

PLANNING MICRO-ROUTES IN CULTURAL TOURISM: MONASTERY ROUTE IN OVČAR-KABLAR GORGE, SERBIA

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Abstract: The last few years have completely changed Serbian tourism. The COVID-19 Pandemics, closed borders as its consequence and the general rise of standard have redirected Serbian population from once-in-year seaside travel to multiple short travels in Serbia. This new impulse in tourism has opened many opportunities for more remoted regions in the country with preserved heritage. One such region in Ovčar-Kablar Gorge in Western Serbia, near the city of Čačak. The magnificent scenery of the gorge is under state protection as a landscape of outstanding features. It is in addition “enriched” by cultural heritage – nine monasteries, two forest churches and one cave-church, developed between the 14th-18th centuries. The concentration of the sacral heritage is so important locally that the gorge is unofficially known as “Serbian Athos”. This paper presents the recent efforts done in the local spatial plan, created by “Gradac” Public Enterprise from Čačak, to address this potential through the development of cultural-tourist micro-route in the gorge.

Keywords: Cultural Tourism; Territorial Planning; Cultural Heritage; Tourist Routes; Cultural Landscape; Linear Development.

Introduction

Tourist or tourism routes are a well-known term in tourism studies. Basically, a tourist route is a purposely planned tourist roadway or waterway that passes through an area with the sites of natural or cultural beauty. European Environment Information and Observation Network defines a tourist route as “[An] established or selected course for travel consisting, typically, of secondary roads with significant scenic, cultural, historic, geological or natural features and including vistas, rest areas, and interpretive sites matching the scenic characteristics of the course” (EIONET, n.d.). Furthermore, there are many internationally used synonyms and similar concepts in tourism planning used: tourist road, tourist drive, tourist trail, travelling route, scenic route, holiday route, theme route, scenic byway, etc.

The creation and promotion of tourist routes “mushroomed” since the last decades of 20th century (Flognfeldt, 2005). Nevertheless, tourist routes include all the elements typical for tourist destinations in general – attractions and infrastructure. The second one is usually more challenging to be developed (Singh, 2008). The tourism exclusively based on tourist routes – route tourism – differs from the other types by several components. It aspires to disperse tourist visitors in a wider area and to less known attractions, reflecting on longer visitor stay and, ultimately, the diffuse of local revenue (Meyer, 2004), (Duarte-Duarte et al., 2021).

Today, there is a myriad of tourist routes across the world. Some of them are more related to natural values, while the others are more inclined towards cultural treasure. For example, cultural tourist routes are more prominent in Europe. There are 48 Cultural Routes approved and promoted by the Council of Europe, that emphasise the memory, history and heritage of the continent (CoE, n.d.a).

Interestingly, route tourism is still not deeply scientifically studied (Vada et al., 2022). Pedrosa et al identify five significant topics within the research of tourist routes: (1) route development, (2) consumer behaviour, (3) stakeholder relationships, (4) territorial impacts, (5) tourism development; plus, other, uncategorised topics (Pedrosa et al., 2022). They also single out route development as the most common topic, underline the importance of planning and territorial impacts. Lourens also highlights the role of strategic planning and development to adequately address the sustainable rise of route tourism by comparing two cases from the regions with the different importance and implementability of strategic planning measures (Lourens, 2007). To conclude, the measures of territorial planning play a significant role in developing tourist routes.

Although tourist routes can be found across the globe, the planning of tourist routes is still in its basic phase in many regions and countries, including Serbia. The understanding and initial development of route tourism was boosted by European level, through the afore mentioned pan-European cultural routes. Serbia became a member state of the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes since 2012 (CoE, n.d.b). Serbia is currently included in nine of these 48 cultural routes. Some of them, which are better recognised in territorial aspects, like "Roman Emperors and Danube Wine Route" and "Iron Curtain Trail – Eurovelo 13" are better promoted and appropriately covered by specific planning documents, so called, spatial plans for special-purpose areas.

