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GUEST BOOKS AS A REFLECTION OF HOSPITALITY: THE CASE OF THE ASTORIA HOTEL AND BLED CASTLE RESTAURANT

KNJIGE UTISAKA KAO POKAZATELJ GOSTOLJUBIVOSTI NA PRIMERU HOTELA ASTORIA I RESTORANA NA BLEDSKOM DVORCU

Abstract: *This paper is an analysis of guest books of the Astoria Hotel in Bled and the Bled Castle Restaurant as an important source for understanding hospitality and hotel culture. Guest books, as a historical source, offer a comprehensive approach to studying the history of travel, cultural interactions, and the hotel industry. They provide an insight into various aspects of hotel life and culture from the perspectives of both guests and employees. The paper includes an analysis of five guest books, which contain a total of 685 entries, chronologically from 1995 to 2016. The main research question is what the guest book entries reveal about hospitality in different time periods and which elements of hospitality are highlighted. Based on the findings, the author wonders how to use or enrich the hospitality practices of the past to enhance the tourism offer/hospitality of the Astoria Hotel today.*

Key words: *Guest book, Astoria Hotel, hospitality, tourism, Bled, Slovenia*

Apstrakt: *Članak se bavi analizom knjiga utisaka gostiju Hotela Astoria na Bledu i restorana na Blejskom dvorcu kao važnim izvorom za razumevanje gostoljubivosti i hotelske kulture. Knjige gostiju kao istorijski izvor omogućavaju sveobuhvatan pristup proučavanju istorije putovanja, kulturnih interakcija i hotelske industrije. Kroz njih dobijamo uvid u druge aspekte hotelskog života i hotelske kulture, kako gostiju tako i zaposlenih. U članku je analizirano pet knjiga utisaka gostiju, u kojima je ukupno zapisano 685 unosa, hronološki smeštenih za period 1995. do 2016. godine. Glavno istraživačko pitanje je šta nam zapisi u knjigama utisaka govore o gostoljubivosti u različitim vremenskim periodima i koji su to elementi gostoljubivosti koji su istaknuti. Na osnovu nalaza, autorka se pita kako primeniti ili obogatiti praksu gostoljubivosti iz prošlosti u turističkoj ponudi i gostoljubivosti Hotela Astoria danas.*

Ključne reči: *knjiga utisaka, Hotel Astoria, gostoljubivost, turizam, Bled, Slovenija*



Introduction

The paper highlights the importance of guest books as an interesting (ethnological source) for shedding light on perceptions of hospitality, as they are a significant reflection of guests' hospitality experiences. Guest books first appeared in hotels, where guests recorded both positive and negative impressions. In addition, higher-end hotels had special guest books for "important" guests from the fields of politics, culture, arts, science, etc. Their statements and opinions were often used for marketing hotel and restaurant services (James, Vincent, 2016). Guest books are thus an important part of cultural heritage and tourism practices, offering insight into both past and present visitor experiences and reflecting the rich cultural history of a place. However, guest books are often overlooked as a research source, although they provide a window into travel experiences and the development of the hotel industry. For this reason, I analysed five different guest books from the Astoria Hotel and Bled Castle Restaurant, covering the period from 1995 to 2016. After that time, entries largely transitioned online through newly developed hotel platforms. Nowadays, guest books have also shifted to digital formats. A lot of tourist destinations, museums, and other institutions now offer digital guest books where visitors can leave their comments and impressions online.

A wealth of information can be gathered from guest books, including details about guests' nationalities, travel habits, and, most frequently, the aspects of their stay they found most significant.

My hypothesis is that people primarily understand hospitality as the attitude of employees toward them, and that entries in guest books are a direct result of hospitality or its opposite, disappointment. I will examine the extent to which the human factor is crucial—whether people decide to leave a comment when they are either highly satisfied or dissatisfied with how the staff treated them. So, what are the elements of hospitality that prompt people to write in a guest

book? The main research questions in the article will focus on what guest books reveal about hospitality, whether perceptions of hospitality change over time, and how practices from the past can be used to enhance today's tourism offer/hospitality.

