

A STUDY ON AGRITOURISM SERVICES IN ROMANIA

Ioana-Alexandra TOADER, Dorina MOCUTA

University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Bucharest, 59 Marasti Blvd,
District 1, Bucharest, Romania, Emails: toader.i.alexandra@gmail.com,
dorinamocuta@yahoo.com

Corresponding author: dorinamocuta@yahoo.com

Abstract

In the contemporary world economy, services have a distinct role, being a true driver of sustainable development. And in the field of tourism, as in other economic sectors, the quality of services is increasingly emphasized as a defining element for revenue generation. Over time, tourism has been on the rise, becoming according to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) "one of the fastest-growing sectors in the world". Tourism in Romania is based on a very generous tourist potential. The patrimony elements, which can attract many Romanian and foreign tourists if properly utilized and promoted, start from the diversity of landscape and continue with the troubled history of the Romanian people, highlighted in numerous material and spiritual testimonies. Thus, one of the forms of tourism that is often promoted in our country is agritourism. In this context, the quality of services in agritourism has special valences, which determine the attractiveness for this sector. In conclusion, in order to be accurately assessed, this type of services requires a combination of social and economic elements.

Key words: agritourism, quality of service, income growth, sustainable development

INTRODUCTION

In today's society, the quality and importance of services in all economic branches is increasingly emphasized. Reality has shown that services can systematically contribute to the development and prosperity of a country, with a significant share of GDP.

Due to the heterogeneity of services, finding an exact definition of the concept is impossible. Most definitions set out one or more service features, emphasizing both the differentiation of tangible products and the fact that they do not materialize in a product with its own existence. Other statements highlight the utilities, advantages or rewards they produce, or the changes they can make to goods, people or social relationships.

The explanatory dictionary of the Romanian language proposes the following definition: "services are considered to be a sector of the national economy in which a useful activity is carried out to meet certain social needs without necessarily materializing in goods or goods" [3].

Kotler and Armstrong's opinion [6] is that "services are activities or benefits provided in immaterial form by a supplier or a

beneficiary, without transferring the ownership rights to the purchaser.

Services are usually linked to material goods, although this is not a mandatory condition" [2]. The emphasis on the main characteristic features of services is important for their identification and delimitation with respect to other structures of economic and social activity.

First of all, services are characterized by immateriality and intangibility. The immaterial aspect of the service makes its assessment difficult and often subjective. Unlike a material good that exists in itself, the service is generally impassable, intangible, cannot be seen, tried. This makes its assessment difficult and, most of the time, subjective. Without a material form, services cannot be stored and kept for future consumption. Although the main difference between goods and services is intangible property, making a distinction between a good and a service is difficult to achieve. This is because "purchasing a product is often accompanied by certain support services (such as installations) and purchasing a service often includes assistive goods (e.g. food in a restaurant). Any acquisition involves material

goods and services in various proportions" [7].

The importance of services is spoken in all economic sectors, but more importantly than anywhere, it is reminded of their quality in tourism. "Tourism is a branch of the national economy with complex functions that brings together a set of goods and services offered for consumption to people who travel outside their usual environment for less than a year and whose main reason is other than the exercise of a activities paid within the visited site" [11].

Today, the volume of tourism business is equal to or even exceeds that of oil, food or car exports, according to UNWTO [13]. Tourism provides one of the main sources of income for many developing countries, bringing them hope and prosperity. The development of this economic sector is accompanied by a continuous diversification of services and competition growing between destinations.

According to global statistics, tourism in rural areas has gained more and more followers in today's society. Although in our country agritourism has developed especially in recent years, it is not a new phenomenon in the countries of the European Union. Vacations in the countryside are more and more preferred, making it profitable both for tourists and for farmers.

Analysed by the fact that it is a component of tourism, agritourism represents an economic activity, a means of increasing incomes and the quality of life of the inhabitants of the area where it is practiced, of preserving the geographic space and its values.

The objectives of this study derive from the need to analyze agritourism services as a mean for development of this economic sector and agritourism evolution over the last years in our country.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Among the many definitions that have been attributed to agritourism, the following is of particular relevance: "a form of tourism practiced in rural areas, based on the provision of accommodation, meals,

recreation and other services within the household, thus making the most of the resources natural and anthropogenic aspects of the area and contributing to raising the living standards of the rural population" [12]. According to the Wikipedia site, "agritourism is able to capitalize the existing accommodation surplus in the peasant household by involving the tourists in the life of the household and their provision of services and activities (mass, accommodation, interaction with the socio-natural environment), which are the peasant's household, without its specificity. Rural tourism embraces all the tourism activities carried out in the rural area with the aim of capitalizing on the natural and human potential of the village" [1].