The current recognisability of the aforementioned tourist routes in Serbia is at least partly related to their international importance, as both the Danube Region and the area of Ancient Roman Empire are the shared heritage of many European countries. This situation has dramatically changed with the COVID-19 Pandemics, accompanied with closed national borders during 2020-2021, when going to 10-day seaside holiday abroad during summer was not possible. This "once-in-year ritual" of many Serbians was swiftly transformed into multiple short trips across Serbia (Gajić et al., 2023). Plus, the general rise of the standard of Serbian population achieved last years has additionally contributed to these travelling and visiting changes. Serbians in their cars have rediscovered many small tourist locations in their own country. This mode of transport has also enabled the visits of several nearby locations or multiple locations along travelling route. To sum up, the recent change of tourist habits of local population has fuelled the rise of tourist routes in Serbia (Mandarić et al., 2022).

One of the regions that has been remodelled into a prospective tourist route is Ovčar-Kablar Gorge in Western Serbia, near the city of Čačak. The magnificent scenery of the gorge is under state protection as a landscape of outstanding features. It is in addition "enriched" by cultural heritage – nine monasteries, two forest churches and one cave-church, developed between the 14th-18th centuries. The concentration of the sacral

heritage is so important locally that the gorge is unofficially known as “Serbian Athos”. In addition, there is a small spa locality in the centre of the gorge. This paper presents the recent efforts done in a spatial plan created for this special-purpose tourist area, created by the institute for urbanism in Čačak, to address this potential through the development of cultural-tourist micro-route in the gorge.

Methodology

This conference paper is organised as a single-case study, where the case is the Spatial Plan for the Special-purpose Area of the Landscape of Outstanding Features “Ovčar-Kablar Gorge” (Serb. *Просторни План Подручја Посебне Намене Предела Изузетних Одлика “Овчарско-Кабларска Клисуре”*; hereinafter: *the Plan*). As the research based on a single case can not be studied by comparative methods, it requires a more rigid criteria framework for the case study (Gustafsson, 2017). The results from the case study leads final recommendations in conclusions.

In this research, the criteria are extracted from the explained specific characteristics of route tourism, which are to be analysed in the plan. They are:

- 1) Tourist route covers wider area, i.e. there is no one core destination;
- 2) Multiple less-known attractions within the route;
- 3) The diffusion of visitor stays into several locations;
- 4) The development based on diffused benefits and revenues;
- 5) Linking element to be promoted.

Some of these elements are already included in the official definition of a landscape of outstanding features (Serb. *Предео Изузетних Одлика*). By Serbian law, it is “an area of recognizable appearance with significant natural, biological-ecological, aesthetic and cultural-historical values, which has developed over time as a result of the interaction of nature, the natural potential of the area and the traditional way of life of the local population” (GS, 2009-2021: Art. 33). All these landscapes are under strict protection measures. Ovčar-Kablar Gorge is among 20 such areas in Serbia.

Due to their significance and protection regime, the landscapes of outstanding features, as well as other officially protected regions with exceptional values (e.g. national parks or cultural zones) are the objects to be developed by the special territorial plans. These plans are legally named as spatial plans for special-purpose areas. By Serbian law, the areas which are suitable for the creation and development by this type of plan are, inter alia, area with natural and combined natural and cultural values, as well as areas with significant tourist potential (GS, 2009-2023: Art. 21). It is important to underpin that this type of plan is the only one among regional territorial plans that cover areas which are not outlined by administrative borders, i.e., which outlines follow “natural” borders of focused areas. In the case of Ovčar-Kablar Gorge, this is the whole region of gorge.

Planning Context

Ovčar-Kablar Gorge (Serb. *Овчарско-Кабларска Клисура*) is located in Western Serbia and it is the part of the composite valley of Zapadna Morava, one of the longest rivers entirely in Serbia. As the name shows, the gorge is formed on the narrow section of the valley between two mountains – Ovčar (south) and Kablar (north) (figure 1). This is an area of extraordinary landscape diversity, beauty and attractiveness (Čačak, n.d.).



Figure 1. Two mountains – Ovčar (first plan) and Kablar (background plan) – with the gorge and its meanders in between (Author: M. Obradović).

