

SUSTAINABLE CERTIFICATION OF A TOURIST DESTINATION THROUGH THE PRISM OF A VISITOR'S POINT OF VIEW

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Hiking on Trstelj, the highest hill in the Karst, which, together with Brkini, is included as a destination in the Green Scheme of Slovenian tourism.

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Sustainable certification of a tourist destination through the prism of visitor's point of view

ABSTRACT: With the research we wanted to find out what are the tourism practices that tourists perceive as sustainable at tourist destinations in Slovenia that have the Slovenia Green sustainability certificate. We have selected eight destinations. The main method of work was surveying, followed by the analysis of the results. We analyzed 1444 surveys. We found that only 50% of respondents know about the sustainability certificate for tourist destinations, that the most recognizable sustainable practice in destinations is the possibility of using water for drinking from the tap, and that the biggest drawback in destinations is inadequate public passenger transport. We conclude that destinations should invest in more effective propaganda of the sustainability certificate and make more visible progress, especially in the field of public passenger transport.

KEY WORDS: Slovenia, tourism, certificate, sustainability, destination

Trajnostno certificirane turistične destinacije skozi prizmo obiskovalcev

POVZETEK: Članek prikazuje rezultate raziskave, s katero smo želeli ugotoviti, katere so tiste turistične prakse, ki jih turisti kot trajnostne dojemajo na slovenskih turističnih destinacijah s trajnostnim certifikatom Slovenia Green. Izbrali smo osem destinacij. Poglavitna metoda dela je bilo anketiranje, kateremu je sledila analiza rezultatov. Analizirali smo 1444 anket. Ugotovili smo, da trajnostni certifikat za turistične destinacije pozna le slabih 50 % anketirancev, da je najbolj prepoznavna trajnostna praksa na destinacijah možnost uporabe vode za pitje iz pipe ter da je največja pomanjkljivost na destinacijah neustrezen javni potniški promet. Ugotavljamo, da bi destinacije morale investirati v učinkovitejšo propagando trajnostnega certifikata in posebej na področju javnega potniškega prometa storiti vidnejši napredek.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: Slovenija, turizem, certifikat, trajnost, destinacija

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1 Introduction and theoretical background

The tourism industry in Slovenia has shown an average growth trend since 1991, when Slovenia declared its independency. The crisis with the pandemic Covid-19, of course, stopped this trend. The peak was reached in 2019, when 6,229,573 tourists visited Slovenia and generated 15,775,331 overnight stays. In 2019, the tourism industry employed 6.5% of the labour force and contributed 5.3% to GDP (Špik and Počuča 2020).

On the one hand, rapid growth of the tourism sector brings economic benefits but, at the same time, it means a greater burden on the environment and society (Fennel 1999; Mokry 2013; Stojanović et al. 2014; Dragičević et al. 2015). Some studies from the last decade have concluded that the risk of negative impacts of tourism development increases with the number of tourists, which in turn leads to lower tourist satisfaction with the experience and destination (Geneletti and Dawa 2009; Juutinen et al. 2011; Vasiljević et al. 2011; Navrátil et al. 2014). It also has a number of negative consequences for the quality of life of the local population (Moscarda 2011; Gravari-Barbas and Jacquot 2017; Koens and Postma 2017; Postma, Buda and Gugerell 2017). Some authors speak of the emergence of overtourism (Koens, Postma and Papp 2018; Rangus, Božinovski and Brumen 2018; World Tourism Organization 2018; Polajnar Horvat and Ribeiro 2019). A well-known approach of how to manage overtourism is through the concept of sustainability. This is based on four pillars: economic, environmental, socio-cultural and political participatory (Mihalic 2016; Knežević Cvelbar et al. 2021).

To counteract the negative externalities of tourism and enable sustainable development in tourism, there is an obvious need to develop green tourism strategies and products (Parsons and Grant 2007; Zelena shema ... 2017). Individual destinations and suppliers can achieve this through standardization, certification, labelling, competition for awards and titles, and networking (Razpotnik Visković 2020, Ledinek Lozej and Razpotnik Visković 2022; Razpotnik Visković and Logar 2022).

Certification is also referred to as a »stamp of approval,« identified by labels, seals, certificates, brands or trademarks (Buckley 2002; Harris 2007) and is just one of the mechanisms available to tourism providers. Certification is the process by which an organization grants recognition to a person, organization, process, service or product that meets certain recognized and established standards (Conaghan and Hanrahan 2009). It can assure consumers that a product or service meets specific standards or measurable criteria, and this can increase customer confidence and satisfaction (Dodds and Joppe 2005). Certification has become an increasingly popular voluntary tourism management tool to meet both supply-side and demand-side requirements that go beyond regulatory requirements (Honey and Rome 2001). Certification has been shown to increase a company's credibility in world markets because of its public commitment to quality, safety and risk management, which leads to increased sales, competitiveness and profitability (Conroy 2001). Certification can raise the profile of a brand and/or destination, making it synonymous with sustainability, quality and/or safety (Honey 2002; Philpott et al. 2007). For these reasons, certification is often seen as a beneficial marketing tool for tourism operators (Adanur and Allen 1995; Ho 1994; Honey 2002). From a safety perspective, it makes sense for the system to provide for recertification after a few years. The result of certification is a certificate, which is a document between the company conducting the assessment and the applicant (company or destination). It can be said that certification guarantees a holistic approach and long-term sustainable performance. The communication with the final consumers is called labelling (Figure 1) (The concepts ... 2003; European ... 2018; Rangus, Božinovski and Brumen 2018; Razpotnik Visković 2020).

