



## Article

# Cultural Tourism in Nitra, Slovakia: Overview of Current and Future Trends

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**Abstract:** Cultural tourism has undergone fundamental changes in several countries of post-socialist Europe. In Slovakia, this fact concerns, for example, localities with a strong connection to the church and its cultural heritage. These monuments belong to the foundations of cultural tourism, yet the state intentionally did not prefer them as tourist destinations until 1989. Only after political and social changes were such localities exploited by tourism with a qualitative and quantitative increase in cultural tourism. The aim of this paper is to investigate the recent changes in cultural tourism in urban areas and to address alternative cultural tourism products to diversify the offerings. To do so, Nitra (Slovakia) was used as a case study area. The main used methods were comparative analysis of information sources and questionnaire surveys, aimed at residents, entrepreneurs, and tourists. The main result is that Nitra has the potential to become an important center of cultural tourism/stage destination of various cultural routes. The presented results will increase awareness of the present and future of cultural tourism; they can be beneficial for organizations dealing with tourism management in the city (city office) and its marketing (Nitra Tourism Organization) for the academic and public sphere.

**Keywords:** cultural tourism; cultural routes; historical heritage; intangible culture; corona crisis; Nitra



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## 1. Introduction

Culture is one of the key components of tourism that motivates traveling [1]. It currently covers a very attractive form of tourism—it is defined e.g., by [2–4] as a migration of people from home to places with cultural attractions with the aim to gather new information, experience, and reminiscence to satisfy their cultural needs.

In this context, [5] defines the so-called cultural ecosystem services (CES) as “non-material benefits for the people collected in the ecosystems through spiritual enrichment, cognition, aesthetic experience and recreation”. These include aesthetic values (perception of beauty of the ecosystems and their components), spiritual/religious values (sanctity and mysticism of the ecosystems, pilgrimage destinations), recreation and tourism (e.g., ecotourism, geotourism), educational values (the ecosystems and their components and elements constitute the basis for formal and informal learning and education), scientific values (scientific discoveries), values in cultural heritage (cultural diversity and social relations), the spirit of the place (genius loci), and inspiration (ecosystems may become an inspiration for art, architecture, folklore, symbolism, and advertising).

Cultural ecosystem services are consistently recognized but not yet adequately defined or integrated within the ES framework. A substantial body of models, methods, and data

relevant to cultural services has been developed within the social and behavioral sciences before and outside of the ES approach. A selective review of work in landscape aesthetics, cultural heritage, outdoor recreation, and spiritual significance demonstrates opportunities for operationally defining cultural services in terms of socioecological models, which is consistent with the larger set of ES [6].

CES identification and quantification is essential for landscape planning and ecosystem management [7]. The CES are sensitive to external impacts such as landscape changes and inappropriate management. CES under-estimation in research and planning can lead to non-objective assessment in nature conservation policy. Understanding how different landscape features contribute to diverse CES provision is essential for landscape planning. This is also important for evaluating landscape changes [8–10]. The first catalog of ecosystem services in Slovakia was created only in 2020 [11].

CES are also analyzed in many studies focused on the ecosystem services in which they are defined as “features that fulfill human life” [12], “information functions” [13], “comfort and fulfillment” [14], “recreational and cultural services” [15], or “socio-cultural fulfillment” [16]. Cultural ecosystem services are mainly intangible benefits gathered through aesthetic and other experiences, recreation, exploration and spiritual enrichment, and the ability to distinguish between values.

Interest in spiritual and religious significance and values attributed to certain aspects of nature has been growing [17,18] as reflected in their inclusion as a subcategory of cultural ES [19–21]. Sacred sites may also attract tourism, which may coincide or conflict with the religious or spiritual use of these sites, as observed at the heavily visited pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela in Spain [22]. Following TEEB—The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (2013) tiered valuation framework—spiritual and religious services are still largely limited to the recognition category, whereas evaluation of recreation services frequently includes some well-established monetary valuation methods. According to [23], available data to measure the status and trends of nature-based tourism and recreation are increasingly collected, whereas many other cultural services that relate to ethical or religious perceptions of nature are in essence not, or at least hard, to quantify.

An important role in the development of tourism in various spatial dimensions in relation to CES is played by the “Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe” approved in 1987 by the Council of Europe with the aim to demonstrate—with routes through space and time—how the heritage of various European countries and cultures contributes to our common cultural heritage. The aim of the Agreement on Cultural Routes is to strengthen the potential of cultural routes in cultural co-operation, sustainable territorial development, and social cohesion, with a special focus on the themes of symbolic importance for European unity, history, culture, and values, and the discovery of less known destinations.

It helps to develop the democratic dimension of cultural exchange and tourism by engaging local networks and associations, local and regional authorities, universities, and professional organizations. It contributes to preserving the diverse cultural heritage through thematic and alternative tourist routes and cultural projects. The Committee of Ministers of Council of Europe approved the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes—EPA, and Resolution CM/Res (2010) 53, CM/Res (2013) 66 and CM/Res (2013) 67. These documents are to strengthen the potential of cultural routes in cultural co-operation, sustainable territorial development and social cohesion, with a special focus on the themes of symbolic importance for European unity, history, culture and values, and discovery of less known destinations. The cultural routes are adapted to local specificities [24–27].

Currently, altogether, 40 cultural routes have been certified. Traveling along these routes has become one of the pillars of cultural tourism, which also includes religious tourism [28]. In the last two decades, we have witnessed the renaissance of traveling and wandering along the medieval pilgrimage routes—e.g., Way of St. James, Via Francigena, St. Olav’s Way, and St. Martin’s Way [29,30]. Naturally, most works are devoted to the Way of St. James, which has been recognized by Council of Europe as the first cultural route in Europe. The Way of St. James has been analyzed both in terms of the

conditions of its development, for example by [31], evaluation of facilities and services for pilgrims, for example by [32], or the impact of this pilgrimage route on the development of the territory [30]. This phenomenon has also been addressed in [33,34], who focus on the conditions for building pilgrimage routes in Moravia based on the tradition of Cyril and Methodius.

The importance of European cultural routes for the development of tourism was also reflected in the Slovak Republic in the last decade with its accession to the Enlarged Partial Agreement (EPA) on Cultural Routes as its 23 member states on 25 June 2014. For this reason, various associations, government agencies, and municipalities seek to actively participate in the construction of thematic routes of different categories. These also include the regional city of Nitra and the Office of Nitra Self-Governing Region [35].

Cultural routes have a very valuable and hitherto untapped potential for the development of tourism in Nitra and its greater area. The aim of this paper is to investigate the recent changes in cultural tourism in urban areas and to address alternative cultural tourism products to diversify the offerings. Suitable alternatives can be seen in the transnational cultural routes (e.g., Cyril and Methodius Route, Way of St. James, the Jewish Way) or regional routes, which, in addition to being very popular among tourists, are one of the forms of sustainable tourism. They are one of the best, most natural, and most interesting ways of presenting cultural heritage to foreign and domestic visitors.

