

Tourism Valorisation of Croatian Intangible Cultural Heritage on the UNESCO Lists: The Example of the Sinjska Alka

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Until fifteen years ago, intangible cultural heritage was considered a less recognised value requiring preservation for future generations. To ensure better protection and raise awareness of its importance, UNESCO created the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2008. Today, three lists of intangible cultural heritage under UNESCO patronage include 18 intangible cultural assets, placing Croatia 7th in the world and 3rd in Europe among countries with recognised intangible cultural assets. In addition to artistic value, intangible cultural heritage also has tourism value. The question remains about valuing intangible heritage in terms of tourism and integrating it into the tourism supply.

The research aims to analyse the conversion of Croatian intangible cultural heritage into tourism supply, using the example of the Sinjska Alka, a knights' tournament. It is a tradition that has continuously occurred every year since 1715. The event has been on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity since 2010. The Sinjska Alka is an example of good practice, with the opening of the Sinjska Alka Museum in 2015 and the transformation of the event from a one-day to a year-round tourist attraction. The research is based on an analysis of tourism statistics in the Town of Sinj, an analysis of registered visitor flow to the Sinjska Alka Museum as well as the Sinjska Alka event, an analysis of the presentation of the Sinjska Alka in tourist brochures, and interviews with key stakeholders from the local public.

Keywords: intangible cultural heritage, UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, tourism valorisation of intangible heritage, the Sinjska Alka, Sinj, Croatia



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Introduction

Intangible cultural heritage was first recognised in the early 21st century as a value that needs protection and determines a locality's identity for future generations. Timothy (2011) includes in intangible cultural heritage the following categories of cultural assets: the arts (art traditions, handicraft skills, foodways and

gastronomy), languages (unique languages, music), folkways (dress, farming methods, faith, behaviour, folklore, stories), music and performing arts (dance, music, opera), religion (beliefs, practises, ceremonies, gender roles), sport (play, rules, and methods), and festivals and pageants (ethnic festivals, food festivals, religious pageants). The late recognition of the

value of intangible heritage has affected its inclusion in tourism (Melis & Chambers, 2021), and a stronger tourism valorisation of intangible heritage assets has been noticeable only in the last fifteen or so years (Petronela, 2016; Drpić & Rudan, 2019). As with tangible cultural heritage, the crucial role in better protecting intangible cultural heritage is raising awareness of its value, promoting it, and strengthening the tourism valorisation contributed by UNESCO. In 2008, the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage was established. Today, there are three lists of intangible cultural heritage under UNESCO: 1) the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity; 2) the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding; and 3) the Register of Good Safeguarding Practises (UNESCO, 2022).

Croatia has recognised the value of its intangible cultural heritage early on, as reflected in the many protected intangible cultural assets under the Croatian Ministry of Culture and Media. The Intangible Cultural Property Register of the Republic of Croatia includes 209 secure intangible cultural assets classified into the following five categories: 1) oral tradition, expressions, and speeches; 2) performing arts; 3) customs, rituals, and ceremonies; 4) knowledge and skills; and 5) traditional crafts (Ministry of Culture and Media of the Republic of Croatia, 2022b). Among these, 18 intangible cultural assets have been on the UNESCO World Intangible Cultural Heritage list, i.e., sixteen of them on the Representative List of Intangible Heritage of Humanity and one intangible asset on each of the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding and on the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices for Intangible Assets, placing Croatia 7th in the world and 3rd in Europe in terms of the number of intangible cultural assets on the UNESCO lists (Ministry of Culture and Media of the Republic of Croatia, 2022a; 2022b; UNESCO, 2022).

The question remains as to the manner of adequately valorising intangible cultural assets in terms of tourism and preserving them for future generations while, on the other hand, enriching tourism supply while not excessively commodifying intangible cultural heritage (Du Cross & McKercher, 2020). More commercialisation of any intangible cultural heritage

as a tourist attraction can prevent it from losing its authenticity (Park, 2014), which can hurt the local and regional identity in a way that cannot be fixed. Intangible and tangible cultural assets included on the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage lists are protected and saved from oblivion but are branded more than other intangible and tangible cultural assets and, therefore, exposed to excessive commodification when transformed into tourism products (Cole, 2007; Adie, 2014). This commodification has initiated intensive discussions in academic circles as to whether the inclusion of cultural assets on the UNESCO lists is a blessing or burden (Pyykkönen, 2012; Moy & Phongpanichanan, 2014; Caust & Vecco, 2017) and whether the UNESCO lists contribute to “producing heritage” (Hameršak & Pleše, 2013; Zebec, 2013).

Though there are many examples of good practises in integrating all forms of intangible cultural heritage included on the UNESCO World Heritage List, there are no generally accepted models of valorising it in terms of tourism. Therefore, the Sinjska Alka, a case study for this research, is an example of the tourism valorisation of Croatian intangible heritage included on the UNESCO world heritage lists.

Research Goals and Methods

This research aims to analyse the transformation of the Sinjska Alka, an intangible cultural asset, into a tourism product of the Town of Sinj. The Sinjska Alka, a knights' tournament, has been held continuously every year since 1715 and has been included in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity since 2010. The Sinjska Alka was an example of good practice when the Sinjska Alka Museum was opened in 2015, transforming the Sinjska Alka from a one-day to a year-round tourist attraction and branding the new museum as an identity builder for Sinj as a tourist destination.

The research is based on analyses of tourism statistics for the Town of Sinj, registered visits to the Alka Museum and the Sinjska Alka event, presentations of the Sinjska Alka and the Alka Museum in tourist brochures published by the Sinj Tourist Board, and interviews with key stakeholders from the local public.