Understanding Hospitality

The most general definition of hospitality is kindness and willingness to welcome and take care of guests or visitors, which includes ensuring their comfort and satisfaction.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, hospitality is an "act of being friendly and welcoming to guests and visitors" (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/hospitality>)

Dictionary.com, which is the world's leading digital dictionary, defines hospitality as "friendly reception and treatment of guests or strangers", "the quality or disposition of receiving and treating guests and strangers in a warm, friendly, generous way and the business or act of providing accommodation, food, drink, and other services to guests" (<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/hospitality>).

Hospitality can be defined in various ways depending on the context (cultural, tourism, psychological, business). Each definition emphasizes different aspects of hospitality, but they all share the idea of welcoming and taking care of others to create a pleasant environment.

In a tourism context, hospitality is defined as a comprehensive set of services and experiences provided by tourism service providers (such as hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, and others) to ensure that visitors have a pleasant and comfortable stay. This includes friendliness and helpfulness of the staff, quality of services, comfort and safety, adaptability to the needs and desires of guests, which includes personalized services and the emphasis on local culture and tradition, enriching the guest experience and connecting them with the destination (Ivanuša –

Bezjak et al., 2012). In my analysis of guest books, I was interested in the extent to which the entries I analysed confirm these definitions.

Based on the chronological review of guest books, I wondered how the understanding of the heritage of hospitality in our country has changed over time and how this is relevant to my research.

Heritage is a concept with a long history. Ethnologist Dr. Janez Bogataj has extensively studied the heritage of hospitality in Slovenia, concluding that two main areas emerge in relation to hospitality: offering shelter or lodging to a stranger and providing a culinary experience to a guest. Hospitality also appeared as a balance between false servility and spontaneous awareness of one's own culture, through which people sought to surprise and enrich their guests (Bogataj, 1992).

To sum up, based on the literature, hospitality is a matter of human life culture, which significantly influences kindness and the quality of life in general. Hospitality is a warm and generous welcome to a visitor – a stranger. To be hospitable means to care for and respect another being. It involves relationships and processes between the guest and the host. There is no good service without hospitality as it is a key, perhaps even essential, component. Quality service in tourism is linked to understanding the guest's needs, desires, and expectations. The aim of this paper is to explore whether all of this holds true and, in particular, what guests consider to be more or less important in relation to hospitality.

Guest Books as a Research Source

Guest books are understood as “a book sometimes found in a hotel or a place of interest, in which people who are visiting are asked to write their name, address, and anything they would like to say about their visit (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/visitors-book>).

Hotel guest books are often overlooked as a research source, even though they provide insights into how hospitality has been perceived across different time periods. Guest books can offer significant information about which hospitality practices are most important to guests. They can also serve as a valuable tool for reconstructing tourism markets and intercultural encounters (James, Vincent, 2016).

The analysis of guest books can discern the dynamics of hotel activities and provide an insight not only into where the guests came from but also, as much as possible, what it meant to be a guest at a particular hotel. It also allows us to understand guest books as witnesses to culture and to compare them across time and space. They provide a foundation for exploring hotel culture and the hotel as a cultural, social, and commercial institution.

Therefore, guest books are much more than mere records; they are artefacts of a particular hotel culture that document—or more precisely, develop—the power relations between host and guest, and speak about the broader culture that governs hotel life.

Astoria Hotel and Bled Castle Restaurant

The material being analysed—guest books—relates to the Astoria Hotel and Bled Castle Restaurant, so I will briefly present both. The original Astoria Hotel was built in 1930. Marija Vrhunc, a knitter and a merchant, bought the land from Josipina Vrhunc in 1930 and built the hotel in that same year. It had 39 beds, a restaurant, and a garden. It operated until World War II when it was occupied by the army. After the war, in 1952, it was taken over by the Yugoslav People's Army, renamed to the Svoboda Hotel, and converted into a holiday home. It was expanded twice, the last time in 1973. It served as a holiday destination for senior military officers, and later, its doors were opened to other guests as well (Benedik, 1993).