## 2. Theoretical Background

The views on cultural tourism differ greatly. UNESCO defines culture as a set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, emotional, and social characteristics of societies or social groups that includes art and literature, but also lifestyle, emotional characteristics of society or social groups, value systems, traditions, and beliefs. If culture is understood as a set of spiritual and material values of a society formed during its development, then cultural tourism is a kind of tourism that is intended to meet the intellectual needs of the people by making them familiar with the values, cultural heritage, and way of life of the residents in the relevant destinations. Cultural tourism enriches the cultural, social, and professional orientation, and it is often combined with other types of tourism, such as spa, recreational, and congress tourism [36].

Tourism includes all trips whose main motive is to visit historical sites and buildings of artistic and cultural value and participate in cultural activities [37].

Cultural tourism is divided as follows:

- In a narrow sense—it is limited to the monuments of material culture, which were built at their respective places by previous generations, or are concentrated in museums and galleries,
- In a broader sense—it includes all manifestations of culture as a whole, i.e., material and immaterial results of human activities, which are collected, stored, and evaluated in the course of human history, and passed from generation to generation.

Other possible segmentations are patriotic tourism, ethnic tourism, dark tourism, festival tourism, culinary tourism, entertainment tourism, club and “party” tourism, film tourism, and religious tourism.

Cultural tourism offers attractive cultural and artistic content related to everyday life in the local environments, customs and traditions, festivals and presentations, as well as presentations of cultural sites and all other elements that make the given destination different from the rest.

Cultural tourism in the 21st century defines the ways to revive and activate the cultural potential of the local environment. It creates an offering from the existing cultural potentials, differences, and specificities, which should arouse interest in the greatest number of visitors.

It is a shift from the passive visits of cultural attractions and animated culture (museums, monuments etc.) to an active discovery of vibrant local culture (everyday culture of the local populace) with regard to the following changes:

- Demographic—satisfaction of requirements, such as educated clients and/or elderly clients; comfort and quality, resulting in the creation of products aimed at individuals,
- Educational—the packages include elements of culture (theater performance), creative presentation of information, requirement of authenticity,
- Lifestyle—new products, which are related to tourist interests
- Information and communication technology—information is transmitted electronically, growing importance of visual presentations.

This is given by the overload in the demand and supply: today's tourists are already "tired" of walking in the museums, galleries, and castles . . . they want to communicate with the holiday destinations and their people (for example, even a visit to the local market is a "cultural experience"), experience the current culture more intensely (not necessarily modern culture, but rather how the elements of ancient cultures survive in the modern world and how the old influences are represented), and not merely "see and listen to the guide".

In its key report (1987) titled "Our Common Future" [38], the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission) introduced the term "sustainable development of tourism" into general use. Since the late 1980s, sustainable tourism has become an increasingly popular field of research—it meets the needs of modern tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing the opportunities for the future. It is expected to lead to such management of resources that the economic, social and aesthetic needs will be met while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life support systems [39].

Cultural tourism and the development of tourism in general must be viewed not only in the context of success of the tourism industry—but more importantly, in the wider context of regional development and wider economic, social, political, and environmental concerns [40].

Experienced consumers of tourism products have become more sensitive to environmental issues, sustainability of tourist activities, and the COVID-19 crisis. They expect their requests to be answered by travel agencies, tour operators, local and regional authorities, dioceses, and entrepreneurs through various new offers, which are also available online [41].

However, recreation and tourism also provides many important benefits, such as physical exercise, aesthetic experiences, intellectual stimulation, inspiration, and other contributions to physical and psychological well-being [42]. The relationship between culture and tourism is complex, and it involves many areas of urban life and municipal policy. The basic challenge that cities and their citizens have to face is resolving the tension between the opportunities offered by increasing globalisation and mobility and the essential support provided by embedding in the local context. Priority should be given to maintaining diversity, supporting the links between heritage and contemporary culture, and tourism can be an interesting asset in these analyses by providing resources to support local culture [43].

Launched by the Council of Europe in 1987, the Cultural Routes demonstrate, by means of a journey through space and time, how the heritage of the different countries and cultures of Europe contributes to a shared and living cultural heritage.

Cultural Routes "represent interactive, dynamic, and evolving processes of human intercultural links that reflect the rich diversity of the contribution of different peoples to cultural heritage" [44]. They demonstrate, by means of a journey through space and time, how the heritage of different countries and cultures contribute to a shared and living cultural heritage [45–50]. There are many cultural routes in Europe that can operate at international, national, regional, and local levels. All cultural routes criss-cross the landscape-dynamic areas where people live and interact with nature that surrounds them (Council of Europe (2000), European Landscape Convention, Florence, Italy). Therefore, they cover the promotion and protection of collective tangible and intangible heritage in Europe, whose environment has been changed and crafted by humans over the past 10,000 years [24,51]. Each cultural route is based on a European theme, which explores and

explains European history, arts, aspects of society, forms of agriculture, and geographical features. Cultural routes enrich the diversity, richness, and importance of European culture, since the topic of a particular cultural route is shown not only through the material but also through intangible components of cultural heritage. Cultural routes point to a strong correlation between heritage, such as monuments and places, and traditions and practices of the communities living in these countries. Cultural routes are also a certain type of “time travel”, reflecting the past in the present. They represent the collective memory of the rich heritage passed from generation to generation over the centuries. This heritage is irreplaceable and vulnerable in times of globalization. Therefore, cultural routes contribute to the protection of heritage for future generations. By linking the past and present, they also contribute to the protection of heritage for future generations [52].

In recent years, Cultural Routes have emerged as important management utility tool for the promotion of cultural resources and the further promotion of cultural tourism of a city [53]. In addition to the presentation of culture and history, their importance is also in uniting tourism actors [30,54]. Naturally, their economic impact is important, too [55,56].

On the basis of this theoretical background and knowledge about the development of cultural tourism in the city of Nitra, in a present significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, we have formulated the following research questions:

- Does the city of Nitra, with its original agricultural and trade fair tradition, have the potential to become a center of cultural tourism in the context of the development of cultural routes?
- To what extent can cultural routes help the city of Nitra in terms cultural ecosystems services?
- What were the effects of the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic on cultural tourism in Nitra?

### 3. Methodology

The information base in this study consisted of a number of sources—relevant literature, data from the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, internal data and information from municipal and regional authorities, as well as the aforementioned questionnaire.

Since last year, cultural tourism has become one of the key areas of interest of the city of Nitra and its management in close cooperation with regional authorities and the general public. In connection with drafting the Strategy for the Development of Culture, Creative Industries, and Cultural Tourism in Nitra (2021–2031), a questionnaire about the cultural needs of the residents of Nitra was distributed in the April and May 2020 to 1234 respondents. The vision and objectives verbalized in the Strategy are also linked to Nitra’s candidacy for the European Capital of Culture 2026 [57]. The participatory process with the aim to define the above Strategy was actively attended by the authors of this paper and members of the SPOT (Social and innovative Platform On Cultural Tourism and its potential towards deepening Europeanisation) team within the HORIZON 2020 program [58].