There are different types of certificates in tourism; they can be national or global, and they can be linked to the destination as a whole or to a single supplier. Each type of supplier can have its own certificate (e.g., hotels or beaches).

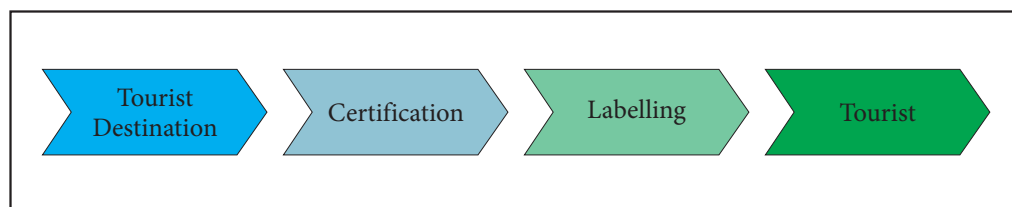


Figure 1: Position of certification and labelling in the communication between destination and tourist (Razpotnik Visković 2020).

It is therefore not surprising that in 2002 there were more than 100 green tourism certification schemes worldwide (Jarvis, Weeden and Simcock 2010). In the Labelscape project, we identified 30 certificates for tourism destinations that correspond to Global Sustainable Tourism Council criteria (hereafter: GSTC) (Global Sustainable ... 2022) and Sustainable Development Goals (Sustainable development ... 2022).

A discourse has recently developed on the subject of certification in tourism. The most comprehensive of these studies is Pennington-Gray et al. (2014). It can be seen that the focus has been on eco-certification in the past. The exact process of six-step ecological certification in tourism was defined by Sasidharan, Sirakaya and Kerstetter (2002), and it can also be used for other types of certification in tourism. The ecological aspect is also emphasized by some other authors, such as Janjušević and Perović (2020).

Another group of studies has focused on assessing customer perception and awareness of certified hotels (e.g., Penz, Hofmann and Hartl 2017; Martínez García de Leaniz, Herrero Crespo and Gómez López 2018; Spenceley 2018; Martínez, Herrero and Gómez - López 2019; Agudo et al. 2021; Nelson et al. 2021).

Font (2002) found that awareness and familiarity with eco-labels in the tourist sector is generally low. It may partially result from confusion due to the current proliferation of labels and certifications. This confusion may further lead consumers to ignore green messages. On the other hand, consumers may be unaware of eco-labels in the tourist sector, since the majority of consumers do not consider sustainability issues (particularly environmental ones) when planning their holiday (Budeanu 2007; Erskine and Collins 1997; Fairweather, Maslin and Simmons 2005; Resier and Simmons 2005). Generally, the concept of traveling and holidays is (still) not linked to sustainability (Penz, Hofman and Hartl 2017). Nevertheless, Janjušević and Perović (2020) claimed in their study that potential consumers are willing to pay up to 40% (which does not mean that they actually paid) more for services of eco-certified units, since their principal benefit is in added value. In the case of tourists on Gili Trawangan in Indonesia, the percentage of such tourists was more than 70% (Nelson et al. 2021).

The third group consists of articles about selected tourist activities linked to certification (culinary, beach, festivals ...). For example, Ratnasari et al. (2020) found that halal certification does not affect customer satisfaction, but it does affect behavioural intention. Dodds and Holmes (2020) concluded that the majority of beachgoers are aware of the certificate but do not know what it means. Another study (Chirieleison, Montrone and Scrucca 2022) highlighted that certification is only the first step, since tourists who were aware of the label tended to have relatively positive perceptions and higher satisfaction compared to those who were not. Two articles have addressed certified wildlife activities. Lissner and Mayer (2020) found that most tourists were willing to pay more money to travel with a certified tour operator. Lawton and Weaver (2009), on the other hand, claimed that certification can promote sustainable practices in the management of bird festivals. National park certification has been studied in terms of how sustainability standards can be used to support protected area management for tourism (Bushell and Bricker 2017) and the lack of response to ecolabeling in certified protected areas in Finland (Puhakka 2010).

There have been few studies concerning certification at the destination level. Grapentin and Ayikoru (2019) highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of the systems currently in use, including various factors that could influence their future development. In particular, the study concluded that destination rating and certification is affected by four key factors: practicality, reliability, visibility and (non)availability of incentives. The salience of these issues and their resulting complexity influence the way tourists and tourism destinations deal with destination rating and certification. This narrows the opportunities and limitations of such systems. Pennington-Gray et al. (2014) focused on certified, crisis-prepared destinations in the United States, while Wambugu Maingi (2019) indicated that tourism certification and accreditation systems in East Africa are one of the most important tools in dealing with overtourism in the East African context.

It can be concluded that the literature on the demand side is sparse and, consequently, very little is known about how consumers perceive tourism certification and how their perceptions of a destination and travel decisions may be influenced by destination certification.

The few studies that have looked at consumer demand for certification have focused primarily on pricing, the relationship between quality and certification, and willingness to travel (e.g., Chafe 2005; Fairweather, Maslin and Simmons 2005; Rivera 2002). In this article, we will focus on certification from the tourist's point of view.

We will therefore focus on two main research questions in this article:

RQ1 – Are visitors familiar with the Slovenian sustainable tourism certificate?

RQ2 – Which tourism practices are recognized by visitors as sustainable?