When Slovenia gained independence, the hotel was taken over by the Ministry of Defence, and its original name, the Astoria Hotel, was restored. In 1999 the Government of the Republic of Slovenia assigned the hotel to the newly established Vocational College for Hospitality and Tourism Bled to be used as a part of the Inter-Enterprise Education Centre (MIC). The Astoria Hotel has been operating as a school hotel since 2000 (Rešek 2016). The hotel underwent partial renovations in 2005 and 2006. The second phase of renovations took place from March 2012 to June 2013, during which the remaining rooms, conference premises, and educational facilities were renovated, and a modern wellness centre was built. Since then, students have had access to the excellent facilities of the renovated Astoria Hotel, the wellness centre, and up-to-date educational premises (lecture hall, service classroom, and school kitchen). In recent years, the Astoria Hotel has earned the reputation of being one of the best hotels in Bled.

From 1 October 2004 to 2015 the Vocational College for Hospitality and Tourism Bled also managed the Castle Restaurant at Bled Castle. At the time of acquisition, the restaurant could accommodate 96 people indoors and 100 on the terrace. The Knight's Hall, which could host 70 guests, was also available (Premrov et al., ed., 2016). Hospitality at Bled Castle has a long tradition. Guests were welcomed at Bled Castle as early as 1902, when high-ranking officers were received by honorary member of Bled Municipality, Adolf Muhr. During the war, the owner at the time, Ivan Kenda, offered 10 beds and a restaurant. After the castle's renovation, completed in 1961, a dining area with a terrace and a small guesthouse were set up, managed by the Krim Hotel (Benedik, 1993). Later, the Vocational College for Hospitality and Tourism Bled took over the management, and in 2015, Jezeršek Catering d.o.o. assumed responsibility for running the restaurant, which they still manage today.

Presentation of Analysed Material – Research

The material for this paper was gathered through the analysis of five guest books, chronologically placed from 1995 to 2016. After that, entries in the guest books became extremely rare due to the rise of online platforms like Booking, Airbnb, etc., and reviews moved online. The guest books were maintained by all hotel receptionists, but the most notable contributor was Mrs. Vesna Perić.

The analysis includes two different types of tourist establishments: the Astoria Hotel and the Restaurant at Bled Castle, which was managed by the Vocational College for Hospitality and Tourism from 2004 until 15 January 2015.

For better clarity the guest books from the Astoria Hotel have been numbered from 1 to 4 and cover the period from 1995 to 2016. The oldest guest book, Book 1, spans from 16 January 1995 to 31 January 2004; Book 2 from 11 January 2004 to 21 November 2010; Book 3 24 from November 2010 to 14 September 2014; and Book 4 from 21 October 2014 to 6 September 2016. In Book 2, there are 5 entries related to the Castle Restaurant, and in Book 3, there are 21 such entries. Guest Book 5 is entirely dedicated to the Restaurant at Bled Castle. In total, I analysed 685 opinions, 133 of which pertain to the Castle Restaurant, and 552 to the Astoria Hotel.

Each entry in the guest book was analysed based on the following criteria: thank-you note number, entry date, language of the note, country of origin, form of the text, writing method, content (praises and complaints), the author of the opinion or entry, and any unique aspects.

These criteria were developed through the review of each entry. I was particularly interested in what could be deducted from individual entries and the extent to which these criteria affect perceptions of hospitality.

First, I focused on the language in which the thank-you note was written and the

country of origin of the opinion writer. The next criterion related to who wrote the entry or opinion. Five major groups emerged: businesses (travel agencies, sports clubs, and various associations), groups of friends, individuals, families or couples, and journalists.

The entries in the guest book were recorded in various ways - some were written directly into the book, while others were written differently and then attached to the book. The forms of text included emails, faxes, official letters or thank-you notes, notes written on the Astoria Hotel flyers, scraps of paper from random notebooks, photos, menus, letters, newspaper articles, postcards, congratulations notes, and direct entries into the book. The method of writing ranged from handwritten text, drawings by both adults and children, to typed or computer-printed text.

In terms of content, entries generally express praises or excitement, showing a positive attitude toward the hosts and the host country in the broadest sense. The compliments were directed at the staff as a whole (e.g., service, professionalism) or specific individuals, the location (e.g., views, nature, weather), the hotel as a whole or individual elements (e.g., ambiance, rooms, organization, cleanliness). Rare complaints referred to factors beyond the host's control, such as bad weather, and to the hotel itself (e.g., poor bathrooms, expensive water, bad beds) or the staff (misinformation at the reception, poor service). The final criterion covered any unique aspects of the entries, particularly positive or heart-warming stories related to the Astoria Hotel as a whole.

