respect for culture and tradition, authenticity, and sustainability (MARTÍN, J.C. et al. 2020).

Several researchers have been working on segmenting the demand for rural tourism, and their analyses focus on various types of motivation, which (CHEN, L.C. et al. 2013) summarized, highlighting the importance of factor-based motivation testing. PARK, D.B. et al. (2014) found 5 segments according to the benefits sought by tourists in rural settings: the pursuit of spending time with family, the pursuit of escape from the daily routine, the pursuit of learning and socialization, the pursuit of rural experience, and the pursuit of education.

FROCHOT, I. (2005) segmented the Scottish market by factor-cluster analysis. As a result of his research, active, rural, resting, and contemplative types emerged from the data. Taking it a step further, KAPTAN, A.C. et al. (2020), as well as ROBERTS, L. and HALL, D. (2004) are the one of the many authors who describe rural tourism as a tourist activity associated with farm-based tourism, nature-based tourism, adventure tourism, wellness tourism, spiritual tourism, nostalgia tourism, heritage tourism, cultural tourism, agrotourism, and ecotourism.

However, in their research BEL, F. et al. (2015) distinguished the group of people interested in gastronomy, with special attention to traditions, and formed a separate cluster in French rural tourism. They urged to include gastronomic tourism and its connection to local products and services as the future research direction of rural tourism. Agrotourism offers an opportunity to restore and maintain the well-being of rural areas and to solve social problems (employment, health, education, leisure).

EUSÉBIO, C. et al. (2017) in their research, also examined rural tourism in the Portuguese interior, which has many similarities with the rural space in Hungary. Based on the activities of tourists in the countryside, 4 clusters were formed: 1) Active visitors; 2) Passive nature observers; 3) Inactives, and 4) Summer family vacationers. The tasting of local food and wine was investigated, and involvement in the cultivation of climate-specific products (olives, grapes); however, no details of the content of food and drink were included. DARABOS, F. and PRINTZ-MARKÓ, E. (2018) use the distinguished two main segments among Hungarian rural tourists: first, the holiday seekers at a wine or palinka maker, and second, the active recreation in a village house with potential cycling activity or organized nature tours.

The very many outdoor activities available in rural settings are important drivers for rural tourism since for example, hiking is an important leisure activity for urban populations visiting rural areas for recreation and well-being (RODRIGUES, A. et al. 2010), as it offers a relatively simple wellness experience in nature. These activities are summarized in *Table 1*.

Table 1. Summary of motivation-based factors affecting rural tourism decisions in former research

Authors	Motivation-based factors									
	Learning	Relaxation, self-fulfilment	Accessibility	Rural heritage, nature	Outdoor activities, sports	Novelty, Excitement	Socialization	Sun and beach	Gastronomy	Family togetherness
FROCHOT, I. 2005.	-	X	-	X	X	-	-	-	-	-
PESONEN, J.A. 2012.	-	X	X	X	-	-	-	-	-	X
CHEN, L.C. et al. 2013.	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	-	-	-
RID, W. et al. 2014.	X	-	-	X	-	-	X	X	-	-
BEL, F. et al. 2015.	-	X	-	X	X	-	X	-	X	-
PESONEN, J.A. and TUOHINO, A. 2015.	-	X	-	-	X	-	-	-	-	X
EUSÉBIO, C. et al. 2017.	-	-	-	X	X	-	X	X	X	-
REMOALDO, P. et al. 2020.	X	-	X	-	-	X	X	-	-	X
WOOKHYUN, A. and ALARCÓN, S. 2021.	-	-	-	X	X	-	-	-	-	X

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The former research highlighted that there could be a significant variance in the motivation of tourist sub-groups (ZIMMER, Z. et al. 1995; CHEN, L.C. et al. 2013; RID, W. et al. 2014; REMOALDO, P. et al. 2020). Relaxation and escape from everyday life were some of the critical motivations for rural tourism. In addition, several factors can stimulate the decision at the same time, such as a desire for historical or natural attractions. Some authors have distinguished between family gathering and socialization, where the latter refers to meeting the locals. At the same time, rural tourism can be good for refreshment, seeking novelty and excitement, but also for relaxation, immersion in nature and complete relaxation. In essence, both are driving forces for escape from everyday life. Finally, as Table 1 shows, getting to know nature, history or other cultures is also an important factor.

Besides the motivation to engage in certain activities, tourist demographics were questioned to play a significant role in rural versus urban holiday decisions (Table 2). PESONEN, J.A. and KOMPPULA, R. (2010) created the profile of the Finnish rural tourist, in which the typical representative of the segment is the one who has been growing for 45–54 years, with a high education, and a household income is medium.

