

QUALITY MANAGEMENT IN RURAL TOURISTIC BOARDING HOUSES

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Abstract

The main purpose of this paper was to assess quality in Romanian rural touristic boarding houses by completing a questionnaire-based survey. The survey was made in the summer of 2020 by interviews with 139 managers from 28 villages from Maramures County. The research was based on over 100 items questionnaire structured on 40 questions and 4 sections: the description of the buildings and facilities, the description of the environment, the characteristics of accommodation facilities, the characteristics of the offered services (food, cleaning, hospitality). The main results of our survey revealed that the analyzed rural touristic boarding houses have procedures and methods to assure the quality of buildings and services which are implemented for years. In this way the adaptation to safety measures needed to assure the quality of accommodation and services during COVID period is easier to be implemented.

Key words: rural tourism, quality of accommodation facilities, quality of services, quality management in tourism

INTRODUCTION

Rural areas offer unique resources to touristic sector, especially in Romania [14, 13] where the development of touristic activities is considered by local communities like a necessity for the economic growth [11]. Despite the higher number of recognized touristic boarding houses from rural areas, there are many rural accommodation facilities which are not certified according with Romanian legislation [5] and their existence affect the perception of quality of rural touristic products and services [8]. Also, in certified accommodation facilities there are management decisions regarding costs which can affect the quality of tourist accommodation services and products, like the ones related with water and energy consumption [7].

Many studies are trying to assess the quality in rural tourism [2, 4]. Some of them are oriented towards the perception of tourists over the quality but this kind of researches are subjective and are based on the profile of the tourists and their expectations [3], [10]. Other studies tried to develop tools and quantify the quality of different rural touristic households

by benchmarking processes but they are difficult to adapt to a national context [1], [6], [9], and [12]. We refer here also to the national laws which provide the legal framework for the classification of the tourist accommodation units.

In our vision, the quality of a rural touristic boarding house can be measured mainly by two general dimensions: the accommodation facilities status and the touristic services offered. Off course is very difficult to assess the real dimension of quality if we don't have at our disposal objective tools of quantification of different characteristics such as a national database. So, our approach was mainly qualitative and it was trying to identify the way in which different aspects of quality are fulfilled in Romanian rural touristic boarding houses (like touristic and agroturistic pensions) and to find solution to adapt the existing situation to the more actual demanding conditions due to the pandemic period.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Our assessment is based on a questionnaire-based survey which took place in the summer of 2020 in Maramures county. We used 40

questions which permitted us to collect data regarding: the general description of the accommodation, the general description of the pension' environment, the characteristics of accommodation facilities, the characteristics of the offered services (food, cleaning, hospitality). Regarding the methodology, we want to specify the following: we selected accommodation facilities which are rural touristic boarding houses or agro-touristic boarding houses (139 cases, from 28 villages); the selection was random and is based only on the willingness to respond to our survey; the survey interval was June-September 2020; we used IBM SPSS Statistics for data processing and evaluation. We assessed over 100 items related with touristic quality assurance with the purpose to identify the main factors which contributes to a good management in the field.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The managers of the analyzed rural accommodation households were the owners (81.3%) or a family member of the owners (13.7%) and only 5% were employees. Over 70% of these managers have between 36 and 55 years old and 69.8% of them were women. Regarding their education, almost 60% have university degree, 36% have studies in touristic field and the majority of them have a good proficiency in English.

The quality of accommodation facilities

The investigated touristic boarding houses had the following characteristics:

- category of comfort: - 3 (around 56%) and 2 stars (around 44%);
- in the accommodation structure, double rooms represent over 75% (65.5% of the respondents);
- 56.1% are legal authorized persons and 41.0% are family enterprises;
- 54.0% offer between 11 and 20 places and 27.3% between 6 and 10 places;
- 37.4% offer only accommodation, 27.3% offer B&B (bad and breakfast) and 28.8% half board services.