Next, I will present a chronological analysis of the books based on the aforementioned criteria, as I am interested in whether the perception of hospitality varies over different time periods.

Analysis of Guest Book 1

In Guest Book 1 I analysed 226 entries related to the Astoria Hotel and one entry related to the Castle Restaurant. The entries

span from 16 January 1995 to 31 January 31 2004.

116 entries were written in English, 75 in Slovenian, 15 in Serbo-Croatian, 15 in German, and one in Hebrew. The countries of origin of the authors of these opinions were Slovenia (70), the United Kingdom (81), Croatia (13), Germany (12), Italy (11), Israel (6), Austria (5), Ireland, Scotland (4), Bosnia, Serbia, Portugal, Malta, Thailand, Russia, Romania, America, France, and Norway (1 each), and 9 entries where the country of origin could not be determined. I was also interested in who the authors of the entries were. In 145 cases they were families or couples, 47 representatives of businesses, 21 individuals, and 14 representatives of groups.

As for the form of the text, most opinions were entered directly into the guest book (106 entries), followed by opinions written on random scraps of paper and submitted at the reception, where the receptionist pasted them into the guest book (32 entries). Official letters or thank-you notes, also pasted into the guest book, appeared 25 times. Guests sent postcards 23 times, congratulations notes 11 times, faxes 10 times, letters and emails 7 times. In 4 cases opinions were written on the Astoria Hotel flyers and pasted into the book, while in one case each, a photo and a note on a menu were found. Regarding the method of writing, most entries were handwritten (187), 37 were computer-typed and pasted into the book, and one entry each was an autograph, a typewritten opinion, and a newspaper article.

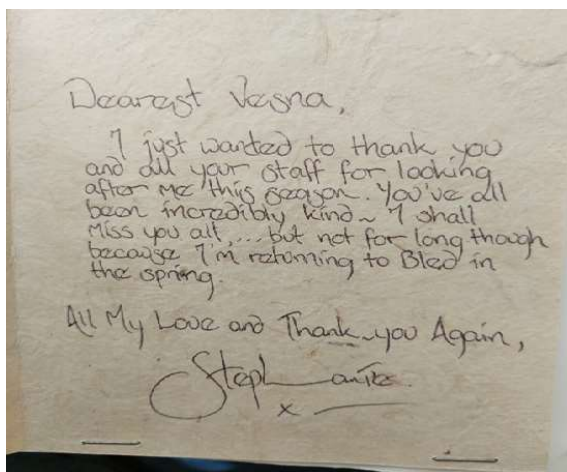
Regarding compliments, each entry could fall under multiple subcriteria, as a single entry might contain praise for various elements. In 106 cases the authors praised the staff in general, 132 times they specifically praised friendliness, hospitality, and helpfulness, and in 20 cases they mentioned individuals by name. Service was praised 12 times, professionalism 5 times, food 15 times, cleanliness 9 times, and 2 guests thanked the staff for birthday cards. Company representatives thanked for cooperation 13 times and sponsorship twice. In 20 cases guests praised the

hotel as a whole, the rooms 3 times, the New Year's celebration 4 times, the atmosphere 9 times, and organization 15 times. Some compliments (12) referred to the location itself, 1 to the ambiance, 5 to nature, 5 to the country as a whole, and 1 even to the weather.

Complaints during this period referred to the staff in only one case. In terms of the hotel infrastructure, complaints involved the condition of bathrooms (4), leaking taps (2), bad-tasting water (1), cleanliness (3), and poor accessibility for the disabled (1).

