

## THE CONTRIBUTION OF FAMILY ENTREPRENEURSHIP TO MITIGATING SEASONALITY IN CROATIAN TOURISM

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to analyze the economic contribution of family businesses in Croatian tourism and to explore the relationship between family businesses and the mitigation of tourism seasonality in Croatia.

**Methodology** – Using secondary data on tourist arrivals and overnight stays in the Republic of Croatia and comparing them with other European countries, this paper examines the issue of tourism seasonality. Through an analysis of family accommodation (family hotels) and its representation within Croatia's overall accommodation supply, as well as through the offer of family-owned enterprises, the study highlights the importance and economic contribution of family businesses to Croatian tourism. The seasonality index is used to demonstrate the contribution of small family enterprises to reducing the seasonality of Croatian tourism.

**Findings** – The research results indicate that family businesses contribute to attracting tourists outside the main tourist season, and that small family hotels exhibit a lower seasonality index compared to large hotel facilities.

**Contribution** – The study may serve as a foundation for further research on family businesses and seasonality in Croatian tourism. Understanding and recognizing their role in extending the tourist season can assist destination management in fostering the development of this form of entrepreneurship.

**Keywords:** family businesses, tourism seasonality, mitigation of seasonality, small and medium-sized enterprises in tourism

*JEL classification:* M13; Z32; L83

### INTRODUCTION

Family entrepreneurship has been recognized as a key driver of transformational change within Croatian tourism (Čapeta, 2024). This role is particularly evident in addressing one of the sector's central challenges – seasonality. Given that tourism accounts for 19.1% of Croatia's GDP (2023) and that foreign tourism revenues reached €14.6 billion (HNB, 2024), these financial indicators clearly create a highly favorable environment for entrepreneurial initiatives. Family businesses, motivated by such opportunities, are the driving force behind a wide range of activities—from the establishment of small family hotels and the development of eno-gastronomic offers such as cheese, olive oil, and lavender routes, to guest animation services, event organization, excursions, and the creation of digital platforms for accommodation booking. Ultimately, the development of authentic tourism products that attract visitors beyond the main tourist season stands as one of the most effective strategies for mitigating seasonality—one of the key structural challenges of Croatian tourism.

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According to the Strategy for the Development of Sustainable Tourism in the Republic of Croatia (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2023), tourism in Croatia transcends its economic function and becomes a way of life. In this context, family entrepreneurship in tourism can also be viewed as a lifestyle choice of the business founders and their family members. The synergy between private and professional life that characterizes family businesses manifests in several ways: flexibility in product adaptation to meet market demands; the ability to adjust working conditions and adopt a lifestyle according to business needs; flexible approaches to wages (Peters & Buhalis, 2004); and profit distribution and reinvestment in business development. These characteristics make family businesses particularly adaptable and resilient to market fluctuations, allowing them not only to survive outside the main tourist season but also to play an active role in expanding tourism offerings, thereby contributing to the extension of the tourist season and reducing the negative impacts of seasonality. Finally, their deep rootedness in local communities and their ability to communicate the cultural identity of destinations position family businesses as carriers of authentic tourist experiences, offering visitors more than a service—an emotional connection with the destination itself. This emotional and cultural authenticity becomes a compelling attraction, particularly for tourists seeking meaningful experiences beyond the high season.

Following the theoretical framework of family businesses in tourism (Fóres et al., 2021; Camilleri & Valeri, 2022; Gupta & Valeri, 2022), this study poses the central research question: How do family businesses contribute to mitigating the seasonality of Croatian tourism? Their ability to transform from mere adaptation to proactive creation of market trends (Čapeta, 2024) provides a foundation for understanding and recognizing their true contribution to extending the tourism season.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a significant body of scholarly interest devoted to the study of family entrepreneurship. A review of the evolution of family business research (Siaba & Riviera, 2023) highlights the variety of aspects and shifting research foci over time, reflecting the need to address emerging themes and challenges faced by family firms. At the same time, it points to a persistent research gap stemming from the heterogeneous nature of family enterprises and the need to study them through the lenses of family dynamics, conflict, and tradition (Rovelli et al., 2024).