1.1 Slovenia Green

Slovenia Green is a national sustainable tourism certificate, established in 2015 and managed by the Slovenian Tourist Board (Priročnik ... 2021). It was created in the frame of The Green Scheme of Slovenian Tourism, a national supporting programme for developing sustainable tourism on the level of destination and service providers (Weston et al. 2018). Entities that can become certified are destinations, protected areas, accommodations, tour operators, restaurants, attractions and beaches. Certification of the service providers is relatively simple and is based on recognising endorsed existing sustainable tourism certificates (see Table 1). When a business obtains one of these certificates (primary certificate), it can also apply for the Slovenia Green certificate (secondary certificate) without any additional evaluation.

Certification of destinations (individual municipality or group of municipalities) and protected areas is more complex since the process involves a greater number of local actors, e.g., Destination Management Organisations (hereafter: DMO), local tourism authority (often acts as the DMO but not always), providers of communal services, NGOs, associations, tourism providers and/or their interest groups. Destinations and protected areas need to be in compliance with the GSTC recognized Green Destinations standard but are supported in the process of certification by the Slovenian Tourism Board, which provides training, workshops and internet counselling (Poziv k oddaji ... 2022).

The number of certified entities has been increasing annually. In 2022, the number of certified entities was as follows: 58 destinations, 4 protected areas, 99 accommodations, 8 travel agencies, 6 attractions, 40 restaurants and 1 beach (Green Scheme of ... 2022a). In other words, certified destinations cover approximately 1/3 of Slovenian territory (75 municipalities) and 75% of tourism volume, namely overnight stays in the pre-pandemic year 2019 (Prihodi in prenočitve ... 2019).

The process of certification lasts approximately 10 months and the certificate is valid for three years. Destinations can be awarded bronze, silver, gold or platinum signs, depending on their sustainability performance. In this 3-year period of certificate validity, destinations need to continue with activities in the field of sustainable tourism development and ideally show progress during the re-certification evaluation, which results also in a more valuable sign colour. However, the opposite can also happen – the destination can regress in colour or even lose the certificate.

One of the important elements of Slovenia Green certification for the destination is the inclusion of local inhabitants, local tourism businesses and visitors in the activities. Each destination that enters the (re-) certification process must carry out surveys with these three groups in order to take into consideration their perceptions of local tourism and include their expectations in the tourism strategy of the area.

Destinations are autonomous in implementing this task, but for those that need support, the Slovenian Tourist Board has prepared three different questionnaires (including an online version) adapted to each group: local inhabitants, local tourism businesses and visitors. The research presented in this article is based on questionnaires for visitors to the destinations.

Table 1: Primary certificates endorsed by the Slovenian Tourist Board (Poziv k oddaji ... 2022).

Endorsed certificate (primary certificate)	Slovenia Green Category (secondary certificate)
Bio Hotels, Ecocamping, EU Ecolabel, Green Globe, Green Key, Travelife, World of Glamping Green, Hostelling International Quality & Sustainability	Slovenia Green Accommodation
Travelife, Green Globe	Slovenia Green Travel Agency
Green Globe, Green Key	Slovenia Green Attraction
Blue Flag	Slovenia Green Beach
L.E.A.F., Green Key	Slovenia Green Cuisine

2 Methods and study area

2.1 Questionnaire development and data analysis

The analysis of visitors' perceptions of a destination's sustainability performance is based on a visitors' survey carried out by (re-)certifying destinations in 2021. According to the Slovenia green certificate rules destinations need to carry out surveys with visitors and, for this purpose, can use questionnaires proposed by the Slovenian Tourist Board (Priročnik ... 2021). The authors of this study upgraded the questionnaires and the survey was implemented by DMO. The questionnaire comprises four groups of questions and evaluations (Table 2):

- general information about their visit (e.g., number of nights in destination, motivation for traveling);
- evaluation of their experience at the destination on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 (e.g., accommodation, gastronomy, shopping, public transport, health & security);
- evaluation of sustainable practices at the destination on a Likert scale from 1 to 5;
- general demographic information about the visitor (e.g., age, sex, country of residence).

Based on the data collected in the survey, we prepared statistical analyses with descriptive statistics calculations and displayed the selected results with the help of charts.

Table 2: Questions in the questionnaire.

Groups of questions/evaluations	Question/Evaluation
General information about their visit	Who are you travelling with?
	How many nights will/did you spend in our destination?
	Which mode of transport will/did you mostly use during your visit to our destination (select only one option)?
	What is the main motive of your visit?
	Are you familiar with Slovenian label for sustainable tourism Slovenia Green?
Evaluation of experience at the destination	Possibility to travel by foot or riding a bike.
	Public transportation.
	Well-kept surroundings.
	Health care and health protection.
	Opportunities for hiking and cycling.
	Cultural offer (museums, galleries, cultural events ...).
	Kindness and hospitality of local people.
	Personal safety during the visits.
Value for money.	
Evaluation of sustainable practices at the destination	Destination is providing enough information about the local gastronomic offer and local products.
	In destination, it is safe to drink tap water.
	In destination, there are enough waste separation points available.
	Destination is providing enough information about reducing water and energy consumption.
	Destination stimulates visitors to use sustainable modes of transport (cycling, walking, train, bus ...).
	Destination is providing enough information about health concerns and accessibility to medical care.
Destination is providing enough information about how to act responsibly (while visiting attractions, during events ...).	
General demographic information	Age.
	Gender.
	Employment status.
	Country of your residence.

2.2 Data collection and study area

The survey was carried out by DMO in the destination (Table 3; Table 5), either in person or through an online questionnaire. The most common locations for addressing visitors (Table 4) were tourism offices, accommodations or attractions.