The correlations between demographic, and social factors and participation in rural tourism were analyzed in

Table 2. The former research on rural tourists' demographics

Authors	Age	Gender	Occupation	Income	Education	Rural origins	Number of visits	Travel with	Residence
FROCHOT, I. 2005.	X	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	X
MOLERA, L. and ALBALADEJO, I.P. 2007.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
PESONEN, J. et al. 2011.	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	X	-
PESONEN, J.A. 2012.	X	-	-	X	X	-	-	-	-
BEL, F. et al. 2015.	X	-	-	X	X	-	-	-	X
SHUAI, M. et al. 2022.	X	X	X	X	X	-	-	-	-

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

China (SHUAI, M. et al. 2022). The researchers found that gender, age, occupation, education, and family structure did not significantly affect the choice of leisure agricultural trips. However, men's consumption expenditures exceed those of women, which may be related to the fact that women are more cautious than men in the consumption process, or men bear the greater part of the expenses incurred during the journey of lovers. BEL, F. et al. (2015) found no socio-demographic differences in France between domestic tourists in the countryside and in the city in terms of age, educational attainment, household income, etc., are very similar. According to the study of ANDRIOTIS, K. (2011), in the rural area of Archaneas (a Greek county), the tourists are younger and more highly educated than tourists visiting Athens.

For our research, important analyses were carried out by (BEL, F. et al. 2015) in the three rural regions of Aquitaine, Auvergne, and Rhône-Alpes in France. The results overlap with studies in Scotland (FROCHOT, I. 2005), Spain (MOLERA, L. and ALBALADEJO, I.P. 2007), and a study in Finland (PESONEN, J.A. 2012). BEL, F. et al. (2015) noted the main target group in rural tourism market segments are those interested in outdoor activities, excursions or family vacations. Families with children or groups of young adults are looking for outdoor activities. While those interested more in rural culture and visiting natural as well as heritage sites are typically older, lower- and middle-class tourists. Finally, they also found evidence that gastronomic tourism attracts tourists who spend more. All of these scholars nevertheless argue that in order to meet the demand, the product development activity must be adapted to the needs of the target groups.

Succeeding in post-COVID times as a rural destination

In practice, the competitiveness of a destination depends to a large extent on the service experience: consumers evaluate the service not only in terms of its utility, but also ex-

perience it in an emotional, sensorial, and symbolic way (LANE, B. and KASTENHOLZ, E. 2018). Today, according to ELLIS, G.D. and ROSSMAN, J.R. (2008) the “experience economy” is characteristic of all areas of life, where valuable resources (time, money, or other personal alternative costs) are exchanged for a benefit that is also associated with an experience. Thus, the experience of a trip is defined not only by the cleanness or beauty of the destination, etc., but – often more importantly – by the emotional and motivational states experienced during the time spent there. In this way, experience when it is created to enhance the value of a product or service, or it is provided as an independent entity (KNUTSON, B.J. and BECK, J.A. 2004).

The tourist experience is a very complex, multidimensional, highly subjective and dynamic phenomenon, and it usually lasts over time; at the same time, from the point of view of tourism demand, the experience lived in the destination is crucial (HUANG, S. and HSU, C.H.C. 2009; KASTENHOLZ, E. *et al.* 2018). The challenge from the point of view of suppliers is that experience is individualized, determined largely by the different backgrounds, values, attitudes, and beliefs of each tourist; they “experience” it through their individualized “glasses”. Consequently, no matter how hard someone tries to visualize an experience others are likely to end up saying, “You should have been there” (KNUTSON, B.J. and BECK, J.A. 2004, 25).

Today’s affluent and demanding consumers along with the challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic together are escalating the competitive rivalry in the industry (KOMODROMOS, M. *et al.* 2022). KASTENHOLZ, E. *et al.* (2012) prove that rural tourism retains its importance because tourists are increasingly looking for authentic experiences. The analysis of target groups involved in rural tourism is also interesting because potential tourists consider these rural destinations to be safer, where the possibility of spreading the coronavirus is lower (LOPES, A.S. *et al.* 2021). HALL, C.M. and SEYFI, S. (2021) citing UNWTO data, found that the COVID-19 pandemic has reduced the number of international tourists

by approximately 1.1 billion, putting 100 to 120 million jobs at risk. ÖZDEMİR, M.A. and YILDIZ, L.D.S. (2020) have drawn attention to meeting the needs of post-pandemic tourists who want stress relief and refreshment in a natural environment through rural tourism. According to ZHU, H. and DENG, F. (2020), WEN, J. *et al.* (2021), and VAISHAR, A. and ŠTASTNÁ, M. (2022) the post-covid satisfaction of needs for physical and psychological well-being was considered to be solvable by rural tourism.

The demand segmentation of rural tourism has been carried out based on the motivation of tourists, benefits, and activities in recent scientific research (WOOKHYUN, A. and ALARCÓN, S. 2021). For example, PESONEN, J.A. and TUOHINO, A. (2015) used factor analysis to divide demand into three types of activities, bathgoers, well-being lovers and sporty.

The commonality in these studies is that they arrive at very diverse results, difficult to compare as the locations – country specificity – largely determine the underlying motivations. PESONEN, J.A. *et al.* (2011) noted that positive prior experience with rural tourism is likely to result in repeated travel. They also argued that international tourists differ in their demand, and there is great variance among the factors that attract various nationalities to different destinations. For example, rural tourism for Germans is about closeness to nature and the farm lifestyle.

