

THE ROLE OF LOCAL CULTURE AND AUTHENTIC TOURS IN THE SARAJEVO TOURISM IMAGE

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Abstract: Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, stands out for its distinctive European cultural blend of eastern and western influences, providing unique experiences through its architecture, local products, and cultural diversity. The study examines the top tourism products in Sarajevo based on tourists' impressions. The results highlight city walks, gastronomy, craft tours, and night tours as the most popular tourist activities. Tourists are particularly drawn to the city's vibrant atmosphere and the seamless integration of cultural and historical elements. The study identifies key local dishes and handicrafts, as well as authentic tours, that enhance the tourist experience and contribute to the unique Sarajevo tourism destination image.

Keywords: tourism products, tours, souvenirs, gastronomy, handicrafts, tourism image

1 Introduction

Tourism is a strategic economic sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a total contribution of travel and tourism to the national GDP of 11.4% and to employment of 12.2% in 2023^a (WTTC, 2024), as well as in Sarajevo (its capital city), which is "the most visited destination in Bosnia and Herzegovina, accounting for more than one-third of the overall tourist traffic" (Žunić et al., 2023). Sarajevo attracts visitors worldwide, offering a unique blend of cultural eastern and western elements. Tourism not only fosters economic growth but also plays a crucial role in preserving traditional crafts, customs, and gastronomy. Through direct interaction with the local community, tourists experience authenticity, which significantly shapes their perception of the destination. This perception forms what is known as the destination image. Beerli & Martín (2004) stated that image presents tourists' perceptions of the brand and its associations stored in their memory. Rayesh (2013) defined it as tourists' impressions of a destination with respect to the consumption value. According to Tasci et al. (2007), image is an interactive system of thoughts, opinions, feelings, visualisations, and intentions toward a destination. Huete-Alcocer & Lopez-Rui (2019) identified four types of destination image: organic (opinions of friends or magazines), induced (image proffered by commercial information and marketing sources), affective (visitor's feelings or emotional responses toward the subject), and cognitive (knowledge of a place). Žunić (2022) stated that various attractions influencing factors of destination image, including culture, art and env. atmosphere, while satisfaction, loyalty and Word-of-Mouth promotion are strongly connected as relevant parameters of destination image.

Factors significantly influencing Sarajevo's image discussed in this paper include local culture, authentic tours that provide profound experiences, and interactions with traditional products and communities. Various products of local traditional manufacturing and arts, as well as creative tours, including promotion of culture and art, history, and nature, contribute to the Sarajevo destination image. The quality of tourism products and meaningful stays in a destination that provide unforgettable, pleasant, and distinctive experiences significantly impacts tourist satisfaction. "Quality has a positive influence on satisfaction and intention to return, and that satisfaction determines the willingness to recommend the destination" (Bigne et al., 2001). Tourist satisfaction (as a "feeling of pleasure regarding a product related to expectation" as interpreted by Kotler & Kotler, 2012) is a key determinant of whether visitors will recommend the destination to others or plan future visits, directly impacting its reputation and economic sustainability.

Local products, such as handmade souvenirs, traditional crafts, and gastronomy, are integral to the cultural identity of Sarajevo. Items like copperware and carpets represent centuries-old traditions, while dishes such as ćevapi, burek, and Bosnian coffee offer a sensory connection to the local heritage. These products not only enhance the destination's economic potential but also serve as a medium for storytelling, allowing tourists to engage deeply with the city's history and culture.

Guided tours and travel agencies further enrich tourist experiences by emphasizing authenticity. By providing detailed narratives and personalized insights, guides shape tourists' perceptions, fostering emotional connections with the destination. Memorable experiences are a key factor driving tourists to participate in guided services, as they seek meaningful and personalized interactions that enhance their overall travel satisfaction (Liu et al., 2021). This emotional engagement boosts satisfaction and encourages visitors to share their experiences, thereby strengthening the destination's image (Urry & Larsen, 2011).