Despite the abundance of studies on family business, no universal definition of family entrepreneurship has been reached—neither for scholarly use nor for broader applications such as statistical monitoring or public policy (Bujan, 2020). Moreover, family businesses are not formally recognized within the national legislations of European countries (with the exception of Malta) (Kaur & Singh, 2019). The main reason lies in the complexity of the very concept of “family” and the specificities of family business operations, as well as the broad and multi-dimensional nature of the term, which encompasses diverse contexts, sectors, and influences (Bujan, 2020a). When the concept of “tourism” is added to the definition, the task of conceptualizing family entrepreneurship becomes even more complex.

According to the European Commission's (n.d.) proposed definition, a family business is one in which: "a) the majority of decision-making rights are held by the person(s) who established the company, or who acquired the company's capital, or by their spouse(s), parent(s), child(ren), or direct heirs of the founder(s); b) the majority of decision-making rights may be either direct or indirect; c) at least one representative of the family or kin formally participates in the management of the company; and d) publicly listed companies are considered family businesses if the founder(s) or their descendants hold at least 25% of the decision-making rights tied to their share capital". The OECD (2021) suggests a slightly higher threshold of 32%, while the Global Family Business Index applies a 50% ownership criterion for defining family control (Camilleri & Valeri, 2022). Astrachan, Klein, and Smyrniotis (2002) identify three main groups of definitions prevalent in the literature, depending on research focus: (1) ownership-based definitions; (2) ownership and management-based definitions; and (3) generational succession-based definitions. Kaur and Singh (2019) offer a simplified definition, describing family businesses as entities in which a family holds a majority of voting rights and therefore control. The absence of a unified definition can distort empirical evidence, while the use of varying definitions across studies can yield inconsistent or incomparable findings (Harms, 2014). Furthermore, the lack of statistical tracking of family enterprises makes it difficult to assess their real dynamics or to compare them reliably across time and economies. Most existing studies therefore rely on qualitative approaches, such as case studies and in-depth interviews (Getz & Carlsen, 2000; Wang et al., 2019; Memili et al., 2020; Bujan, 2020a; Ivanciuc & Ispas, 2023), which further limit the generalizability of findings and hinder a comprehensive understanding of their economic contribution.

Seasonality represents one of the key challenges faced by family businesses in tourism (Li & Zuo, 2020), as it directly influences the stability and sustainability of their operations (Getz & Carlos, 2005). From a tourism perspective, seasonality has been a frequent subject of research (Yabanci, 2023), regularly monitored and analyzed statistically (Croatian National Tourist Board, 2022). Its mitigation is defined as a developmental and sustainability priority within Croatian tourism strategies (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2023). However, despite the strategic recognition of the importance of addressing seasonality and the potential of family businesses to alleviate it, the academic literature lacks empirical studies that examine family enterprises specifically within this context. This gap leaves an important void in the scientific understanding of how family businesses contribute to reducing tourism seasonality.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study explores the role of family businesses in addressing the problem of seasonality in Croatian tourism by analyzing their ability to adapt to changing trends in the tourism market. Using secondary data on tourist arrivals and overnight stays in the Republic of Croatia, and comparing them with data from other European countries, the research examines the issue of tourism seasonality. Through an analysis of family accommodation (family hotels and private households) and its representation within Croatia's total accommodation supply, as well as through an overview of the broader offer of family enterprises, the study highlights the importance and economic

contribution of family businesses to Croatian tourism. In the absence of direct statistical monitoring of family entrepreneurship in the tourism sector of the Republic of Croatia, the research relies on statistical data concerning small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), crafts, and self-employed professionals operating within the accommodation and food service industries. In this way, family businesses active in tourism are indirectly captured within the analytical scope. The study also draws on relevant reports and studies issued by the Croatian National Tourist Board (CNTB) and other institutions monitoring the dynamics of family enterprises, such as the Centre for Policy Development of Small and Medium Enterprises and Entrepreneurship (CEPOR). Descriptive statistics were employed for data processing and analysis. The primary goal is to determine the economic contribution of family businesses to Croatian tourism and to examine the relationship between family enterprises and the mitigation of tourism seasonality. By doing so, the research aims to fill the identified theoretical gap by providing empirical insight into the specific role of family businesses in extending the tourist season in the Republic of Croatia.