In the instructions for the use of these questionnaires, DMOs were instructed to follow quota sampling for their survey, and to adjust their sample in a way that corresponds best to the number of visitors and their origin, sex and age group. They were advised to calculate the size of the sample by using online calculators, e.g., surveymonkey by entering the total population size (population is the average annual number of visitors), a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error.

It should be added that surveying was carried out during the time of the Covid-19 epidemic, so all sampling requirements could not be respected due to the prevalence of home visitors over foreign tourists and decrease in tourism volume in some destinations (in comparison with 2019; Turizem v številkah 2020). Surveys were carried out from April until December 2021. Criteria for inclusion of the destination in our analysis were geographical diversity (located in different parts of Slovenia), different types of tourism offer (seaside tourism, urban tourism, wellness tourism ...) and different levels of sustainability performance (bronze, silver, gold).

Table 3: Destinations included in our analysis (Poziv k oddaji ... 2022; Vrste turističnih občin ... 2022).

Destination	No. of municipalities	No. of respondents	Statistical region	Slovenia Green sign (in 2022)	Type of tourism
Kranj	single	329	Gorenjska	gold	urban
Kras-Brkini	group	337	Obalno-kraška	gold	other
Krško	single	78	Posavska	gold	other
Laško	single	110	Savinjska	gold	wellness
Ljutomer	single	66	Pomurska	bronze	other
Murska Sobota	single	397	Pomurska	bronze	wellness
Piran - Portorož	single	82	Obalno-kraška	bronze	seaside
Postojna	single	45	Primorsko-notranjska	silver	other

Table 4: Socio-demographic characteristic of respondents (n = 1444).

Demographic variables	Frequency (n)	Valid percent
Age	less than 25	16%
	25–44	35%
	45–64	34%
	65 or more	15%
Gender	female	53%
	male	47%
Employment status	student, pupil	14%
	employed, self-employed	66%
	retiree	18%
	other	2%
Country of residence	Slovenia	65%
	Bordering countries	10%
	Other European countries*	22%
	Other countries	3%

*Russia and Türkiye are included in the group of other countries.

Figure 2: Map of included destinations. ► p. 92

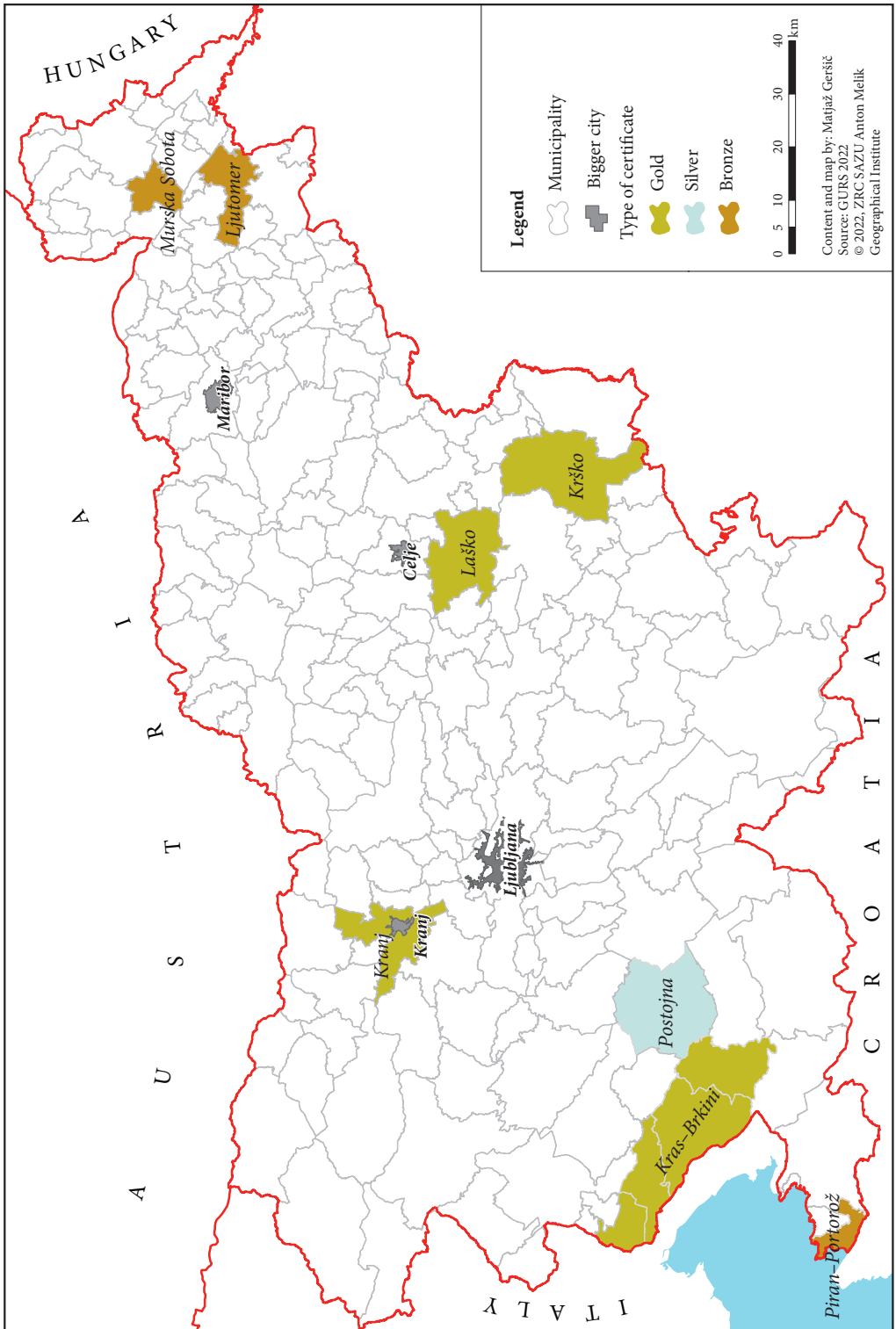


Table 5: Characteristics of the destinations (*data missing for April 2021; ** data missing for April 2020).