Sarajevo's rich traditions and unique cultural identity make it an exemplary case for exploring the interplay between local culture, authentic tours, and the creation of a lasting destination image. By heritage utilization and offering unforgettable experiences, Sarajevo continues to position itself as a must-visit destination for global travelers. Together, these components contribute to a multidimensional visualization of a destination, which plays a critical role in shaping tourist satisfaction, loyalty, and word-of-mouth promotion, enhancing the Sarajevo destination image.

2 Methodology

The research goal is to identify and evaluate local culture and authentic tours as the top tourism products of Sarajevo destination based on the perceptions and impressions of visitors. The local specialties, handicrafts and authentic tours as popular products were rated on the multiple-choice scales. The two forms of survey (e-survey and "face to face") were conducted with 92 tourists, of which 57.6% were foreign tourists and 42.4% domestic tourists (residents of Bosnia and Herzegovina). The online survey was created in Google Forms and implemented on the social media network Facebook, more precisely in groups and pages related to travel operators ("Nomadik travel—Tips for travel," "Travel tips and tricks," "Travel to Bosnia and Herzegovina," "Holiday in Bosnia—Tips and Experiences," and others). The field survey of tourists was implemented in the top three tourist locations: Baščašija (Old Town), the area in front of the SCC shopping center (Centre), and the terminal on Ilidža. The questions in the surveys refer to the nature of products offered by travel agencies dealing with inbound tourism and knowledge of local specialties, handcraft products, souvenirs, and authentic tours. Additionally, interviews with locals, visitors, and tourism personnel were used to broaden the conclusions. The paper highlights the crucial role of local culture and authentic experiences in tourism promotion and enhancing the destination image.

3 Results & Discussion

Tourists come to the destination to visit the attractions, but there are specific components that enhance the overall tourist experience (local souvenirs, gastronomic offers, tours offered by travel agencies, etc.). Local products can be termed "cultural ambassadors." Local gourmet delicacies, such as Sarajevo ćevapi and Bosnian coffee, provide guests with real experiences and flavors. Žunić & Nežirović (2022) stated that some of the world's most popular chefs rated Bosnian cuisine with the highest score, declaring it as "flavors for everyone's taste". Some tourists (e.g. transit visitors) declared "ćevapi" (top traditional meal and protected gastro-brand of Sarajevo) as the main motive for visiting Sarajevo. Sarajevo has a centuries long

tradition of authentic dishes and beverage preparation. "Different cultures have shaped Bosnian gastronomy: Turkish-Islamic-Oriental, Austro-Hungarian (Central Europe), Old Balkan (Illyrian), Mediterranean and even Celtic culture, as well as modern processes of globalization (McDonaldization and others)" (Žunić & Nezirović, 2022). "For Bosnian cuisine is specific the preparation of roasted dishes under the baking bell ("sač") in the wood & coal-burning oven and embers. Bosnian coffee is served in a copper coffee pot ("džezva") and drink from a small handleless cup („fildžan“), with candy made of sugar syrup („rahatlokum“)" (Žunić & Nezirović, 2022). Taking again the example of Sarajevo kebabs/ Sarajevski ćevapi, as they were ranked 10th on the list of the world's 100 most identifiable national and regional traditional foods by the World Travel Food Atlas, "The TasteAtlas," and were in the top 5 dishes with great potential for preservation; it resulted with their formal conservation as an autochthonous domestic product, following a two-year protection procedure (2022-2024). This is why those products can be considered ambassadors of local culture and tradition, allowing tourists to physically "taste" Sarajevo. When tourists visit markets or traditional restaurants, they gain a deeper understanding of local lifestyles and values.

Aside from the foregoing, organized arrangements, tours, and activities in destinations play an important part in the whole visitor experience. For example, tours that include visits to historical sites are often combined with tastings of local specialties. This tour provides guests with a complete experience—they can explore the attractions, learn stories and historical facts, and then eat local food. In this way, tours serve as the bulk of the visual and sensory experiences, resulting in a comprehensive experience of the destination.

The combination of attractions, products, and tours allows tourists to experience the destination on multiple levels. This comprehensive approach increases their satisfaction and is likely to recommend Sarajevo to others as a desirable destination to visit. Also, the inextricable link between attractions, products, and tours is reflected in economic benefits. Selling local products and organizing tours directly contributes to the local economy (restaurants, artisans, and guides make a profit).

