

# The Impact of the SARS COV-2 Pandemic on Visitor Numbers to UNESCO Sites in the Czech Republic from the Visitor's Point of View

Libor LNĚNIČKA\*, Tomáš BURDA, Tetiana BUT, Veronika ŽIDOVÁ, Martina JANEČKOVÁ, Sára KULHÁNKOVÁ and Jakub LISA

University of Hradec Králové, Hradec Králové, Czechia; libor.lnenicka@uhk.cz; tomas.burda.2@uhk.cz; tetiana.but@uhk.cz; veronika.zidova@uhk.cz; martina.janeckova@uhk.cz; sara.kulhankova@uhk.cz; jakub.lisa@uhk.cz

\* Corresponding author: libor.lnenicka@uhk.cz

**Abstract:** Tourism depends not only on the locational prerequisites of the area, the appeal of attractions, but also on the interest of visitors/tourists. Although new progressive practices and approaches are being introduced in tourism, there is always a close link to the tourism actors/tourists. Any anomaly or abnormality causes fluctuations in visitor arrivals to attractions, which can have devastating consequences for tourism service providers. The intention of the following paper is to demonstrate and evaluate the impacts of the global pandemic SARS COV-2 on the visitation of UNESCO sites in the Czech Republic. Valuable insights from visitors to UNESCO sites were obtained through an extensive questionnaire survey (377 respondents) conducted in 2023. The collected data were analysed and the conclusion discusses possible measures to increase the appeal of UNESCO sites.

**Keywords:** tourism; UNESCO; heritage; Czechia; survey

**JEL Classification:** O18; R58; Z32

## 1. Introduction

The inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List is a privilege and a sign of exclusivity and uniqueness. The number of UNESCO World Heritage Sites varies from country to country. It requires research to improve the competitiveness of a country's tourist attraction and to find motivating factors for increasing the flow of visitors to UNESCO sites. Researchers who analyse the activities of UNESCO sites use a variety of methods and provide examples of changes in tourism. Such studies are essential to identify the strengths and weaknesses in the use of monuments, to determine their problem areas for increasing tourist inflows and to address these problems in a timely manner.

Falk and Hagsten (2024) conducted a study of factors with ambiguous qualities for UNESCO sites. The identification of favourable and detrimental factors based on the data from the 2014 UNESCO Report for North America and Europe shows that the greatest degree of ambiguity is related to tourism, visitors and recreation, interpretation and sightseeing facilities, and land transport infrastructure, the location of which is controlled. This approach is useful in determining the degree of perception of various factors that threaten tourism

development at UNESCO sites but does not take into account the impact of factors caused by the SARS COV-2 pandemic.

Pérez-Calderón et al. (2024) studied UNESCO geoparks in protected areas in Spain. They found stronger perceptions of sustainable development in geoparks than in national parks. This approach indicates a very strict regulation of protected areas, which may be detrimental to tourism development and the quality of life of the population. However, the study is limited to the impact of factors on UNESCO natural sites and does not consider the impact of the SARS COV-2 pandemic on cultural sites.

Medeiros et al. (2024) studied natural UNESCO sites in Portugal according to physical, aesthetic and psychophysical attributes. This approach is useful for identifying priority measures and monitoring landscape evolution over time. However, it does not include the study of cultural sites and the impact of SARS COV-2 on these attractions.

UNESCO natural monuments have also been studied by Spanish scientists Gavilan et al. (2024), who demonstrated the benefits of digitisation for the development of UNESCO heritage sites. This approach identified critical factors for the development of UNESCO natural sites without taking into account the impact of these factors on cultural sites.

The accessibility of UNESCO sites for people with disabilities in Spain was investigated by Elorduy and Gento (2024). These researchers identified the existing barriers that people with disabilities encounter when visiting UNESCO sites in Spain. This approach highlights the impact of public transport accessibility on the number of visitors to UNESCO sites from different segments of the population, including people with disabilities.

Czech scientists have contributed significantly to the study of tourism development by investigating the tourism potential of UNESCO sites.

Burda et al. (2023) investigated the convenience of using various modes of transport, including public transport, to reach tourist attractions in the Czech Republic. The researchers demonstrated the existing problems in the availability of public transport services caused by the difficulty of accessing some tourist sites in the Czech Republic, including UNESCO sites, due to their location in remote areas, among other factors. This method of examining the relationship between the volume of public transport and the rise in the number of tourists visiting particular tourist destinations—like Český Krumlov, Janské Lázně, and Lednice—does not fully capture the extent of the SARS COV-2 pandemic's effects on all UNESCO sites in the Czech Republic and might require further research.