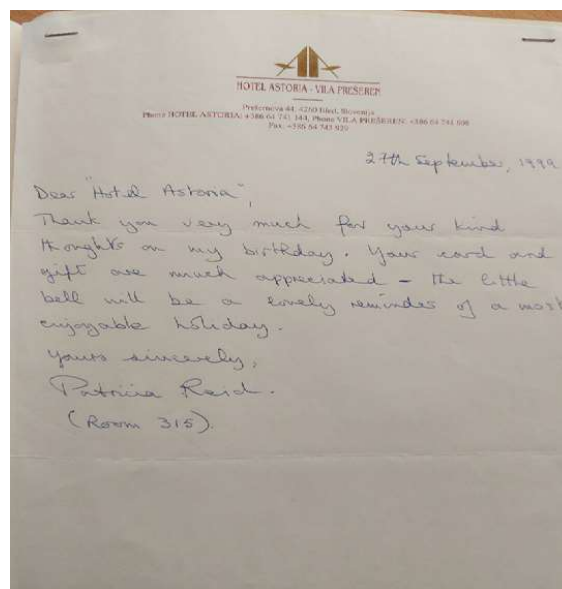
While reviewing the entries, I paid special attention to those that did not fit into any of the above categories but were important indicators of hospitality due to their content. These mostly reflect fond memories of staying at the Astoria Hotel. In Guest Book 1, I identified entries that can be divided into three categories: thanks for organizing and creating "beautiful" memories of weddings or Christmas and New Year's celebrations (5); entries about hotel staff (5), such as "the hotel and staff should be a model for others," "we will recommend it to others," "thank you for the birthday flowers"; and general impressions showing awe for the place and the country (6), such as "we will return," "beautiful lake." In one case, a guest sent a photo of their hometown to the staff.

Fig. 1. Entry in the Guest Book,
20 September 1998



Source: Guest Book 1, photo:
Boža Grafenauer

Fig. 2. Entry in Guest Book 1,
29 September 1999



Source: Guest Book 2, photo:
Boža Grafenauer

Analysis of Guest Book 2

In Guest Book 2, I analysed 190 entries, of which 185 refer to the Astoria Hotel and 5 to the Castle Restaurant. Chronologically, these entries span the period from 11 January 2004 to 21 November 2010.

97 opinions were written in Slovenian, 70 in English, 12 in Serbo-Croatian, 4 in German, 3 in French, 2 in Italian, one in Swedish and one in Hebrew. The authors were from Slovenia (94), the United Kingdom (54), Serbia (8), Israel (7), Scotland (4), France, Austria, Sweden, and Germany (3), Italy, Finland, Hungary, Croatia, and the USA (2), and Montenegro (1).

In 79 cases they were written by company representatives, 55 were individuals, 44 were families or couples, 11 were groups, and one was a journalist. In terms of the form of the text, most opinions were sent via email (81), which was then pasted into the guest book by the receptionist. This was followed by entries written directly into the book (66),

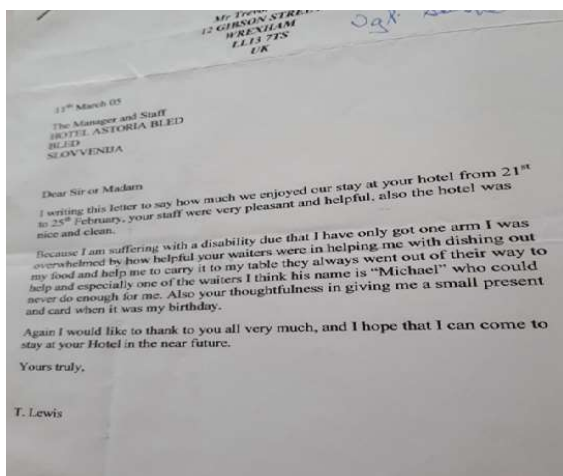
letters (21), congratulations notes (15), 4 postcards, 2 opinions sent by fax, and one newspaper article pasted into the book. The majority of the opinions (100) were typed on a computer and then pasted into the book, followed by direct handwritten entries (86), and in 4 cases, there were drawings added to the book.

In 52 cases, there were thank-you letters where guests expressed gratitude for a pleasant stay at the hotel. 41 praised the staff in general, 34 praised the food, 33 mentioned specific individuals by name, 30 highlighted the friendliness, hospitality, and helpfulness of the staff, 21 praised the organization, and 2 praised the service. In 41 cases guests complimented the hotel as a whole, 6 mentioned the atmosphere, and 7 praised cleanliness. Some compliments (5) referred to the location itself, 1 to the ambiance, 7 to the country as a whole, and 1 to the view.