The most popular tours that make Sarajevo an appealing destination for visitors from other cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and around the world will be discussed below.

Authentic tours creatively entitled by symbolic or metaphoric names mostly due to the sellers competition (Fig. 1) are created on key elements that define the image of the Sarajevo destination regarding the most remarkable cultural and natural attractions and events: the Olympic city (host of the world sports event - the 1984 Winter Olympics); bridge of natural and urban environment (a city with a "green ring" or mountainous environment in which there are numerous protected natural areas not far from the center); the fusion of East and West - multiculturalism (Christianity, Islam, Judaism); a city of world history (assassination of Prince Ferdinand - reason for World War I); gourmet city (dishes for everyone's taste); a city with a famous dark history (the longest siege in Europe); craft town (local culture, creativity, and craftsmanship); the city of the former Yugoslavia (formerly a mighty Balkan republic); a city with contrasting atmospheres (various cultural zones and day-night), among others.

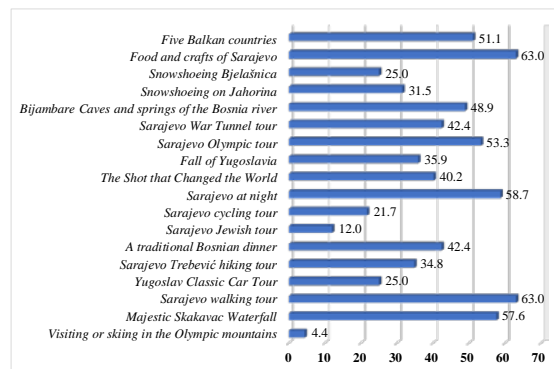


Fig. 1 Tourist preferences for Sarajevo tours offered by travel agencies (%)

Before analyzing the tourists' responses to the question of which tours they like in Sarajevo, it is important to note that the respondents had the opportunity to research tours on the Internet before providing their answers, allowing them to obtain detailed information about the available options, compare various offers, and make decisions based on their interests and preferences. Such an approach makes sure that the responses are representative of tourists' true interests and preferences, as they are the result of a conscious and educated decision. This was done to ensure that the survey findings provide a credible insight into the popularity of the different tours and can help travel agencies to better adapt their offers to the wishes of visitors in the future. It is also important to point out that tours appear under different names in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in other countries. This should be kept in mind when searching and planning, as different names can affect the visibility and attractiveness of tours for potential tourists. Understanding and adapting the terminology used in tour promotion can help travel agencies to better reach an international audience and ensure that their offer is easily recognizable and attractive to tourists from different parts of the world.

The Fig. 1 shows that the majority of tourists prefer walking around Sarajevo (63%), learning about gastronomic specialties and crafts (63%), and exploring the city at night (58.7%). The high percentage of tourists who prefer walking around the city suggests that they are interested in the immediate experience of the city. Walks allow tourists to explore historical and cultural sights, get to know local customs, and feel the atmosphere of Sarajevo in a relaxed way. The popularity of tours that incorporate learning about local crafts and cuisine demonstrates that tourists seek to immerse themselves in the destination's real experience. Gastronomy and traditional crafts represent an important part of heritage, and cultural tours like this offer tourists the chance to try local food and learn about traditional ways of preparing food and making handicrafts. Such experiences often include visits to local markets, workshops, and catering establishments where tourists can interact directly with the hosts. Night tours, which are also highly ranked, suggest that travelers want to experience Sarajevo in the evening. The city has a new feel at night, with lit landmarks, bustling streets, and exciting nightlife, and night tours can include trips to iconic places with panoramic views of the city.