Kvítková and Petrů (2023) investigated UNESCO cultural heritage sites during SARS COV-2. The researchers identified that the number of visitors to UNESCO sites is influenced by a variety of factors, including visitor structure (foreign and domestic), location, accessibility, seasonality, and regional significance. This study makes a contribution by demonstrating that UNESCO listing was more of a disadvantage in the first year of the pandemic (2020), which reduced visitor numbers to the sites. UNESCO listing was a drawback because the decline was more pronounced at UNESCO sites due to their higher visitor numbers. This method does not account for factors such as transport utilisation or visitor motivations between their segmentation during the SARS COV-2 period and after.

Pachrová et al. (2018) investigated differences in tourist demand for UNESCO sites in the Czech Republic. The study hypothesised that visiting UNESCO sites in the Czech Republic draws day visitors. This approach is useful for managing tourist sites and developing individual tourism development strategies, but it highlights a number of issues caused by day tourists.

As previous research suggests, changes in tourist demand for UNESCO sites are also affected by factors other than SARS COV-2, such as tourists' preferences and wishes. This is due, among other things, to the increased use of digital technologies in tourism, which occurred particularly during the SARS COV-2 and post-COVID periods. Furthermore, the current study provides a comprehensive picture of tourist demand for UNESCO heritage, which is relevant to the Czech Republic's regional policy.

According to But et al.'s (2023) research, the most appealing cities for Czech tourists are smart cities, which are mobile (everything important to tourists will be available on mobile devices), data-driven (using big data for better management), and friendly and fun (thanks to advanced navigation, entertainment, and information for tourists). This approach will generally increase the tourist appeal of UNESCO sites in the Czech Republic, as the implementation of digital network standards stabilises and secures the tourist infrastructure. At the same time, the impacts of social, technological, environmental, and management conditions, as well as the SARS COV-2 pandemic, must be considered.

Further research on visitor numbers to UNESCO sites was carried out in 2023, analysing admission prices to UNESCO sites and visitor numbers before and after the SARS COV-2 period (Lněnička et al., 2023).

The above theoretical and practical research is a prerequisite for determining the impact of the SARS COV-2 pandemic on individual UNESCO sites in the Czech Republic.

## 2. Methodology

The authors purposefully focused their research on the effects of the SARS COV-2 pandemic in the Czech Republic on UNESCO sites. These sites suffer the most from visitor loss as a result of the pandemic's closures or restrictions on operations. Another important factor limiting tourism is national legislation or regulations (Act No. 185/2020 on certain measures to mitigate the impact of the SARS CoV-2 epidemic on tourism), which restrict or even prohibit travel and visits to heritage sites. Sixteen UNESCO sites in the Czech Republic were selected as model sites for the study. The monuments' locations are shown on the map in Figure 1. These are the monuments that UNESCO had listed as of March 31, 2023, when the questionnaire survey was launched. In September 2023, at its 45th extended session in Riyadh, the World Heritage Committee decided to include another Czech site on the UNESCO World Heritage List: Žatec and the Žatec Hop Landscape (UNESCO World heritage convention, 2024). However, this monument was not the subject of the research in 2023.



Figure 1. UNESCO Czech heritage (own processing based on ARCDATA (2023))

The overall goal of the study is to assess the impact of the SARS COV-2 pandemic on specific UNESCO sites in the Czech Republic. The evaluation is carried out using both analytical (data collection and analysis) and synthetic methods (measure proposals and recommendations). The main objectives are supplemented by specific objectives:

- Gathering primary data on the number of visitors to UNESCO sites in the Czech Republic;
- A comparison of visitor statistics for 2019 and 2022;
- Creating a set/catalogue of measures based on the main areas analysed from the questionnaire survey results.

This paper does not intend to go into detail regarding all methods, but we can highlight the most important one, namely the qualitative method of sociological research. The authors drew on many years of experience and knowledge from previous studies conducted as part of basic and applied research projects at the UHK (University of Hradec Králové), UK (Charles University in Prague), and MUNI (Masaryk University in Brno). The entire research is divided into three years, so the paper only presents the findings from the first stage.