Thus, we are talking about a main component, the actual tourist activity, which implies basic services: accommodation, meals, recreation, but also a secondary component of economic nature. This is focused on the production and processing of agro-food products in their own household and selling them further to visitors. By their specificity, tourism services imply the creation of a framework for spending leisure time in nature, contributing to ensuring active rest. "They must be designed in such a way that, as a result of their consumption, the tourist acquires more information, knowledge, even new skills" [8].

In order to meet the interest of all those involved in rural tourism, the European Federation of Rural Tourism, EuroGite approved in 2005 the European quality criteria common to rural tourism. These standards have been approved by the 24 EuroGites member countries, being developed on the basis of a common quality agreement. "Standards contain those aspects that are present in the quality schemes of all EuroGites. The criteria are grouped into five categories:

- Equipment
- Surroundings
- Accommodation and surroundings
- Intangible aspects such as personal attention, intimacy, or ambient
- Security" [4].

All these aspects have been established on the basis of the results of a survey conducted among international clients on the quality of tourism and the purpose of discovering the needs of tourists.

The survey, conducted within the project QUALITOOL (“Transfer of Quality Insurance Tools for European Rural Tourism Sector”, 2008-1-LV-LEO05-00125) [5] was repeated in 2009-2010, with 3,487 people surveyed in 55 countries.

The survey found that the average respondent is about 37 years of age, has a vocational or higher education and earns average income. This allows him to take his vacation three times a year, with stays of 3 to 10 days. All respondents' answers were analysed according with two main components: age and nationality. Six age groups (under 20, 21-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-65, over 65) were established, respondents being asked to score from 1 to 5 for each factor analyzed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Analyzing the answers provided by those surveyed, we can observe a number of important issues related to agritourism services. To the question “What is important to you during your stay?” the preferences differ clearly depending on age groups. (Fig. 1).

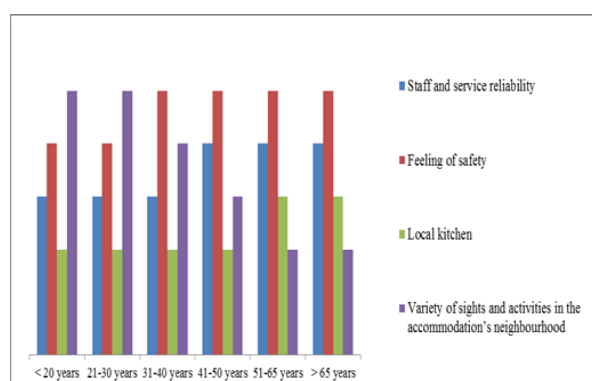


Fig. 1. Top preferences identified during the stay analyzed by age groups
 Source: Processed based on the data provided by EuroGites [4]

If for the youngest population the most important is the diversity of the fun activities offered by the guesthouse or proximity, for

the elderly one the feeling of safety takes precedence. The Figure 1 shows a comparison of 4 of the most important issues identified in the question above.

The preference for these types of services highlights how important it is to ensure a pleasant and safe climate during the stay, which can only be achieved through diversified and high quality services. Considerations such as the authenticity of rural life and traditions, local hospitality, and the opportunity to buy local products should be also considered. And for a vacation to be successful, it is important that when tourists arrive at the guesthouse, their first impression to be favourable. Based on the survey responses, the most important aspect of boarding appeared to be the friendly and warm attitude of the owners and staff. Nevertheless, the majority of the respondents appreciated as critically important that the information described on the guesthouse website or in any other means of promotion matches the reality. This emphasizes how important it is for agritourism to have real, adequate, realistic and reliable information about accommodation. The quality of the furniture is the third important factor, and the fourth place in the preferences of the interviewed persons is the view from the room's window (Fig. 2).

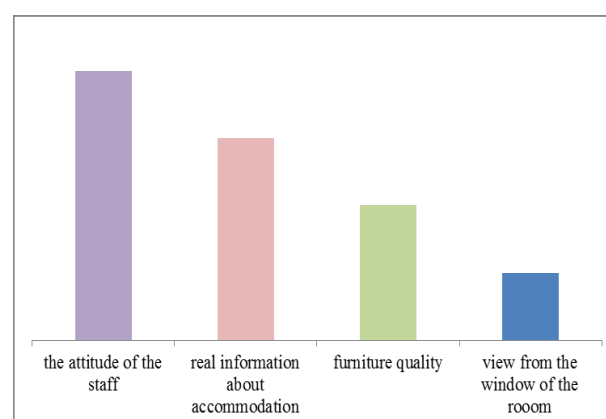


Fig. 2. Top preferences on arrival at the guesthouse
 Source: Processed based on the data provided by EuroGites [4]

