

Announcement

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## The Economic and Tourism Valorization and Legal Protection of the Villas of Vrnjačka Banja as the Guardians of the Cultural Heritage

Conclusions of the Round Table organized by the Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja, within the Project “The Villas of Vrnjačka Banja as the Guardians of Cultural Heritage – ReVillas”, funded by Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SASA) Research Center in Kragujevac and the University of Kragujevac

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As part of the project *The Villas of Vrnjačka Banja as the Guardians of Cultural Heritage – ReVillas*,<sup>2</sup> the Round Table “*The Economic and Tourism Valorization and Legal Protection of the Villas of Vrnjačka Banja as the Guardians of the Cultural Heritage of Vrnjačka Banja*” was held on March 29, 2022 in Vrnjačka Banja. The Round Table was organized by the Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja under the auspices of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SASA) Research Center in Kragujevac and the University of Kragujevac. The relevance of the topic brought together academics and practitioners, representatives of public authorities, cultural institutions, tourism and hospitality service providers, scientific research institutions, and owners of Vrnjačka Banja villas. A great interest in cultural tourism, especially since the 1990s, has led the academic community to dedicate more attention to this niche of the tourism market.

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<sup>2</sup> ReVillas project team is consisted of ten members, out of which five are in the status of researchers and five are in the status of consultants: **Andrej Mičović**, Ph.D., Associate Professor, University of Kragujevac, Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja, Project Leader; **Miljan Leković**, Ph.D., Associate Professor, University of Kragujevac, Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja, Project Member; **Danijela Pantović**, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, University of Kragujevac, Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja, Project Member; **Nataša Dorđević**, MSc, Teaching Assistant, University of Kragujevac, Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja, Project Member; **Marijana Seočanac**, MSc, Junior Researcher, University of Kragujevac, Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja, Project Member; **Marko D. Petrović**, Ph.D., Senior Research Associate at the Social Geography Department of the Geographical Institute “Jovan Cvijić”, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SASA) in Belgrade (Serbia), consultant; **Darko Dimitrovski**, Ph.D., Associate Professor, University of Kragujevac, Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja, consultant; **Marija Kostić**, Ph.D., Associate Professor, University of Kragujevac, Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja, consultant; **Nemanja Pantić**, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, University of Kragujevac, Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja, consultant; **Jovanka Kalaba**, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, University of Kragujevac, Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja. All participants in the project have a high degree of theoretical and practical knowledge from various scientific fields, primarily in the field of tourism, which is supported by their competencies within their biographies.

The aim of the Round Table is to raise awareness of the importance of cultural heritage at the local, national and international level, the need for legal protection of material and intangible cultural heritage, as well as to consider the possibilities of their commercialization for tourist purposes, creation of new tourist products and expansion of the cultural tourist offer in Vrnjačka Banja through the economic and tourist valorization of Vrnjačka Banja villas.

The Round Table participants were greeted by the Dean of the Faculty, Prof. Drago Cvijanović, Mr. Nenad Manojlović, Member of the Municipal Council of the Municipality of Vrnjačka Banja and Prof. Andrej Mičović, ReVillas Project Leader. Keynote speakers at the event were distinguished Jelena Borović-Dimić (Director of the Cultural Center of Vrnjačka Banja), Majda Sikošek (art historian) and Ana Ječmenica (Director of the Baja Tours Travel Agency). Furthermore, the Round Table was also greatly honored by hosting Ivan Trifunović (Director of the Tourist Organization of Vrnjačka Banja), Marija Acimović (archaeologist curator), Nataša Čurčiev (manager of the Villa Emilia), Dragana Matijević (Director of the Center for development of innovative business activities), Nikica Pantović (Spa travel Vrnjačka Banja), Katarina Grujović-Brković (Director of the Institute for Cultural Protection Kraljevo), who actively participated in the discussion.