The research was conducted from March until the end of September 2023. The target group of the research included visitors to the UNESCO Heritage Sites regardless of their place of residence. The selection of respondents was based on random sampling, taking into account the size of the baseline sample, i.e. all visitors to UNESCO sites in 2021 during the tourist season (almost 3 million visitors). The respondents had the opportunity to fill in the questionnaire in physical form at the ticket offices and information centres of the selected UNESCO sites, electronically in the Survio app directly from the link or using a QR code. Information about the survey was published monthly in the newsletter of the Czech UNESCO Heritage portal. The questionnaires were physically available at the ticket offices

of individual sites, tourist information centres and other places where entrance fees were paid (e.g. Villa Tugendhat in Brno, Cathedral of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in Sedlec).

After the questionnaire collection had been completed, the evaluation phase began. All 16 monuments participated in the survey, but in different ways. For example, the historical center of Prague or the state castle Valtice were not represented due to the refusal of the information centre staff and the castle administration. Overall, 377 completed questionnaires were received (218 physically and 159 electronically), which is a relatively small number compared to the total number of visitors. After conducting an initial assessment, sixteen questionnaires were discarded due to their incorrect and incomplete completion, and lack of direct focus on UNESCO sites in the Czech Republic. Frequently, incorrect names of sites appeared (e.g. Karlštejn Castle, Hluboká nad Vltavou Castle or the Krkonoše). These destinations are not part of UNESCO cities. After the initial selection, the sample comprised of 218 questionnaires that were physically submitted and 143 ones that were electronically submitted, resulting in a total of 361 respondents (Table 1). In terms of gender, 56% of the sample was female, 43.9% male and 0.1% non-gender respondents. Unfortunately, some places were not enough to fill out any questionnaires. The questionnaire data were processed in digital form and analysed using the statistical program IBM SPSS Statistics ver. 29. In addition to descriptive statistics, the analysis of variance (ANOVA) method was used to identify differences in the perception of positive and negative impacts between different groups and correlation analysis was used to identify significant factors influencing the perceptions and attitudes of residents. The statistical error for the sample size ( $n = 361$ ) is  $\pm 5\%$ .

Table 1. Number of respondents by survey

UNESCO monument	City/town	Region	Nr. of Respondents	
			Physical	On-line
Villa Tugendhat	Brno	South Moravia	15	1
Historical Town Centre	Český Krumlov	South Bohemia	5	31
Historic Village	Holašovice	South Bohemia	-	-
The Ancient and Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and Other Regions of Europe	-	Liberec	-	1
The landscape for Breeding and Training of Ceremonial Carriage Horses	Kladruby nad Labem	Pardubice	5	1
Gardens and Castle	Kroměříž	Zlín	15	7
Erzgebirge/Krušnohoří Mining Region	-	Karlovy Vary, Ústí nad Labem	38	6
Historical Town Centre with the Church of St Barbara and the Cathedral of Our Lady at Sedlec	Kutná Hora	Central Bohemia	1	19
Great Spa Towns of Europe (in Czechia: Karlovy Vary, Mariánské Lázně and Františkovy Lázně)	-	Karlovy Vary	84	2
Cultural Landscape	Lednice, Valtice	South Moravia	2	21
Castle	Litomyšl	Pardubice	11	8
Holy Trinity Column	Olomouc	Olomouc	6	5
City Centre + Průhonice Park	Praha	Praha	-	5
Historical Town Centre	Telč	Vysočina	29	17
Jewish Quarter and St Procopius' Basilica	Třebíč	Vysočina	3	11
Pilgrimage Church of St John of Nepomuk at Zelená Hora	Žďár nad Sázavou	Vysočina	4	8
Total			218	143

Parallel to the questionnaire survey, a survey of the number of visitors to UNESCO sites was carried out. Using statistical data and subsequent telephone follow-up, a database of visitor numbers to the sites in 2019 and 2021 was compiled. Additionally, data were collected on admission prices to the sites in 2019 and 2022.