Destination (number of respondents)	Type of certificate (year of acquisition of the first certificate)	Area [km ²]	Inhabitants	Nights spent by citizens / share			Nights spent by foreigners / share				
				2018	2019	2020	2021	2018	2019	2020	2021
Kranj (329)	gold (2022)	150.9	57,185	9031 / 7%	7584 / 6%	7759 / 20%	11,629 / 22%	119,479 / 93%	113,783 / 94%	31,340 / 80%	40,791 / 78%
Kras-Bikini (337)**	gold (2017)	660	26,642	20,557 / 12%	19,549 / 11%	36,390 / 47%	60,197 / 50%	152,923 / 88%	158,403 / 89%	41,667 / 53%	60,469 / 50%
Kiško (78)**	gold (2021)	286.5	25,904	7608 / 31%	4517 / 27%	4855 / 43%	7276 / 38%	16,784 / 69%	11,925 / 73%	6538 / 57%	11,975 / 62%
Laško (110)	gold (2016)	197.5	13,123	12,565 / 43%	88,837 / 38%	10,1397 / 73%	151,616 / 78%	164,132 / 57%	146,350 / 62%	38,317 / 27%	42,432 / 22%
Ljutomer (66)	bronze (2017)	107.2	11,233	48,733 / 76%	51,251 / 75%	51,086 / 93%	62,770 / 85%	15,689 / 24%	17,056 / 25%	3666 / 7%	11,289 / 15%
Murska Sobota (397)	bronze (2021)	64.4	18,622	31,627 / 62%	31,026 / 60%	20,322 / 84%	25,762 / 79%	19,055 / 38%	20,901 / 40%	3979 / 16%	6749 / 21%
Portorož-Piran (82)	bronze (2021)	44.6	18,457	589,624 / 31%	583,802 / 31%	873,084 / 69%	992,348 / 64%	1,292,759 / 69%	1,290,660 / 69%	399,858 / 31%	546,324 / 36%
Postojna (45)*	silver (2019)	269.9	16,675	15,203 / 9%	11,385 / 7%	16,346 / 36%	20,736 / 29%	149,222 / 91%	153,913 / 93%	28,732 / 93%	51,035 / 64%

3 Results

Guests spent an average of 2.6 nights at destinations, and the main purpose of their visit was to visit natural and cultural attractions, followed by rest and recreation. The least number of guests visited the destination for shopping, health services and education.

3.1 Familiarity with the Slovenian certificate for sustainable tourism Slovenia Green

In general, the Slovenian sustainable tourism certificate Slovenia Green was known to fewer than 50% of respondents although there were some slight differences depending on certain tourist characteristics.

The majority of respondents (62%) used cars during visits to the destination. Exactly half of them were familiar with the certificate. In the case of tourists who used other types of transport in their destination, there were some differences identified. Among those who used buses, 47% knew the certificate and slightly more, 55%, among those who cycled around the destination knew the certificate. Among those who walked, only 37% knew about the certificate. The certificate was most recognizable by those tourists who used trains to travel to the destination. It should be noted, however, that these were the least of all visitors (only 1%).

Comparing domestic and foreign tourists, 61% of domestic tourists knew the certificate and only 24% of foreign tourists.

The difference between recognition of the certificate among tourists traveling alone, with family, friends or otherwise was negligible. There was more than a 5% difference between knowledge of the certificate only between those visitors who were travelling with friends or alone, and between those who chose the category other.

Depending on the purpose of visiting the destination, there were somewhat larger differences between visitors who were aware of the certificate and those who were not (Figure 3). The biggest difference between those familiar with the certificate and those not familiar with it was among visitors whose main purpose for the visit was business visit – only 36% of them knew the certificate, and 64% did not. Among those whose main purpose of the visit was health and medical care, 60% know the certificate and 40% did not. There were also noticeable differences between those who travelled to the destination to visit friends and acquaintances (57% of them knew the certificate) and those who came for entertainment and gastronomy (only 45% of them knew the certificate).

Based on the length of stay at the destination, 60% of one-day visitors to the destination knew the certificate, but only 42% of those who stayed at the destination up to three nights, and half of those who stayed longer.