The gorge is approximately 20 km long, with several meanders. The depth of the gorge is approximately 400-600 m, but it goes to 700 m in the most extreme section. Due to this character, Ovčar-Kablar Gorge has significant geoheritage, an example of the interplay of geological, geomorphological, hydrological processes and phenomena. The gorge is also rich in caves. The physical isolation of the gorge causes micro-climate conditions, which, then, enables diverse flora and fauna with endemic species (TO Čačak, n.d.).

Aside of rich nature, Ovčar-Kablar Gorge is also famous by cultural heritage. The most important examples are nine monasteries, located on this relatively small area (figure 2). After Fruška Gora Mountain, Ovčar-Kablar Gorge has the highest concentration of monasteries in Serbia (Tadić et al., 2016). Ovčar-Kablar Monasteries are established in the late Middle Ages and during Ottoman period (16th-18th century) (TO Čačak, 2014). As this period is marked as relatively poor in heritage, these monasteries represent a rather uniqueness in Serbian sacral legacy. Furthermore, many of the monasteries are located on specific locations, contributing to a magnificent scenery (figure 3).



Figure 2. (left) Nikolje Monastery is one of larger ones, with distinctive traditional architecture (Author: M. Obradović). Figure 3. (right) Uspenje (Dormition) Monastery on the top of a hill above the river (Author: M. Obradović).

The richness of natural and cultural heritage was the main reason to officially proclaim Ovčar-Kablar Gorge as a landscape of outstanding features. Many smaller locations within the gorge are also protected as locally called the monuments of nature or culture. This status of a landscape of outstanding features has influenced intensive tourist development in the gorge in recent years. It was further supported by the renewal of small Ovčar Banja/Spa in the centre of the gorge, as well as better transport connections with the rest of Serbia via a new highway, which touches the gorge on its eastern edge.

The plan which is created to develop this area is already mentioned the Spatial Plan for the Special-purpose Areas of the Landscape of Outstanding Features “Ovčar-Kablar Gorge”. The plan is officially enacted in 2019. The initiative for this plan was previously set up in the spatial plan of the administrative self-government unit of Čačak, where the main argument for this was the proper identification and development of tourist potential of this area (City of Čačak, 2010). As a result, the protected area of Ovčar-Kablar Gorge as a landscape of outstanding features was increased from 22.5 sq.km to 49.8 sq.km. The planning horizon of the plan for Ovčar-Kablar Gorge is 20 years, but it can be harmonised and upgraded in the meantime, if new circumstances arise. The plan area was 97.53 sq.m, of which approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ is under strict state protection as natural or cultural heritage. The most of the plan area administratively belongs to the City of Čačak¹, while small parts are in Lučani and Požega municipalities. (GS, 2019).

Results

Five analytical criteria are derived from theory. In case study section, both textual and graphical segments of the selected plan are descriptively compared with them, to form the results and, then, the main findings.

¹ The administrative cities in Serbia are the former bigger municipalities, which encompass the seat – bigger urban settlement – and usually dozens of nearby rural settlements. Hence, a difference between cities and municipalities in Serbia in spatial manner are just their size – cities are usually bigger and with more inhabitants.

CRITERION 1 – TOURIST ROUTE COVERS THE AREA WIDER THAN ONE SETTLEMENT: This is already explained – this type of a plan usually covers a region, based on a certain feature, which is regionally important. In this case, it is a region with a landscape of outstanding features. The plan area is almost 100 km² and it includes the territory of eight rural settlements, fully or partly. There is also a central, urbanised area – Ovčar Banja (Ovčar Spa) – which is an administrative centre for several villages located in this area (figure 4). CRITERION FULFILLED.