A large number of votes were also received by the tours related to the visit to the Skakavac waterfall (57.6%), followed by the Olympic tour (53.3%), as well as the tour of spring of the Bosna River and the Bijambare caves (48.9%). This shows that tourists appreciate the natural beauty surrounding Sarajevo. The Skakavac waterfall, located in the immediate vicinity of the city, offers a beautiful natural environment, ideal for hiking and escaping from the hustle and bustle of the city. Visits to spring of the Bosna river and Bijambare caves are also popular among tourists, which highlights the interest in natural attractions around Sarajevo. Bijambare "is a popular Bosnian green site with rising tourist appeal" (Žunić, 2022). "Bijambare is getting more tourist interest lately because of its positive image that is highly influenced with the recent structure of visitors, mostly

Arabs who longing for "green motives" (Nezirović et al., 2017). Spring of the Bosna river, known for its springs and idyllic landscapes, and Bijambere caves, with impressive geological formations, offer tourists a unique experience. "The Bijambare Caves are rare and representative karst and speleological phenomenon" (Nezirović et al., 2017) in the Sarajevo surroundings on the northeast area of Black River plateau. "PL Biambare is attractive to visitors who are interested in speleology, walking in nature, bicycling, riding, hiking, alpinism, fishing, hunting, skiing, collecting medicinal herbs and mushrooms. The protected area is recognized by the rare and unique natural resources with its high scientific and tourism value. The greatest attraction is Bijambare Cave, which is full of striking cave formations (stalactites, stalagmites, curtains, basins, pillars...) and about 400 meters of the cave are open to the public." (Nezirović et al., 2017). According to Žunić (2022), satisfaction with pleasant environment of Bijambare and positive experience, loyalty and WOM recommendations are the highest among visitors from the Middle East region (Kuwait, Bahrain, and UAE). Furthermore, a significant percentage of tourists are interested in the Olympic Tour, which includes visits to the sites used for the 1984 Winter Olympics. These tours offer tourists a unique opportunity to get to know the rich sports history of the city, as well as to visit the mountains Bjelašnica, Igman and Jahorina, as well as the Olympic Museum.

Gastronomy features on numerous different tours, and each garnered a relatively high number of votes from travelers, indicating the strong attraction and popularity of culinary experiences among Sarajevo visitors. This finding underscores the importance of including local cuisine in tourist packages because authentic dishes and gastronomy excursions assist visitors to gain a deeper understanding of the destination's culture and traditions. The study of Žunić and Nezirović (2022) also found positive results toward the overall satisfaction with gastronomy attributes and gastronomy as a travel motive, with an excellent rating of the gastronomic supply, accounting traditional Bosnian dishes as an important brand and vital part of tourism supply. Gastronomy and tours of cultural and historical monuments are often connected through thematic tours that provide a comprehensive experience of the destination.



Fig. 2 Authentic and preserved gastro-brand "Sarajevski ćevapi" – the most popular traditional meal in Sarajevo (Authors. Photo by The World Travel Food Atlas, 2024)

"The shot that changed the world", also known as "Gavrilo Princip Tour", received less than half of the votes from the total number of surveyed tourists (40.2%); however, it should be taken into account that foreign tourists are more interested in this tour, as domestic tourists are mostly familiar with the events and have already visited the Latin Bridge, the monument to Gavrilo Princip, and the Sarajevo 1878-1918 Museum. "Gavrilo Princip assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, and his consort, Sophie, Duchess von Hohenberg (née Chotek), at Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, on June 28, 1914" (Britannica, 2024); the incident "*Sarajevo Assassination*" led to the beginning of the First World War (1914-1918). Foreign tourists, on the other hand, often come to Sarajevo precisely because of the historical importance of this event. For them, the "Gavrilo Princip tour" is an opportunity to see firsthand the places where world historical events took place and to learn more about the context and consequences of the assassination. Different degrees of interest between domestic and

foreign tourists emphasize the importance of adapting tourist offers to different target groups. While domestic tourists may prefer tours that involve nature excursions or explore lesser-known locations, foreign tourists are often more interested in globally known historical events and landmarks. Understanding these differences can help travel agencies better structure their offers and marketing strategies to attract a wide range of tourists and satisfy their specific interests.



