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**TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN LESKOVAC:
FROM TRANSIT TO INTEGRATED DESTINATION
РАЗВИТИЕ ТУРИЗМА В ЛЕСКОВАЦЕ: ОТ ТРАНЗИТА К
ИНТЕГРИРОВАННОМУ ТУРИСТИЧЕСКОМУ
НАПРАВЛЕНИЮ**

Abstract. This study examines the tourism potential of Leskovac using data from 2019 to 2025, focusing on arrivals, overnight stays, and the accommodation structure. The results show strong growth in tourism, driven by rising foreign arrivals and the expansion of apartment and private room offerings. The primary objective is to ensure the reorientation from a transit (short-stay) to an integrated destination model: the advancement of gastronomic and event tourism should be accompanied by a more efficient utilization of the cultural-historical and natural potential of the territory.

Key words: tourism, Leskovac, tourist arrivals, overnight stays, foreign and domestic tourists, transit destination, integrated destination.

Аннотация. В данном исследовании изучается туристический потенциал Лесковаца на основе данных за период с 2019 по 2025 гг., с акцентом на количество прибытий, ночевки и структуру размещения. Результаты показывают сильный рост туризма, обусловленный увеличением числа иностранных туристов и расширением предложения апартаментов и частных номеров. Основная цель – обеспечить переориентацию с транзитной (краткосрочной) модели на интегрированную модель туристического направления: развитие гастрономического и событийного туризма должно сопровождаться более эффективным использованием культурно-исторического и природного потенциала территории.

Ключевые слова: туризм, Лесковац, количество прибытий туристов, количество ночевки, иностранные и внутренние туристы, транзитное направление, интегрированное туристическое направление.

The City of Leskovac possesses a unique cultural environment and a diverse tourism offering, characterized by territorial diversity, a well-developed network of cultural institutions, and a rich cultural-historical heritage. In addition, the city is recognized for its event tourism and gastronomy, which represent important components of its tourist attractiveness. These resources, combined with a favourable geographical location and strong transport connectivity, create significant potential for further tourism development and for enhancing the destination's competitiveness at both the regional and international levels. An additional development impetus lies in the fact that Leskovac has been designated as the Capital of Culture of the Republic of Serbia for 2026, opening up opportunities to improve its cultural offer and strengthen its identity as a tourism center.

According to data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (SORS, 2026), the City of Leskovac recorded significant changes in tourism activity volume during the 2019–2025 period, driven by both external shocks and the sector's gradual recovery (see Table 1). Following a sharp decline in 2020, a strong recovery was already recorded in 2021. The positive trend continued in the subsequent years, while in the last two years of the observed period, growth has stabilized. At the same time, the share of foreign tourists in total overnight stays gradually decreased (from 61% in 2019–2020 to 50 % in 2025). The average length of stay ranged from 1.7 to 2.1 days for domestic guests and from 1.7 to 5 days for foreign tourists. These indicators point to the dominance of short-term visits, with a more pronounced decline in the length of stay of foreign tourists observed after 2020.

Table 1

Arrivals, overnight stays, and average length of stay in the period 2019-2025

Year	Arrivals			Overnight stays			Average length of stay		Year-on-year dynamics of arrivals and overnight stays, in %	
	D.	F.	T.	D.	F.	T.	D.	F.	Arrivals	Ov. stays
2019	10488	13792	24280	17680	27498	45178	1,7	2	-	-
2020	5081	3302	8383	10240	16454	26694	2	5	-65,47	-40,92
2021	11995	6487	18482	23944	19741	43685	2	3,1	120,46	63,65
2022	12545	14044	26589	26422	27287	53709	2,1	1,9	43,86	22,94
2023	16075	19911	35986	28184	35252	63436	1,8	1,8	35,35	18,11
2024	16129	21569	37698	31855	37652	69507	2	1,7	4,76	9,57
2025	17558	21665	39223	36554	36868	73422	2,1	1,7	4,05	5,63

Note: D – domestic, F – foreign, T – total.

According to SORS (2026) data, tourism activity in the municipality of Leskovac in 2025 was most concentrated in hotels and private rooms, which together accounted for the largest number of arrivals and overnight stays. Motels and garni-hotels show a shorter average length of stay, indicating brief or transit visits, while apartments and rural tourist households, although smaller in capacity, record significantly longer stays – particularly among foreign visitors – pointing to the potential for developing long-term and specialised tourism. The relatively small share of rural households in total tourism activity suggests their insufficient development or limited tourism utilization within this segment.

Changes in the structure of tourism activity by type of accommodation in Leskovac between 2015 and 2025 indicate not only a significant increase in volume but also a diversification of accommodation capacities (see figure 1). While in 2015 tourism activity was predominantly generated by hotels and motels, which together accounted for the largest share of overnight stays, by 2025 the structure had become considerably more diverse. The share of motels declined, which may indirectly suggest that the city is becoming less aligned with a transit (short-stay) tourism development model. It should also be noted that the average length of stay of foreign tourists in motels and hotels in 2025 was only 1.03 and 1.79 days, whereas in apartments and rural tourist households it reached 2.50 and 3.37 days, respectively.