### 3. REZULTATI I DISKUSIJA

The Republic of Croatia possesses an exceptionally rich natural and cultural–historical resource base suitable for the development of year-round tourism. A particularly underutilized potential lies in the continental part of the country, which offers opportunities for the development of various alternative forms of tourism. Despite this, tourist activity remains heavily concentrated along the Adriatic coast, and the main motivation for visiting Croatia continues to be the “sun and sea” product. This results in a high level of seasonality, markedly more pronounced than in other Mediterranean countries (Figure 1).

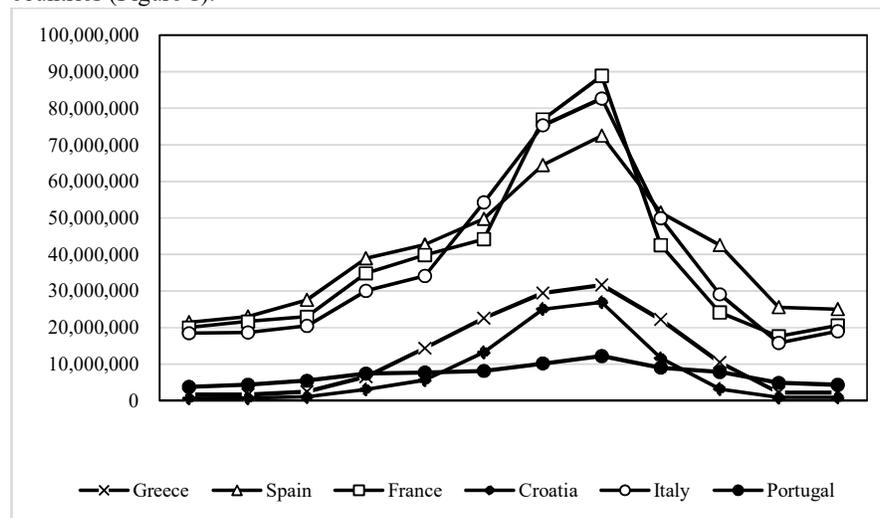
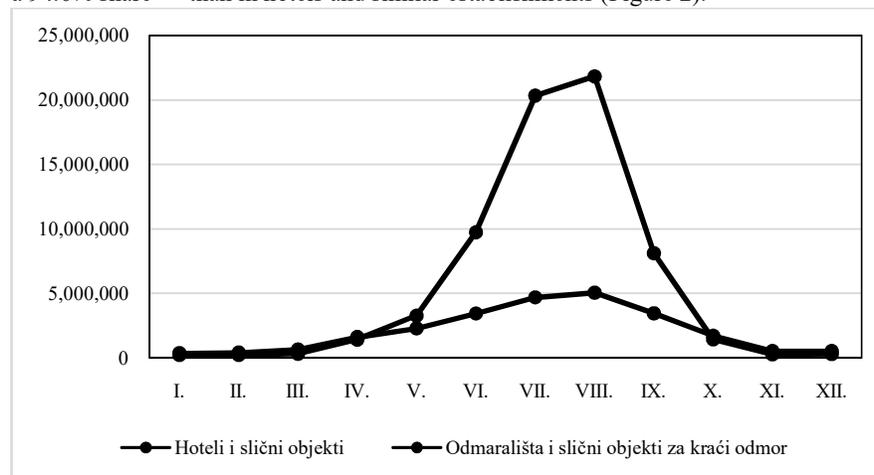


Figure 1: Tourist overnight stays by month in EU Mediterranean countries, 2023.

Source: Author's according to: Eurostat, 2004a.

Data in Figure 1 show a significantly higher occupancy rate of accommodation capacities in Croatia during the summer season (June–September) compared to other EU Mediterranean countries. In 2023, 56.2% of all overnight stays in Croatia were realized in July and August, and 83.0% when June and September are included. By comparison, in Italy, the second EU country by total overnight stays, July and August accounted for 41.54%, and June through September for 71.93%. The lowest seasonality levels were recorded in Portugal and Spain, with 46.4% and 49.1% of annual overnights in the June–September period, and 26.29% and 28.24% respectively in July–August. However, compared to 2013, when 62.1% of Croatian overnight stays occurred in July and August and 85.8% from June to September, there are visible positive trends toward reduced seasonality. EU countries not primarily reliant on coastal tourism show much flatter seasonality curves than Mediterranean countries — for instance, Hungary (29.6%), Slovenia (27.1%), Austria (25.5%), and Germany (24.1%) of total overnight stays during June–September.