Within the SPOT project, we carried out three surveys in August and September 2020 according to a unified methodology created for the purposes of the project. Indicators have been developed for the national regional local level with an emphasis on understanding the role of cultural tourism by developing indicators at the national, regional and local levels that are suitable for understanding the role of cultural tourism. Three surveys—visitors (132), population (164), and entrepreneurs in tourism (45)—were held within this project in Nitra in the second half of 2020. The smaller numbers in the second survey were due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

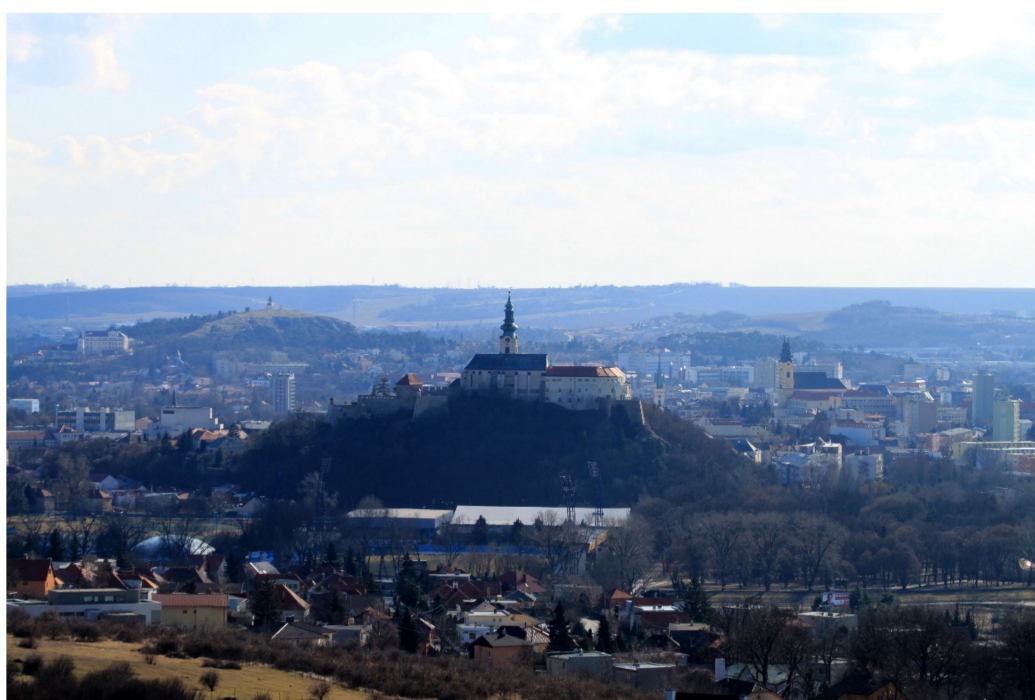
All questionnaires were published by the municipal office of Nitra via Google forms on the city’s website, the city’s Facebook account, in the local press via a QR code, and was also sent to all Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra (CPU) students and staff in Nitra. The results were processed and visualized in Microsoft Excel and subsequently analyzed. Maps were created in the QGIS software.



Through the inductive and the comparative method, it was possible to contribute to the causal analysis of the reported phenomena.

#### 4. Nitra in Cultural Tourism Framework

The city of Nitra (Figure 1) is situated in the southwestern part of Slovakia approximately 90 km northeast from the Slovak capital Bratislava. In terms of the administrative division of Slovakia, Nitra belongs to the Nitra Region, and it is its administrative center. With its 77,691 (2021) inhabitants, Nitra is the sixth most populous city in Slovakia. The economy of the city is dominated by electrical (Foxconn) and automotive (Jaguar Land Rover in Nitra) industry. The launch of production in the Nitra Jaguar Land Rover plant in 2018 turned Nitra into one of Slovakia's key industrial centers along with Bratislava, Košice, Trnava, and Žilina [59]. The city is home to two universities and a number of secondary schools.



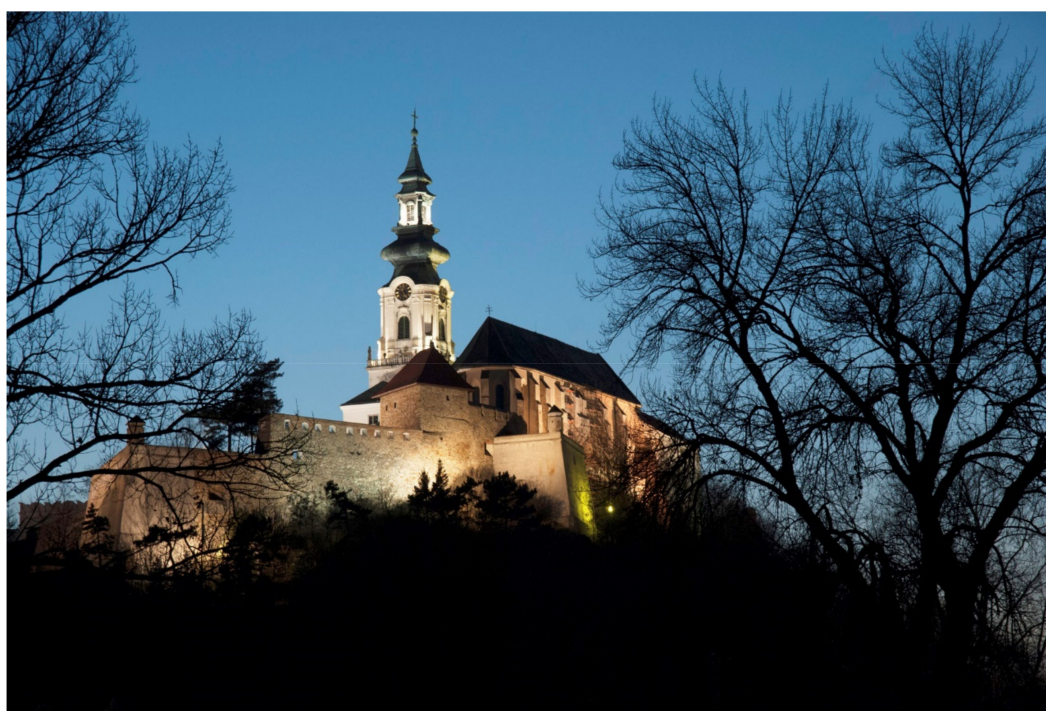
**Figure 1.** The cityscape of Nitra, the “Mother of Slovak cities”, from the southern foot of Mt. Zobor (Tribeč Mts.), which rises above the city, Photo: Martin Hetényi, 2020.

It has a very good location for the development of tourism because it is situated on the border of two sizable and contrasting Central-European landscape types, i.e., the Pannonian Basin and Carpathians. The tourist attractiveness of towns and cities is naturally high on the boundaries of contrasting landscape types. The convenient location of the said area has naturally attracted people with their activities since prehistoric times. In addition to the natural phenomena, Nitra lies on the border, even in the political–geographic sense. The city was located in the contact zone of Western (Germans) and Eastern (Slavs) cultures, and later the Slavs and Hungarians. Nitra is situated on the crossroads of important historical routes. The routes from Nitra went in several directions: those that connected to the so-called Czech Route from Prague to Constantinople and those that headed to Poland [60]. It was intensely inhabited since prehistoric times. In the 9th century, it became the center of the Principality of Nitra and consequently one of the most important centers of Great Moravia. In 828, the first Christian church above the Danube was consecrated here, and Nitra became the center of the Nitra Diocese in 880. The city became an important center of Christianity and a starting point for further Christianization of Central and Eastern Europe. Even after the demise of the Great Moravian Empire and the Kingdom of

Hungary in the 10th and 11th century, it was among some of the key cities in Central Europe. However, during the High and Late Middle Ages, the importance of the city declined, and other cities such as Bratislava and Košice flourished. Due to these developments, only a few older architectural monuments were preserved in Nitra [61].