There were relatively few complaints during this period—only 6. Three of these complaints referred to hotel equipment (e.g., lack of a printer), with one complaint about the staff, food, and misinformation at the reception.

Notable entries include 12 thank-you notes for wedding organization, 1 thank-you note for organizing a pleasant New Year's celebration, and 4 opinions expressing admiration for the beauty of the country and the castle.

Fig. 3. *Guest Book 2, 11 April 2005*



Source: *Guest Book 2, photo:*
Boža Grafenauer

Analysis of Guest Book 3

In Guest Book number 3, which covers the period from 24 November 2010 to 14 September 2014, there were 104 entries, 83 of which refer to the Astoria Hotel and 21 to the Castle Restaurant. It was not always possible to determine which establishment the entry referred to, so I have treated them together.

Most of the entries were written in Slovenian (46), followed by 39 in English, 12 in Serbo-Croatian, and 7 in German. The structure of guests by country was quite diverse during that period. The majority of guests were still domestic (45), followed by the United Kingdom with 8, Serbia (6), Croatia (5), France and Switzerland (4), Hungary (2), and with one entry each from the USA, Montenegro, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Italy, Ireland, Israel, Malta, Germany, Russia, Spain, and Ukraine. In 14 entries, the guest's country of origin was unknown.

In terms of who wrote the entries, 56 were company representatives, 35 were families or couples, and 13 were individuals. Regarding the form of the text, most opinions were sent by email and pasted into the guest book by the receptionist (81). This was followed by direct entries written in the guest book (8), 5 postcards, 3 official thank-you letters, 2 entries written on an Astoria flyer, 2 on notepads, 2 congratulatory notes, and 1 letter. Most of the entries (85) were typed on a computer and pasted into the guest book, while 17 were written directly into the book. In 2 cases, the entry was simply a guest's signature or autograph.

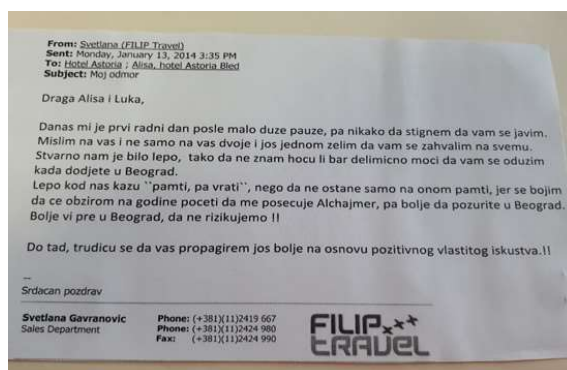
In 32 cases the authors praised the staff in general, 25 times they specifically praised friendliness, hospitality, and helpfulness, and in 26 cases they mentioned individuals by name. There were 14 compliments about the service and 36 about the food. Three guests praised the hotel as a whole, 7 mentioned the atmosphere, 28 highlighted the organization, and 2 praised the wellness centre facilities. One compliment referred to the castle, 7 to the view from the castle, 9 to the ambiance,

and 1 to the country as a whole. Additionally, 20 opinions included thanks for a pleasant stay at the Astoria.

Complaints during this period were about uncomfortable beds (2), technical issues (1), food (3), and the difficult accessibility of the castle (1).

Among the notable entries, there were 5 thank-yous for wedding organization at the hotel, 1 for assistance with a proposal, 3 congratulatory messages for Christmas and New Year, and 1 guest who was impressed with the mountains

Fig. 4. *Guest Book 3, 13 January 2014*



Source: *Guest Book 3, photo:*
Boža Grafenauer

Guest Book 4

Guest Book number 4 covers the period from 21 October 2014 to 6 September 2016, and includes 58 entries.

34 entries are written in Slovenian, 12 in English, 5 in Serbo-Croatian and German, and 2 in Italian. The countries of origin of the authors include Slovenia (32), Austria, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom (3 each), Italy and Serbia (2 each), and Bosnia, Croatia, Israel, and Germany (1 each). In 10 cases, the country of origin is unknown.