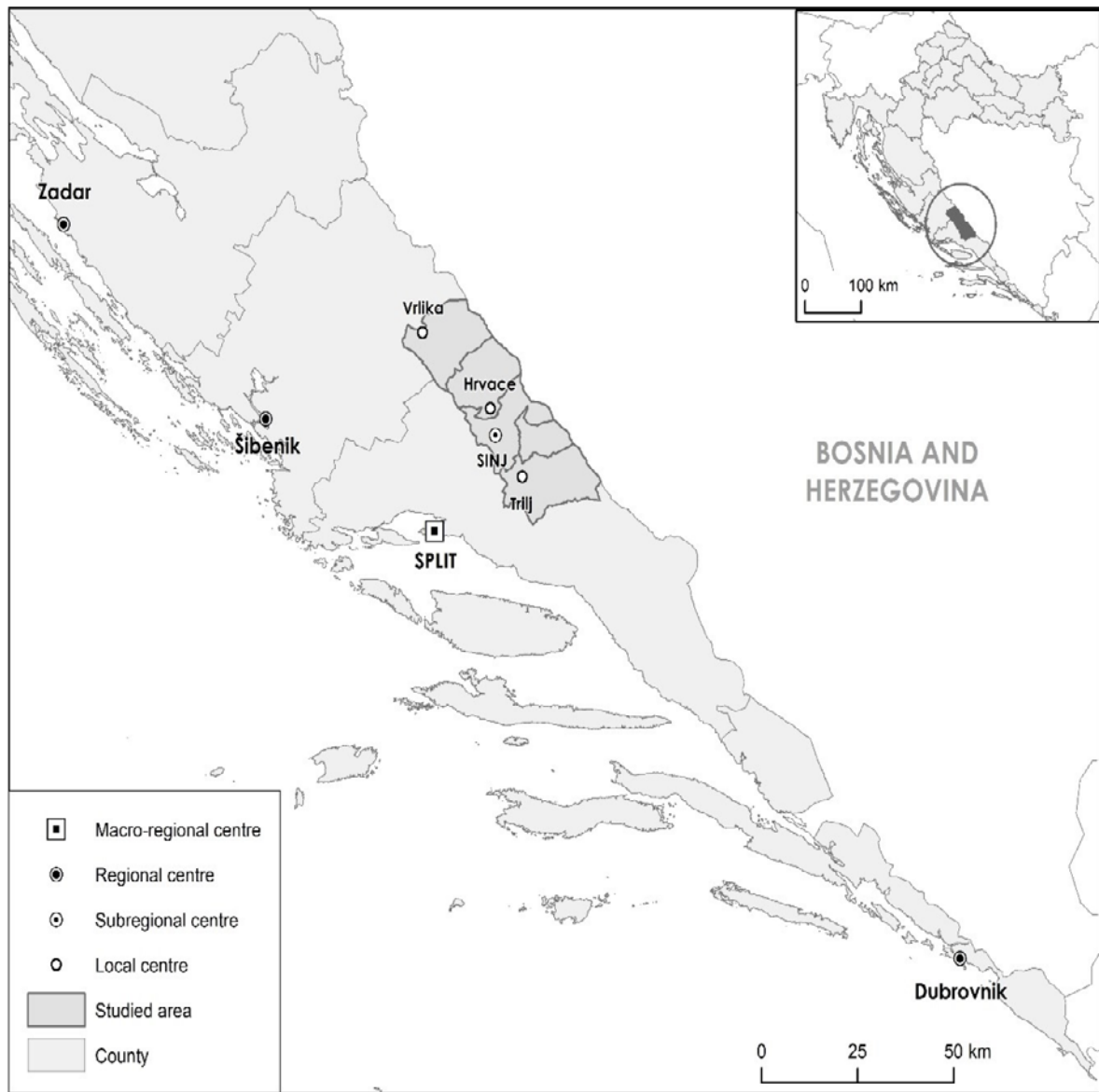


Figure 1 The Geographical Position of the Town of Sinj and the Cetinska Krajina Region

Source Croatian Geodetic Administry (2016)

Tourism flow in the administrative area of the Town of Sinj over the last ten years was analysed by descriptive statistics methods using official data from the Croatian Tourist Board and sourced from the eVisitor system for the most recent six consecutive years (2016–2021), while data for the period 2012–2015 derives from the Croatian Bureau of Statistics.

We used official data on the number of visitors to the Sinjska Alka Museum from its opening in 2015 to the end of 2021 to analyse the number of museum visits yearly and monthly.

The prevalence of the Sinjka Alka in the tourist brochures and tourist maps published by the Sinj Tourist Board and the Public Institution RERA S.D.

for Coordination and Development of Split-Dalmatia County was determined using the method of content analysis, in this case, a study of images (photographs). This method is based on the presumption that there is a link between the presence of mainly presented content in the analysed sources and the importance of the contributed content (Mejovšek, 2008; Zupanc, 2010). The analysis of images relies on decoding the meaning of the photographs and converting them into quantitative data to provide statistical analysis and interpretation. The decoding process included determining the number and importance of images related to the Sinjska Alka in the tourist brochures and the tourist map. We identified the importance of images related to the Sinjska Alka through the following indicators: the size of the image, its position in the brochure according to the page number, and the centrality of the image in the page design.

The key local stakeholders in the tourism valorisation of the Sinjska Alka and its transformation into a tourist product are the Sinj Tourist Board, the Sinjska Alka Museum, and the Alka Knights Society. In March 2022, their headpersons participated in a semi-structured interview.

The Sinjska Alka: A Good Practice Example

The town of Sinj (administrative region: 23,574 inhabitants; settlement of Sinj: 10,828 inhabitants in 2021; Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2022)) is in the Dalmatian hinterland in the most densely inhabited region of poorly inhabited Dalmatinska Zagora in the Cetinska Krajina region. The area covers the fertile Sinjsko Polje and some smaller karst poljes between the massifs of Dinara Mountain in the east (bordering Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Svilaja Mountain in the west, which extends northwest-southeast in the valley of the Cetina River. Sinj is 40 kilometres from Split, Croatia's second-largest city and Dalmatia's largest urban area. Some are 20 kilometres from the exit of Dugopolje on the Zagreb-Split-Dubrovnik motorway; some are 50 kilometres from Split Airport. Such transport accessibility drives general development, particularly tourism (Figure 1).