Figure 1

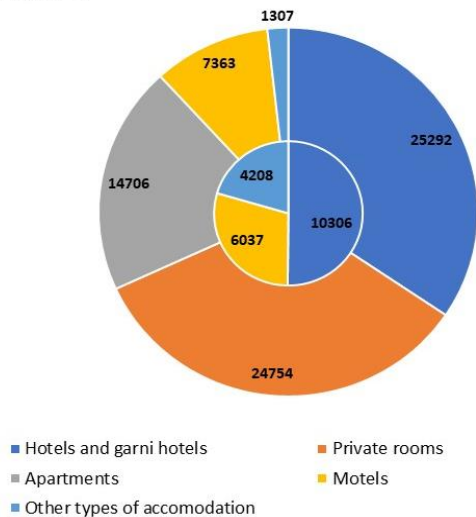


Fig. 1. Structure of tourist overnight stays in Leskovac by types of accommodation establishments in 2015 (inner ring) and in 2025 (outer ring)

Figure 2

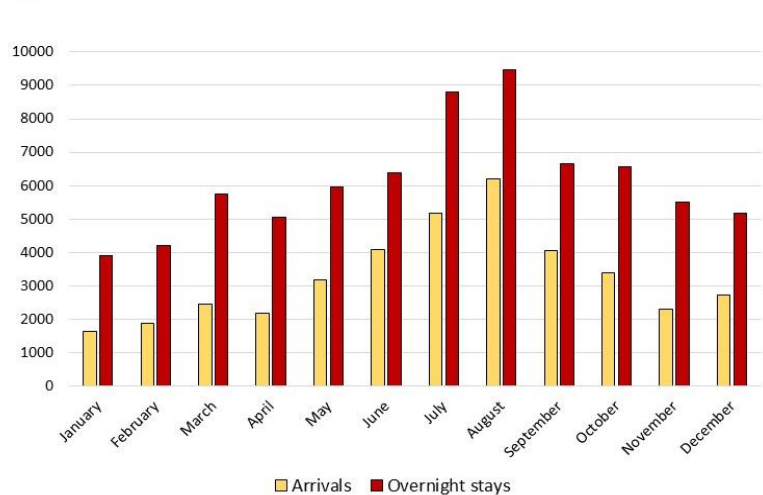


Fig. 2. Arrivals and overnight stays at accommodation establishments in Leskovac in 2025, by month

Total tourism activity in Leskovac during the January–December 2025 period shows pronounced seasonal variation, with a peak in the summer months (see Figure 2). This indicates intensive summer tourism directly linked to events such as Roštiljijada (held in late August), Leskovac Carnival (during July), the Leskovac Summer Festivals, and STRINGS International Festival and the Summer Academy of Music, among others (Grad Leskovac, 2020). Additionally, foreign tourists dominate during the summer months, while domestic tourists are more evenly distributed throughout the year, with a slight increase in May and September. These data suggest that Leskovac has a clearly defined summer season, with strong potential for attracting international visitors, while the winter months offer room for the promotion of specialized events that could help distribute tourism activity more evenly throughout the year.

In the geographical structure of arrivals and overnight stays in 2025, Bulgaria and Greece stand out (accounting for 13.0 % and 12.1 % of total arrivals, respectively), followed by Romania, North Macedonia, and Hungary (see table 2). Thus, Leskovac is most frequently visited by tourists from Serbia's neighbouring countries of the first and second order. The city's favorable transport-geographical position supports the development of tourism based on a transit (short-stay) destination model: a significant number of tourists from Austria, Poland, and the Czech Republic, as well as other countries, stay only briefly while traveling to summer resorts in Greece, while Greek travellers also pass through Leskovac en route to other European destinations (the average length of stay for these countries ranges from 1.08 to 1.38 days). Leskovac is more often considered a primary tourist destination by visitors from Bulgaria (1.62), North Macedonia (1.68), Bosnia and Herzegovina (1.69), and Germany (1.64), as well as by guests from Croatia and Turkey.

Based on the above, it should be noted that the City of Leskovac has significant potential as a transit tourism center, with a high share of foreign tourists but a low length of stay. By investing in facilities and attractions that would encourage longer visits, the city could become a more prominent component of the regional tourism network. These findings point to the need to develop additional content and activities outside the summer season to increase year-round attractiveness of Leskovac and extend tourists' stays.

Table 2

Geographical structure of arrivals and overnight stays in Leskovac in 2025

Country	Arrivals	Overnight stays	Arrivals structure (%)	Overnight stays structure (%)	Average length of stay
Bulgaria	2806	4552	12,95	12,35	1,62
Greece	2624	2941	12,11	7,98	1,12
Romania	2150	2766	9,92	7,50	1,29
North Macedonia	1872	3144	8,64	8,53	1,68
Hungary	1731	1873	7,99	5,08	1,08
Germany	1234	2028	5,70	5,50	1,64
Slovenia	1223	1896	5,64	5,14	1,55
Poland	1097	1438	5,06	3,90	1,31
Austria	717	987	3,31	2,68	1,38
Bosnia and Herzegovina	707	1194	3,26	3,24	1,69
Lithuania	683	757	3,15	2,05	1,11
Czech Republic	581	675	2,68	1,83	1,16
Croatia	416	839	1,92	2,28	2,02
Turkey	346	843	1,60	2,29	2,44
Other countries	3478	8935	16,06	24,24	2,57

Although it possesses strong potential in gastronomic and event tourism, extending the stay of foreign visitors requires further improvements to the tourism offering, particularly in accommodation capacity, integrated tourism products, and international promotion of the destination. It is also necessary to enhance the tourist attractiveness of local cultural-historical and natural sites, whose visits could be combined into several thematic tours.

A significant potential for the development of tourist offering of Leskovac lies in rural and ethno-tourism. Ethno-tourism enables the promotion of traditional lifestyles, customs, and local production, while the inclusion of ethno-based content contributes to entrepreneurship, employment of the local population, and the promotion of domestic handicrafts and agricultural products. Rural tourism, focused on stays in natural surroundings, local food, and activities that bring visitors closer to countryside living, requires a systematic approach, including the improvement and categorization of accommodation facilities, investment in infrastructure, and environmental protection. Relying on the cultural-historical and natural heritage of Leskovac and its surroundings, it is possible to create a competitive and sustainable tourism offering that meets modern demands and contributes to the socio-economic development of the region.

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