In summary, the COVID pandemic has affected the entire tourism industry. However, scholars (cf. KUMAR, A. and NAYAR, K.R. 2021) have also pointed out that the COVID-19 epidemic has mental health and psychosocial consequences in addition to other health symptoms reported worldwide. On the one hand, the quarantine disrupted people’s usual activities and daily routines, often leading to livelihood problems, and on the other hand, the constant stream of media (including social media) increased people’s sense of loneliness and isolation. Mood and emotional outbursts also became more frequent. In addition to anxiety and depression, panic and stress symptoms have increased.

Others reported that once the travel restrictions were lifted, people were keen to make up the lost opportunities and the tourism industry demonstrated its unique ability to bounce back (UNWTO, 2023). But the war in Ukraine since February 2022 has interrupted the stronger than expected recovery of the travel sector, due to factors such as persistent inflation, high energy prices, cost-of-living increases, and labour shortages at airports. Rural tourism, however, has become one of the driving forces of post-covid tourism, as its offer and its typically short distances make it a perfect way to satisfy people's need for health, relaxation, and recreation (WANG, J. et al. 2022).

The effects of COVID-19 on rural attractions

In the post-COVID years hence the role of rural areas as tourism is expected to grow (LIU, Y. et al. 2022) and the need to better understand the drivers and motives of rural tourists has become critical. Consequently, the present research fulfils an important role in investigating these preferences in order to facilitate a more resilient as well as effective rural tourism supply.

Before the pandemic, guests sought "immersive" and "amazing" experiences, while after, they craved "reassuring", "sociable", and "unparalleled" gastronomic experiences, as well as an experiential home service delivery. Following the outbreak of the pandemic, there has been an increase in perceived risk related to eating at a restaurant and a notable change in the usual clientele (e.g. an increase in younger customers), with a consequent change in customer needs. (BONFANTI, A. et al. 2023). Wine tourism has also been negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and previous perceptions of safety in rural destinations may no longer hold (NIKLAS, B. et al. 2022).

The post-COVID tourism market is undergoing a period of significant transformation (cf. KIM, Y.-J. et al. 2021; CHIN, C.H. 2022; HUANG, T. et al. 2024). To illustrate, the competitive advantages typically associated with urban destinations, such as the creation

and support of resources, are also evident in rural offerings. Conversely, traditional rural factors, such as inherited resources, are not always considered to be decisive in the competition between rural and urban tourism. It is posited that rural tourism has witnessed an increase in longer-term stays (LYU, J. et al. 2021), potentially attributable to the heightened challenges associated with overseas travel. New activities have emerged, including camping, drive-through destinations, and cycling (CHEN, J. et al. 2023). Rural wine tourists are equally motivated by hedonistic and wine-specific activities (GAETJENS, A. et al. 2023). The appeal of ecological and natural tourist sites has notably increased, largely because these destinations offer tranquil atmospheres and a lower density of visitors, allowing tourists to avoid close contact with others (BALOCH, Q.B. et al. 2023). Moreover, the difficulties associated with overseas travel have contributed to an increase in the length of stay in rural areas.

In light of the aforementioned evidence, the present study aims to test the following hypotheses:

- H1/A: There is a significant difference in respondents' gender and gastronomic programs.
- H1/B: There is a significant difference between respondents' gender and their preference for touristic programs.
- H2/A: There is a difference between respondents' age and their participation in tourist attractions.
- H2/B: There is a difference between respondents' age and their participation in gastronomic events.
- H3: There is a significant difference between tourists' education and their wine-drinking preferences.

Methodology

Our research focused on the COVID-19 crisis in the tourism industry for the period from 2019 to 2023. By conducting a questionnaire survey in 2021, we aimed to understand the social and

economic processes in tourism after the pandemic and their impact on rural tourism. To gain an in-depth understanding, we analyzed secondary data sources to track trends in guest nights and examined how different types of accommodations were affected by the crisis. In particular, we compared the responses of smaller rural tourism accommodations with those of hotels. The tourism sector, which is sensitive to crises, also has a remarkable capacity for rapid regeneration. With this assumption in mind, the study also examined whether recovery has occurred, the duration of this recovery, or if it is still ongoing. Within this framework, we have contextualized the relationship of the clientele surveyed to rural tourism.

The data for this research was gathered during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, between January and June 2021, and the survey aims to examine demand in rural tourism focusing on being able to design optimal offers in the period following the pandemic. The topic of this study is the examination of holiday habits in Hungary with special regard to rural tourism. The sampling frame consisted of small and large families mainly from the Western Transdanubian region. The area under study is located in the “Golden Triangle” Vienna–Bratislava–Budapest, an economically developed region, and the Benedictine Abbey of Pannonhalma, which is located here, was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1996. The sample is not representative, the respondents were selected using an arbitrary method. The formal questionnaire was divided into four parts. The length of stay was measured in days on an eight-point Likert scale, and the priority of tourism and gastronomic events was measured on a four-point Likert scale. A score of one meant strongly agree, and a score of eight meant strongly disagree. In addition to demographic data (age, gender, educational attainment, residence), information was gathered about the willingness to spend (on food and accommodation), length of stay in rural settings, travelling habits, participation in gastronomic events, participation in tourism attractions, and so on. All together a total of 28 questions were set in the survey.