In the Middle Ages, Sinj affirmed itself as the leading settlement in the Cetinska Krajina region due to

its favourable and advantageous transportation links, geographical position on the border of Dalmatia and Bosnia, and intersecting longitudinal and transversal transport links (Magaš, 2013). Sinj and the Cetinska Krajina region were under Ottoman rule for 150 years during the 16th and 17th centuries. Though the Treaty of Carlowitz in 1699 (present-day Srijemski Karlovci) led to the merger of Sinjsko Polje with the Venetian Republic and the eastern part with the Ottoman Empire, the Ottomans attempted on several occasions to conquer the entire Cetinska Krajina region, leading to their defeat and banishment from the area in 1715, as affirmed by the Treaty of Passarowitz, a peace treaty signed at Požarevac in 1718. The organisation of Sinjska Alka first appeared in honour of the win over the Ottomans as a knight's tournament called the Sinjska Alka. The later periods saw Venetian, Austrian, Napoleon, again Austrian, Yugoslavian rule, and finally, the independent Croatian Republic.

The preserved nature of the tranquil fertile valley in the Cetina River valley, surrounded by steep karst mountains, including the turbulent history of this region, has become the basis for developing various natural and manufactured tourist attractions in the tourism supply of Sinj and the Cetinska Krajina region. Some of the natural attractions requiring mentioning are the geomorphological attractions such as the massifs and the natural surroundings of Dinara, the highest mountain in Croatia, and Kamešnica, which in 2021 became an integral part of the Dinara Nature Park. Among other critical natural attractions, the massif of the Svilaja Mountain and hydrographic features such as the Cetina River source and the upper part of this karst river, including the Peruća artificial lake, should be mentioned. It also includes attractions that stem from the appeal of the cultural landscape, such as the original stone houses in the rural settlements; in terms of the manufactured ones, the most significant importance in local tourism supply are the cultural and historic features, such as the Sinj Fortress, Kamičak Fortress in Sinj, Alkars' Courtyard in Sinj, Sinj Franciscan Grammar School, Prozor Fortress in Vrlika, Stone Bridge on Han, and the bridge on Panj. There are also sacral attractions such as the Shrine of the Miraculous Madonna of Sinj, the

pre-Romanesque church of the Holy Saviour at the Cetina source, including traditional cultural life like Ojkanje Singing, Silent Circle Dance (nijemo kolo) of the Dalmatian hinterland, the carnival procession called Didi s Kamešnice, pottery, and local cuisine, followed by cultural institutions such as the Sinjska Alka Museum, Museum of the Cetinska Krajina region, the Archaeological Collection of the Franciscan Monastery, Sikirica Gallery, and also events like the Sinjska Alka and pilgrimage on the Feast of the Assumption of Our Lady in Sinj.

Though tourism in Dalmatinska Zagora is significantly less developed than on the Croatian coast and islands, in the Dalmatian hinterland, there has been an increasing orientation towards tourism as the crucial economic sector and its increasing importance, not only in the day trip excursion. However, one can expect the destination (longer-stay) segment of tourists. The most common forms of tourism in Sinj and the Cetinska Krajina region are events, religious and cultural tourism (especially heritage tourism), rural tourism, cyclotourism, mountaineering, ecotourism, and equestrian tourism. Affirming the Sinjska Alka on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010 and the opening of the Sinjska Alka Museum in 2015, this event, including all complementary tourist attractions stemming from the Sinjska Alka, has become even more critical when visiting Sinj and the Cetinska Krajina region. Besides being the most prominent feature in the region's identity, the Sinjska Alka and alka traditions hold the Sinj identity as a tourist destination.

The Sinjska Alka is a unique also one of the last preserved traditional horse-riding knight tournaments in Europe, in which the horse-riding knight (alkar) rides at full gallop (at least 45 km/h) carrying a 3-metre-long spear and attempts to hit the alka, which is a small iron ring hung from a rope across the racetrack. The alka comprises two circles with a common centre hold. A hit in the middle is three points; in the upper section, it is two points; and in the two side sections, one point is an award. The winner is the horserider who gets the most points in three races. The Alka honours the win over the Ottomans in 1715. It probably began in 1718, when, after the signing of

the Treaty of Carlowitz in 1699 (present-day Srijemski Karlovci), Sinj and the Cetinska Krajina region were finally merged into the Venetian Republic (Belamarić, 2015). Since then, the Alka has happened every year on the first Sunday in August. Besides the main tournament, the Alka, on Friday and Saturday before that, the Bara and the Čoja are organised, and two preliminary races introduce the main event. The Alka intertwines historical local, Venetian, and Ottoman cultural elements in terms of the costumes, weapons, and precise military rules of the tournament, including the alkars' parade and other participants of the alkars' procession, in which each participant has their name, role code of behaviour, and clothing (Belamarić, 2015; 2019). The Alka is headed by the Tournament Master and organised by the Alka Knights Society. The Alka Knights Society (2022) is an association of citizens that holds the Sinjska Alka, carefully preserving all the tangible and intangible aspects that make the knights' tournament an intangible heritage. The headquarters of the Alka Knights Society and the actual Sinjska Alka Museum is in the Alkars' Courtyard in Sinj in one of the rarely preserved Venetian kvartirs (rectangular-shaped barracks to accommodate cavalry) in Dalmatia, built in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The locals from Sinj and the Cetinska Krajina region, including all Croatians, are strongly associated with the Sinjska Alka, the symbol of the battle for freedom and peace, uniquely celebrating honour, integrity, heroism, and courage while emphasising the tradition of the time (Belamarić, 2015). The Alka expresses the traditional identity of the Cetinska Krajina region, historically formed along the border of Mediterranean and oriental influences, Christianity and Islam, presented in rich folk costume, the solemn parade of altars, and other participants in the altar procession, including the traditional dialect and music. The local identity exists since the alkars are only reputable and honourable men from Sinj and the Cetinska Krajina region.