To the question “What is important when planning a vacation?” the respondents had to note different factors according to their preferences. It is interesting that for all age

groups, nature and the environment is the most important factor in choosing a holiday, in while internet connection is it on the last place. The explanation derives from the wishes and motivations of tourists who feel the need to escape from the usual space, to recover both physically and mentally, to try and to know new activities. At the same time,

the location and services offered must positively mark the memory of the tourist so that he returns to the guesthouse and share the experience of friends and acquaintances. Table 1 shows a ranking of five preferred answers by the respondents in the question above.

Table 1. Top 5 decisive factors for holiday

Top preferences	Age					
	<20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-65	>65
1	Attractive nature or landscapes					
2	Complete and reliable information on the accommodation	Price	Complete and reliable information on the accommodation		Good location	
3	Price	Complete and reliable information on the accommodation	Price		Quiet and peaceful setting	
4	Easy and secure booking		Quiet and peaceful setting		Complete and reliable information on the accommodation	
5	Good location	Recommendations by friends	Easy and secure booking		Price	Comfort of the accommodation

Source: EuroGites. [4]

This classification shows that similar priorities can be observed for age groups 31-40 and 41-50, as well as 51-65 years and over 65 years. The responses of the youngest age group highlight different priorities from other age groups.

It is obvious that the choice of a tourist destination is not easy at all, which is influenced by a number of factors related to age, education, expectations, budget, but also to the existence of a varied offer of accommodation possibilities.

In our country, the number of agritourist guesthouses has steadily increased, reaching 2,556 units in 2017.

According to the National Institute of Statistics, agritouristic guesthouses are reception accommodation structures with a capacity of up to 8 rooms, “operating in the dwellings of citizens or in independent buildings, which provide in specially arranged spaces the accommodation of tourists and the conditions for preparing and serving meal, as well as the possibility of taking part in the household or crafts activity” [9].

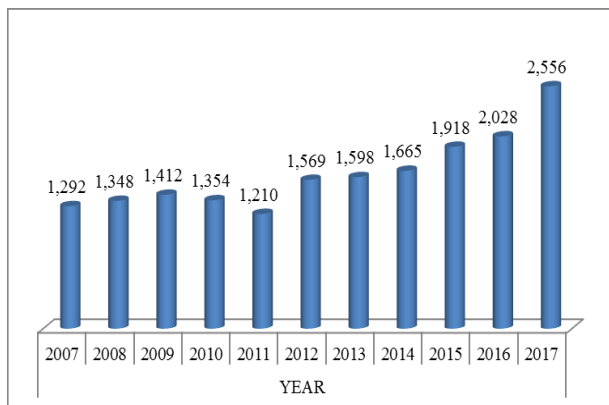


Fig. 3. Evolution of the number of agritourism guesthouses in Romania from 2007 to 2017

Source: Processed based on the data provided by INSSE

In Figure 1, it is noted that the number of agritourist guesthouses has changed in the ascending order each year, registering a 97.8% increase in 2017 compared to 2007. Interesting is also the evolution of the number of agritourist guesthouse in terms of comfort offered (Fig. 4).

According to Order of Ministry of Tourism No. 1296 from 2010 for the approval of the Methodological Norms regarding the

classification of the tourist accommodation structures, "the tourist accommodation structures are classified on stars and respectively on flowers in the case of agritouristic guesthouses depending on the constructive characteristics, the facilities and the quality of the services offer [10, 12]. The classification of the tourist reception facilities has as a priority the protection of the tourists, being a codified form of a synthetic presentation of the level of comfort and the offer of services".

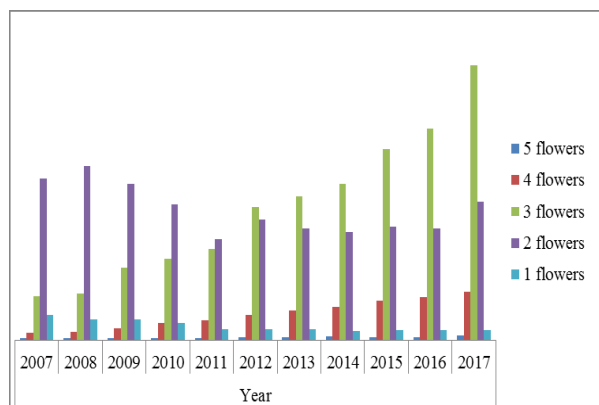


Fig. 4. Evolution of the number of agritourist guesthouses in Romania, 2007-2017

Source: Processed data provided by INSSE

The Fig.4 highlights the fact that investments in this sector, as well as improving the quality of services offered to tourists, led to a 518% increase of guesthouses classified with 3 flowers in 2017 compared to 2007 and 537% of guesthouses classified with 4 flowers. Although the number of the units classified with 5 flowers is low (about 26 units in 2017) they recorded a 160% increase in the analyzed range.