To answer our research question, we employed a segmentation methodology. A priori, or common-sense segmentation, groups tourists by known characteristics like age or gender. In contrast, a posteriori, or post-hoc, data-driven segmentation analyzes data to identify segments based on similarities and differences. While a posteriori segmentation requires more technical skill, it enables researchers to delve deeper into the data and uncover hidden insights. This method often uses symptomatic bundles of advantages sought, travel motivations, activities, perceived destination qualities, and preferences to define segments (McKERCHER, B. *et al.* 2023a).

Moreover, many studies have identified activities as an effective basis for segmentation. Activities are a crucial link between travel motivation and destination choice, influencing the image and reputation of a tourist destination. For example, PESONEN, J.A. and TUOHINO, A. (2015) argue that the activities offered play a significant role in shaping how a destination is perceived and chosen by tourists. However, there are inherent limitations in surveying a specific, limited area. Mostly, the results may not be generalizable to the population as a whole. Nevertheless, such surveys can provide valuable insights for theory-building, especially regarding the evolution of representations and consumption patterns in rural areas (EUSÉBIO, C. *et al.* 2017). They underline the importance of the sought activities as a relevant segmentation basis for visitors (MUMUNI, A.G. and MANSOUR, M. 2014; McKERCHER, B. *et al.* 2023b).

Results

Analysis of the periods before and after the pandemic

In 2019, the KSH (Central Statistical Office of Hungary) stopped monitoring private accommodation, and data on rural tourism are included in the special accommodation statistics.

According to *Table 3*, other accommodations also affected by rural tourism could not withstand the impact of COVID-19, with a decrease in the number of guest nights in all regions (KSH 2024a). The average decrease was 17.3 percent. The rate of decrease was smallest in Pest County, Central Transdanubia, Northern Hungary, and was the greatest (above average) in the Northern and Southern Great Plain regions, and in Western Transdanubia. The recovery process has already begun in 2021. In Central and Southern Transdanubia regions, and Pest County the values exceeded the number of guest nights in 2019; approached it in Northern Hungary and Southern Great Plain. In 2022–2023, these values were above those of 2019 everywhere (KSH data includes both other and private accommodation).

The number of guest nights in larger hotels and hotels, which are therefore more dangerous in the crisis, has suffered a more significant decrease than in other accommodations (KSH 2024b) (*Table 4*). The average decrease is 44.5 percent, which is 2.5 times the decrease in rural tourism. The rate of decrease was above average in Pest County, Western Transdanubia and Northern Great Plain. In Pest County, the largest decrease in the number of hotel nights is matched by the smallest decrease in other accommodations. Central Transdanubia and Northern Hungary performed below average in both accommodation types (below average decrease), but the rate of hotel decrease was closer to average (higher) than other accommodation values. The recovery process for hotels and pensions has been slower and lasted until 2023, and the inflation period has even been brought to a halt. Full catch-up with 2019 could take two or three times longer period than in rural accommodation.

Overall, it was found that guest nights in other and private accommodation facilities are also affected by economic crises and health constraints. However, it can be concluded that, in times of crisis, tourists turn more towards other and private accommodation, which also occurs in the countryside, than towards hotels; And there they can cause

*Table 3. Number of guest nights in special accommodation in statistical regions between 2019 and 2023**

Year	Statistical region						Pest County
	Western Transdanubia	Central Transdanubia	Southern Transdanubia	Northern Hungary	Northern Great Plain	Southern Great Plain	
2019	Nights (%) 1,243,805 (100.0)	Nights (%) 1,082,747 (100.0)	Nights (%) 476,175 (100.0)	Nights (%) 870,229 (100.0)	Nights (%) 697,442 (100.0)	Nights (%) 715,551 (100.0)	Nights (%) 254,621 (100.0)
2020	937,063 (75.0)	984,223 (90.9)	402,333 (84.4)	707,839 (81.3)	455,502 (65.0)	550,367 (76.9)	244,613 (96.0)
2021	1,111,389 (89.3)	1,116,898 (103.1)	487,158 (102.3)	855,335 (95.9)	546,287 (78.3)	704,114 (98.4)	263,582 (103.5)
2022	1,549,724 (124.5)	1,363,485 (125.9)	1,951,926 (409.0)	1,307,427 (150.0)	919,558 (131.8)	1,069,941 (149.5)	439,591 (172.6)
2023	1,515,717 (121.8)	1,319,834 (121.8)	1,943,328 (408.0)	1,264,496 (145.0)	935,271 (134.0)	1,011,916 (141.4)	412,451 (161.9)

*2019 as the base period. Source: KSH, 2024a.