Tourism Flow and Accommodation Capacities in the Town of Sinj

Though tourism flow in the administrative area of the Town of Sinj, based on registered tourist arrivals and

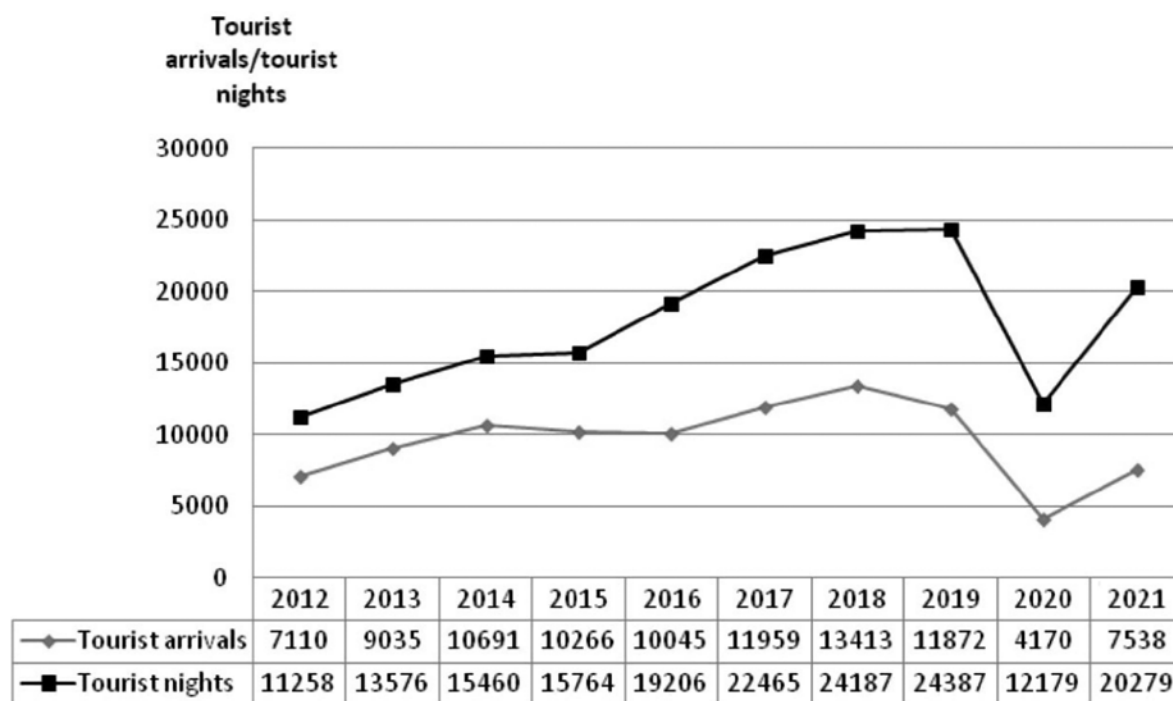


Figure 2 The Number of Tourist Arrivals and Tourist Nights in the Administrative Area of the Town of Sinj for the Period 2012–2021

Sources Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2013; 2014; 2015; 2016); Croatian Tourist Board (2016; 2017; 2018; 2019; 2020; 2021)

nights, is small compared to closer coastal tourist destinations, there has been a noticeable trend of continual growth in the last decade (Figure 2).

The increasing trend is emphasising tourist nights more than tourist arrivals. From 2012 to 2019, there were more significant risk nights each year than the previous year. The exceptions were in 2020 and 2021, with the sudden fall in tourism flow due to the COVID-19 pandemic, not only in Sinj but also in Croatia and elsewhere in Europe. Nonetheless, a significant increase in tourism flow in 2021 compared to 2020 indicates that the tourism sector is recovering in the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic after conducting the vaccination campaign and introducing COVID passes, thereby more clearly regulating tourist arrivals in Croatia than in 2020. The number of tourist arrivals shows a somewhat slowing growth, along with specific oscillations between the years, regarding the number of tourist nights in 2012–2019. Noticeably, the number of tourist nights significantly decreased

in 2016 compared to 2015, coinciding with the opening of the Sinjska Alka Museum and the expansion of tourism supply stemming from cultural and rural tourism attractions with the Alka.

Based on the presented data, it is evident that the duration of the average tourist stay is becoming longer. In 2012, the average duration of a tourist stay in the Town of Sinj was 1.58 tourist nights. In 2016, it was 1.19, and in 2021, the average stay was 4.86 nights, indicating a more significant and diverse tourism supply in Sinj and the entire Cetinska Krajina region and motivating tourists to decide on more extended stays. The longer average stays in 2020 and 2021 are due to the increasing demand for individual tourist stays in less-visited destinations, enhancing the enjoyment of clean natural surroundings and preserving traditional cultural heritage without the need to make too many risky social contacts. This fact leads to new trends in tourism, which will reflect changes in terms of a quicker dispersive expansion of tourism demand

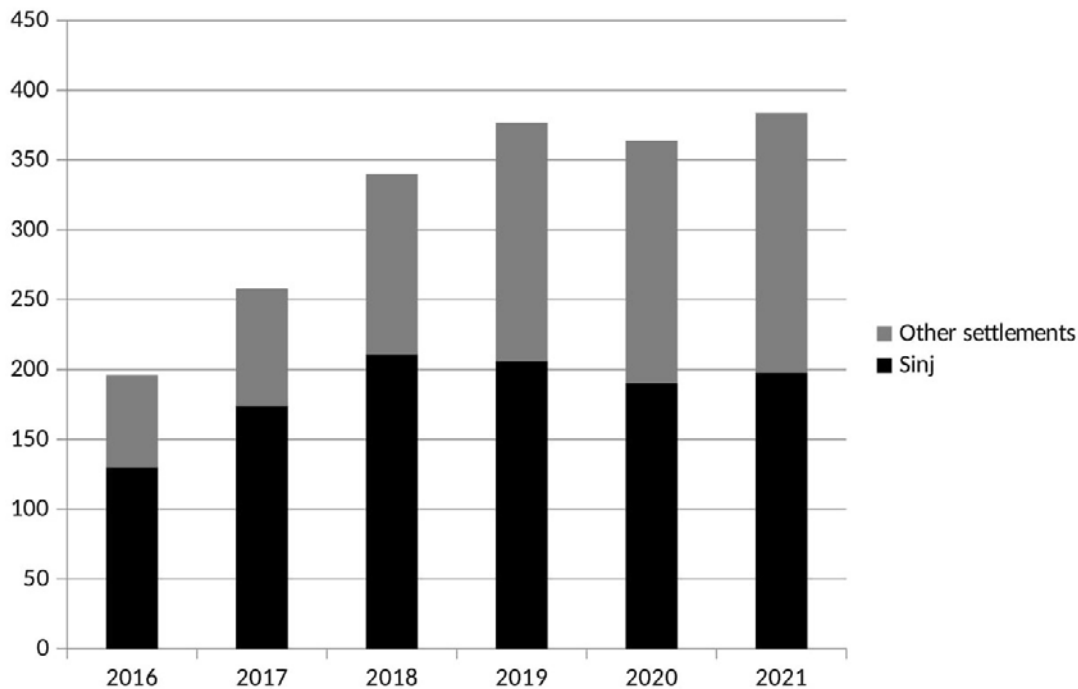


Figure 3 The Number of Beds in Sinj and Other Settlements Belonging to the Administrative Area of the Town of Sinj for the Period 2016–2021