### 3. Results

This chapter presents selected outcomes of the questionnaire survey. The questionnaire included seventeen questions and three additional geodemographic questions. It was deliberately distributed only in the Czech language, and the question regarding the respondents' geographic origin confirmed their Czech origin, among other things. Most respondents arrived at the UNESCO sites from the Czech Republic, specifically from Bohemia (33.6%) and from Moravia (30.4%) There were only 8.8% of foreign respondents, most of them from Slovakia. Although the questionnaire was in Czech, six other foreign respondents were able to complete it. However, these may be foreign visitors who have

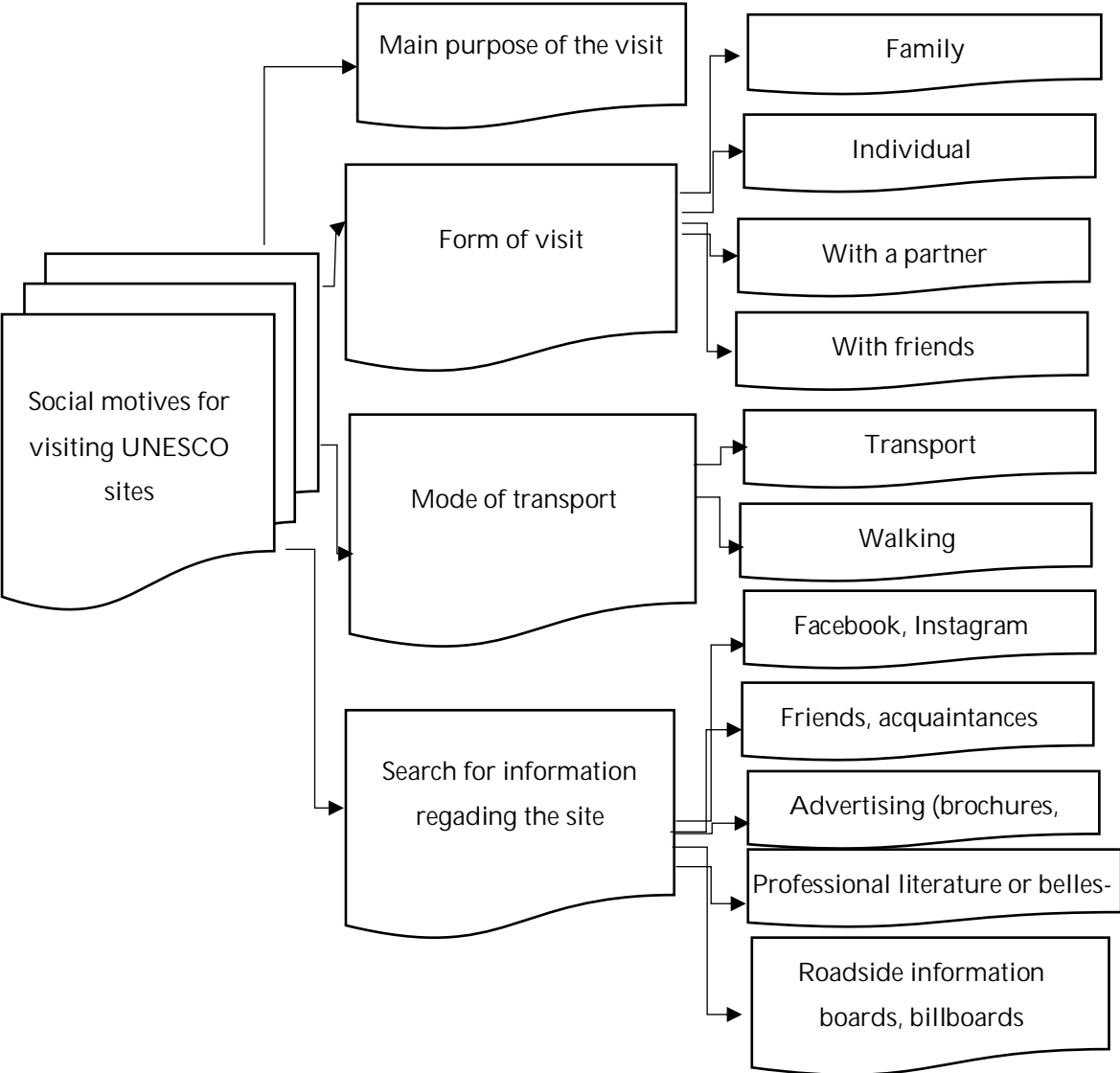


Figure 2. The social motives for visiting UNESCO sites

Czech roots, but who have been living outside the Czech Republic for a long time. Other group of respondents (8.4%) came from the vicinity or from the same region where the UNESCO site is located.