Despite this fact, the city boasts 134 national cultural monuments and sights from different time periods and with different degree of accessibility in terms of cultural tourism. Based on the hitherto research into visitor interest in the individual monuments and sites, the following ten most visited areas of interest can be identified in Nitra: (1) Nitra Castle complex, (2) Upper Town, (3) Pedestrian zone, (4) Synagogue, (5) City Park, (6) Calvary, (7) Mt. Zobor, (8) St. Michael the Archangel Church in Dražovce, (9) Slovak Agricultural Museum, and (10) Zobor Monastery. Most of them are points of interest on the existing cultural routes or have a potential to become one.

The most sought-after place by tourists is the Nitra Castle and its surroundings (Figure 2). The Bishop's Palace and St. Emmeram's Cathedral are among its largest sections. The Bishop's Palace is the seat of the Bishop of Nitra, and the interior of the palace is inaccessible to tourists. Tourism was developing very slowly at this place until 1989. This situation reflected the relationship between the totalitarian Communist government and the Church. The Communist authorities identified the Church as its arch nemesis [62]. Therefore, it used all means possible to limit its impact and/or monitor its activities. In terms of tourism, the castle grounds were a tourist attraction without the necessary infrastructure during the Communist times (the state did not intend to implement it here, and private enterprises were banned). Therefore, visitors only stayed very briefly at this place.



**Figure 2.** The Nitra Castle from the 11th century (built on the castle from the 8–9th century) is the most attractive point of interest in the city. The largest medieval castle in Slovakia is the seat of the Nitra Bishopric. The limestone castle hill is one of the seven hills on which Nitra is located. Photo: Jaroslav Košťál, 2020.

The situation changed gradually after the Velvet Revolution in the former Czechoslovakia in 1989. The churches regained their lost status, received their property through restitutions, and started to take good care of it (in contrast to the previous owner, the state). The highest number of cultural monuments and sites is owned by the Roman Catholic Church, which is trying to make them available to the general public. This trend can also be seen at the Nitra Castle, which has been the bishop's seat since medieval times.

The whole area is being revitalized, and accessibility for tourists is taken into account. The newly established Diocesan Museum was opened, showcasing the facsimiles of historical documents and some replicas of archaeological finds. Another part of the exhibition focuses on the presentation of original and unique liturgical items [63]. In a similar fashion, the lookout point from the church tower and the castle casemates were made available to the public. In addition to extending the offer of tourist activities, a tourist gift shop, cafeteria and restaurant was opened in the immediate vicinity of the castle walls. The very castle grounds are the focal point of Way of St. James and Cyril and Methodius Route.

Another integrated complex of historic buildings is located directly below the castle grounds in the Upper Town where most of the buildings were returned to the Church in the restitutions after 1989, and they serve its needs. Therefore, the buildings are accessible to tourists only to a limited extent. The potential of the Diocesan Library, which is located in late Baroque building of the Seminary, is exploited insufficiently, and the library was declared a National Cultural Monument in 1990 [64]. Apart from the potential visits to the library, the building, which is one of the most beautiful buildings in the city, is exploited for tourism only in terms of its aesthetic exterior. The interior of another historic building (Small Seminary) houses the research center of Faculty of Roman Catholic Theology of Cyril and Methodius, Comenius University in Bratislava. The entire Old Town, a complex of townhouses and palaces along the Nitra Castle, was declared an urban conservation area.

Other architectural monuments in Nitra are scattered around town (mainly in the Old Town City District) and are mostly sacral (churches, Synagogue, Calvary). The Townhouse (former City Hall) and County House are the most important secular architectural monuments in Lower Town.

Some of the sites around town are already promoted within the traditional route titled “In St. Cyril and Methodius Footsteps”. This route is under the umbrella of the Cyril and Methodius Route, and it is held within the event Nitra, Dear Nitra, in which the city of Nitra commemorates these patrons of Europe. The one-day route starts at the Romanesque church of St. Michael the Archangel in Dražovce, continues through the Monastery of St. Hippolytus on Mt. Zobor, the archaeological park on Martin’s Hill, and ends at the sculpture of St. Cyril and Methodius at the Nitra Castle. However, this event is rare.

In the period of socialist Czechoslovakia (1945–1989), Nitra became industrialized, the residential areas grew, two universities were established, and an exhibition center was built. Nitra’s strategic location in the agricultural area in Slovakia was one of the reasons for founding the Agricultural University in 1952. In 1959, the Pedagogical Institute was formed—the predecessor of Constantine the Philosopher University. Nitra’s reputation of a metropolis of Slovak agriculture was further strengthened in 1973 through the decision of Ministry of Agriculture to set up Agrokomplex, a state-owned enterprise, and hold agricultural fairs and exhibitions in the city. Up until 1989, this very form of tourism was preferred in Nitra because of its “ideological harmlessness”. Therefore, tourism in Nitra was traditionally represented particularly by fair and congress tourism, and these forms of tourism have accounted for most of the overnight stays in the city. Nitra’s long tradition of fairs is still standing strong in the minds of the public. It is also documented by the research results in which the trade fairs dominate as a primary association in the minds of the tourists [65]. This phenomenon is still heavily present in the city’s tourism image.

After 1989, when this state-owned enterprise started to operate on the market, the offering of the fair events was further expanded by other topical fairs. Exhibitions focusing on engineering, a car show (extremely popular with the general public), gardening exhibition, hunting exhibition, regional development event, etc., were added to its portfolio. In parallel with the fair events, thematic conferences and seminars were held for the professional public (organized by both universities and other research institutes). Until recently, the exhibition and fair industry in Nitra and Bratislava achieved international acclaim [66]. Trade fair tourism provided most overnight stays.



Organized events are an important part of cultural tourism. The city organizes a wide range of cultural events. These are based on the Slovak traditional holidays and celebrations related to the seasons (for example, the Nitra Carnival, Spring Festivities, or the Nitra Christmas). Several classical music festivals have a profound tradition in Nitra (e.g., Musica Sacra and the Nitra Musical Spring). Gastrotourism is also growing in popularity (e.g., the Festival of Flavors from the Nitra Region, The Strawberry Nitra, and various beer and wine festivals). With the exception of theatrical performances in the Andrej Bagar Theater, these events mostly have a local significance. The city is home to two universities with vibrant student life during the year—the Student Days of Nitra Universities offer cultural, social and sporting events. In comparison with other folk festivals, a special position is held by Academic Nitra, a festival focusing on academic folk ensembles and groups. The rich history of the city is also reflected in the event Nitra, Dear Nitra, the aim of which is to commemorate the Slavic missionaries St. Constantine and Methodius who laid the foundations of Slavonic literature and education. For several years, these celebrations have been part of the international project Cyril and Methodius Route. The Route to Nitrawa is held on a similar basis.