Source Croatian Tourist Board (2016; 2017; 2018; 2019; 2020; 2021)

from a very touristified Croatian coastline toward less saturated destinations in closer hinterland regions. As a developing destination, in these new circumstances, Dalmatinska Zagora has many opportunities to develop increasingly popular alternative forms of tourism, such as cultural tourism, events tourism, intangible heritage tourism, gastro tourism, ecotourism, cyclo tourism, rural tourism, for which one can expect a greater demand in the post-COVID period.

What supports the evidence of the current dispersion of tourism in the Town of Sinj as a tourist destination is a trend indicating a smaller percentage of tourist arrivals and nights in Sinj compared to surrounding settlements which belong administratively to the Town of Sinj. Hence, the share of tourist arrivals in Sinj in 2016 was 96.89% of all administrative areas of the Town of Sinj. This percentage fell to 91.81% and 84.05% for 2019 and 2021, respectively. In 2016, 86.72% of all tourist nights in the administrative area of the Town of Sinj were in the settlement of Sinj. This per-

centage fell to 74.13% and 64.43% for 2019 and 2021, respectively. It becomes evident that the rate of tourist nights in the surrounding areas of Sinj increased more quickly than the percentage of arrivals; this leads to the conclusion that tourists stay in the surrounding areas longer than in the town. The explanation is that the tourism supply for accommodation in holiday houses and private accommodations better suited for more extended stays in the surrounding areas is growing quicker than in Sinj.

The overall number of beds in tourist accommodation across the entire administrative region of the Town of Sinj almost doubled in six years (2016–2021), from 196 beds in 2016 to 384 beds in 2021 (Figure 3).

Though Sinj recorded the most significant number of beds in all analysed years, the growth was due to an increase in the number of beds in other settlements in the administrative area of the Town of Sinj. In contrast, the number of beds in Sinj recorded a minor increase. The percentage of overall beds from other settlements

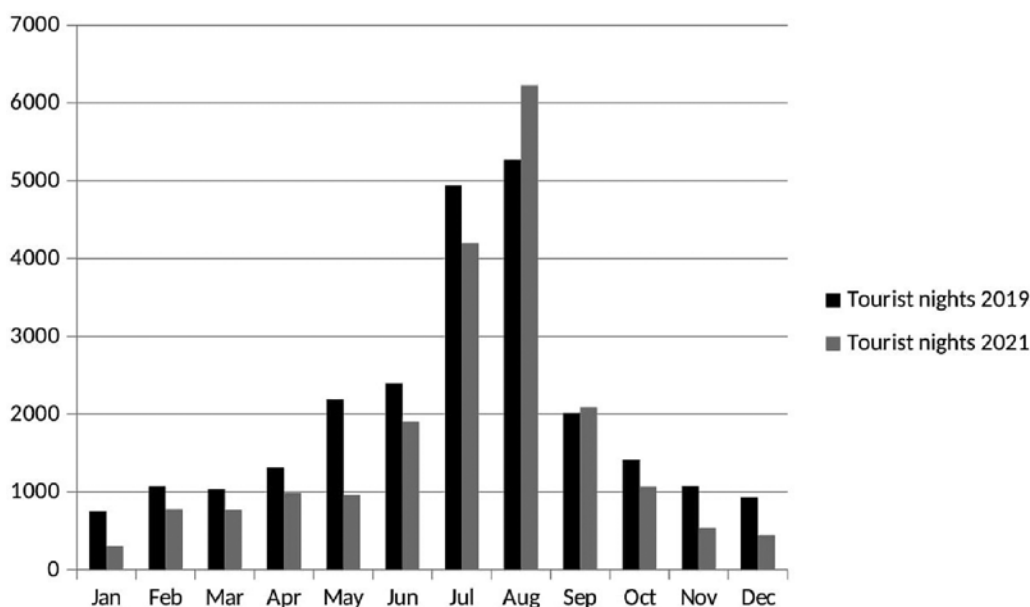


Figure 4 The Number of Tourist Nights in the Administrative Area of the Town of Sinj in 2019 and 2021 by Months

Source Croatian Tourist Board (2019; 2021)

increased from 33.67% in 2016 to 48.44% in 2021; this confirms the dispersion of tourism in the destination and the beginning of its maturing development phase. The structure of accommodation capacities is dominated by complementary accommodation capacities in private accommodation (apartments and rented rooms, holiday houses), offering 295 beds, mostly the four-star category, which accounts for 162 beds. In comparison, a single three-star hotel in Sinj has 89 beds available. In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of beds in private capacities of a higher category (four and five stars), which indicates an increasing quality of the destination tourist product.

Most tourist arrivals in Sinj occur during summer, especially in July and August (Figure 4).

The peak season, in July and August, recorded 41.88% of all tourist nights in 2019 and 51.43% in 2021, indicating significant seasonality in tourism. This distribution of tourist nights by month is not surprising given that most foreign tourists visit Sinj in passing by while they stay on the Croatian coast, during annual holidays and the bathing season. Moreover, on

the days when the Sinjska Alka happens every year, all accommodation capacities in Sinj and the Cetinska Krajina region are entirely booked. Domestic tourists exhibit a different concentration of tourist nights during summer. What is noticeable is that the share of tourist nights in the 2021 pandemic year during the two busiest summer months increased compared to the pre-pandemic year of 2019, which is due to the extended lockdown in Croatia and emissive European markets during the winter and spring of 2021, including restrictions on visiting Croatia which negatively affected tourism. The vaccination program and introduction of the European COVID-19 certificates led to more precise regulations of rules for visiting Croatia and behaviour during the pandemic. Coinciding with increased tourism demand after the winter and spring lockdowns, this increased the number of tourist nights, which in August 2021 even exceeded the previous record in August 2019.