### *3.1. Social Motives for Visiting a UNESCO Site*

The social motives for visiting UNESCO sites are shown in Figure 2 above.

In the first section of the questionnaire, the research wanted to determine the main purpose of the visit to the UNESCO site, the form of the visit, and the mode of transport used by the visitors. These were questions with a choice of just one of the options offered. From the results obtained, it is not surprising that the main purpose of visiting a UNESCO site is interest in history, architecture, and UNESCO sites (stated by 52% of respondents). Most sites have a historical context, and the purpose of protection lies in their historical and architectural value. Another purpose mentioned is the pursuit of recreation, sport, culture (21.1%), and interest in natural attractions (10.8 %). These responses were particularly evident among respondents who had visited a site that featured a significant landscape component, specifically the Lednice-Valtice Area, the Erzgebirge, and the Jizera Mountains. To a lesser extent, responses such as visiting relatives or friends (4.4%) and other unspecified purposes (8.2%) were also identified.

The second part focused on the form of the visit. This question was purposefully asked to find out whether visitors travel individually or in a group. The highest representation was found in the categories of travelling with family (44.4%) and individual or with a partner (36.3%). These were mostly visits to historic monuments, historical centres, and spa towns. The third most representative answer was travelling with friends (11.1%) This category was more represented in the case of natural monuments, such as the Lednice–Valtice Area and the Erzgebirge. A mere 2% of the respondents reported an organized visit by a travel agent or agency.

An interesting question was directed to the mode of transport to the site. The respondents had a choice of nine options, from car to walking (see Figure 3). 44.7% of the respondents opted for the car as their mode of transport. Therefore, it is an individual mode of transport that is associated with convenient transportation to the monument. The typological distribution indicates that more visitors travel by car to historic and architectural monuments. They assume that there is a good parking option with accompanying facilities, such as guarded parking. The second preferred transport option was personal transport by caravan, with 26.3%. However, in response to question no. 9 (Describe three things you would do to improve (change, renovate, make more attractive) the UNESCO site and its administrative area), respondents were dissatisfied, even outright critical of the parking facilities. Among respondents, the most used modes of transport were the train (9.4%), bus (6.4%) and collective tour coach (3.5%). According to the survey, 6.4% of respondents accessed the monument on foot.