Table 4. Number of guest nights in hotels and pensions in statistical regions between 2019 and 2023*

Years	Statistical region						
	Western Transdanubia	Central Transdanubia	Southern Transdanubia	Northern Hungary	Northern Great Plain	Southern Great Plain	Pest County
2019	Nights (%) 5,142,889 (100.0)	Nights (%) 2,176,176 (100.0)	Nights (%) 1,973,766 (100.0)	Nights (%) 2,165,444 (100.0)	Nights (%) 1,942,467 (100.0)	Nights (%) 1,571,414 (100.0)	Nights (%) 1,184,949 (100.0)
2020	Nights (%) 2,482,695 (48.0)	Nights (%) 1,328,011 (61.0)	Nights (%) 1,212,993 (61.4)	Nights (%) 1,318,695 (60.8)	Nights (%) 1,040,762 (53.5)	Nights (%) 896,115 (57.0)	Nights (%) 541,690 (45.7)
2021	Nights (%) 3,068,402 (59.6)	Nights (%) 1,392,571 (63.9)	Nights (%) 1,332,775 (67.5)	Nights (%) 1,362,097 (62.9)	Nights (%) 1,178,760 (60.6)	Nights (%) 1,050,281 (66.8)	Nights (%) 658,914 (55.6)
2022	Nights (%) 4,636,882 (90.1)	Nights (%) 2,057,974 (94.5)	Nights (%) 1,929,925 (97.7)	Nights (%) 1,986,820 (91.7)	Nights (%) 1,845,365 (95.0)	Nights (%) 1,548,552 (98.5)	Nights (%) 1,171,814 (98.8)
2023	Nights (%) 4,472,784 (86.9)	Nights (%) 2,051,654 (94.2)	Nights (%) 1,740,504 (88.1)	Nights (%) 2,068,114 (95.5)	Nights (%) 1,805,403 (92.9)	Nights (%) 1,513,659 (96.3)	Nights (%) 1,170,180 (98.7)

*2019 as the base period. Source: KSH, 2024b

an increase in the number of guest nights even during the crisis. The economic crisis has affected accommodation less negatively than COVID. Significant territorial differences can be detected in the country, according to which the rural accommodation facilities of the more developed regions (e.g. Pest County and Western Transdanubia), and places with traditional offers (e.g. Northern Hungary), hardly react to negative financial flows. However, COVID makes more developed areas more resilient in this area as well. The recovery process can take up to a year for village accommodation and 3–4 years for hotels.

Results of the survey

In the survey, all 925 respondents were validated. Three different age groups were defined. Based on the biological criteria, young respondents belonged to the group between 16 and 29 years old, the second group was that of middle-aged respondents between 31 and 50 years, while 51 or older respondents belonged to the senior group. The sample is dominated by female respondents (59.9%) and also by people living in urban areas (53.8%) including the capital all together above 75 percent of the respondents. Most respondents have at least secondary education (52.0%) although 47 percent of them have graduated in higher education. This is very important, as education level is found to be a strong driver for travel decisions (cf. ZIMMER, Z. et al. 1995). Young people are underrepresented in the sample. Five-day stay was the typical length of time spent in rural destinations. The distribution of the studied sample is shown in Table 5.

Regarding the willingness to spend, results show that senior tourists are likely to spend the most on accommodation (mean 2.39) followed by the middle-aged (mean 2.35) and finally the youngsters (mean 2.29). The youngsters spend more on food and drinks (mean 2.95) spend much more than the elderly (mean 2.90) and middle-aged (mean 2.76). On average tourists spend between 9.9 EUR

Table 5. Distribution of the sample

Variable	N	%
Gender		
Male	371	40.1
Female	554	59.9
Age		
Youngsters (16–29 years)	143	15.5
Middle-aged (30–50 years)	568	61.4
Elderly over 51 years	214	23.1
Educational attainment		
Higher education	434	47.0
Secondary	482	52.0
Primary	18	1.0
Residence		
Capital	207	22.4
Urban	498	53.8
Sub-urban	220	23.8

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

and 14.8 EUR for one person/attraction. When attending gastronomic programs, the expenditures are higher, between 12.3 and 24.6 EUR. It is important to highlight that in the survey Forint, the Hungarian national currency was used and then converted to Euro (Exchange rate: 1 EUR = 406.09 HUF).

To gain better insights into the tourists' profiles, a continuous factor analysis was performed. Factor analysis can be one of the possible methods of multivariate statistical analysis, it defines a structure, while it reduces the amount of data. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value is > 0.6 and the p-value in Bartlett's test is less than 0.01 ($p < 0.01$), which indicates that the scale is suitable for continuous factor analysis. Moreover, when the coefficient is greater than 0.60 (0.817), this indicates that the questionnaire has good reliability, and continuous analysis can be retained. The procedure measures all possible combinations of the questions the questionnaire contains, the coefficient of reliability can be a number between 0 and 1. The closer the coefficient is to 1, the more reliable the data of the survey are. If the coefficient is between 0.9 and 1, they are excellent, between 0.8 and 0.9 they are good, between 0.7 and 0.8 they are acceptable, between 0.6 and 0.7 they are acceptable, between 0.5 and 0.6 they are weak,

and a coefficient below 0.5 is considered unacceptable (SAJTOS, L. and MITEV, A. 2007).