The number of tourist nights by foreign tourists in the Town of Sinj exceeded the number of tourist nights achieved by Croatian tourists, hence the ratio of 60:40 in favour of tourist nights by foreign tourists

Table 1 Tourist Nights in the Administrative Area of the Town of Sinj for 2019 and 2021 According to Emissive Markets

2019		2021	
STATE	% OF TOTAL TOURIST NIGHTS	STATE	% OF TOTAL TOURIST NIGHTS
Croatia	38.62	Croatia	39.25
Germany	17.89	Germany	20.54
South Korea	6.95	Poland	7.85
France	3.37	France	4.83
Netherlands	3.15	Netherlands	2.74
Romania	2.95	Austria	2.04
Poland	2.90	Slovenia	1.69
UK	2.40	Romania	1.52
China	2.09	Belgium	1.49
Greece	1.99	Italy	1.40
Other	17.69	Other	16.65
TOTAL	100	TOTAL	100

Source Croatian Tourist Board (2019; 2021)

and before the COVID-19 pandemic (data for 2019) and during the pandemic (data for 2021) (Table 1).

Croatian tourism's most significant number of tourist nights comes from the most crucial emissive market, i.e., Germany. A considerable share of tourist nights for 2021 have tourists from Poland and France. A comparison of the profile of tourist nights based on emissive markets indicates that in the 2019 pre-pandemic year, the more prevalent non-European and more remote markets (South Korea, China, and the U.K.) were among the leading ten markets, more so than in the 2021 pandemic year. The large share of tourist nights by tourists from South Korea and China before the COVID-19 pandemic is due to slightly lower accommodation prices in Sinj compared to nearby coasts. Such accommodation for tourists from these far away countries is adequate when travelling on round-trip organised tours, which is the most common way of seeing Croatia. On the other hand, in the 2021 pandemic year, there was a larger share of tourist nights by tourists from nearby countries like Austria, Slovenia and Italy, suggesting a somewhat restricted range of tourist mobility during the pandemic.

Tourism Presentation and Valorisation of the Sinjska Alka

The method of content analysis, specifically images (photographs) in tourist brochures published by the Sinj Tourist Board and the Public Institution RERA S.D. for Coordination and Development of Split-Dalmatia County, was used for interpreting the meaning of the Sinjska Alka as a tourist attraction in Sinj and the Cetinska Krajina region. The analysis covered six tourist brochures and one map promoting tourist attractions in Sinj and the Cetinska Krajina region. They include The Town of Sinj: Tourist Guide (Sinj Tourist Board, 2021c); Miraculous Lady of Sinj (Sinj Tourist Board, 2021a); Three Museums, One Gallery, and the Town of Sinj (Sinj Tourist Board, 2021e); The Our Lady of Sinj Route: Tourist Guide (Sinj Tourist Board, 2021b); The Town of Sinj: Tourist Map (Sinj Tourist Board, 2021d); The Cetinska Krajina Region: Tourist Guide (Public Institution RERA SD for Coordination and Development of Split Dalmatia County, 2021a); and The Cultural Heritage of the Cetinska Krajina Region: An Overview (Public Institution RERA SD for Coordination and Development of Split Dalmatia County, 2021b).

The brochure titled *The Town of Sinj: Tourist Guide* offers tourists the most comprehensive presentation of town attractions; the alkar motif during the Alka is the only motif on the cover, and describes the Sinjska Alka in the brochure as the first tourist attraction, along with photographs of the alka and alkars' heritage on the inside rear cover, which undoubtedly confirms that the Alka is the greatest tourist attraction and the primary motive for the tourism branding of Sinj as a tourist destination. The same brochure describes and presents the Sinjska Alka Museum as a tourist attraction. Though the pamphlet *Miraculous Lady of Sinj* is thematically related to the Marian shrine that attracts many visitors, pilgrims, and tourists, the Sinjska Alka is also textually and pictorially presented on two pages. The brochure *Three Museums, One Gallery*, and the *Town of Sinj* describes the Sinjska Alka Museum and attached photographs as the third most important, probably because it is open after the first two museums: Archaeological Collection of the Franciscan Monastery in Sinj and the Cetinska Krajina Museum. The tourist guidebook *Our Lady of Sinj Route: Tourist Guide* is thematically related to the pilgrimage which takes place each year in the period leading to the Feast of the Assumption of Our Lady. In the evening, from the 8th to the 15th of August, many pilgrims make the journey. The pages describing the Sinj shrine also mention the Sinjska Alka in the first paragraph.

In contrast, the *Monument Three Generations* (three men from different generations holding the alka together) and the *Monument to the alkars* are in the photographs. On *The Town of Sinj: Tourist Map*, a photo of the altar procession from the Sinjska Alka Museum is found on the back covers, and the altar tournament is on the inside page with short descriptions of tourist attractions and the described Alka taking the first position on the page. In *The Cetinska Krajina Region: Tourist Guide*, Sinj takes first place among other tourist attractions and localities. The Alka presents a synonym for the town of Sinj and the Cetinska Krajina region as its most important attraction. A photograph of the *Monument to the alkars* accompanies the text. The Sinjska Alka Museum is one of the Sinj museums worth visiting. It presents texts and photos from the brochure *Cultural Heritage of*

the Cetinska Krajina Region. An Overview explains the Alka textually and pictorially using the *Monument to the alkars* and the Sinjska Alka Museum as the first two cultural heritage attractions in the Cetinska Krajina Region and the *Monument Three Generations*, presented in a photograph in the second part of the brochure. In addition, the *Monument to the alkars* is one of six photographs on the back covers.

An analysis of the images (photographs) in the tourist brochures of Sinj and the Cetinska Krajina region suggests that the Sinjska Alka and related tourist attractions (the Sinjska Alka Museum, alkars' heritage, monuments raised in honour of the alkars and the alka) is the most important among the tourist attractions of Sinj and the Cetinska Krajina region and is justified in assuming the tourist identity and brand in promoting this tourist destination on the tourist market.