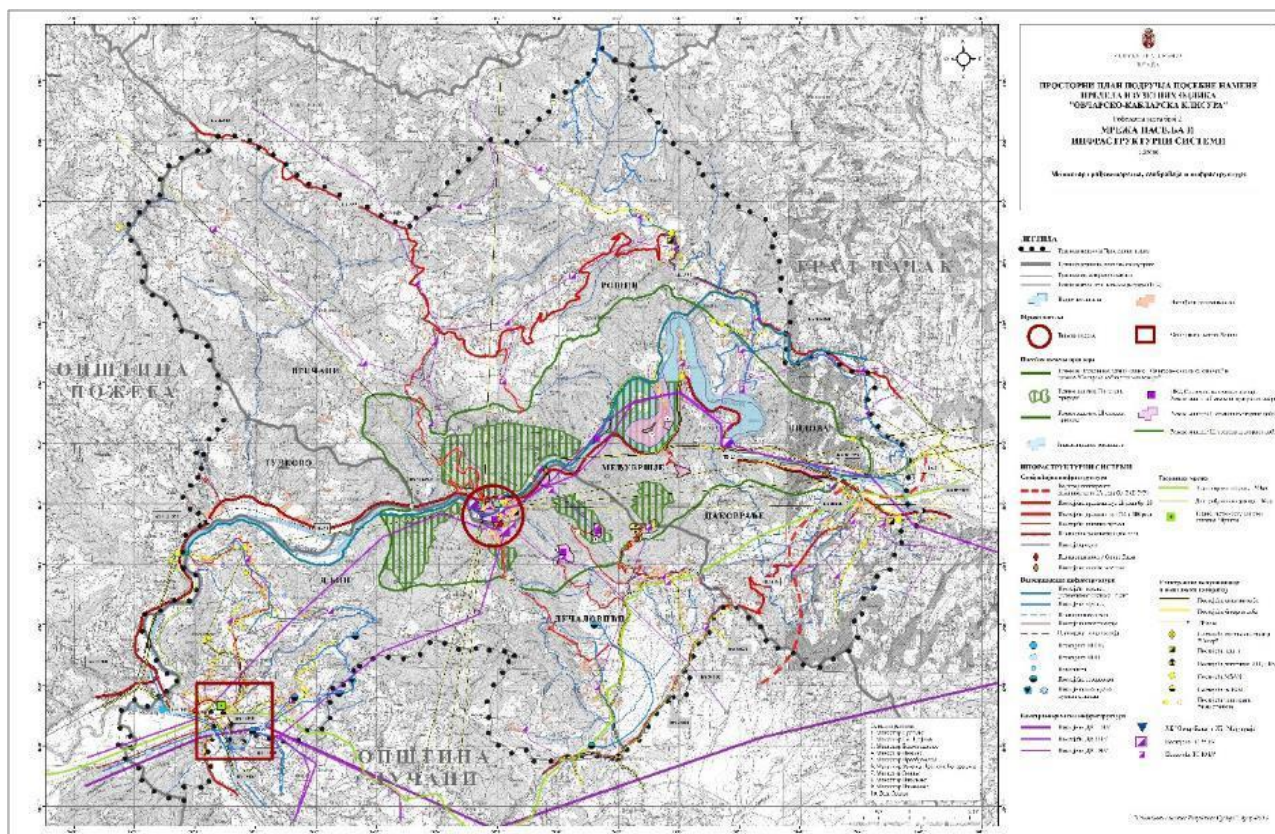


Figure 4. The plan map of settlement network and infrastructure systems. The central settlement of Ovčar Banja is easy to be noticed, as it is encircled in the middle of the map (source: the Plan).

CRITERION 2 – MULTIPLE LESS-KNOWN ATTRACTIONS WITHIN THE ROUTE: Nine monasteries, as well as two forest churches, one cave-church and a spa (Ovčar Banja), are already mentioned. Additionally, there are the examples of rural built heritage (ethno-complexes) and archaeological sites. In the case of natural heritage, there six localities under stricter protection. The main problem regarding this criterion is that these tourist attractions are scattered throughout the plan area (figure 5) and many of them are far away from good roads. Furthermore, in the tourism section they are not branded as an entity, but more within the different types of tourism – religious, cultural, ethno-, ecological, rural, etc. **CRITERION PARTLY FULFILLED.**

CRITERION 3 – THE DIFFUSION OF VISITOR STAYS INTO SEVERAL LOCATIONS: The development of long-stay tourism is mainly focused on one location – Ovčar Banja (spa) – which is ideally located in the central part of both the protected area

and the plan area. There are no other concrete locations in the plan area, especially those ones which can become a “backbone” for the types of tourism which is not related to the spa, such rural or eco-tourism. These types of tourism also prefer the locations which not on the main road, which is the case with Ovčar Banja. CRITERION NOT FULFILLED.

