

ANALYSIS OF CONSUMER PREFERENCES REGARDING TOURISM AND RURAL TOURISM ACTIVITY IN HUNEDOARA COUNTY

Horia Nicolae CIOCAN, Ioan Niculae ALECU, Reta CONDEI, Ion DONA

University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Bucharest, 59 Marăști Boulevard, District 1, 011464, Bucharest, Romania, Phone: +40213182564, Fax:+40213182888, Mobile:+40744 6474 10, Emails: horia_cn@yahoo.com, alecuioanniculae@yahoo.com, r_condei@yahoo.com, ion_dona@yahoo.com

Corresponding author: horia_cn@yahoo.com

Abstract

In the last years the share of tourism in the Romanian GDP has grown steadily and started to represent an important part of the Romanian economy. An important aspect of the tourism industry is represented by the rural tourism which have a high growth potential in our country. At present, rural tourism and agritourism represent only a small part of total tourism, but this niche has increased significantly in the last years. The rural areas of Romania attract many tourists from the country and from abroad who appreciate them due to the picturesque landscapes and the cultural habits kept by generations. In order to be able to find out exactly how this activity can be improved, a quantitative research based on the questionnaire method was performed. This research aims to find out what are the main characteristics that tourists look for when choosing how to spend their holidays and how important are certain aspects in the decision of choosing the tourist destination. The paper aimed to analyze consumers' perceptions and expectations regarding rural tourism and agritourism in Hunedoara county, Romania. The results revealed that the majority of consumers who answered the questionnaire had a positive opinion about rural tourism, which was found in the top of the preferences of consumers who choose to spend their holidays in Romania.

Key words: rural tourism, agritourism, consumer behavior, decision making, consumption, rural development

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to find out what are the main tourists' expectations when choosing how to spend their free days and how important are certain points in their decision of choosing the tourist destination. The paper aimed to analyze consumers' perceptions and assumptions regarding rural tourism and agritourism in Hunedoara county Romania.

Hunedoara county has a great tourism and agritourism potential because on its territory there are numerous archaeological remains, natural reserves with very beautiful mountain trails and exceptional landscapes [13].

In addition to the main archaeological sites, Sarmizegetusa Regia and Sarmizegetusa Ulpia Traiana that are dating back to antiquity and used to be capital of Dacia and the capital of Roman Dacia, in the Hunedoara County there are numerous emblematic medieval buildings, the most important being the

Corvin Castle. Also, in Hunedoara County there are numerous religious edifices and monuments that attract an impressive number of tourists every year [1].

Considering this high tourism potential, the investors from Hunedoara county have all the premises to develop successful agritourism businesses [8].

Another very important aspect is the possibility of investors to access European funds for new tourism projects in rural areas of Hunedoara County [9],[7].

Due to the closure of mining activities, many people were left without jobs in Hunedoara. These persons can provide the labor force needed for the agritourism activities [2],[3].

Moreover, in addition to a job, rural tourism can become a profitable business for those with entrepreneurial skills [5].

The assessment of touristic resources and opportunities was made using the analysis of

available touristic objectives in order to see if the potential tourists are aware of their existence and importance.

Paper aimed to achieve a hierarchy of these objectives according to consumers preferences.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research uses quantitative method. The first step is to collect the data based on either hypothesis or a theory through a descriptive or inferential statistic. The data was gathered using a survey. It is the most appropriate instrument because is used either on small or large population. There is need it a sample from the wanted population in order to discover certain patterns or relations between variables. The aim is to find out about some populations by questioning a sample of it. In order to get the information a series of questions will be asked from the people. Their answers will be summarized in percentages or frequency distribution [10].

There are two types of surveys: longitudinal surveys, which are done during a period, to see the changes that might appear and cross-sectional survey, which helps gather the data at one point of time. It is called cross-sectional because the population sample might be male or female, above 18 years old with different socio-economic backgrounds [12].

Once the data are collected, they must be analyzed by employing different statistical components in quantitative data analysis: mean or average shows the central tendency and the standard deviation helps the researcher to see how far away or close are the scores around the mean [11].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The survey was conducted on a number of 758 respondents living in different areas of Romania and with different social background. The genre split of the sample was 53% women and 47% men.

The respondents' distribution by age was made tacking in account seven categories of age. The most numerous age category was 25-35 years old with 30.2% of respondents,

followed by category 36-45 years old with 23.8%. The next category by respondents' number is 46-55 years old with 15%, followed by category 18-24 years old with 13.5%. Category 55-65 years old was 12.4% and category under 18 years old was only 0.8% (Table 1).

The distribution of respondents touristic preferences by age revealed that in the situation of the holiday in Romania, 36.9% of the respondents prefer the agritourism to the detriment of other forms of tourism. Of these the most numerous age category is the category 36-45 years, in this age category 43.5% of the respondents prefer the agritourism. In the case of the following three age categories, 46-55, 55-65 and over 65 years old, over 50% of the respondents, respectively 52.1%, 52.4% and 53.5% prefer the agritourism.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents touristic preferences by age.