Taking into an account doctrinal views, the participants of the Round Table agreed that travel motivated by cultural and historical resources is one of the largest and fastest growing sectors of the tourism industry in the modern world. Namely, cultural heritage tourism is growing much faster than all other forms of tourism and is therefore considered an important potential tool for community economic development (UNWTO, 2005). Cultural heritage is increasingly seen as a resource not only for the promotion of culture, but also for socially and economically sustainable development and well-being of the population, especially through its use as one of the main attractions of cultural tourism (Yáñez Martínez, 2011). Tourism is the leading generator of resources crucial for the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage (Chiabai et al., 2014; Strielkowski, 2012) and cultural tourism is often considered the key generator of resources necessary for the preservation and promotion of cultural assets, with cultural tourism playing a key role in identifying cultural heritage (Chiabai, 2013).

The villas' architecture is one of the striking characteristics of the physical structure of Vrnjačka Banja, standing out with the special type of buildings that participate in the formation of the tourist offer (Marić et al., 2009). From 1868 onwards, the construction of spa villas marked the beginnings of the modern development of Vrnjačka Banja, and they were built either as family holiday homes, or as purpose-built boarding houses and lodgings. The diversity of architectural styles and expressions of villas is a cross-section of styles used in the construction of modern Serbia.

The construction peak of the first wave of the villas was the period from the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, namely the period of Art Nouveau. This artistic movement left a serious mark in the architecture of Vrnjačka Banja and provided unique examples of the style in Serbia. Some of the villas were more in the academic building style, but they had a distinct Art Nouveau decoration and ornamentation, whereas some, like Villa Arnovljević, were designed as unique examples of Art Nouveau architecture. This villa was designed by one of the most important architects of Serbia at the time - Branko Tanazević. The second wave of construction of the villas was the period between the two world wars, when some of the most beautiful examples of modernism in Serbia were built in Vrnjačka Banja.

The Round Table was one of the activities of the ReVillas project,<sup>3</sup> which aims to: improve and increase the scholarly contribution to the valorization of cultural heritage tourism; raise awareness of the importance of the tourism valorization of tangible heritage in the Republic of Serbia, retaining existing tourists on the one hand, but also attracting new categories of culturally interested tourists on the other hand; conduct tourism valorization of villas and examining the opinions of tourists using a multidisciplinary approach (Du Cros, 2001); identify perspectives for commercializing villas for tourism purposes; create a proposal for the protection of villas in accordance with the existing legal regulations. The scholarly result of the project will be the monograph *The Tourism Valorization of Cultural and Historical Villas of Vrnjačka Banja*, which will, through fieldwork and empirical research, lay the basis for expanding knowledge about cultural heritage tourism. The practical result of the project would be the proposal of a new tourism product “The Villas of Vrnjačka Banja Cultural Route”. The new product is expected to enrich the existing cultural tourism offer in Vrnjačka Banja and contribute to the promotion of local cultural heritage, as well as increase the average length of tourists’ stay in Vrnjačka Banja, which has been declining in recent years.

Within the project, a joint effort of all team members and partner institutions also produced research titled “Cultural Heritage and Old Villas in Vrnjačka Banja”, based on a survey created to collect tourists' opinions. The original survey questionnaire was obtained from Zhang et al. (2021). After collecting 320 answers and processing the data obtained in the survey, a comparative analysis of the conclusions was made.<sup>4</sup>

The conclusions from the Round Table, organized as part of the Project, that can be singled out are the following:

- Cultural heritage has a significant impact on the choice of tourism destination: the more monuments, museums and the larger the area of the protected urban zone, the greater the benefit for tourism and the possibility that the area will be visited;
- Cultural tourism in Vrnjačka Banja is developed to a certain extent through the programs of the Belimarković Castle, Film Scenario Festival, Culture Festival, Carnival, while the villas of Vrnjačka Banja are a considerable untapped potential;
- When making reference to cultural heritage and spa tourism, the expression “spa villa” is used exclusively in the context of Vrnjačka Banja, as no other spa center in the Republic of Serbia has so much cultural and historical wealth related to old villas;
- An exchange of experiences is necessary among the representatives of public authorities, tourism and cultural representatives, owners and managers of the villas of Vrnjačka Banja in order to raise awareness of the importance of cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible;
- It is necessary to insist on the importance and potential of Vrnjačka Banja’s cultural heritage;
- Protection of cultural heritage is dependent on adequate legal framework;
- Cultural tourism is fundamentally motivated by experiencing culture in different ways, which is a context where the villas of Vrnjačka Banja are an unused resource;
- Due to the growing interest in cultural tourism, especially since the 1990s, this topic is expected to encourage the academic and wider community to pay as much attention to this problem as possible, all in the function of developing a new tourism product;