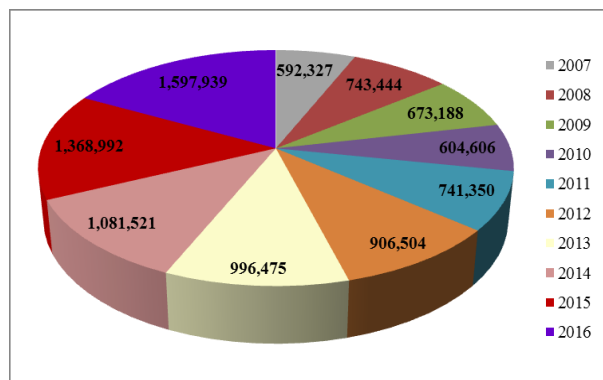


Fig. 5. Number of overnights in agritourist guesthouses in the period 2006-2016

Source: Processed based on the data provided by INSSE

There is also an increase in the tourists' interest for agritourism, leading to a 170% increase in the number of visitors who overnight in agritourism guesthouses in 2016 compared to 2007.

According to the National Institute of Statistics, the "tourist overnight stay is the 24-hour period, starting with the hotel hour, for which a person is registered in the tourist accommodation space and benefits from the accommodation for the occupied space, even if the actual stay is inferior to that range. It is also envisaged the overnight stays of extra beds (paid by customers)".

Although the number of tourists who preferred agritourism has increased steadily, the accommodation capacity of the guesthouses has been used at a low percentage, the accommodation capacity reaching 15.5% in 2016, with a maximum of 18.4% in 2008 (Fig. 6).

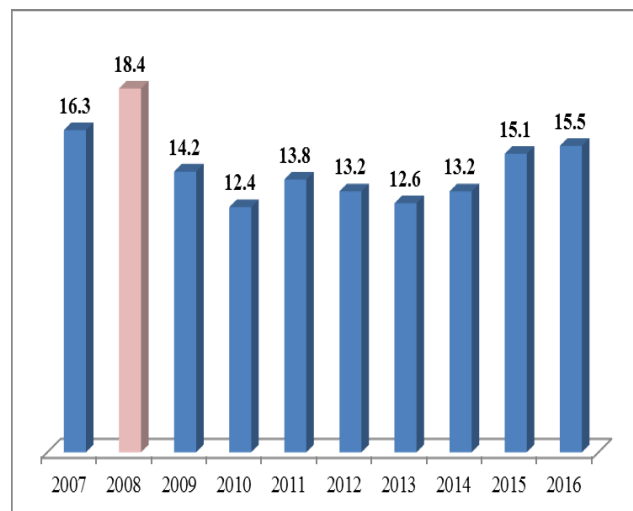


Fig. 6. Index of the use of tourist accommodation capacity in agritourism guesthouses

Source: Processed based on the data provided by INSSE

The usage index of the tourist accommodation capacity in operation is calculated by reporting the number of overnight stays made to the tourist accommodation capacity in operation during the respective period"[9]. These data highlight once again the need to align the standards offered by the agritourism providers in Romania with those offered by the EU providers. A sustained effort is needed

both by state authorities and agritourism providers. All investments must be made on the basis of feasible economic analyzes designed to delimit correctly the needs of each area. Tourism support in the rural areas and agritourism, was made somewhat chaotic, under SAPARD program, and thus, while busy tourist areas such as Moeciu appeared, some have lost their glamor, and in others, guesthouses were opened without potential clients, namely, the investments were made without economic dimension. In order to be able to meet the requirements of the market, each agritourist reception structure must offer a guarantee of quality, issue that every tourist is looking [5].

The index of using the accommodation capacity by categories of comfort (Fig. 7) highlights the preferences of the tourists for the guesthouses of 5 and 4 flowers, which strengthens the ones expressed above. Therefore, agro-tourism services management implies a long-term strategy that leads to a continuous improvement of the quality of rural tourism products and services coupled with the ability of the owners to meet and exceed the needs of tourists, facilitating the increase of labour productivity and profit.