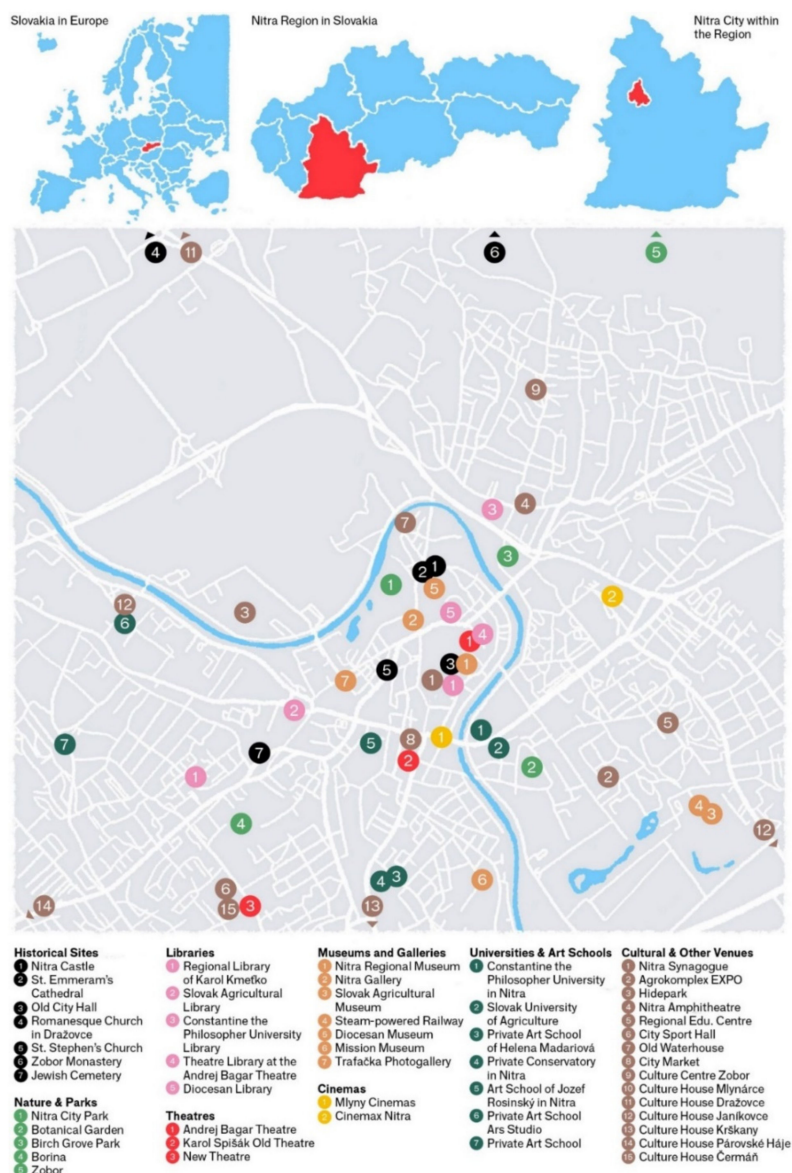
Religious tourism was given a boost after 1989 thanks to freedom of religion. The Christian tradition in the city is also reflected in the five pilgrimage destinations (Figure 3) with local (3) to national importance (2). The establishment of independent Slovakia in 1993 accelerated the importance of missionaries St. Cyril and Methodius, and a national pilgrimage is held in Nitra every 5th of July in their memory. The pilgrimage to Calvary is of national importance, and it is a recognized Marian pilgrimage destination [67].



**Figure 3.** At the foot of Mt. Zobor, a Camadolese Monastery was built over the city in the Baroque style in 1692–1695 upon the remains of the former Benedictine Monastery of St. Hippolytus from the 9th century. The monastic complex is being reconstructed, and the ruins of St. Joseph’s Church are a pilgrimage stopover en route to St. Svorad-Andrew, who lived here in around 1020 as a hermit, Photo: Alfred Krogmann, 2020.

Tourism in Nitra can be summarized with the following data for 2019: • 7 hills, beautiful views from Nitra and of Nitra (a “photogenic” city) • 5 museums and 4 galleries, 3 theaters • 280,525 overnight stays • average length of stay of 2.49 days • 34 accommodation facilities • 1991 beds • 6500 permanent jobs in catering establishments and 2500 seasonal jobs • revenue from accommodation tax of €193,048 • revenue from visitors in accommodation facilities of €6,025,117 • average revenue per bed of €3190 • 12,736 students at two universities • Agrokomplex exhibition center with 143 ha and 15 exhibition halls • 42 exhibitions and fairs held at Agrokomplex • 692,347 Agrokomplex visitors • 73,971 Nitra

Castle visitors • 61,495 open swimming pool visitors • 3500 visitors with guided tours • 23 municipal sports facilities • 141 cultural events • 96 sporting events • 13,088 bikesharing loans [68]. The cultural tourism infrastructure in the city is shown in Scheme 1.



**Scheme 1.** Infrastructure of culture tourism in the city of Nitra, Source: [https://www.nitra2026.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Nitra2026\\_ECoC\\_PreSelection\\_Bidbook.pdf](https://www.nitra2026.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Nitra2026_ECoC_PreSelection_Bidbook.pdf) (accessed on 9 March 2021).

Tourist attractiveness is one of the key issues related to the functioning of tourism in each region. It has been previously claimed that the tourist attractiveness of a particular place depends on its tourist qualities or merely the existing tourist infrastructure. However, the force, which a particular place uses to attract tourists, does not depend solely on its tourist qualities. A valuable natural landscape has a considerable tourist potential, but the potential alone is not enough for tourism to actually develop. It is generally agreed that the organization of tourism, especially promotion and tourism services, is one of the key factors that determine the attractiveness of tourist sites [69].

The organizational and institutional backing of tourism in the Nitra urban area is provided by the Tourist Information Center [70] in collaboration with the Nitra Tourism Organization [71]. At the regional level, tourism is managed by the Department of Tourism

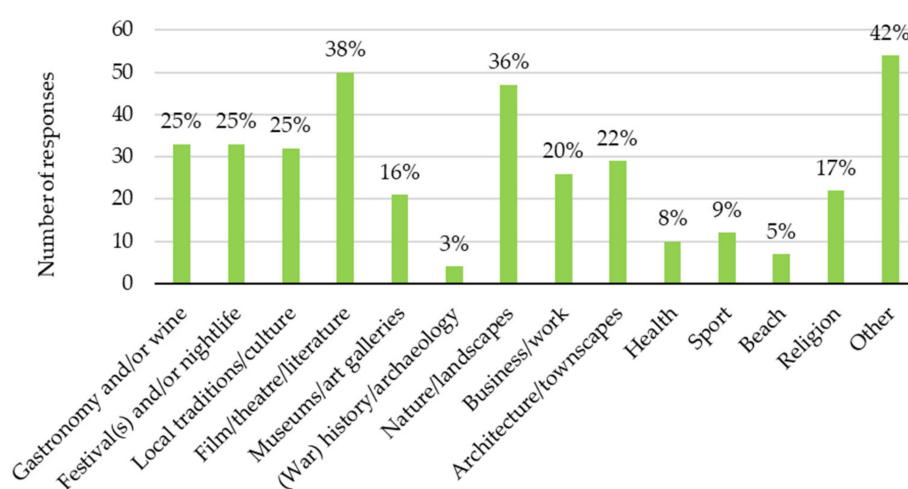
at the Office of Nitra Self-Governing Region. The Bishops' Office, which is the administrator of the Nitra Castle and other state and contributory organizations, has a specific position. Nitra also provides secondary and university education in the field of tourism and regional development. The preparation of university-educated professionals for (cultural) tourism is provided by both universities, with the University of Constantine the Philosopher [72] standing in the foreground.