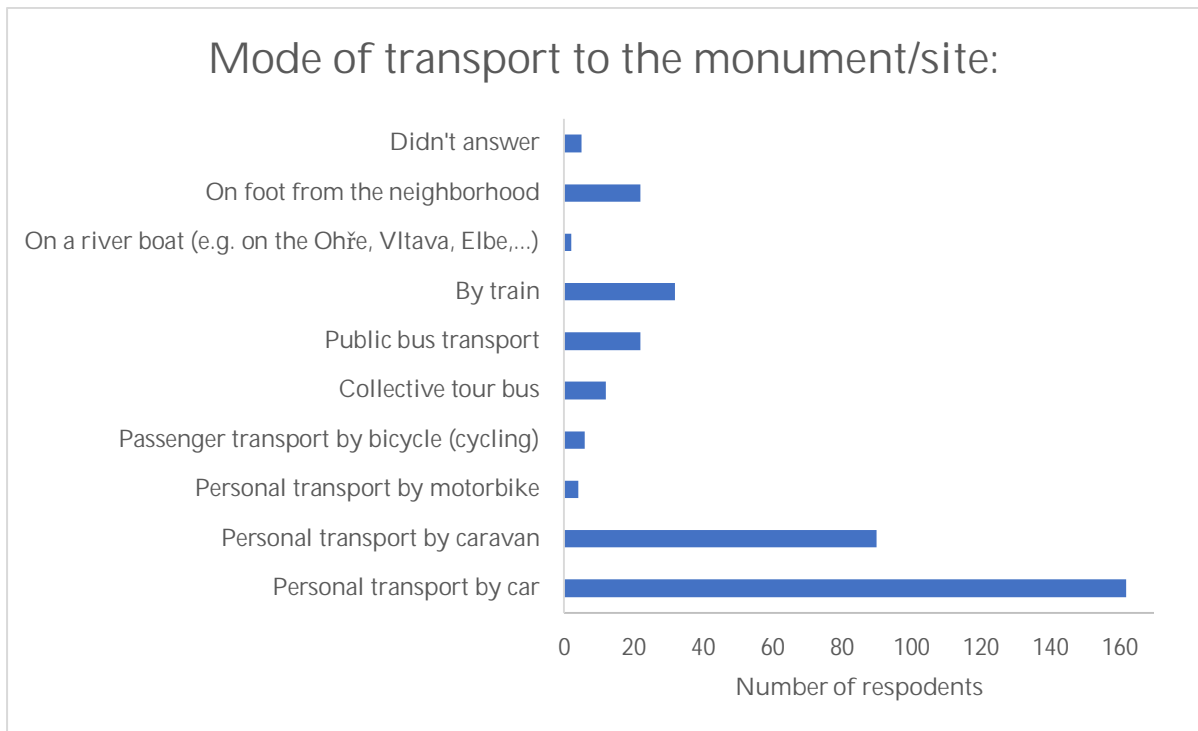


Figure 3. Mode of transport to the monument/site

The final question in this section was related to finding out about the awareness of the UNESCO site, i.e. from which sources visitors learned about the site. The results indicated that electronic media (web, Facebook, Instagram, etc.) dominated the list – 30.1%. Since access to these types of media is now commonplace, the results were not surprising. Another source of information (20.5%) was the personal knowledge of friends and acquaintances. Print media, particularly leaflets, brochures, and other similar materials, also play a significant role. 12% of respondents reported receiving information from printed promotional materials, while another 7.9% of respondents obtained information from professional literature or belles-lettres. Other sources of information include information boards and orientation systems, most often found in towns or on important roads of class I and II. This option, which is available from information boards located in nearby towns and roadsides, was mentioned by 3.8% of respondents.

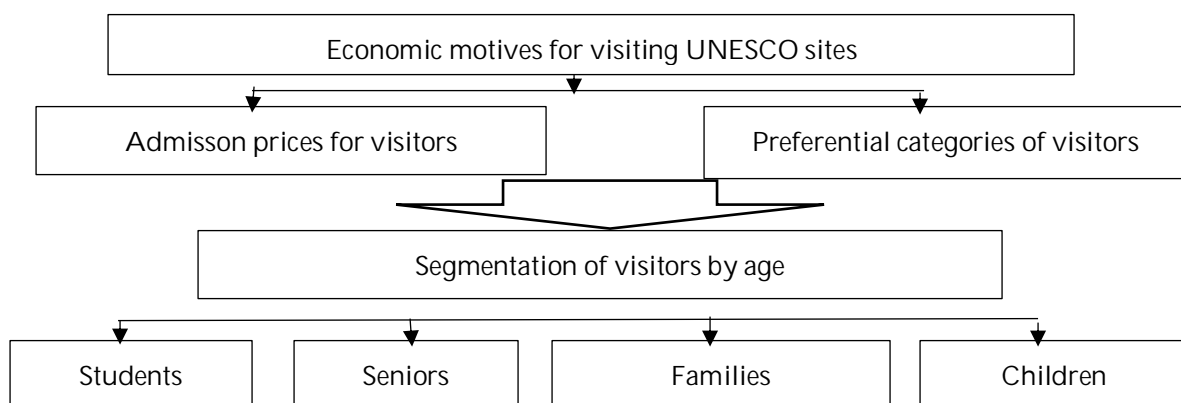


Figure 4. The impact of economic motives on visitor numbers to UNESCO sites



### 3.2. Economic Motives for Visiting UNESCO Sites

The impact of economic motives on visitor numbers to UNESCO sites is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4 shows that for many visitors the economic aspect, namely financial (ability to pay), can also be a reason to visit a tourist attraction. The interruption of the tourist season and the closure of monuments in 2020 due to the declaration of a state of emergency in the Czech Republic (Resolution No. 69/2020 Coll.) and the adoption of legislative measures (e.g. Act No. 247/2020 Coll, Act No. 247/2020 Coll. or Act No. 185/2020 Coll). on certain measures to mitigate the impact of the SARS CoV-2 coronavirus epidemic on the tourism industry) has resulted in a significant loss of revenue for owners and operators of tourist attractions. It is therefore not surprising that admission prices have increased since operations resumed in 2021, which may be a reason for some visitors not to visit. Another factor affecting admission prices is the rising rate of inflation (the average annual inflation rate in 2023 was 10.7%, Czech Statistical Office, 2024).