Using SPSS 25.0 five factors were gained out of the original set of sixteen (Table 6), that explain more than 60 percent of total variance. Regarding the hypothesis testing, there are no significant gender differences in attending gastronomic events, hence H1/A has been rejected. Regarding other activities, we found that females tend to attend more of the local attractions ($\chi^2 = 9.839$, $p \leq 0.01$), local heritage ($\chi^2 = 17.58$, $p \leq 0.01$), or cultural and religious events in the neighbourhood of the destination ($\chi^2 = 15.70$, $p \leq 0.001$). Other activities, such as hiking or cycling revealed no gender differences. That is why H1/B is only partially accepted.

In line with the expectations, age affects greatly the tourists' interest. The middle-aged are more likely to be interested in outdoor activities, such as hiking or biking ($\chi^2 = 30.967$, $p \leq 0.01$), they are also likely to be interested in socializing with others and attending events where this is facilitated, such as family fun ($\chi^2 = 51.642$, $p \leq 0.01$) or folklore events ($\chi^2 = 18.265$, $p \leq 0.01$). That is why H2/A is accepted.

The middle-aged respondents also tend to be more interested in food tours with local dishes ($\chi^2 = 15.986$, $p \leq 0.01$) or wine tours ($\chi^2 = 14.504$, $p \leq 0.01$). There were no differences in grilled or cauldron foods. Hence H2/B is also partially accepted.

The results showed no difference in preference for wine tours among the sub-groups by education level, hence H3 is rejected. Nevertheless, the higher educated sub-group tends to spend more than the tourists with primary or secondary education.

After the factor analysis, the obtained factors were sorted into K-centred clusters. One striking difference between the clusters is that there is at least one factor that is not preferred by the respondents in all clusters. The members of the first cluster (142 Persons) like to taste local dishes, experience tradition, have a drink, as well as connect with others, but they do not like outdoor activities, hence this group is named "No hiking". The

Table 6. Results of the factor analysis

Factors	Components				
	Food tours	Exploring tradition	Connecting with others	Drink tours	Outdoor activities
Grilled meats	.793	-	-	-	-
Cauldron foods	.706	-	-	-	-
Homemade ham, sausage, and cheese	.685	-	-	-	-
Turkey dinner	.638	-	-	-	-
Goose dinner	.612	-	-	-	-
Local dishes	.604	-	-	-	-
Visiting local heritage	-	.777	-	-	-
Visiting local attractions	-	.759	-	-	-
Attending cultural and/or religious events	-	.747	-	-	-
Family fun	-	-	.785	-	-
Folklore evening	-	-	.692	-	-
Horse-drawn carriage	-	-	.602	-	-
Homemade spirit tasting	-	-	-	.840	-
Wine tasting	-	-	-	.829	-
Cycling	-	-	-	-	.826
Hiking and tour guided walking tour	-	-	-	-	.820
Cronbach's Alpha	.732	.701	.622	.639	.607
Eigenvalues	4.171	1.779	1.454	1.197	1.076
% variance explained	26.068	11.118	9.085	7.480	6.723
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling	.817	-	-	-	-

Notes: Extraction method: Principal Component Analysis; Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization; Rotation converged in 5 iterations.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

members of the second cluster (145 Persons) are not motivated to connect with others, hence this group is the “Just us”. The third cluster (129 Persons) explores tradition and heritage around the destination, they rather prefer to do sports or taste wine and spirits. They are the “No tradition”. The fourth cluster (170 Persons) consists of those people who are not motivated by drinking tours, hence they are called “No wine”. The members of the fifth cluster are rather interested in outdoor activities only during their rural holidays. They are the “Sportive” tourists (82). Finally, the last cluster has no opposition toward any activity, they are motivated to try out many new things as shown in Table 5. Hence this group is called “go for it”.

Looking into details of the composition of travelers 5 sub-groups are identified (Table 7). Travelers with partners are typically not looking for meeting new people and connecting with locals, but rather they look for togetherness and withdrawal from the crowd. They are typically active, 44 percent of them belong to the Sportive cluster. This is not surprising as they can refresh in nature while being active. Their travel decision is least motivated by visiting local heritage or tradition, probably the accessibility of nature – and the availability of hiking tracks for example – seems to be a decisive component.

Table 7. Final cluster centres

Activities 925 persons	Clusters					
	No hiking 142 persons	Just us 145 persons	No tradition 129 persons	No wine 170 persons	Sportive 82 persons	Go for it 257 persons
Food tours	.20708	.21863	.19719	.23477	-2.23890	.22232
Exploring tradition	.15755	.33572	-1.53306	.15871	-.22021	.45833
Connecting with others	.19328	-1.62302	.10031	.50187	-.04877	.44215
Wine tours	.02244	-.06909	.31182	-1.24974	-.04269	.71036
Outdoor activities	-1.61189	.22907	.35041	.34102	.02204	.35288

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The “no drinks” is the largest, respondents travelling with family seem to be least interested in wine or spirit-tasting tours (Table 8). Nevertheless, it is surprising that respondents travelling with teams also score low on wine tours. 49 percent of large family travellers opt for the “go for it” option and are open to new experiences and entertainment, whether they come from gastronomic or sporting experiences. Moreover, taking it all together, app. 28 percent of the respondents are motivated to “go for it” when travelling to rural places.