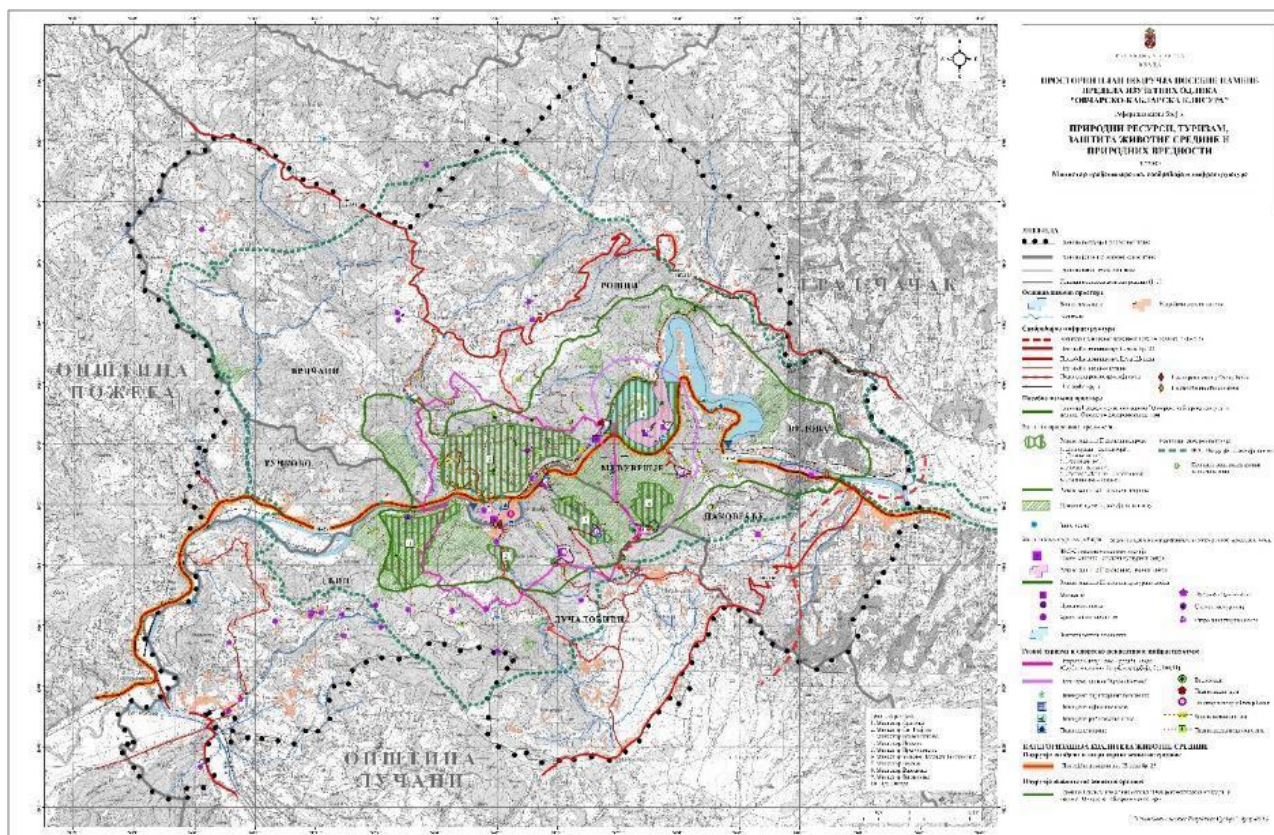


Figure 5. The plan map of tourism and heritage protection. Many smaller tourist attractions are visible as colour-marked area in this map (source: the Plan).