For the reasons mentioned above, the questionnaire included questions about visitors' financial considerations. The opening question of this section was directed at the amount per person that visitors spend when visiting a tourist attraction (see Figure 5). In order disproportionate amounts, categories for economically weaker visitors up to CZK 250 and economically stronger customers above CZK 750 have been purposefully created. Most respondents stated that their financial limits were CZK 250 per person (24.9%) and CZK 500 per person (37.4%). Most of the time, these are families with children, and any expense for more than one person is financially burdensome. Visitors who do not have other family members or are travelling with only a partner are willing to pay admission fees above CZK 750 per person (17.7%).

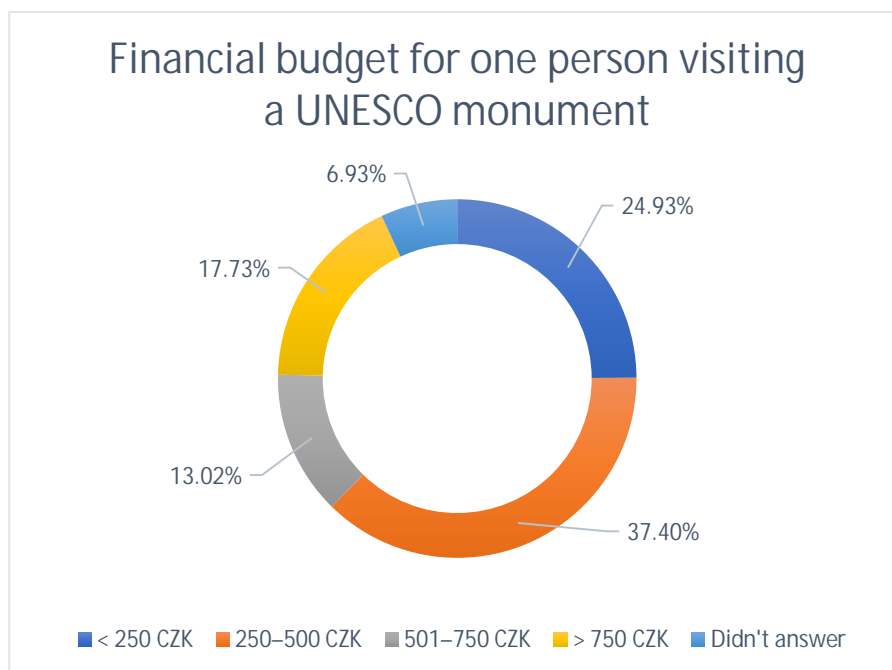


Figure 5. Financial budget for one person visiting a UNESCO site

In order to differentiate the amount of the admission prices also according to the personal preferences of the visitors, we asked them about the maximum amount they are willing to pay for the admission to an attraction. We differentiated price levels by category into adult, discounted admission (student, senior and disabled) and family admission. In the category of single adult admission, there was a high variance of values (ranging from CZK 2 to CZK 1,200). The low value of CZK 2 cannot be considered entirely plausible. Most respondents reported a financial limit of CZK 250 (15.5%), followed by CZK 200 (14.6%) and CZK 300 (13.2%). The values of CZK 150 (9.4%), CZK 500 (9.1%) and CZK 100 (7.9%) were also recorded frequently. Logically, the discounted admission was recorded at a lower value than the full adult admission. Even 1.8% of respondents opted for zero value, i.e. free entry. The highest values recorded were CZK 500 (1.2%) and CZK 400 (0.9%). The most frequent values in the set were recorded for discounted admission of CZK 100 (21.1%) and CZK 150 (14.9%). The last category observed was family admission (2 adults + 2 children). Logically, higher amounts can be expected here, therefore the values obtained also range from CZK 0 to 2,500. However, in contrast to the highest amount received (CZK 2,500 CZK – 1 respondent), 3 respondents reported a zero value. In terms of frequency of value, the most frequently mentioned price level was CZK 500 (14.9%), followed by CZK 400 (9.9%) and CZK 1,000 (8.5%). Rounded amounts (CZK 200, CZK 300, CZK 600, or CZK 800) were mentioned more often. As many as 7.0% of respondents mentioned a total of CZK 2,000.