The Sinjska Alka is one of the most famous traditional Croatian events each year at the beginning of August in Sinj and the Cetinska Krajina region, attracting many tourists and one-day visitors. Though there is much interest in attending the Alka, due to seating capacity limits, the fact that the Alka Knights Society endeavours not overly to touristify this traditional event and thereby lose its authenticity, the Alka is nonetheless attended by more than 6,000 visitors each year, and all available seating is always full. According to internal data from the Alka Knights Society since 2018 on attendance at the Alka, the capacity of the temporary grandstand assembled each year for the Alka race is 5,170 seating places, and another approx. One thousand visitors follow the Alka event at the start and end locations of the racetrack (standing places only). Hence, in 2018 and 2019, the Alka was watched by 6,170 spectators. Between 2000 and 2018, the number of sites on the grandstand was slightly less and amounted to 4,160 seats (Alka-Knights-Society, 2022). The Alka was held during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 and 2020, and permitted capacities were significantly smaller due to epidemiological measures; in 2020, there were 1,740 spectators 2020 and 2,650 in 2021.

Given that the considerable public interest in watching the Sinjska Alka live cannot be satisfied, the tourism valorisation of the Alka, Sinj and Cetinska

Table 2 Number and Structure of Sold Tickets to the Sinjska Alka Museum for 2015–2021

Year	Ticket category					TOTAL
	Adults	Students, pensioners, children	Family (parents + children)	Preschoolers	Group (5 persons and more)	
2015	2,835	6,012	369	-	-	9,216
2016	4,280	13,044	730	1,649	-	19,703
2017	3,432	11,383	504	826	-	16,145
2018	3,092	10,443	446	941	-	14,922
2019	2,572	10,253	418	600	-	13,843
2020	541	755	219	38	-	1,553
2021	1,031	2,305	278	51	284	3,949
TOTAL	17,783	54,195	2,964	4,105	284	79,331

Source: Sinjska Alka Museum (2022)

Krajina region required the opening of the Sinjska Alka Museum in the Alkars' Courtyard. The first idea of opening a unique museum where Alkar uniforms, weapons, the Alka history, and all other related valuables would be stored and exhibited to the public appeared in the first half of the 20th century. However, the museum opened on 8 August 2015, on the 300th anniversary of the victory over the Ottomans; this was how the Sinjska Alka, an intangible cultural asset, materialised. The knights' tournament, held one day a year, became a tourist attraction open to visitors throughout the year and gained its full affirmation in local tourism. The Museum set is modern and interactively interpreted, attracting visitors of various ages, interests, and knowledge. Besides the exhibition, which includes alkar uniforms, equipment, and weapons, alkar statues including statutes and rules in digital form, including an additional exhibition area for temporary exhibitions, the museum also houses modernly refurbished rooms for holding conferences, seminars and various workshops, which additionally enriches the local tourism of Sinj and providing opportunities for development and congress tourism. The museum has received multiple awards and recognition. Some of the more important are the Storytelling Award by the Forum of Slavic Cultures in 2016 (ŽIVA Award 2016), winner of the golden plaque of the international cultural tourism award Plautilla in 2017, nomination for the European Museum of the

Year award in 2017 (EMYA 2017) and European Cultural Heritage Award / Europe Nostra Prize 2018 in Education, Training and Raising awareness (Sinjska Alka Museum, n.d.).

The most significant number of tickets sold to the Sinjska Alka Museum was in 2016, the first year in which the museum operated throughout the year. After that, the number of tickets in all categories fell until 2020. The most significant decrease in the number of visits was in 2020 compared to 2019 (a decrease of 88.78%). The reason was the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in fewer tourist arrivals and reduced mobility of people. Museum operations were rare during the lockdown, as with most other activities in closed spaces. Also, visitors largely avoided such venues due to a fear of becoming infected. The second pandemic year (2021) showed slightly better attendance at the museum; the attributes for this are the stipulation of more explicit epidemiological regulations for visits to institutions in closed spaces, as well as the arrival of vaccines, which gave visitors a greater sense of safety (Table 2).

Based on the profile of sold tickets and categories, it becomes clear that the type of tickets for pupils, pensioners and children is the most sold and attributed to 68.32% of all sold tickets in the analysed period, more popular than the category of tickets for adults, followed by preschool children, and then family and group tickets. The predominance of tickets for pupils,

Table 3 Number and Structure of Sold Tickets to the Sinjska Alka Museum in 2019 by Months

Year	Ticket category					TOTAL
	Adults	Students, pensioners, children	Family (parents + children)	Preschoolers	Group (5 persons and more)	
2015	2,835	6,012	369	-	-	9,216
2016	4,280	13,044	730	1,649	-	19,703
2017	3,432	11,383	504	826	-	16,145
2018	3,092	10,443	446	941	-	14,922
2019	2,572	10,253	418	600	-	13,843
2020	541	755	219	38	-	1,553
2021	1,031	2,305	278	51	284	3,949
TOTAL	17,783	54,195	2,964	4,105	284	79,331

Source Sinjska Alka Museum (2022)

pensioners and children is due to the more significant number of educational school and student excursions and those visiting the museum as extracurricular activities; this is a confirmation by internal data from the Sinjska Alka Museum on the number of tickets sold by the month in 2019 (the last year before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the introduction of epidemiological measures) (Table 3).

The most significant number of visits to the museum were recorded in July (total of 3,354 tickets sold) and May (2,831 tickets sold) due to the organisation of school and student excursions. A significantly smaller number of sold tickets were during the peak tourist season: 1,214 in August and 484 in July; this suggests that pupils and students mostly visit the museum in organised visits, whereas tourists are significantly small in numbers. Indeed, here lies the critical opportunity for tourism valorisation of the Sinjska Alka and the town of Sinj. Also, in the future, tourist visits to the Sinjska Alka Museum should be increased to make this intangible cultural asset more recognisable in terms of tourism and the town of Sinj better branded as the town of Alka.