In 22 cases the entry was made by a company representative, 16 by a family or couple, 14 by an individual, and 6 by a group representative. Regarding the form of the text, most opinions were sent by email and pasted

into the guest book by the receptionist (44), followed by direct entries into the guest book (10), with 3 letters and 1 congratulatory note. 45 entries were typed on a computer and pasted into the guest book, while 12 were handwritten directly into the book.

In 51 cases the authors praised the staff in general, with 5 specifically mentioning staff members by name. 24 praised the food, and 5 mentioned cleanliness. In 34 cases guests praised the hotel overall, 3 mentioned the wellness centre, and 4 praised the organization. Five compliments also referred to the place itself.

There was only one complaint and it related to the staff. Among the special entries one guest noted that the hotel and its employees should be a model for all other hotels.

Guest Book 5

Guest Book number 5 contains 106 entries, all related to the restaurant at Bled Castle, covering the period from 5 December 2010 to 4 January 2013.

The opinions in the guest book are written in 10 different languages. Most entries are in English (58), followed by Italian (16), Slovenian (12), Serbo-Croatian (11), Spanish (3), French (2), and one entry each in Catalan, Estonian, Portuguese, and Norwegian. The countries of origin of the authors include Italy (18), Slovenia (12), Croatia (9), the United Kingdom (7), China (5), Australia (4), Brazil, Denmark, Serbia, Spain, Switzerland (2 each), and one entry each from Estonia, Finland, France, Ireland, South Africa, Monaco, Morocco, Mexico, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Taiwan, Uzbekistan, and at 27 entries the country of origin was not identifiable.

Most authors were families or couples (46), followed by individuals (44), group representatives (11), and company representatives (5). All entries were written or drawn directly into the guest book, with some entries featuring drawings or icons.

In 24 cases the authors praised the staff in

general, 9 praised the service, 46 praised the food, and 1 praised cleanliness. Twelve guests sent congratulatory messages for the New Year. Eleven guests highlighted the atmosphere, 7 mentioned the organization, and 21 praised the location itself, 3 the country overall, and 1 even praised the weather. Fifteen guests expressed fascination with the castle, 9 praised the view from the castle, 1 praised the well-maintained terrace, 3 praised the selection of music, 6 thanked the restaurant for its event organization, and 2 highlighted the museum.

Complaints during this period were rare: 2 related to the staff, 1 to the food, 1 guest complained about the high price of water, and another about the difficult accessibility of the castle.

Under special entries, 22 were thank-you notes or fond memories related to weddings at the castle. These special entries largely focused on personal histories and memories.

Discussion of Results—Analysis of Hospitality Evaluation Over Time

The largest number of entries in the guest book occurred between 1995 and 2004, with 227 entries, and the fewest between 2014 and 2016. These results are not surprising, as guest satisfaction assessments for accommodations shifted from guest books to online platforms following the launch of Booking.com in 1996 and the introduction of other platforms afterwards.

In all periods, most entries were written in Slovenian, English, Serbo-Croatian, and German. Regarding the countries guests came from, domestic guests, those from the United Kingdom, and guests from Croatia and Serbia consistently ranked in the top three across all periods. For some entries, it was unclear where the guest was from, as the opinions were written in English, so these were categorized as “unknown country.” Some entries were in languages I do not recognize, which is interesting because the writer may have assumed that their entry

would not be understood. This could suggest two things: either the guest did not know another widely spoken language, or they intentionally wrote in their own language as a mark of respect, honouring the fact that they chose Slovenia, Bled, and the Astoria Hotel for their visit from a distant country. In some cases, Slovenes or Serbs living in Germany or Switzerland wrote their entries in Slovenian or Serbian, but I categorized the country of the sender as Germany or Switzerland. Some non-Slovene-speaking guests also wrote brief notes or greetings in Slovenian as a sign of respect.

In the first period (16 January 1995 – 31 January 2004), most entries were from families or couples. In the second (11 January 2004 – 21 November 2010), third (24 November 2010 – 14 September 2014), and the fourth (21 October 2014 – 6 September 2016) periods, most opinions were written by company representatives. For the Castle Restaurant, entries were again mainly from individuals and couples.