Seasonality, besides being associated with the “sun and sea” product, is also closely related to the structure of accommodation capacity, in which family accommodation dominates. The seasonality curve is more pronounced in the category of family accommodation — classified as “holiday and other short-stay accommodation” with a 94.0% share — than in hotels and similar establishments (Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Tourist overnight stays by type of accommodation and month in the Republic of Croatia, 2023**

Source: Eurostat, 2004a.

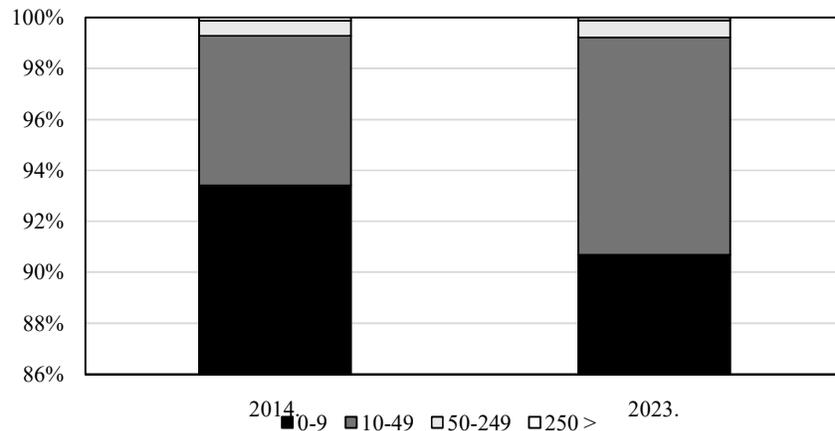
Seasonal fluctuations and concentration of tourist flows bring a number of challenges to developed destinations, including overburdened municipal and transport infrastructure during peak season, degradation of cultural and natural heritage, and consequently, a reduction in quality of life within local communities (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2023). Seasonality also affects nearly all aspects of the tourism value chain — marketing, financial management, labor market stability, and overall business performance. The impacts of seasonality are highly complex, intertwining economic, sociocultural, and environmental dimensions. Literature

suggests a persistent underutilization of resources during the off-season combined with capacity shortages during peak demand periods (Yabanci, 2023). Mitigating seasonality is thus identified as one of the strategic priorities for sustainable tourism development in Croatia, with particular emphasis on stimulating entrepreneurial initiatives that create high value-added offerings. Within this framework, family entrepreneurship plays a central role.

Family businesses, confronted with the constraints of seasonality, adapt their business models in pursuit of innovative ways to diversify income beyond the summer season. To reduce dependency on seasonal revenues and ensure long-term sustainability, family entrepreneurs expand their offerings during pre- and post-season periods through thematic, cultural, or gastronomic events, and investments in year-round tourism products. Examples include thematic hotels (e.g., *Meneghetti Wine Hotel & Winery*, which combines enogastronomy and art), themed parks, wellness facilities, and experiences linked to excursion, gastronomy, active, and agritourism (Buble et al., 2018). Through such innovative approaches, family entrepreneurs create tourism products that disperse visitor activity across a broader area, thereby reducing pressure on highly developed coastal destinations. These offerings often include so-called “soft activities”—such as horseback riding, cycling, paintball, or similar outdoor pursuits—which require minimal prior experience and align with contemporary demands for a healthier lifestyle. In line with global trends emphasizing authenticity, identity, learning, personal development, and ecological awareness, family entrepreneurs increasingly develop “green” tourism concepts, integrating their products into natural and preserved environments. The result is a unique tourism experience born from co-creation between tourists and family entrepreneurs. This is often realized through authentic family life experiences on *wine routes*, *olive oil trails*, or *honey paths*, where interaction, participation, and learning become central to the tourist experience. On such routes, winemakers, olive growers, and beekeepers jointly offer guests product tastings, traditional meals, and hands-on experiences—from grape or olive harvesting to workshops on traditional production methods. These experiences are more than just tourism products—they represent living expressions of family identity, generating emotional value and storytelling that deepen visitors’ connection with the destination. Through the co-creation model, the tourism experience becomes an interactive process of revitalizing local identity, enhancing destination resilience, and transforming tourism into a sustainable driver of family entrepreneurship rather than merely a seasonal income source.