Views of Key Local Stakeholders in the Tourism Valorisation of the Sinjska Alka and its Transformation into a Tourist Product

All three interview participants highlighted the importance of the Sinjska Alka in creating a tourist iden-

tity for Sinj as a tourist destination. They pointed out the importance of further intensifying the promotion of the Alka and the need to preserve its authenticity to avoid excessive commodification and touristification. Priority was also placed on its status as an intangible cultural asset on the UNESCO list in promoting it and the obligation to preserve its authenticity. The head of the Sinjska Alka Museum importantly mentioned that one must keep the authenticity of the Alka in line with the strict Statute of the Alka Knights Society, which takes care of its protection and continuity of tradition and that there is no fear of excessive touristification. Representatives of the Alka Knights Society pointed out that there are no plans to increase the capacity of the grandstand for Alka visitors.

In addition to preserving and exhibiting alkar's heritage, the head of the museum pointed out that one of the main reasons for its opening was also to transform the Alka into a permanent tourist attraction in Sinj. The head of the museum highlighted the importance of collaboration with tourist agencies, which is affirmed by the museum's partnership with about 40 tourist agencies, mainly from Croatia, to get the Sinjska Alka Museum to attract a more significant number of individual and organised tourists visits in the future, and also strengthen the tourist component. As suggested by the data on the number and categories of tickets sold, the museum is visited mainly by pupils and students regarding educational programs, not

individual tourists. The head of the museum explains that the large share of pupils among visitors is due to the recommendation within the national school curriculum to visit the museum.

The director of the Sinj Tourist Board pointed out that Sinj is a leading destination in Dalmatinska Zagora. There has been an increase in accommodation capacities in the town and across the entire Cetinska Krajina region, especially in private accommodation. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a fall in the number of arrivals and the duration of tourist stays. The Sinj Tourist Board director also highlighted the thematic walking route (e.g., Our Lady of Sinj Trail), the bicycle route, and the equestrian route along the Dinara Mountain, along the Cetina River and the Kamešnica Mountain as essential segments of the tourism supply in Sinj and the surrounding region. She sees many opportunities to integrate natural attractions from the newly declared Dinara Nature Park into the tourism supply of Sinj and the Cetinska Krajina region. The respondents highlighted the importance of the Sinj u sridu project, which was conducted by the Town of Sinj (Sinj.hr, 2019) as the beneficiary, together with project partners, among which are the Sinj Tourist Board and the Alka Knights Society, and which is partly financed by the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Additional tourism valorisation of the Alka from the stated project requires constructing the new Sinjska Alka Interpretation Education Centre, which will “enable holding all-year interpretive-educational content relating to the Sinjska Alka that has already become an established and recognised Sinj brand.” Though the new Sinjska Alka Interpretation Education Centre on the Sinj Hippodrome is still in the planning stages, all the stakeholders have pointed out its vital role in the future positioning of Alka as a year-long tourist attraction.

The respondents concluded that further tourism promotion of Alka requires its upgrade in several different ways and through various media, such as:

1. Tournaments,
2. The Sinjska Alka Museum
3. The Cetinska Krajina Museum

4. The new Sinjska Alka Interpretive-Educational Centre
5. More frequently organised alkars' parades in several cities in Croatia and abroad
6. Eventual alkars' tournaments outside of Sinj (even though in its 300-year-old tradition, the tournaments were only held outside of Sinj in Split in 1832, Belgrade in 1922, Zagreb in 1946 and Vukovar in 2017)
7. Events inspired by the Alka, such as Vučković's Children Alka and similar Alka's for children, the Women's Alka, the Flying Alka, the Moto Alka

Fortunately, Sinj has witnessed such synergy, reflected in the proper tourism valorisation of the Sinjska Alka as an intangible cultural heritage. An essential aspect of promoting the Sinjska Alka abroad is the project to network traditional equestrian games in Europe, such as the Trka na Prstenac (Barban, Croatia), Sartiglia (Oristano, Italy), Giostra di Zante (Zakynthos, Greece), Giostra Cavalleresca (Sulmona, Italy) and other games. All three respondents pointed out good cooperation and a close connection with these three critical institutions for tourism valorisation and promoting Sinjska Alka, who agree with the thesis that coherent action by important local stakeholders is vital to success in creating and branding new tourist products.

Discussion and Conclusion

Croatia is a positive example of a country that early acknowledged the importance of including its intangible cultural assets on the UNESCO lists, where its cultural assets become living guardians of the local identity and a statistical value transforms into commercial value, used to expand tourism supply in many destinations (Jelinčić, 2008; Smith, 2009; Opačić, 2019).

The Sinjska Alka, a knights' tournament, has become a beneficial case study. The town of Sinj and the surrounding (Cetinska Krajina) region are touristically branded thanks to this traditional equestrian knights' tournament, as listed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010 and reflects as the successful exam-

ple of tourism valorisation of intangible cultural heritage in Croatia. Namely, researching the presentation of Sinjska Alka in the tourist brochures and the tourist map has shown that Alka is the carrier of the town's and the entire region's identity and the tourism identity of Sinj as a tourist destination; this shows the parallelism between the frequency of the presence of the Alka in analysed tourist communication means (brochures) and its significance (Mejovšek, 2008; Zupanc, 2010). Strengthening the Alka brand in the town's and region's tourism identity has been facilitated by the modern and interactive Sinjska Alka Museum, which opened in 2015, helping Alka and the alkars' tradition become a daily materialised and institutionalised tourist attraction among the tourist attractions of Sinj and the Cetinska Krajina region. Nonetheless, what is evident is that profiling the museum as a tourist attraction will need more work in the future because analysing the number and profile of sold tickets has shown that pupils and students are the leading groups of visitors, not tourists. A statistical analysis of the data on tourism flow and accommodation capacities has determined that tourism development in Sinj and its surrounding region shows positive tendencies, though a less developed destination than those on the coast. This assessment indicates growing accommodation capacity and tourism flow, not only in the town of Sinj but also in its surrounding regions, which conforms to the tourism valorisation of various attractions, contributing to the dispersion of tourist attractions for this specific destination. One can expect positive trends in the further maturing of Sinj as a tourist destination when the newly declared Dinara Nature Park, in the immediate proximity of Sinj, fills its utilisation. The presumption is that the protected natural heritage will be an additional factor in creating coherent local tourism, which will be based on tourist products from the tourism heritage, natural and cultural, where one can find abundance in Sinj, the Cetinska Krajina region and the entire Dalmatinska Zagora.

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