CRITERION 4 – THE DEVELOPMENT BASED ON DIFFUSED BENEFITS AND REVENUES: The previous criterion (no 3) is basically a precondition for this one. Therefore, the plan limitation about the absence of long-stay tourism in the most of the plan area disrupts the desirable measures to ensure diffused benefits and revenues. However, the plan also prescribes several locations for which more detailed plans are required, targeting the sustainable development of weekend and cottage tourism. This can be understood as a “grassroot” for the future dispersed benefits and revenues. CRITERION PARTLY FULFILLED.

CRITERION 5 – LINKING ELEMENT TO BE PROMOTED: By its structure and coverage, this plan is a sort of the promotion of the unified “protection+tourism” regional development. However, the textual section about tourism misses a clear perspective relating to this. It is more focused on the different types of tourism than to the development of a complete “tourist product” in a spatial sense. On the other side, the planned development of transport infrastructure (i.e., roads) supports the unified picture of the analysed area, as all critical roads met in Ovčar Banja, the central settlement of the area. CRITERION PARTLY FULFILLED.

Discussion and conclusions

The case study of the selected Spatial Plan for the Special-purpose Area of the Landscape of Outstanding Features “Ovčar-Kablar Gorge” as a prospective tourist region in Serbia shows several important findings. First, there are many small local attractions based on natural and cultural heritage within the gorge, which is the very first element to even consider the development of a tourist route. They are relatively known regarding their heritage importance. Thus, this element is fulfilled. However, the other critical element to fully develop it – tourist infrastructure – is still underdeveloped. More challenging is that its territorial framework is planned as relatively monocentric with a centre in Ovčar Banja, i.e., neither linear nor dispersed. This is contrasting to the basics to properly establish a tourist route. In line with this, there is a problem to diffuse revenues and benefits from tourism in general. At the end, the implementation of the plan has also positive elements, as it prescribes several dispersed zones to be further developed by more detailed planning documents.

The main recommendations address the expected harmonisations(s) of the plan in the future. They should insist on remodelling of the currently planned monocentric network into linear one, which is more suitable for tourist routes. Then, tourist points are not just the main attraction, i.e., the main sites of cultural and natural heritage, but also crossroads towards them as the points of tourist service and infrastructure. They need to get a proper planning measures in the plan, as their future facilities and form had to address the multi-faceted character of the gorge as a landscape of outstanding features, to enable the visit and stay of the different types of tourists. The peripheral zones of the plan area, which are not in the gorge, had to be planned to embrace the “tourist niches” which are not covered by the main ones, dedicated for the attractions in the gorge. They are eco-, ethno- and rural tourism. Although these types of tourism are already included in the plan, there is no prioritisation of their development in a spatial sense. Hence, adequate planning measures in these peripheral zones are welcomed.

At the end, it is important to emphasise that documents of territorial planning, such as the analysed plan, had to be accompanied with the other strategic documents and measures to appropriately initiate and establish tourist routes as a desired sustainable development trajectory.

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Abstract and Keywords in Serbian

Резиме: Туризам у Србији потпуно је промењен последњих пар година. КОВИД-19 пандемија, затворене границе као њена последица и општи раст стандарда преусмерили су српско становништво са годишњих путовања на море на виšekратна кратка путовања негде у Србији. Нови подстрек кроз туризам отворио је бројне могућности за удаљеније области у држави са очуваном баштином. Такав пример је Овчарско-кабларска клисура у западној Србији, код Чачка. Величанствени предео клисуре је под заштитом државе као предео изузетних одлика. Он је поред тога „обогашен” и културном баштином – 10 манастира, две шумске и једна пећинска црква, сви настали између 14. и 18. века. Концентрисање дате баштине је локално толико важно да је клисура незванично позната као „Српска Света Гора”. У раду су приказани скорашњи напори учињени у локалном просторном плану, израђеном од стране Јавног предузећа „Градац” из Чачка, да се овај потенцијал искористи кроз развој културно-туристичке микро-руте кроз клисуру.

Кључне речи: Културни туризам; просторно планирање; културна баштина; туристичка рута; културни предео; линијски развој.

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