3.2 Tourism practices recognized as sustainable among visitors

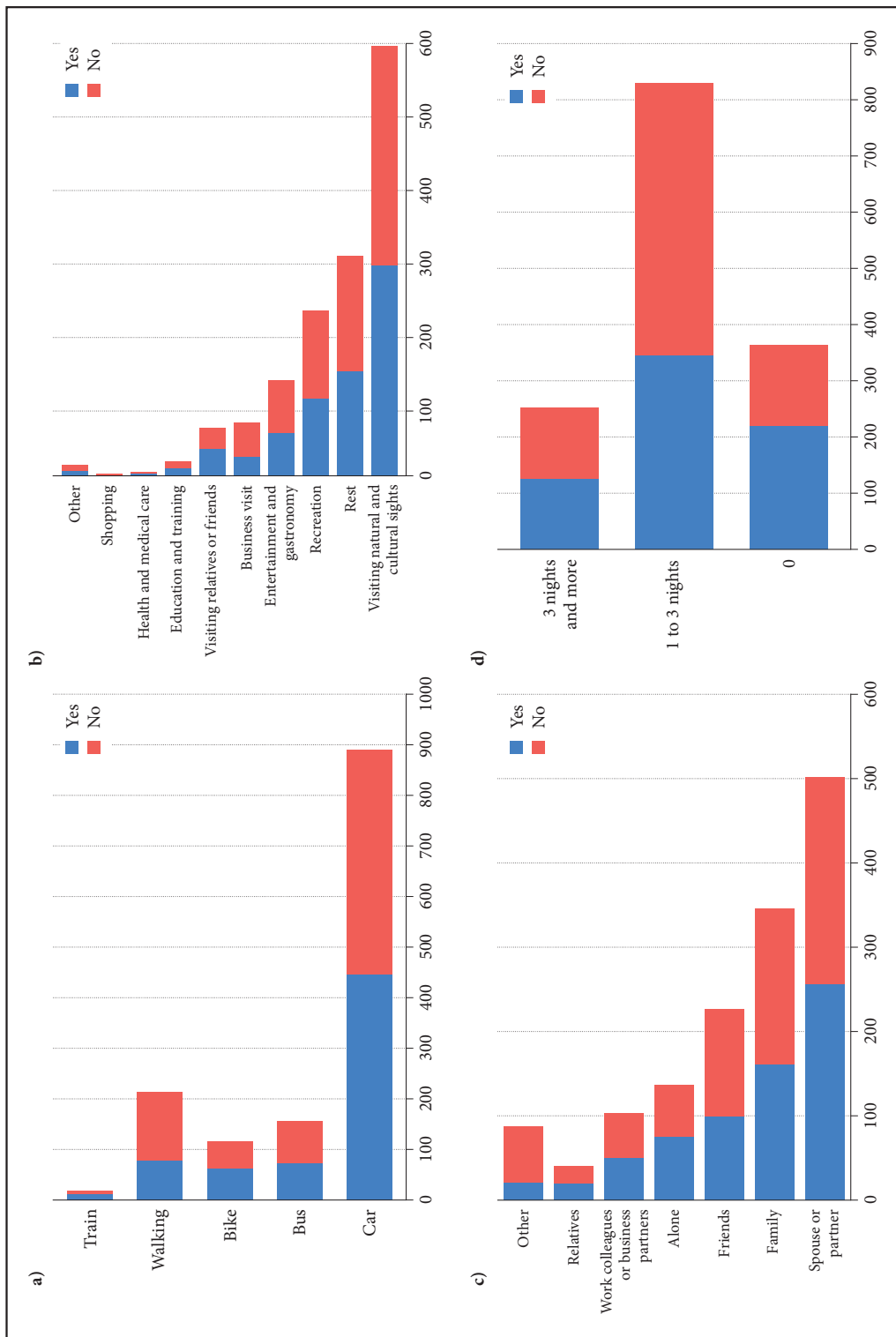
Of guests who spent an average of 3 to 4 days at the visited destination, 70% were transported by personal vehicles, 77% came from Slovenia and 40% came to the destination to visit natural and cultural attractions. Visitors rated the possibility of drinking tap water as the most recognizable at the destination (4.6/5) (Figure 4). Visitors also agreed with the statements that there are enough places to separate waste at the destination and enough information on how to behave responsibly (4.3/5).

They rated the destinations' efforts somewhat worse in terms of sufficient information about the local gastronomic offer and local products (4.2/5), sufficient incentives for the use of sustainable forms of transport (4.1/5), and a sufficient amount of information about healthcare and access to medical care (4.1/5).

According to the visitors the least attention was paid to the information on saving energy and water as sustainable practice (3.9/5).

Comparing the perception of sustainable practices between domestic and foreign tourists, only small differences were found. The biggest difference was observed in the category »in destination, there are enough waste separation points available«. Foreign tourists were more satisfied (4.26/5) with these incentives than

Figure 3: Familiarity with the Slovenian certificate for sustainable tourism Slovenia Green in relation to the type of transport during the visit (A), the main motive of the visit (B), who they were traveling with (C), and how many nights were spent in the destination (D). ► p. 95



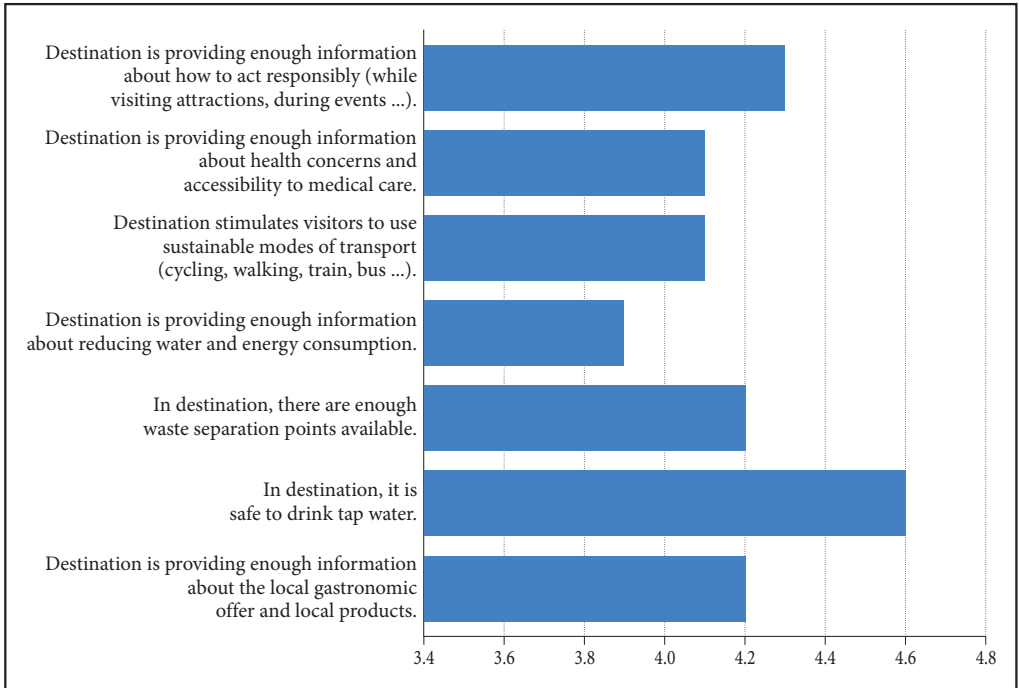


Figure 4: Assessments of destinations' sustainability efforts.