## 5. Results

The content of this section are two themes. The first part presents selected results of a questionnaire survey of visitors and entrepreneurs in the city of Nitra with the possibilities of their use in the development of cultural tourism. In the second part, we identify the potential of cultural and other routes in the city and its wider area, which can further expand the possibilities of cultural tourism.

### 5.1. Selected Results of Questionnaire Surveys

Given that tourism and tourist establishments were significantly affected by the pandemic situation, we used a questionnaire to determine the motivation for visiting Nitra. Based on the results of the visitor questionnaire (2nd half of 2020, N = 132, each possibility = 100%), it can be concluded that almost a quarter of respondents visited the city due to theatrical and film performances (38%) and the nature and/or landscape of the city (36%). Gastronomy and festivals attracted 25% of the visitors and the local culture and architecture up to 22%. However, fairs appeared in the "Other" category (Scheme 2), which indicates a change in the perception of the city.

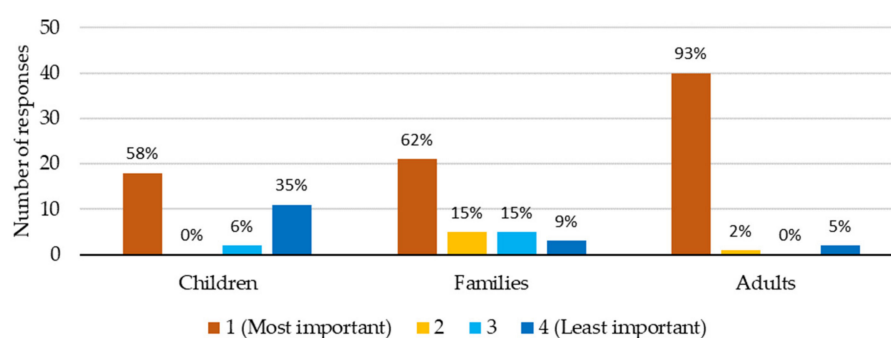


**Scheme 2.** Motivation to visit the city of Nitra, Source: Own research.

We also investigated the situation with the local entrepreneurs (N = 45) and their tourism offer before and after COVID-19. Restaurants accounted for 64.4% of the business entrepreneurs, which is more than half of the respondents. Accommodation facilities accounted for 20%, of which \*\* and \*\*\* hotels were statistically most represented (33%), and the "Other" category had the smallest representation (2.2%). The operators of visitor attractions/sites accounted for 13.3% (Scheme 3). The average length of stay in their accommodation facilities is between 2 and 4 nights (67%). Before the pandemic, business entrepreneurs were statistically mostly focusing on the target group of adults (93%, Scheme 4) and families with children (62%).



**Scheme 3.** Type of business in the city of Nitra, Source: Own research.



**Scheme 4.** Type of visitors in target of business entrepreneurs in the city of Nitra, Source: Own research.

Almost half of the subjects reported occupancy of less than 40% in all seasons of the year. Summer (35%) and autumn (30%) were reported by the subjects as the periods with the highest occupancy, which overlap with two busiest business periods. The lowest occupancy or even closures of the premises were reported in the spring period (20%) and winter season (15%) when Nitra is visited by fewer tourists. Most respondents (58%) employ 5–10 employees in their company, with 4% employing more than 20 employees.

A majority of respondents (57%) stated that the most important clientele is of domestic provenience from a distance of up to 150 km. This situation is unlikely to change; we assume that domestic tourism will prevail due to coronavirus. Therefore, nearly half of the respondents (49%) report that the proportion of income from the domestic tourists reached 71–90%.

Over the last five years (before coronavirus), 24 respondents (53.3%) viewed their business as mostly growing. It is clear that this trend will not continue, and some providers will have to close their business.

We also used the questionnaire to see how the pandemic affected individual businesses in the second half of 2020. The businesses in Nitra stated that they were significantly affected by coronavirus (41 answers—91%). Only four business (9%) answered to the contrary. During the first year of coronavirus, most FTEs (Full-Time Equivalents) worked in the summer (the total average of FTEs per season working in businesses is 6.98—36%), followed by spring (6.29—32%) and autumn (6.20—32%). Businesses were most affected by lower numbers of national visitors (31 answers—68%), international visitors (25 answers—56%), and cancellations (14 answers—31%). Businesses were trying to maintain the existing employment levels. When measures had to be taken, they preferred to lay off workers (26 answers—58%), not to hire new workers (23 answers—51%), and keep the workers but on a zero hours contract (11 answers—24%). The responses about the government assistance to offset the impacts caused by the coronavirus pandemic were significantly negative. Positive answers were provided mostly in the area of general advice from



the government (27 answers—60%), other (17 answers—38%), financial assistance with furloughs (4 answers—9%), and loans (2 answers—4%).

The global COVID-19 pandemic brought a virtual end to tourism and highlighted the need to diversify the tourist offer. The “conference visitor” or “business trip” segment, which is typical for Nitra, essentially collapsed in 2020.

In the case of several activities, the response to this situation was to implement them in virtual space (theatrical performances, gallery tours, church masses, virtual tours and tourist sites, etc.). In 2019, applications such as “Nitra on 7 Hills” [73] and/or the geo-game “Young Corgoň’s Travels” [74] were created for the visitors to present the cultural and historical monuments of the city.

In response to the research questions, it can be concluded that history and cultural heritage are the foundations on which tourism in Nitra continues to develop, and people still show interest in it. In addition to the promotion of historical monuments, work is underway even in the area of historical facts connected with the city and their transformation into tourism products (e.g., cultural routes and/or other tourist packages). The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant/critical impact on cultural tourism in Nitra. It revealed the unilateral and inertial reliance on the two underlying visitor segments—business and culture. The almost exclusive orientation of the accommodation providers on the business clientele revealed the inconvenience of this strategy. Low product diversification of the accommodation facilities caused a huge drop in their use. Urban tourism in Nitra is currently “at a turning point”; therefore, it is essential to admit the shortcomings, learn from mistakes, and step into the new decade with a transformed offering reflecting on the trends of the present time (sustainability, traveling “without a trace”, local experiences, ecological tourism) and implementing modern destination marketing. As an urban destination, Nitra is currently facing a great challenge. The city of Nitra has the potential to transform the existing tourism and implement new products and visitor segments [68,75].