It can be concluded on the basis of these results that the Astoria Hotel was particularly appealing to two groups of guests: families and business guests. Various companies organized seminars, training sessions, and other events at the hotel. In the first time period, most entries were written directly into the book, while in the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th periods, receptionists pasted emailed opinions into the book. This reflects the type of tourism and business etiquette of companies, which sent thank-you emails after successful collaborations, whereas families and couples tended to write directly in the book in a more personal way. There were also some creative entries, such as notes written on menus or photographs, or simply autographs, which were especially common during visits by sports teams.

Couples or families were more likely to send personal emails, cards, or guest book entries. Those often highlighted a specific individual who had been particularly helpful, such as someone who made them coffee or provided sightseeing tips.



The elements of hospitality are most evident in the criteria of compliments. I was also interested in the elements that guests highlighted as worthy of an entry in the guest book or a thank-you email during different time periods.

In 254 cases the authors praised the staff in general, 187 times they specifically praised friendliness, hospitality, and helpfulness, and in 84 cases they mentioned individuals by name. 37 guests praised the service, 5 the professionalism, 197 praised the food, and 22 mentioned cleanliness.

In 93 cases guests praised the hotel as a whole, 3 praised the rooms, 16 sent thank-you cards for enjoyable New Year celebrations at the hotel, 33 mentioned the atmosphere, and 75 praised the organization. Some compliments (43) referred to the location itself, 11 to the ambiance, 5 to nature, 16 to the country as a whole, 17 to the view from the castle, and 3 even to the weather.

It can be concluded on the basis guest compliments across all periods that the top compliments were directed at the staff (254), followed by the preparation of tasty food (197), then the friendliness, helpfulness, and hospitality of the staff (187), with 84 guests highlighting specific individuals, and 75 praising the organization. The compliments predominantly focused on people and the services they provided, while the condition and infrastructure of the hotel were secondary. Book 3 assesses the castle, and therefore the fascination with the beautiful view is highlighted. There were only 32 complaints in total.

To conclude, the complaints were more focused on the infrastructure of the hotel while compliments were primarily directed at the staff.

It is interesting to note that guests attending weddings at the hotel or the castle often wrote wedding wishes for the couple in the guest books. There were many thank-you letters from companies, expressing gratitude for event organization. Most of these were related to seminars organized at the hotel,

such as the annual conference of the European Federation of Natural and National Parks (EUROPARC 95), a meeting of Minor Offence Judges (25 October 1996), and tourist agencies that brought their guests to the hotel.

Conclusion

A detailed analysis of the guest books confirmed the hypothesis that people primarily understand hospitality as the attitude of employees toward them, and that entries in guest books are a direct result of hospitality. The human factor—employees with their friendliness, kindness, and professionalism—is a key element in how hospitality is perceived. Guests decide to write in the guest book when they are extremely satisfied with the behaviour of the staff, especially when the staff exceed their expectations.

Understanding hospitality as the care for guests, ensuring that they feel comfortable and welcome, is the central element of hospitality across all the analysed chronological periods, aligning with the definitions of hospitality mentioned at the beginning.

Therefore, the positive practices of hospitality gleaned from guest books can be applied to enhance elements of hospitality today. Moreover, these insights show that the essence of how hospitality is understood has not changed over time. Information from the guest books can serve as guidance on what guests valued most in specific periods and continue to appreciate today. The analysis of the Astoria Hotel guest books quantitatively demonstrates that the main aspect of hospitality is the behaviour of the tourism employees toward the guests, and this is the crucial element that needs to be further developed in the future.

Hotel guest books are not just collections of entries; they are key to understanding tourism markets, commercial development, intercultural encounters, and cultural evaluation. Researching guest books offers insights into the spatial dynamics of hotel operations,

the origins of guests, their understanding of the place and the people, their travel experiences in a given period, and above all, what enriched their travel experience. Guest books capture very personal opinions and writings from guests, providing meaningful insights about both the guests and the hosts.

Understanding guest books and connecting them with other sources provides a rich perspective for studying hotel and tourism culture in the future. Guest books are thus an important part of cultural heritage, offering a unique view into the history of travel, social interactions, and cultural practices. Their preservation and study are essential for understanding past eras and the development of tourism culture. Hospitality in tourism is crucial for guest satisfaction and can significantly influence their decision to revisit and recommend the destination to others.

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