Regarding the evaluated elements of quality of the accommodation facilities, we observed a real concern of the managers for keeping in good condition the buildings and the afferent

annexes. Our findings can be summarize as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Quality assessment of accommodation facilities

| Investigated element | Results |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Building conservation status | 95.7% are in very good shape and only 4.3% have some problems with the buildings but with no direct impact on the touristic activities |
| Building architecture | 78.4% present the traditional architecture features of the area but 21.6% are a built with modern features |
| Designated areas for tourists | The host and his family does not use the areas provided to guests for personal purposes. The staff of the guest house does not enter the rooms rented to tourists. The rooms are adequately insulated against noise. Guests can lock the door both inside and out. Guests receive a room key upon arrival at the guest house |
| Room facilities | Complete furniture, including cabinets and chairs; TV; Internet connection (99.3%); Shared bathroom with other rooms (23.0%); Central heating system (98.6%); Air conditioning (74.8%); Hairdryer (80.6%) |
| Utilities | 91.4% of boarding houses are connected to the public water distribution network (other sources: well, spring). Hot water distribution systems: 13.7% - boiler; 33.8% - wood heating; 2.2% - gas power plant; 50.4% - electric heating plant. 86.3% of boarding houses are connected to the public sewerage network (only 13.7% have a septic tank). 85.6% of boarding houses are connected to the public electric network and only 14.4% have complementary solar panels. |

Source: Own assessment based on questionnaire survey.

The quality of gastronomic services

Many rural boarding houses offer gastronomic services under different forms (96.9%). 55.4% of them put a kitchen at tourist disposal and 29.5% offer access to the host kitchen (access to stove, refrigerator, etc.). Only 12.2% offers access to restaurant facilities.

The managers in tourism field from Maramures County are trying to integrate the local food products in their activity. A large part of the products are obtained inside their

own households. Additionally, to get food that is not produced in their own household, 34.5% collaborate with neighboring households (for local specialties like bacon, sausage, smoked meat, honey, etc) and 15.1% with farms (for vegetables and fruits). Also, the manager is willing to offer on request special menus such as gluten-free, but this facility is not included in the menus in the present.

The quality of cleaning services

When we talk about the quality cleaning services in tourism we refer to internal and external procedures to deal with this matter. Regarding the waste resulted from touristic activities, the touristic boarding houses depend on the contracts made by the city halls (92.1%). Based on these contracts, in 71.2% of boarding houses the garbage is picked up weekly and in 28.8% at 2-3 days. But only in 87.8% the manager applies a garbage selection procedure. In the villages where there are not public waste collection services, the managers made contracts directly with specialized firms (5.8%) or take care of the situation by themselves. Regarding the cleaning services provided for tourists, in 94.2% of the accommodation units they are provided by family members or employees and in 12% the managers resort to the employees of a specialized company. Based on the pattern of the travel of tourists, the cleaning services are provided as such: 54% at 2-3 days; 22.3% daily; 16.5% weekly; 5.0% in weekend and 2.2% at the end of the stay.

The quality of hospitality services

Our approach to evaluate the quality of hospitality services take in consideration the interactions between the host (manager, family members, employees) and the tourists, divided it into two categories: printed or verbal. In this way we established the flux of information and the methods used to interact with tourists to assure hospitality (Table 2).

As we may observe, there are many information made available to tourists, but the managers prefer a direct and verbal contact regarding: the assistance on long stays, the ways to contact the hosts if they are need it or the transfer of knowledge regarding the use of some equipment. The printed documents offer

information regarding: certificates of authorization; instructions regarding internal rules, prices, equipment, touristic activities in the area, etc.