#### 4. Discussion

The results presented in the paper showed that, despite certain constraints, visitors are willing to travel and visit tourist attractions. Most of the respondents visit UNESCO sites because they like history, architecture, and monuments. They travel alone or with their partner or family. A common mode of transport to a monument is their own car or caravan, but public transport (bus, train) is no exception. Public transport is used more often to get to the site, especially in historical towns. The more remote location of the site gives more reason to use a private means of transportation (car, bicycle). If visitors travel by caravan, they often have very limited parking options, especially in the historic town centres (Český Krumlov and Kutná Hora). The solution is to build Park & Ride, i.e. car parks in suburbs, and add infrastructure (toilets, dirty water sinks, drinking water sources, and electricity supply to the caravan). Such car parks can now be found, for example, in in Telč or Třebíč. A more detailed assessment of the services provided will be the subject of further research in this area.

The average admission fee to a UNESCO site, which is deemed acceptable by visitors, is CZK 325 (for adults), while in the event of discounted admission, it is CZK 144. Some monuments also offer a family admission category, with the average price being CZK 590. The researchers included an open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire: *What three other sites in the Czech Republic do you think deserve to be added to the UNESCO list, and why?* Respondents could answer anything because the question was open-ended. However, as it turned out, most respondents struggled with this question. They were unable to name a specific site that deserved UNESCO protection (45.6% did not respond). At the same time, 16.1% of respondents had no idea or chose the option I don't know. Some responses were

extremely broad (cities, all monuments, more natural historical sites, abandoned settlements, a collection of Baroque fountains, etc.).

The respondents proposed as new UNESCO sites not only cultural monuments (e.g. castles and chateaux like Karlštejn Castle, Bouzov Castle, Pernštejn Castle, Hluboká nad Vltavou Castle, Konopiště Castle, Nové Hrady Castle near Litomyšl) or natural monuments (e.g. Moravian Karst, Adršpašsko-Teplické Rocks, Jeseníky Protected Landscape Area, SOS Reserve, or Křivoklátsko Region), but also some technical monuments (e.g. the Industrial Complexes at Ostrava - Lower Vítkovice Area, Dlouhé stráně Power Plant, Hradec Králové Football Stadium, Velké Losiny Paper Mill, Terezín and Josefov Forts, Jindřichův Hradec Local Railways - narrow gauge railway, Pilsen Brewery or Bechyně Railway Bridge). The most frequently mentioned historical towns were Hradec Králové (7 times), Cheb (7 times), Tábor (4 times), Slavonice (3 times), Liberec (3 times) or Štramberk (3 times).

The results of the questionnaire survey indicated some gaps that the authors of the research will have to deal with in the future. This is primarily a one-sided focus on the Czech visitor. The questionnaire was distributed only in the Czech language, making it difficult to understand for many foreign visitors. In the next tourist season, the solution is to make the questionnaire available in English. This measure would also guarantee the feedback of foreign tourists, who constitute more than 70% of all visitors to Český Krumlov and Prague. Another limitation is the owners' and operators' unwillingness to tolerate the questionnaires' placement on their sites, as well as the respondents' willingness to complete the questionnaire, both of which are beyond the researchers' control. We can only offer to distribute the questionnaires through all possible information channels, but completion depends on the willingness of individual respondents. We also encountered a barrier when the site operators claimed that the physical collection box was an eyesore and unsuitable for the interior of a historic site.

## 5. Conclusions

The questionnaire survey served as the initial stage of a comprehensive research project that will continue throughout the subsequent years. The intention is to create a comprehensive view of the UNESCO sites in the Czech Republic from the visitor's perspective. The outcomes obtained will undergo a thorough examination, and the authors will employ statistical techniques to identify variables and their interdependencies. A comprehensive research report will be prepared and provided to the operators of the sites and the representatives of the voluntary association UNESCO Czech Heritage. In order to effectively plan activities during the following tourist seasons, it is necessary to respond more effectively to emergency situations. Such situations, such as the SARS COV-2 pandemic, can have devastating consequences for owners and operators of UNESCO sites in the Czech Republic. As elsewhere in the world, many Czech UNESCO sites depend on foreign visitors (e.g. Prague, Český Krumlov). Owners and operators should therefore be prepared for such situations and have a contingency plan in place. The authors aim to propose feasible measures and recommendations in the form of a handbook titled "Crisis Preparedness of

UNESCO Sites", aimed at site operators and their accompanying services, destination management, and the decision-making realm.

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