According to Eurostat (2024), the accommodation and food service sector comprised 21,377 enterprises in 2023, representing 9.4% of all private-sector businesses in Croatia, confirming its substantial weight in the national economy. As noted by Camilleri and Valeri (2022), a large proportion of small enterprises are family-run businesses, which act as economic generators and key intermediaries between tourists and destinations. Consequently, the fact that 99.9% of enterprises in Croatia’s accommodation and food service sector fall within the SME category provides a reliable framework for estimating the share of family businesses. However, the lack of a unified definition still complicates precise measurement. Excluding single-employee entities (8,933 in 2023), approximately 58.1% of all enterprises could potentially be categorized as family businesses. This indicates the entrepreneurial attractiveness of the tourism sector,

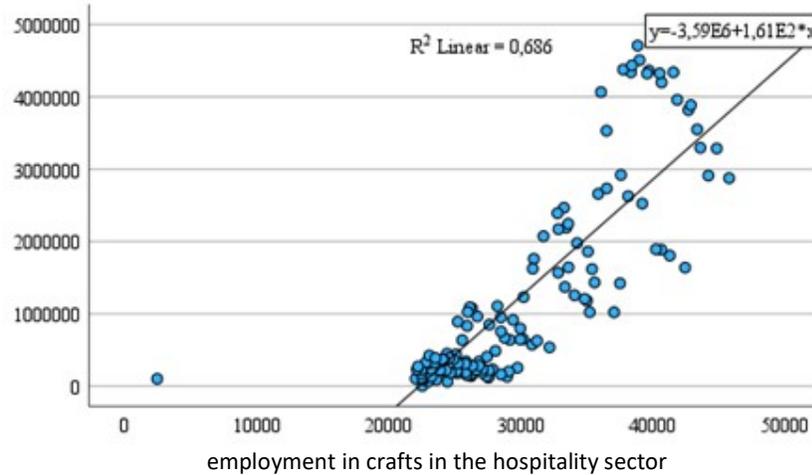
especially for micro and small enterprises. Between 2013 and 2023, the annual growth rate of micro enterprises (0–9 employees) averaged 1.5%, while small enterprises grew at 6.0% per year. Medium-sized enterprises recorded a 1.6% annual growth rate, and their number in 2023 was over 12% higher than in 2018, the peak year of the observed period. This faster growth among small and medium-sized firms has reshaped the sector's structure (Figure 3).



**Figure 3: Structure of enterprises in accommodation, food, and beverage services in Croatia by size, 2014 and 2023**

Source: Author's calculations based on Eurostat (2004b).

According to the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts (2024), there were 11,549 active hospitality and tourism trades, representing 10.3% of all registered trades in Croatia. The majority (65.4%) are concentrated in Adriatic counties, particularly Split-Dalmatia, Istria, and Primorje-Gorski Kotar, which together account for over 40% of all hospitality and tourism trades in the country. This strong regional concentration reflects the close relationship between tourism and craftsmanship, as tourism promotes traditional food production that craftsmen then bring to market through hospitality venues. Such businesses enrich the diversity and authenticity of the national tourism offering, contributing directly to the creation of authentic tourist experiences. Given that tourism-related enterprises often operate on a seasonal basis, employing family members greatly enhances operational flexibility. Family members frequently perform multiple roles within the business, ensuring continuity and adaptability. Because crafts are traditionally family-based, it is highly likely that a large portion of these are family trades. A Spearman correlation analysis of tourist arrivals and employment in hospitality and tourism trades from 2013 to 2023 revealed a strong positive relationship ( $\rho = 0.897$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Increases in tourist arrivals were directly associated with higher employment levels in family-owned hospitality trades (Figure 4), demonstrating the positive employment effect of tourism within family enterprises. In 2023, employees in the craft sector of accommodation and food services accounted for 15.3% of total employment\*\*, compared to 7.5% in legal entities\*\* (DZS, 2004a).



**Figure 4: Correlation between tourist arrivals and employment in hospitality and tourism trades in Croatia, 2013–2023**

Source: Author's calculation according to: Eurostat, 2024h.