Table 2. Quality assessment of hospitality services

| Investigated element | Verbal % | Edited % |
|---|----------|----------|
| Assistance from the host, if tourists stay for a long time. | 72.7 | 27.3 |
| How and where can I contact the host if I need to contact them | 45.3 | 54.7 |
| Instructions regarding the equipment used and the facilities offered: (sauna, swimming pool, massage) | 37.4 | 62.6 |
| Information on payment documents and payment method (invoices, etc.) | 22.3 | 77.7 |
| Area information | 18.0 | 82.0 |
| Information on the facilities of the unit | 12.9 | 87.1 |
| Price information | 11.5 | 88.5 |
| Information about the sights in the area | 11.5 | 88.5 |
| Instructions on the prices applied and how to settle | 9.4 | 90.6 |
| Instructions on the rules of the accommodation unit (smoking, garbage sorting, etc.) | 7.2 | 92.8 |
| Presentation of information about health services in the area | 5.8 | 94.2 |
| PSI authorization | 1.4 | 98.6 |
| Presence of fire extinguishers inside the pension | 1.4 | 98.6 |
| Consumer protection telephone number | 0.7 | 99.3 |
| Sanitary authorization on hygiene conditions | 0 | 100.0 |

Source: Own assessment based on questionnaire survey.

Ways to improve the quality

Many managers look for ways to improve quality in their touristic boarding houses (around 88%). In most of the cases they make decisions based on the recommendations of the tourists (Table 3).

However, we observed that the opinion regarding the facilities are usually recorded in writing (in 62.6% of cases) and the opinion regarding the leisure services are recorded in writing only in 46.8% of cases.

Table 3. Methods to improve quality

| Investigated element | Verbal % | Edited % | No |
|---|----------|----------|------|
| Opinion on accommodation facilities | 37.4 | 62.6 | 0 |
| Opinion on tourist and leisure services | 51.1 | 46.8 | 2.2 |
| Proposals to improve services | 33.8 | 43.9 | 22.3 |

Source: Own assessment based on questionnaire survey.

Ways to improve quality and safety in COVID times

Our survey permitted us to collect some measures to assure the safety of the tourists selected by the managers. These measures were selected from a list created based on the last year proposed recommendation of the authorities for HORECA. Like we may observe from the following table, managers of rural boarding houses were more than capable to implement safety protocols.

Table 4. Measures to improve quality during COVID

| Investigated element | Verbal % | Edited % |
|---|----------|----------|
| Online payments | 100.0 | 13.1 |
| Alternative accommodation (one free room, one occupied) | 89.2 | 11.7 |
| Disinfection at the end of the stay | 100.0 | 13.1 |
| Gastronomic services will be made only by designated staff | 100.0 | 13.1 |
| The distance between tables of 2 meters; no more than 8 people at the table | 100.0 | 13.1 |
| One maid per each room | 82.0 | 10.7 |
| Equipped staff according with COVID 19 safety recommendation | 96.4 | 12.6 |
| Employment of medical staff | 12.9 | 1.7 |
| Change of sheets will be made by the tourist to avoid COVID infection | 83.5 | 10.9 |
| | - | 100 |

Source: Own assessment based on questionnaire survey.

They couldn't provide an increase of staff (maids or medical staff) but they even agreed with the implementation of safety tools like buying protection equipment or temperature measuring devices.

CONCLUSIONS

Using the frequencies for comparing the responses from our survey we can draw the following conclusions regarding the assurance of the quality in rural touristic boarding houses from Maramures County:

- the touristic buildings are, in general, well preserved, respect the traditional architecture and create a generous space to assure the privacy of the tourists;
 - the rooms are fully destined for touristic activities and satisfy basic needs for accommodation (no noises, furniture, TV, internet, etc.), the only negative point being that only 77% have en-suite bathroom;
 - the building is usually connected with public utilities networks but some of them (30-50%) have another types of heating or sewerage systems;
 - all the managers integrated in the gastronomic services local products from their own household, the neighbors or local farms;
 - the waste collection systems are functional in almost all the villages with the help of local authorities and the internal cleaning services are provided by the hosts especially within a 2-3 days interval or weekly.
- The main conclusion of our research is that in rural areas from Maramures County exists a real preoccupation to assure quality in rural tourism from building to hospitality services. The implication of the managers (owners or not of the business) revealed the possibility to implement safety measures needed in this COVID times. We consider that these type of accommodation facilities don't have to be assimilated with hotels and that they can be promoted like an alternative for families or individual tourism.

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