	I prefer agritourism-ism (from total)	I prefer agritourism-ism (from age category)	I prefer other types of tourism	Total
under 18 years old	0.0%	0.0%	0.8%	0.8%
18-24 years old	1.5%	11.0%	12.1%	13.6%
25-35 years old	8.5%	28.2%	21.7%	30.2%
36-45 years old	10.4%	43.5%	13.5%	23.9%
46-55 years old	7.8%	52.1%	7.2%	15.0%
55-65 years old	6.5%	52.4%	5.9%	12.4%
over 65 years old	2.2%	53.5%	1.9%	4.1%
Total	36.9%	-	63.1%	100%

Source: Own calculation.

The respondents education level was split into four categories, middle school studies with 1.6% of respondents, high school studies that represents 62.5% of respondents, university and master studies with 33.8% of respondents and postgraduate studies with 2.1% of respondents.

The respondents occupational status was divided into five categories. The first category that is also the most numerous is represented by employees with 61.0%. The second category is represented by students with 17.9% from respondents. Third category is

retirees with 9.7%, followed by fourth category of entrepreneurs with 3.4% and fifth category of freelancers with 7.7%.

The respondent's monthly income data represents the monthly income per person and was divided into six categories. Cumulated, the first two most numerous income categories represent almost 59% of the total respondents. The most numerous answers were for category 2,000-3,000 lei.

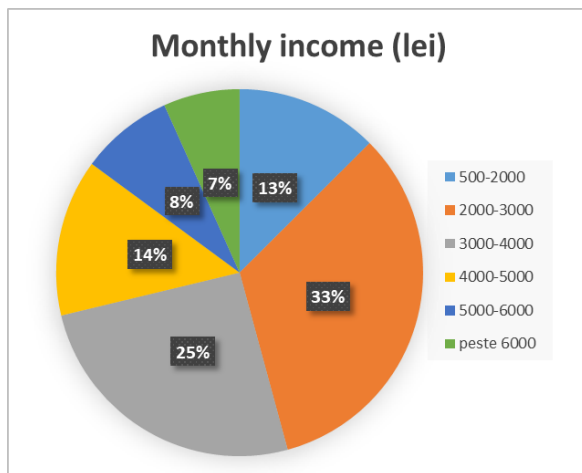


Fig. 1. Distribution of respondents by monthly income
 Source: Own calculation.

According to the National Institute of Statistics, in November 2019, the nominal average net salary in Romania was 3,179 lei [14]. Taking this official report the average value as a reference point for a comparison with the weighted average for the monthly income of the respondents can show if the sample used in this study is representative for the Romanian population. If the first five categories of average incomes are calculated and weighted according to the number of respondents in each category, and the last category is considered to be approximately 6,500 lei, the weighted average arithmetic of the monthly incomes of the respondents is 3,389 lei [8]. This value is only 6.6% higher than the average value calculated by the NIS. This small difference can be explained by the fact that 68% of the respondents of this survey live in urban and peri-urban areas, compared to the national average, which is only 53.6%, according to the National Institute of Statistics. With more respondents in the urban area, the weighted average arithmetic of respondents' monthly incomes has increased,

as this category of respondents has easier access to better paid jobs compared to people living in rural areas.

The category of 4,000-5,000 lei monthly income represents 13.8% of the total respondents, followed by the category 500-2,000 lei monthly income which represents 12.5% from total respondents.

The last two categories, 5,000-6,000 lei and over 6,000 lei monthly income represents only 8.1% respectively 6.7% from total respondents.

Regarding respondents travel mobility, when asked: What transport methods do you use when traveling on holiday in Romania? by far the most frequent transport method used by the respondents is the passenger car, only 7% of the respondents usually use the train or bus. The vast majority, respectively 97% use the car as the first option for travel. Of these, 57% use their own car, 34% travel with the car of friends / companions and only 1% use modern car sharing applications.

This fact has both advantages and disadvantages in relation to the agritourism activity. As an advantage, tourists traveling by passenger cars have very good mobility and independence [6]. They can cover a larger visible area in a shorter time and have easier access to remote rural areas as compared to tourists traveling by train or bus. but, as a disadvantage, given the existing road infrastructure problems, the tourists who use the car during their holidays leave cause more pollution with CO₂ and other greenhouse gases compared to tourists that use public transport [4] [15].

Regarding the average duration of respondent's leave, 25.7% answered 4-6 days, 39.7% answered 7-9 days, 21.64% answered 10-14 days. Only 2.1% replied that usually stay on leave for more than 14 days. The results did not show an important gender differences in terms of the average length of leave (Table 2).

Regarding the holiday's financial aspects, survey respondents answers had a significant variation and were on split into eight categories.

Table 2. Distribution of respondents by gender depending on vacation length

Gender	4-6 days	7-9 days	10-14 days	over 14 days	Total
Women	12.70%	20.70%	10.40%	3.80%	53.10%
Men	13.03%	19.01%	11.24%	3.19%	46.90%
Total	29.68%	39.71%	23.61%	6.99%	100.00%

Source: Own calculation.