Fig. 3 The Latin or Principov Most (bridge) in Sarajevo, the symbol of the "*Sarajevo Assassination*" (1914)—the trigger of the First World War (Authors. Photo by CA Author)

"The War Tunnel Tour" is also known as the "Tunnel of Hope" and the "Sarajevo Siege Tour—War Tunnel Museum." This tour, with 42.4% of votes, as well as the tours "Fall of Yugoslavia," "Siege of Sarajevo," and "Times of Disaster—War Tour" with 35.9% of tourist votes, are likewise more appealing to foreign than local tourists. "The Sarajevo War Tunnel of Hope" (beneath the International Sarajevo Airport) represents "the unique dark memorial site with international tourism representativeness" (Žunić, In Press), and the reminder of the local creativity and hard struggle during the last War in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995), specific for the longest siege of the city (Sarajevo) in European contemporary history. A tour of the War Tunnel allows visitors to learn about one of the most difficult and crucial chapters in Sarajevo's recent history. This tour is especially appealing to foreign tourists who are unfamiliar with the details of the siege, whereas domestic tourists, who have often personally experienced the events of the war or learned about them through education and the media, may not feel comfortable visiting the tunnel or some sites and museums related to the siege war events in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Foreign tourists often come with a desire to learn more about the complex history of the Balkans and the breakup of Yugoslavia, which had global implications and attracted international attention. These tours offer an understanding of the conflicts, political instability, and human stories that have shaped the region.

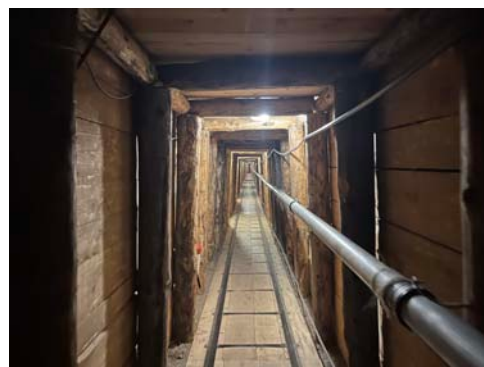


Fig. 4 Sarajevo War Tunnel of Hope—the symbol of the longest urban siege in contemporary history of Europe (Authors. Photo by CA Author)

The majority of 51.1% of tourists voted for the tour called "Five Balkan Countries," which the travel agency "2M Travel" emphasizes as their best-selling tour. This tour includes stops in Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia. It begins in Skopje and ends in Zagreb, with two nights in Sarajevo. Tourists are drawn to each of these countries because of their distinct cultural and natural heritage, as well as their rich history. The five countries described above have distinct gastronomic delicacies that entice gourmets; the locals are famed for their hospitality, which enhances the vacation experience. These are the exact reasons that foreign travelers choose this tour.

Tourists' awareness of local products and souvenirs in Sarajevo depends on their interests and the information they received before their arrival. For most tourists, authentic souvenirs such as handmade copperware, traditional textiles, or unique filigree jewelry can be very attractive. It is important that tourists have access to information about local products in order to better understand their value and authenticity.

Figures 5 and 6 show tourist knowledge of local gastronomic, craft, and artistic products, some of which can be bought as souvenirs. Respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina and nearby countries differ significantly from those from faraway countries. Locals and tourists from the region are much more familiar with local products, which include Bosnian coffee, kebabs (ćevapi) and other meat dishes from the spit and grill, dolma and sarma, pies, traditional sweet dishes, and Bosnian rugs. Other foreign tourists are less familiar with the listed items, but Bosnian coffee and kebabs (ćevapi) are the most well-known.



Fig. 5 Knowledge of local specialties, craft products and souvenirs by foreign tourists in Sarajevo (%)

According to Fig. 5, Bosnian coffee (19.6%) and Sarajevo's ćevapi (17.4%), as well as Bosnian carpets (11.6%), are the most popular local specialties and handicrafts among foreign tourists. The popularity of Bosnian coffee and Sarajevo kebabs (ćevapi) highlights the preserved traditions of Bosnian cuisine and hospitality, as well as the potential for gastronomic tourism based on local offers. When famous American actor Kirk Douglas (Michael Douglas's father) visited Sarajevo in 1984 for the Winter Olympics, he stated that he was also particularly motivated to experience popular traditional dishes, Sarajevo's ćevapi and Bosnian coffee, in an authentic Bosnian environment. Sarajevo's traditional gastronomy has a global commendable reputation and is one of the tourism supply's most compelling draws.