Although family businesses are most often associated with small enterprises, there are notable examples of medium-sized (e.g., *Katarina Line d.o.o.*) and large family-owned companies (e.g., *Lukšić Group*) within Croatian tourism. *Katarina Line d.o.o.* has evolved over the past three decades from a small family-run agency with a single employee into a major tour operator specializing in small-ship cruising along the Adriatic. With a fleet of 45 chartered vessels, it brings 130,000–140,000 guests to Croatia annually, and since 2024, operates a 54-room hotel under the Curio Collection by Hilton brand. The Lukšić family's hotel group accounts for approximately 14.2% of Croatia's total hotel capacity. While large hotels (100+ rooms) dominate Croatia's hotel structure (72.4% in 2024), the number of small hotels (up to 25 rooms) has increased notably in recent years. With 13,903 beds, small hotels represented 8.1% of the total hotel supply in August 2024, and together with medium-sized hotels (25–99 rooms), accounted for 27.6% of the overall offer (DZS, 2025). It can be reasonably assumed that most small hotels are family-owned, and when combined with the 14.2% share of Lukšić family holdings, the family accommodation segment constitutes a significant proportion of Croatia's hotel industry. Although small hotels record lower occupancy rates than large ones (28.1% vs. 43.1% in 2024, DZS 2025), they demonstrate a wider dispersion of overnight stays throughout the year, indicating a notable contribution to mitigating seasonality (Table 1).

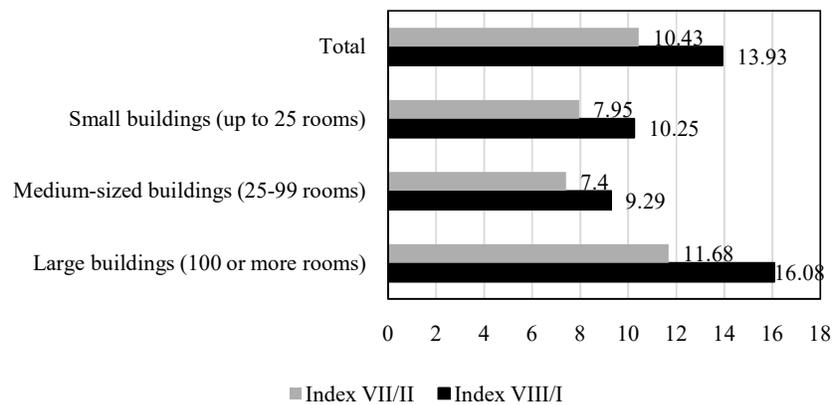
**Table 1: Tourist overnight stays in Croatia by accommodation size within the category Hotels and similar accommodation, 2024**

	Tourist overnight, u 000			Share, u %			
	Total	Small buildings (up to 25 rooms)	Medium-sized buildings (25-99 rooms)	Large buildings (100 or more rooms)	Small buildings (up to 25 rooms)	Medium-sized buildings (25-99 rooms)	Large buildings (100 or more rooms)
I.	370,3	28,6	92,3	249,4	1,4	1,9	1,3
II.	460,2	33,7	104,8	321,7	1,8	2,3	1,6
III.	821,1	48,8	161,5	60,8	3,3	3,3	3,2
IV.	1.504,8	84,9	272,1	1.147,8	5,9	5,8	5,9
V.	2.644,8	141,8	469,0	2.034,0	10,3	9,6	10,4
VI.	3.453,5	192,2	587,7	2.673,7	13,5	13,1	13,7
VII.	4.801,9	268,3	775,4	3.758,2	18,8	18,2	19,2
VIII.	5.161,7	292,9	857,7	4.011,2	20,2	19,9	20,5
IX.	3.339,7	191,2	587,6	2.560,9	13,1	13,0	13,1
X.	1.849,1	103,9	354,5	1.390,7	7,2	7,1	7,1
XI.	619,8	45,3	140,5	434,1	2,4	3,1	2,2
XII.	523,5	39,2	123,6	360,7	2,0	2,7	1,8
<b>Total</b>	<b>25.560,4</b>	<b>1.470,6</b>	<b>4.526,7</b>	<b>19.563,1</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>

Source: Author's calculation according to: DZS, 2025.