Discussion

The COVID crisis has resulted in significant changes in the structure of tourism and the

motivation of guests to travel. The recovery process following the downturn lasted up to 4 years in the case of commercial, larger-scale accommodation (hotels, pensions). Other smaller accommodations involved in rural tourism responded more flexibly and began to increase their visitor traffic within two years. People have turned away from mass tourism and have quenched their hunger for recreation accumulated during COVID-19 in smaller rural accommodations. Rural tourism offers a good opportunity to organise personalised, alternative, combined programmes; in a calm, healthy natural environment. Health and authenticity have become more valuable.

We investigated the post-covid motivations of rural tourists and identified different segments based on their motivations, leisure

Table 8. Distribution of family sub-groups by clusters

Family sub-groups No hiking		Clusters						Total
		No hiking	Just us	No traditions	No wine	Sportive	Go for it	
With family (parents + 2 children)	N	29	20	21	36	14	51	171
	%	20.4	13.8	16.3	21.2	17.1	19.8	18.5
With big family	N	21	17	22	42	10	49	161
	%	14.8	11.7	17.1	24.7	12.2	19.1	17.4
With team	N	16	9	13	13	5	30	86
	%	11.3	6.2	10.1	7.6	6.1	11.7	9.3
With my partner	N	47	79	56	37	36	79	334
	%	33.1	54.5	43.4	21.8	43.9	30.7	36.1
Alone	N	5	4	2	8	6	4	29
	%	3.5	2.8	1.6	4.7	7.3	1.6	3.1
With a small family (parents +1 child)	N	24	16	15	34	11	44	144
	%	16.9	11.0	11.6	20.0	13.4	17.1	15.6
Together	N	142	145	129	170	82	257	925
	%	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

habits, and expenditures. The study confirms that the spectrum of rural tourism is broad, but wine and spirit tasting was the least motivating factor in the sample. There are several possible explanations for this phenomenon, such as the over-representation of family travellers, or even the desire to compensate for increased stress and discomfort in the post-vacation period with healthier recharging, such as active recreation. Moreover, the increasing expense of food and beverages is likely to reduce the demand for such activities.

Nevertheless, the middle-aged group out of the three sub-groups was the most receptive to food tours (local tastings of village cold dishes, local wines, dishes prepared in a cauldron, and homemade cakes). On traditional events, they are likely to travel just to taste such dishes, for example on St. Marton's Day which is associated with eating roast goose.

Another result is that tradition and local heritage are less attractive in itself. The "go for it" type of tourists may participate in such an event, but for the destination having some historical or cultural heritage sites is usually not enough for demand generation. Also, kids may find it less attractive to visit ruins or monuments etc. hence families are likely to prefer activities which keep kids busy such as hiking or outdoor sports. Nevertheless, results may need to be confirmed by future research as the sample was dominated by families with kids.

Although the identification of the multi-experience seeker group, labelled as the "go for it" cluster, is not entirely novel, as previously noted in research (RID, W. et al. 2014), it remains significant that rural tourism in the post-COVID era transcends mere privacy and quiet self-fulfilment. Rural destinations can appeal to these travellers by offering comprehensive packages. Biking and hiking trails, as well as creative, playful and family-friendly activities including affordable eating-out offers, are likely to be part of the value proposition. The possibilities are endless, nevertheless, treasure hunt activities in the proximity of a heritage site are likely to please the entire family, even if three generations come together.

In line with BEL, F. et al. (2015), and EUSÉBIO, C. et al. (2017) findings there is an independent cluster for gastronomic orientation. The locally provided specialities do attract some demand but much less than originally expected. Probably the supply side needs to identify new target customers or reposition itself to be more attractive to both families and team visitors. As discussed earlier, the current energy and cost-of-living crisis make tourists more concerned with the expenses and when several persons are eating out the expenses are likely to grow and families may lose motivation.

Age matters, middle-aged people are more likely to be interested in outdoor activities such as cycling and are also more interested in socializing with others and participating in events such as folklore activities. There is also significant interest in participating in gastronomy and wine tours among middle-aged people.

An important aspect of our research was to highlight the importance of authentic, personalized, unique offer elements in rural destinations. Our investigation put at the centre the question of whether it can be demonstrated that there is a scientifically supported correlation between individual sociodemographic factors and gastronomic, and other leisure between motivations. It has been proven that in rural tourism after the COVID period, the value of traditional, non-massive personalized service coupled with increased value. In particular, the cross-tabulation analysis has shown that in rural tourism, after the COVID-19 pandemic period, there is a significant interest in traditional, non-mass, and personalized services. This is also supported by the strong interest of the middle-aged group, which represents the above-mentioned reliable market demand. In order to meet the needs of this market segment and fully exploit the market potential, the activities offered must be provided in authentic and unspoiled rural environments. Regarding the gastronomic offerings, the findings suggest that the demand of middle-aged must be met in rural destinations.