## 5.2. Cultural and Other Routes—Their Potential for the Development of Cultural Tourism in the City of Nitra and its Greater Area

The area of the Nitra Region is crossed by several cultural, pilgrim, and wine trails and routes (Scheme 5). These trails and routes are either of European importance or they were established by regional associations to support the development of regional tourism. Pilgrimage/religious routes are among the most important in the Nitra region—Way of St. James, European Cultural Route of Saints Cyril and Methodius, and Via Maria. Religious tourism assumes the role of a niche tourism product in international tourism. Pilgrimage involves not only a journey from one place to another, but it is a spiritual and cultural experience changing or significantly influencing the pilgrims’ lives [76]. Pilgrimages have strong political, economic, social, and cultural implications and may even affect global trade and trade health. The pilgrimage is also an important subject for its scope and spatial impact. It is also the primary economic activity for some countries and cities. Pilgrimage also creates other population mobilities such as trade, cultural exchanges, and political integration [77–81]. Nowadays, religiously motivated tourism is connected to cultural and heritage tourism as well. As it has been demonstrated, religious and secular pilgrims as well as cultural tourists often go on a journey for the same reason: searching for a spiritual experience. Pilgrims and tourists who visit sacred sites may experience intense personal, emotional experiences that are mediated by the visitors’ beliefs [82]. The origins of pilgrimage and the veneration of saints are to be found in the ancient Near East, the cradle to the three Abrahamic faiths (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam). In Christianity, the earliest saints were the martyrs who were persecuted by the Romans. In medieval Europe, the saint came to be recognized through a more formal process of identification, namely through beatification and canonization by the church. In eastern Christianity, the icons of saints became central to the veneration of saints, while in western Christendom, the body of the saint became central to the cult. Common pilgrimage sites were an integral part of the medieval landscape. They were not claimed exclusively by a particular religious community [83].



Generated using: EU-Hydro – River Network Database (<https://land.copernicus.eu/imagery-in-situ/eu-hydro/eu-hydro-river-network-database>), High Resolution Layer: Tree Cover Density (TCD) 2018 (<https://land.copernicus.eu/pan-european/high-resolution-layers/forests/tree-cover-density/status-maps/tree-cover-density-2018>), ESM 2015 - Release 2019 (<https://land.copernicus.eu/pan-european/GHSL/european-settlement-map/esm-2015-release-2019>), (c) European Union, 1995-2020; ZBGIS - Administratívne hranice, ZBGIS®, Úrad geodézie, kartografie a katastra Slovenskej republiky; Digitálny model reliéfu DMR3.5, Mapový podklad © Úrad geodézie, kartografie a katastra Slovenskej republiky; © OpenStreetMap contributors; QGIS.org, 2021. QGIS Geographic Information System (<http://www.qgis.org>).

Scheme 5. Selected cultural routes in the Nitra region, Source: Own processing.

There are two types of pilgrims who come for mainly religious purposes: the ones who come with an organized group, which is usually organized by their own congregation or group of students organized by their school, and the individuals and families. Today, pilgrims come by bus, by private car, or on foot. The pilgrimages are organized by dioceses or by local parishes. Schools are the most important tour organizers of groups for the ceremonies dedicated to children and young students [83]. Religious sites such as Nitra are not only visited by the pilgrims but also visited by non-religious tourists since they have cultural, historical, and religious significance. Tourism and pilgrimage are actually two social phenomena that present rather similar dynamics, so much so that modern tourism finds its origins precisely in the first pilgrimages [78]. Pilgrims and tourists are akin insofar as their search for “something” that drives them to embark on their journey. The former is in search of something sacred, the latter of something secular. However, this something need not necessarily be a single object, item, or experience. Secular tourism and religious pilgrimage overlap and intertwine [84,85].

The most famous European Cultural Route, certified as early as in 1987, is the *Way of St. James* [86] with its end destination in the Spanish pilgrimage center of Santiago de Compostela. Currently, the route passes through the territory of Slovakia and the sites

with religious buildings consecrated to St. James. The Slovak stretch of the Way of St. James with a length of 650 km starts in Košice and continues in the east–west direction to Bratislava. The pilgrims can also use the marked section to the Austrian Wolfstahl, which takes them to the Austrian section of the Way of St. James with the possibility to continue to Santiago de Compostela.

Since 2004, the Council of Europe certified the *European Route of Jewish Heritage* [87], which has been implemented through the combined efforts of numerous Jewish and non-Jewish organizations, including national agencies to promote tourism and numerous volunteers.

The Nitra Synagogue is an architectural gem and the main Jewish site in Nitra. It was built between 1908 and 1911 by the Neolog Jewish community according to the blueprints of architect Lipót (Leopold) Baumhorn. Currently, it is only used for cultural purposes [88]. In the future, other points of interest on this cultural route could include the Jewish cemetery that separates the original territory of the Jewish community in Párovce from the newly built housing estate Klokočina [89]. The older Orthodox section of the cemetery was established in around 1750. One can also find the famous tomb of the Nitra Rabbi Ezekiel Baner, which has become a place of pilgrimage. There are two more Jewish cemeteries in Nitra.

In 2020, the *European Cultural Route of Saints Cyril and Methodius* [90] applied for certification. It is a comprehensive cultural and tourist route in the Central, Southern, and Eastern Europe. The members of the Association European Cultural Route of Saints Cyril and Methodius include the Nitra Self-Governing Region, Nitra Tourism Organization, and Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra. Compared to other routes with a transit character, Nitra can be one of the major end points of the Cyril and Methodius Route (along with Devín and Velehrad) because Nitra was one of the final destinations for the Slavic missionaries during their pilgrimage. The theme of Cyril and Methodius can be developed through a variety of products, which support not only the religious and cultural but also the state and political impact of the Slavic missionaries in Slovakia (Figure 4).

The *Central European Marian Way* [91] pilgrimage route is an artificially constructed trail linking the sacred and the secular heritage sites related to the Virgin in Central and Southeastern Europe. The Via Maria pilgrimage route is 1400 km long, and it connects the sacred and cultural heritage sites related to the Virgin in the Carpathian Basin. The Hungarian regions have several socio-economic and regional differences [82]. The route is mostly trying to make use of the existing hiking trails outside the busy traffic routes. The Slovak stretch of the route passes from the pilgrimage center at Gaboltov close to Bardejov to the national shrine—Basilica of Our Lady of Sorrows in Šaštín. It has two branches—northern and southern. On the northern route, you can visit more than 75 Marian churches and chapels, and the southern route boasts more than 130 temples dedicated to Virgin Mary. The pilgrimage is organized by the civic association Via Mariae.

Another European cultural route is the *Transromanica* [92], which connects the common Romanesque heritage of nine European countries: Germany, Austria, Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, Slovakia, Serbia, and Romania. Only two municipalities are part of the route in the Nitra Region: Bňa and Diakovce. In the future, this route could also involve the city of Nitra because stone architecture and fortifications on the castle hill have been documented through archaeological finds since the 9th century. At the turn of the 11th and 12th century, the ruined fortification was replaced by a Romanesque masonry wall. At the end of the 9th century or in the first half of the 10th century, the building preserved in the south wall of the so-called Lower Church of the Basilica of St. Emmeram was built, which is today interpreted as St. Emmeram's Church [93,94]. The Transromanica cultural route could popularize the very potential of the early medieval history of Nitra among the public.





**Figure 4.** St. Michael the Archangel Church from the 11th century in the Nitra–Dražovce city district is one of the oldest sacral monuments in Slovakia. It is integrated into two live events organized by Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra. In May, it is the starting point of pilgrimage to Nitrawa—an experiential journey through the Great Moravian period, and in July, it is part of the traditional Cyril and Methodius pilgrimage, which runs from the church through the Zobor Monastery of St. Hippolytus to the sculpture of St. Cyril and Methodius at the Nitra Castle. Thus, the University actively contributes to building the European Cultural Route of Saints Cyril and Methodius. The route has been directly marked on the tourist trail in cooperation with the Club of Slovak tourists, Photo: Peter Ivanič, 2020.