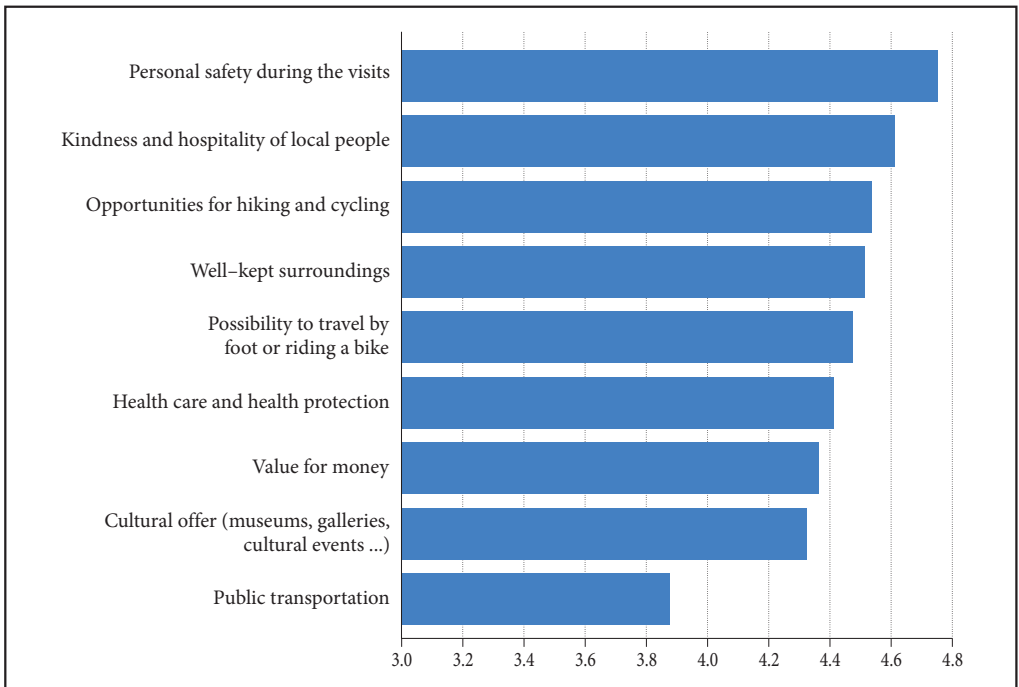


Figure 5: Reviews of some sustainability-oriented experiences at the destinations.

domestic tourists (4.24/5). This shows that, from the point of view of foreigners, such incentives still need to be further refined.

The question is also raised of whether the type of certificate or the tradition of the certified destination affects the assessment. The hypothesis that the best-rated destination would be the one with the longest tradition of certification or the one with the highest level of certification can be at least partially refuted. According to the analyses the best-rated destinations were those with silver (4.4/5) and gold signs (4.2/5), while the worst were those with bronze (4.1/5). In terms of the tradition of certification, it can be concluded that only this can influence the level of perception of sustainable practices. It appeared that the better-rated destinations were those that obtained the first certificate in 2019, 2016 and 2017, while the less well-rated were destinations that obtained the first certificate in 2021 and 2022.

Personal safety during the visit received the highest rating (4.8/5) at the evaluations of some experiences at the destination (Figure 5) that also reflect sustainable tourism practices according to the UN Environmental Program and UN World Tourism Organization. Kindness and hospitality of local people (4.6/5) were also rated highly. Among the destinations, the Kras-Brkini destination received the highest rating for personal safety (4.9/5), while the Piran-Portorož destination received the worst (4.6/5). Value for money (4.4/5) and cultural offer (4.3) received worse ratings. By far the worst rated was public transport (3.9/5). Comparing the ratings among the destinations, the worst rated destination for public transport was Kras-Brkini (3.2/5), and the best was Postojna (4.4/5). The poor evaluation of the destination Kras-Brkini is somewhat surprising, since it is one with the majority of activities focused on sustainable mobility (automatic e-bike sharing system, tourist bus) (Sustainability report 2021). The cultural offer was also poorly rated. The worst of the destinations were Laško and Piran-Portorož, and the best was Kranj. Kranj does not otherwise indicate a special emphasis on the cultural offer. There were also relatively poor value-for-money ratings for destinations. The worst-rated destination was Piran-Portorož, and the best was Postojna.

4 Discussion

The first fact that cannot be overlooked is that the certification was known to only a modest half of respondents. This has similarly been noted by some other authors (for example, Font 2002; Budeanu 2007; Erskine and Collins 1997; Fairweather, Maslin and Simmons 2005; Resier and Simmons 2005; Penz, Hofman and Hartl 2017).

Comparing recognition of the certification depending on the tourists' origin, the certification was best known to domestic guests, 60%. Only 28% of guests from neighbouring countries were aware of the certificate, this is similar to guests from other European countries, while only 13% of guests from the rest of the world were aware of the certificate.