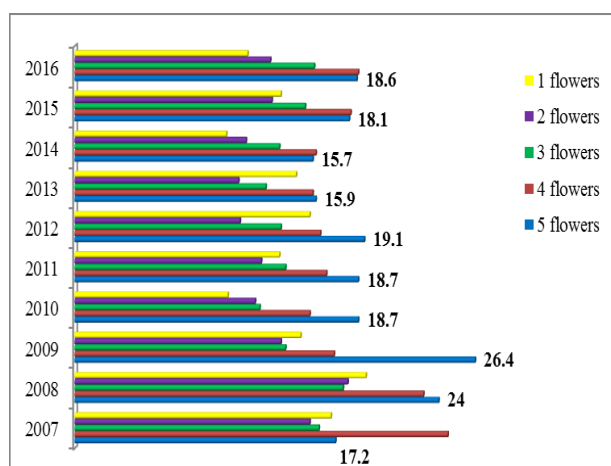


Fig. 7. Index of using agritourist accommodation capacity by categories of comfort
 Source: Processed based on the data provided by INSSE

We can speak of a high quality agritouristic package only to the extent that both the product and the tourist service fully satisfy the needs and expectations of consumers, and it is imperative that they become aware of these.

Thus, in conceiving packages of high quality agritourism services, two fundamental elements must be taken into account:

- products and services offering to meet the needs of tourists so that they can return or recommend their destination to other people;
- involving the local community in managing the destination.

CONCLUSIONS

When talking about services, we need to consider the interdependence created between the service provider and the beneficiary. The quality of the outcome depends on both the provider and the consumer. However, the experience of the products and services provider and their offering are often guarantees of performance.

To talk about the performance in agritourism in Romania requires a much more dynamic involvement of all actors involved in this field. Although the nature and landscape is a priority for tourists, it is especially important for them to feel safe throughout their stay, to receive accurate and real information about the offer, to be kindly treated by the staff of the guesthouses, to enjoy the products prepared at the farm from local ingredients and, last but not least, to choose from a multitude of activities offered for recreation and relaxation.

In order to be properly assessed, agritourism services require a combination of social and economic elements. That is why the agritourism offer should not be focused on quantity, but on the degree of tourist satisfaction. Therefore, it is necessary to continuously diversify the offer, to constantly study potential clients, to analyze them according to typologies, preferences and expectations.

Starting from the experience of European countries in agritourism, it is necessary to broaden the range of tourist activities provided in the native rural environment through a series of services adjacent to the accommodation activity consisting of:

- products offering from local gastronomy
- recreation and relaxation activities specific to the village areas

- dedicated activities for children
- traditional transportation
- pilgrimages to consecrated places of worship
- highlighting craft activities.

Concluding, the EuroGite Tourism Federation emphasizes that “there is only one way to experience the real Romania: stay in our farms, at our homes, in the villages with the most varied landscapes you can imagine”.

REFERENCES

- [1]Agriturismo, Wikipedia,
<http://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agriturismo>, Retrieved
January 4, 2018
- [2]Cristureanu C., 1999. The Economics of Immaterial:
International Transactions with Services, All Beck
Publishing House, Bucharest
- [3]DEX, 1989. Scientific Publishing House, Bucharest,
949
- [4]EuroGite, <http://www.eurogites.org>, Retrieved
January 4, 2018.
- [5]Iova A. R., Năstase M., Lascăr E., 2016,
Development of rural tourism and agritourism in
Romania by implementing European programs,
Scientific Papers Series Management, Economic
Engineering in Agriculture and Rural Development,
Vol. 16, Issue 1, 234.
- [6]Kotler, P., Armstrong, G., 1995, Marketing financial
services, Butterworth Heinemann Publishing House, 32
- [7]Militaru, G., 2010, Service Management, C.H. Beck
Publishing House, Bucharest, pp.7.
- [8]Minciu, R., 2001, Tourism economy, Uranus
Publishing House, Bucharest, 215-216.
- [9]National Institute of Statistics.<http://www.insse.ro>,
Retrieved January 4, 2018.
- [10]Order no.1296, Ministry of Tourism, 15 April
2010.
- [11] Ordinance no.58, Ministry of Tourism, 21 August
1998.
- [12]Stanciulescu, G., Lupu, N., Țigu, G., Țitan, E.,
Stancioiu F., 2002. Lexicon of tourist terms, Oscar
Print Publishing House, Bucharest, 14-15.
- [13]UNWTO, <http://www2.unwto.org/content/why-tourism>,
Retrieved January 4, 2018