In terms of gender, it is traditional visiting country houses is significant for females. The cross-tabulation analysis shows that, in terms of gender, visits to rural heritage sites are significant for women (hypothesis H1/B). However, urban residents, regardless of age and education, are particularly interested in rural touring, for whom socializing with locals is still attractive, but family activities are also an attraction.

The novelty of the research is the scientific verification of the complexity of the rural touristic demand as well as the rise of rural tourism as a lower-cost and healthy alternative to crowded tourist attractions.

For practitioners, the results are also thought-provoking. The rural destinations can benefit from the current international pressures and reap many of the traditionally urban tourists. The demand side seems growing and in case the supply side can satisfy the growing need, then rural tourism will be more popular. Tailored offers and carefully invested utilities (to improve accessibility of the destination) are essential for meeting the demand. In addition, the providers who effectively segment the market will be the winners as they can more easily provide value for the diverse motivations of rural tourists.

We found a connection with previous studies regarding wines since wine consumption is never alone, it is always together, whether in conjunction with gastronomic programs or during family and friend celebrations (CASADÓ-MARÍN, L. and ANZIL, V. 2022).

Conclusions

Our research delved into the driving factors behind the choices made by rural tourists during the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining distinct groups of tourists with unique characteristics, preferences, recreational activities, and spending patterns, we uncovered valuable insights into rural tourism dynamics. The findings revealed that while rural tourism offers a variety of activities,

wine and spirit tasting garnered the least interest. This trend may be attributed to the prevalence of family travellers seeking health-promoting, stress-reducing activities, and the rising costs of meals and drinks.

Middle-aged travellers exhibited the greatest interest in food excursions, relishing local foods, and engaging in traditional festivities. However, heritage and local traditions alone were not compelling enough to attract a broad audience. Specifically, families preferred activities that engaged children, such as hiking and outdoor sports, over visiting historical sites. This highlights the necessity for rural destinations to provide diverse and comprehensive experiences catering to various age groups and interests.

The “go for it” cluster, characterized by a strong inclination towards diverse and extensive experiences, is attracted to pursuits such as cycling, trekking, and family-friendly events. This suggests that rural areas can appeal to this group by offering innovative and inclusive travel packages. Notably, the current energy and cost-of-living issues have heightened tourists’ awareness of expenses, particularly when eating out, impacting their motivation.

Age significantly influences choices, with middle-aged individuals showing a pronounced preference for outdoor activities and social events. Gender differences were also observed, with women demonstrating a distinct inclination towards visiting rural heritage sites.

Our study emphasizes the growing importance of authentic, personalized encounters in rural tourism post-COVID. The investigation established a strong association between sociodemographic characteristics and motivations, particularly indicating a preference for non-mass, traditional services. Middle-aged tourists represent an attractive market segment for these offerings, and it is crucial to fully capitalize on this potential.

These findings offer valuable insights for practitioners. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated a shift towards rural tourism, driven by a desire for well-being, authentic-

ty, and personalized experiences. By understanding and addressing the nuanced motivations of rural tourists, destinations can thrive in this evolving landscape. Rural destinations can capitalize on current trends and appeal to urban tourists by meeting the growing demand with tailored offerings and improved accessibility. Efficient market segmentation will enable providers to cater to diverse motivations, ensuring the continued popularity of rural tourism as an affordable and healthful alternative to overcrowded tourist spots.

In addition, the findings of this study contribute to the development of current theories. The results suggest that retrospective activity-based segmentation can be an advantageous methodological strategy. Additionally, this study adds to the ongoing conversation concerning shifts in tourist motivations in response to current crises, with a particular focus on changes in customer requirements. During the post-COVID period, rural tourism is transforming, moving away from the traditional focus on providing self-fulfilment and privacy. This indicates that rural regions have the potential to successfully attract tourists by offering comprehensive packages that include infrastructure such as bike and hiking trails, as well as creative, family-oriented activities and affordable dining options. Moreover, environmentally conscious activities should be considered to be part of the offerings to attract rural tourism travellers, as suggested by CHEN, J. et al. (2023).

Overall, the results significantly contribute to informed destination development and management, providing a better understanding of markets and modern marketing practices, and professional approaches to holistic and sustainability-enhancing management. However, the study has two primary limitations. First, as mentioned in the methodology, there are inherent constraints in surveying a specific, limited area, making the results potentially non-generalizable to the broader population. Nonetheless, such surveys can provide valuable insights for theory-building, especially regarding the evolution of representations and consump-

tion patterns in rural areas (EUSÉBIO, C. et al. 2017). They underline the importance of sought activities as a relevant segmentation basis for visitors (MUMUNI, A.G. and MANSOUR, M. 2014; MCKERCHER, B. et al. 2023b). Furthermore, future research could extend beyond the current scope to investigate the attitudes and behaviours of solo tourists or those travelling only with their spouses, facilitating the discovery of any unique characteristics that may exist.

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