Through the *Magna Via* cultural route [95], the eponymous association aims to highlight, support, and protect the common cultural heritage, and in conjunction with the presentation of natural beauty and attractions, to assist the development of tourism. The association has no permanent secretariat, unlike other European cultural routes. This route copies the historical routes, such as Amber Road and the *Magna Via* Post Road.

In Europe, wine tourism has often been associated with the official wine routes and roads. The majority of the European wine routes are tourist objectives that have evolved from individual attractions, becoming authentic and diversified destinations themselves, capitalizing on their cultural elements and landscapes, enriched by the reputation of the wines and the specific territory. Wine routes can become interesting tourist destinations due to the themed and travel experience they propose, connecting places, events, and cultural heritage. The process of individualization of wine routes as tourist products is seen as a new principle to protect, revive, use, and present the wine heritage [96–100].

Nitra Royal Wine Route [67] is the largest and longest wine route in Slovakia. It was registered as a voluntary association of individuals and legal entities in 2003. This route has the best opportunity for tasting of local wine varieties Müller Thurgau, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Danube. This wine route has been founded by an association based directly in Nitra whose aim is to assist in the development of ecological tourism by building and promoting the relevant services and a direct experience with the individual stops on the way—member wineries of the said association. This product can be broadly developed through all forms of wine tourism, i.e., cultural, educational, recreational, sporting, social and economically oriented [101,102].



## 6. Conclusions and Discussion

Nitra has been a typical urban destination with a rich history, numerous cultural monuments and institutions, rich offerings of events, and typically one-day visitors with short stays until the pandemic crisis.

In the context of the achieved results, we can state that the city of Nitra and its original agricultural and trade fair tradition potentially can become a center of cultural tourism. Within it, the ideal alternative is the development of cultural routes, especially with a religious context. One of the key factors in the development of cultural and other routes is sustainability, as the landscape and natural environment are their main attractions on this route.

Cultural routes—whether the European certified Way of St. James, European Route of Jewish Heritage (and the Slovak Jewish Heritage Route), or the European Cultural Route of Saints Cyril and Methodius with pending certification, may highlight Nitra on the map of Europe. However, even other routes, for example Transromanica or the Central European Marian Way, have a great potential. If the cultural and other routes are used extensively, Nitra will also benefit in terms of accommodation and catering facilities. The development of wine tourism also has great potential in Nitra, despite the fact that wine cellars are accessible only on certain occasions, e.g., festivals. The transformation of viticulture into a product of tourism is lacking, despite local activities that are not networked.

The economic and socio-cultural benefits of cultural and wine tourism would be the following: an increased number of domestic and foreign tourists, growth in demand for wine tourism as a specific tourism product; extended visits and consumption by tourists; enlarging a destination; increased demand for complementary forms of tourism (rural, gastronomic, event, hunting, and other forms of tourism); continuing to exist and attract new visitors; the extension of the tourist season; and initiating new service and entertainment programs [100].

Cultural heritage is also increasingly the subject of interest of economists and representatives of management sciences who see it as an important resource from the perspective of stimulating the sustainable economic development of regions [25,103]. The economic benefit of the investment in the evaluation of protected areas and cultural monuments can be found in the planned inclusion of these areas into the national tourism promotion. When it comes to complex tourism products such as cultural routes, it is an absolute necessity to incorporate different institutions (engaged in the field of culture, education), public associations, and organizations in the process. Different initiatives and activities should advance the cultural life of a local community and also enrich the tourist offer in various places along the route. Such results can be achieved only with cooperation on multiple levels [104]. The potential for the development of cultural routes also lies in their better labeling and promotion because they are hardly visible in the city. Semiotics and tourism are interconnected things. Signs, symbols, and their interpretation have always constituted a significant role in place identification and place attachment. Signs are identified as anything that can be used to represent something else, holding a second layer of meaning. Semiotics recognized that there are usually several layers of meaning within a sign system, and they are bound in culture and context. Semioticians set out that the meanings of sign structures are not inherent and universal, but they are arbitrary and established through particular social conventions [82].

Thus, cultural routes and cultural heritage can significantly help the city of Nitra in the development of cultural ecosystem services. In their comprehensive evaluation, it is necessary to distinguish three basic aspects—from the country's potential for ecosystem services (ES) provision (demand, capacity) through the requirements for their provision in a particular territory (demand) to their actual use and balance (ES flow) [10,11]. These include aesthetic natural scenery, inspiration for culture, art, and design. They also provide a sense of place, belonging, and spiritual and religious motivation. This leads to opportunities for environmental science, education, recreation, and economic tourism [105]. The development of cultural ecosystem services will increase the attractiveness of the

city, increase the number of visitors, and shift the image of the city from the city of fairs to the city of cultural tourism. Given that the topic of ecosystem services in Slovakia is new [10,11], it represents a potentially important space for further research at the local level.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on the providers of tourist services in Nitra. Since March 2020, the situation in the accommodation, catering, and cultural facilities has been getting worse, and it has reached a critical point as of the date of this article. Due to the pandemic, exhibitions and fairs at the Agrokomplex exhibition center have been put on hold, which has had a crushing impact on almost all accommodation facilities in the city. The pandemic has also revealed that residence tourism in Nitra has long been based on business tourism (exhibitions, seminars, conferences). The data from the Department of Taxes and Fees at Municipal Office in Nitra show that the accommodation facilities reported altogether 144,168 overnight stays in 2020, which compared to 2019 is an almost 50% drop [106].

In the current climate of global uncertainty caused by the global pandemic, it is very difficult to predict how cultural tourism will develop in Nitra after the pandemic ends. Tourism is currently in a transition, changes are happening worldwide, and new ways of more responsible, more sustainable, and more inclusive tourism are being shaped with a focus on learning about the local culture [75]. Virtualization brings potential solutions in this difficult pandemic situation, social media not excluded [107].

Sustainability (not quantity but quality) in relation to cultural supply and demand has become a megatrend in the further development of cultural tourism. The current strategic documents and activities of the city are an example of this commitment [66,75,108].

A huge challenge for the development of the city in this sense is its candidacy for the European Capital of Culture in 2026, which has the ambition to promote this destination at a whole new level and secure it a firm place on the cultural map of Europe [57]. The candidacy marks a new era for Nitra (and) its cultural life, and it is a new beginning for the understanding of culture in the region. Due to this, a new strategy has been created, where cultural and other routes also manifest themselves, especially religious tourism. The strategy for the development of culture, creative industries, and cultural tourism in Nitra for the years 2021–2031 [106] defines the vision for the development of the city as follows: Nitra is a modern cultural, creative, and attractive European city with fully fledged public spaces and a quality offer for all.

The Nitra 2026 concept also incorporates social sustainability through the commitment to inclusiveness, and environmental sustainability by moving culture out to the open fields, groves, rivers and urban neighborhoods to help us achieve the long-lost harmony with nature. The candidacy makes a new platform for further international cooperation. Winning this prestigious title may be instrumental in changing the cultural image of Nitra and creating its new identity.

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