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<sup>3</sup> The project was registered as a program for scholarly research and artistic projects conducted by young researchers and artists and was chosen as the best project in the field of social sciences and humanities. See: [https://www.kg.ac.rs/doc/rang\\_lista\\_projekti.pdf](https://www.kg.ac.rs/doc/rang_lista_projekti.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> The online questionnaire can be found here: <https://forms.gle/6ERr6rPX1GQeCLnXA>

- The study of the villas of Vrnjačka Banja is multidimensional and complex as it entails many areas: from economics and tourism through art history and museology to architecture; but the most important area is the strategy and policy of the development of Vrnjačka Banja as a spa center;
- Cultural tourism is motivated by tourists' interest in historical, artistic, scientific or heritage offering by a community, region, group or institution, and in this sense, Vrnjačka Banja's potential is immense;
- If we look at all basic motives for cultural tourism and look at the geographical, cultural, infrastructural and economic factors relevant for Vrnjačka Banja, adoption and implementation of cultural tourism strategy can move Vrnjačka Banja even higher up the scale of tourist destination visits in Serbia;
- In its surroundings, Vrnjačka Banja has the monastery of Žiča, the coronation monastery of the medieval royal dynasty of Nemanjić, which should perhaps have a better connection with handicrafts stalls and their offer;
- If, however, we wish to evoke the aristocratic atmosphere of the 19th and 20th-century Vrnjačka Banja, that would require presence of volunteers wearing appropriate costumes in front of the most important and best preserved villas during weekends;
- Artistic motives are used in a good way in the Belimarković castle, but insufficiently promoted in Vrnjačka Banja as a whole. The emphasis here should be on the authenticity of the exhibits and the story that the building itself carries;
- Taking into an account that Vrnjačka Banja is a complete ambient whole with all its natural beauties and architectural achievements, the tourism promotion narrative should be adjusted in the sense that Vrnjačka Banja offers them EXPERIENCE, not just a stay.

The potential of the villas for cultural tourism could be used in several ways:

- The exploitation of the educational and evocative potential of architectural heritage, through the organization of city walks either on foot, by bicycle or sightseeing train; untapping this type of potential does not require any material investments, and only the implementation brings immediate economic benefits;
- One of the possibilities for unlocking the potential of this special category of buildings in Vrnjačka Banja, especially those that were erected during the period of Art Nouveau and which do not require major material investments, would be the celebration of June 10, the World Art Nouveau Day. These activities could start at a smaller scale, through the organization of city walks, and could grow over time into an art nouveau festival, which would comprise various workshops, exhibitions, concerts, souvenir fairs inspired by the creation of this style etc.;
- The idea of villas as accommodation with an "aristocratic atmosphere" would require considerable material investments, but the ensuing economic profit would certainly be many times higher than the initial investments. The idea is to buy, restore and offer certain villas to a specific group of tourists who are willing to spend more money, and in return receive top service and accommodation that would provide them with privacy and comfort;
- Looking at examples of the development of different types of products pertaining to cultural tourism, the conclusion is self-evident: activities will attract the media, the media will attract tourists. One-day tourism will bring money to cafés, shops, taxi drivers, restaurants etc. Multi-day tourism will bring money to all the above mentioned plus hotels, hostels/villas. Tourists will become the ambassadors of Vrnjačka Banja, which will lead to new tourists' visits.

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