The pronounced seasonality of Croatian tourism is clearly reflected in the fact that a significant portion of hotel capacity remains out of operation during the winter months. In February 2024—the month with the lowest available capacity—only 33.6% of the beds available in August (the peak month) were operational. Data on the number of available hotel beds in these two months reveal different contributions by hotel size categories to the reduction of seasonality. While medium-sized hotels operated at 45% of their August capacity in February, and small hotels at 41%, large hotels operated at only 30%. This indicates that small and medium-sized hotels are significantly more effective in mitigating seasonal fluctuations. When examining monthly occupancy rates for 2024, a more balanced distribution can be observed among small and medium-sized hotels compared to large ones. Small and medium hotels reached their maximum occupancy in August (67.9% and 83.5%, respectively), whereas large hotels peaked at 104.6%. The lowest occupancy across all categories occurred in January, with medium-sized hotels recording 20.4%, large hotels 17.4%, and small hotels 15.5% occupancy. The average length of stay in large hotels was nearly double that of small hotels (3.71 days vs. 2.11 days). This pattern was consistent throughout the year, with shorter stays in winter months (December, January, February) compared to the summer months (June, July, August). In small hotels, average stays were 2.59 days in summer versus 1.7 days in winter, while in large hotels, they were 4.9 days in summer and 2.26 days in winter. Seasonal variations in guest stays are present across all hotel categories but are less pronounced in small and medium-sized hotels compared to large ones. Although small hotels record shorter average stays, they exhibit greater stability and lower seasonal fluctuation levels than large hotels. Their operations are less dependent on long-stay guests, which explains why seasonality is more intense in large hotel properties. This conclusion is further supported by an analysis of the seasonality index, calculated as the ratio of tourist

overnight stays in the month with the highest number of stays (July or August) to the month with the lowest number (January or February). Results show that small hotels, with indices of 10.25 and 7.95 (meaning 10.25 and 7.95 times more overnight stays in summer than in winter), exhibit smaller seasonal gaps compared to large hotels, whose indices are 16.08 and 11.68. The best performance is observed among medium-sized hotels, with seasonality indices of 9.29 and 7.40 (Figure 5).



**Figure 5. Comparative presentation of the seasonality index of tourist overnight stays by hotel category, 2024**

Source: Author's calculation according to: DZS, 2025.

In recent years, there has been a dynamic growth in accommodation facilities within private households and rural homesteads. With 814.7 thousand beds, private households accounted for over 62% of Croatia's total accommodation capacity in 2024, representing a 3.2% increase compared to 2023 (DZS, 2025a). Household-based accommodation has traditionally maintained a high share of total national capacity, and its growth in recent years has been driven by rising demand for authenticity and personalized experiences, which this type of lodging inherently provides. However, the low occupancy levels of such facilities highlight the need to encourage their transformation into market-viable, higher value-added forms of accommodation, such as family hotels, boutique resorts, or small campsites. This transformation is identified as one of the key priorities for achieving the goals outlined in the Strategy for the Development of Sustainable Tourism of the Republic of Croatia until 2030 (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2023), among which the mitigation of tourism seasonality remains a central objective.

## CONCLUSION

Empirical evidence highlights the important role of family businesses in mitigating the seasonality of Croatian tourism. Owing to their flexibility and strong ties to local communities, family enterprises act as carriers of authentic cultural identity, positioning themselves as catalysts of transformational change. Through their ability to design authentic tourism products that attract visitors beyond the peak summer months,

these businesses make a significant contribution to extending the tourist season and advancing the sustainable development of Croatian tourism.

This research contributes to filling the identified gap in the existing literature by deepening the understanding of the importance of family entrepreneurship in alleviating seasonality—one of the defining characteristics of Croatia’s tourism sector. The empirical validation of the assumption that family businesses play a pivotal role in mitigating seasonality is evident in the analysis, which shows that small and medium-sized hotels (predominantly family-owned) exhibit lower seasonality indices and a more even distribution of overnight stays throughout the year. In the absence of official statistical data on family enterprises, this study employs indirect indicators to assess their contribution, thereby complementing existing research and enriching the empirical understanding of the topic.

The main limitation of the study lies in the lack of systematic statistical monitoring of family businesses and its reliance on the assumption that most small tourism enterprises and crafts are family-owned. Future research should focus on collecting and analyzing qualitative data to better understand the motivations, challenges, and strategies applied by family businesses in mitigating operational seasonality and achieving sustainable performance.

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