An important aspect of sustainability is the mode of travel. In the research, the method of travel at the destination itself was determined and not the method of arrival to the destination. Slightly less than two-thirds of visitors used a private car to travel to the destination, which is the least sustainable form of travel. Walking and using the bus followed with 15%. Only 8% of visitors used bicycles. Comparing the engagement of destinations in raising awareness of the use of public passenger transport at destinations (Sustainability report 2021; Sever 2022; Destinacija Postojna 2022; Green scheme of ... 2022b; Laško 2022; Murska Sobota 2022; Trajnostno poročilo ... 2022; Prlekija 2022), it can be concluded that the effect is poor. However, it is necessary to distinguish between propaganda or awareness-raising and actually well-organized public transport. It is possible that the destinations do not do enough and, due to insufficient flexibility and still too infrequent public transport, visitors are forced to use their own vehicles to make good use of their time.

Guests also highlighted in the survey the topic of public transport as one of the worst sustainability efforts at destinations. Similarly, visitors rated poorly providing enough information about health concerns and accessibility to medical care.

Among the best-rated sustainable efforts, visitors highlighted the possibility of drinking tap water. It is a credit rating offered by Slovenia as a whole and is not the result of any special efforts at certified destinations. In year 2022, however, due to the high summer temperatures and drought, it has become clear that even this natural privilege may be absent in the future, especially in coastal and highland Slovenian regions (Podnebne spremembe 2021).

Our study found that guests considered concern for reducing water and energy consumption to be the worst sustainability effort at the destinations, and that visitors were insufficiently informed and warned about it. This is in the exclusive domain of the destination as such.

A moderately committed effort in the field of sustainability was perceived by visitors in terms of the sufficient number of places for separate waste collection and in terms of providing enough information about the local gastronomic offer and local products.

Visitors also rated good information about how to act responsibly (while visiting attractions and during events ...) as a very appropriate effort in the field of sustainability.

Grapentin and Ayikoru (2019) noted that the most important factor when choosing a destination was the safety of the destination. This is also important from a sustainability point of view. Based on the good evaluation of visitors to the destinations in question, we have to maintain this benefit. The authors also noted that cultural offers come next in importance. Judging by our analysis, selected destinations must place greater emphasis on this area and confirm and improve it. Price is also important for visitors. Selected destinations still have some room for manoeuvre in this area as well. As noted by Sasidharan, Sirakaya and Kerstetter (2002) and Janjušević and Perović (2020), ecology was a very important aspect in the past. Judging by our analyses, this aspect is no longer in the forefront in the frame of sustainable tourism but remains among the more important elements.

As an additional result our research found out that with relation to sustainable practices among individual destinations, the difference between the best and worst was estimated at 0.6 on average.

4.1 Limitation

In terms of interpretation of the results, it should be emphasized that the survey was conducted in 2021/2022 when the consequences of the global pandemic of the Covid-19 virus were being felt. In tourism in Slovenia, this was mainly reflected in the above-average number of domestic tourists, which was the result of individual restrictions on departures abroad and tourist vouchers, which the state allocated to the population to save the tourism sector from collapse. It was therefore an atypical tourist season (Gössling and Schweiggart 2022), which of course is also reflected in the survey results. Although we understand that sustainability consists of several different pillars, in our study we focused on the environmental and social aspects which remains a gap for the future studies.

5 Conclusion

In relation to recognition of sustainability certificates, the results of our research do not deviate from related previous research in other geographical areas. The question naturally arises of how to achieve greater recognition of a sustainability certified destination among visitors and, at the same time, encourage visitors to perceive such a destination as an offer with a higher added value. First of all, more effort and resources should probably be devoted to the promotion of such destinations, especially among foreign visitors. In terms of the resources invested in the certification process and adjustments related to it, the area of promotion should also not be neglected. Another aspect is related to consumer education. For them to be aware of the added value of sustainability certified destinations, they should probably learn more about the concepts through the educational process.

Another aspect that should be noted is public passenger transport. It is generally recognised that public transport is not the best developed in Slovenia because, in past decades, huge investments were made in the construction of the highway network, while the railway network was largely forgotten (Tiran, Hrvatin and Gabrovec 2021). However, it is also true that, within an individual destination, perhaps more than the network in general, it is worth pointing out the challenges associated with the offer of public transport within a destination. These are often in the domain of individual municipalities. Comparing the engagement of individual destinations in the field of public passenger transport, which results from a destinations literature review and the responses of visitors, public transport was identified as a key obstacle. Destinations invest a lot of energy in arranging the offer (especially the bicycle offer), but visitors do not notice or do not use it. Perhaps the reason for the poor response to the offer is a large proportion of domestic guests.

Without a doubt, more care should be taken to inform visitors about saving water and energy, and destinations should improve the cultural offer and continue to maintain a high level of sense of security.

As we noted, the type of certificate (gold, platinum) is not directly proportional to the promotion of sustainable practices in the destination but is much more dependent on the tradition of a sustainable destination.

Finally, it should be noted that an excessive number of tourists causes overtourism (Koens, Postma and Papp 2018; Ranguš, Božinovski and Brumen 2018; World Tourism Organization 2018; Polajnar Horvat and Ribeiro 2019), which undoubtedly does not contribute to the sustainable direction of destinations. Above all, this is a serious challenge for the local population, who should and must be an equal stakeholder in the space. Finding the right balance between the number of conscious tourists and ensuring the concept of sustainability remains an important aspect that must be addressed by certified destinations.

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