Fig. 6 Knowledge of local specialties, craft products and souvenirs by locals and resident tourists in Sarajevo (%)

The Bosnian carpet, with its rich artistic ornamentation and color, combines the influences of the Orient/Far East and indigenous Balkan elements, with "akrep" for the central motif. Various sources interpret "akrep" differently: some associate it with the turtle from ancient religions and the influence of Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, while others associate it with the scorpion from Zoroastrianism and Persian influence, which shared elements with Balkan Illyrian beliefs and folk practices. The National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina is home to the rare collection of more than 100 samples of Bosnian carpets.



Fig. 7 Bosnian carpet with its ancient symbolic motif of "akrep" (marked with green circle), the National Museum exhibition

It is concerning that some of the responses provided in this survey question, such as Sarajevo cube, zvekir, filigree jewelry, and Sarajevo-Romanija priglavak, are less familiar to tourists. For example, "zvekir" is a traditional iron ring bell that may still be found on the gates of old Bosnian houses in the old town of Sarajevo. It symbolizes the city, craftsmanship, and power, as well as welcoming well-meaning visitors and hospitality. In the field of Bosnian diplomacy, it serves as an appropriate commemorative gift for foreign delegates and guests. However, it is concluded that these products are not adequately promoted on online platforms, brochures, and other locations where travelers look for information on gifts or even destinations in general. Also, if these products are poorly represented in local souvenir shops frequented by foreign tourists, there is less chance that tourists will be familiar with them. The display of magnets imported from other countries or cheap imported jewelry should not be the first and main thing that tourists notice. Tourist workers should make an effort to promote and present as many local and authentic products as possible. Furthermore, foreign tourists may be unfamiliar with the cultural importance or tradition associated with these things, so a lack of context may diminish their motivation to explore or acquire these souvenirs. As a result, it is conceivable that travel firms, guides, and local organizations do not devote adequate attention to educating tourists about various local items. Tourist tours should incorporate these products, increasing their visibility among tourists. For example, when visiting Umoljani, the guide's story about wool spinning, knitting, and the creation of woolen socks may pique tourists' interest, including creative craft workshops as well, prompting them to see and purchase wool products.



Fig. 8 Zvekir, a traditional iron ring bell—the urban symbol of craftsmanship, power, and hospitality (Authors. Photo by Tourism Association of Canton Sarajevo)

4 Conclusion

The research underscores the significant role that local products, tours, and authentic experiences play in shaping the overall tourism image of Sarajevo. Local products, especially gastronomic delicacies like Sarajevo čevapi and Bosnian coffee, serve as cultural ambassadors, offering tourists a tangible connection to the local culture and traditions. Tours that combine visits to historical sites with tastings of local specialties provide a comprehensive sensory experience, helping tourists engage more deeply with the destination.

This study also highlights the importance of walking tours, gastronomy-focused experiences, and night tours as top preferences among tourists, suggesting that visitors seek a direct and immersive experience of Sarajevo. Additionally, natural attractions such as the Skakavac waterfall, the spring of the Bosna River, and the Bijambare caves attract tourists who appreciate Sarajevo's natural beauty, while the Olympic tour reflects interest in the city's sports history. Detailed research on the differences in preferences for visiting certain sights, as well as the differences in preferences for buying arrangements and souvenirs, among domestic and foreign tourists, can help travel agencies adapt their offer to different markets.

The study concludes that there is a need for more marketing of real domestic products and souvenirs, such as filigree jewelry, traditional fabrics, and unique handicrafts, which are frequently underrepresented in local souvenir shops and on digital platforms. Many tourists, especially those from other countries, are unfamiliar with these products because of a lack of visibility and understanding of their cultural and historical importance. Instead, shops often display mass-produced or imported items, overshadowing authentic local crafts. Future research should be directed towards revealing the percentage of information about the products that the destination Sarajevo offers. In addition, it is necessary to find out how much interest tourists have in such products. To solve this, it is crucial that tour guides, travel agencies, and local businesses actively educate tourists about the value and meaning of these traditional products. Integrating these items into tourist tours, where guides provide context about their manufacture and cultural significance, can pique tourists' interest and increase their likelihood of purchasing these authentic souvenirs.

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