These expenses include all costs: transportation, accommodation, food, access to tourist attractions and leisure activities. The most numerous answers fall into 1,500-2,000 lei category which represents 26% of total answers. Other two important categories are 1,000-1,500 lei with 24.4% and 2,000-2,500 lei with 22.2%. (Fig 2)

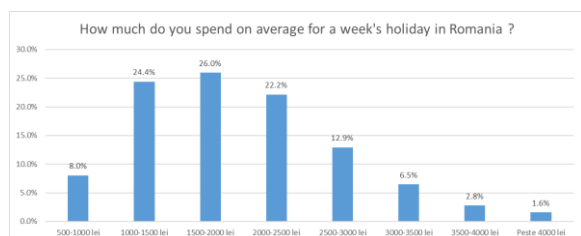


Fig. 2. Distribution of respondents average spending for a week's holiday in Romania
 Source: Own calculation.

Another survey question was related with the number of persons who spend holidays together and the relationships between them. The answers are split between five categories. Family and other family friends with 25.2%, together with life partner represents la largest category with 29.9%; together with partner and child/children 19.7%; 17.9% of respondents travel with a group of friends and 7.3% are going in vacation alone (Fig. 3).

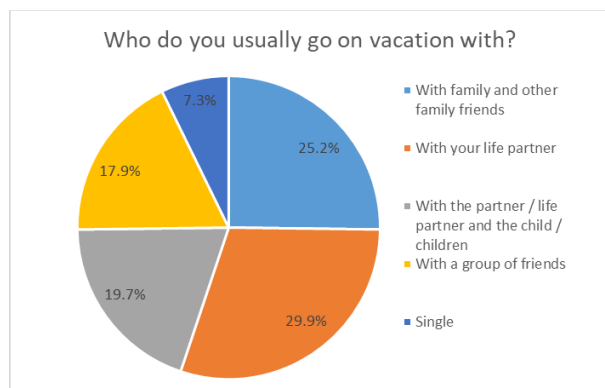


Fig. 3. Distribution of answers according to the number of persons who spend holidays together and the relationships between them
 Source: Own calculation.

In connection with the process of choosing the holiday destination, the main sources of information used by the survey respondents were: Sites with accommodation offers and travel blogs with 38.1%, recommendations of friends or acquaintances with 35%, online advertising with 23, 9%, radio and TV commercials with 19%, travel agency offers with 17.2% and flyers and street ads represented 11.3% (Fig. 4).

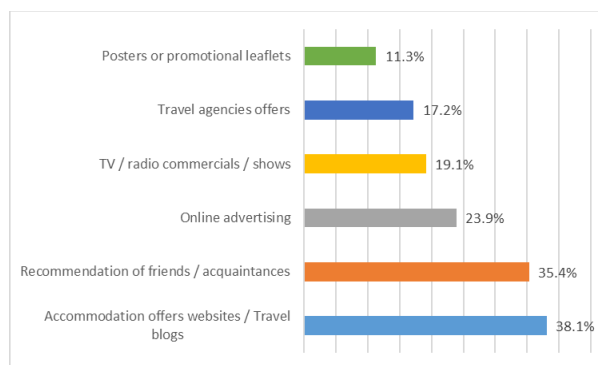


Fig. 4. The share of information sources used in the process of choosing the holiday destination
 Source: Source: Own calculation.

Another matter tackled in this study was the importance of certain factors in the process of choosing the holiday destination. As expected, Services quality was rated first, 81% of the respondents rated service quality as very important, followed by the rest of 19% that rated it as important. There were no respondents to consider this aspect unimportant. Also, the cleanliness and hygiene where were considered to be important by 31% of respondents and very important by 66%. The prices charged are in third place according to the hierarchy of importance with 48% of the respondents considering that this aspect is very important and 37% considering this important aspect. Only 3% of the respondents considered this aspect unimportant (Fig 5).

Other aspects to which a significant percentage of about 20-30% of the respondents replied that they have average importance are: the multitude of tourist attractions, peace and quiet, the distance and the proportion of traditional products in the menu (Fig 5).

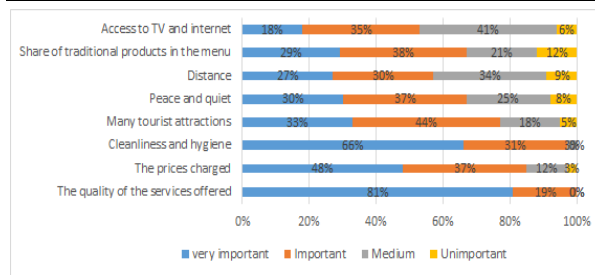


Fig.5.Importance of various factors in tourist destination choosing
 Source: Own calculation.

Of all the aspects analyzed, the least important aspect was the access to television and internet, 41% of the respondents considered that this aspect is of average importance, and 6% considered it not important (Fig 5).

The answers given by respondent's question regarding the importance of certain sports activities revealed that quite a few tourists are interested in playing practicing certain sports. The most important sports activity from respondent's perspective is hiking in nature. In total, 65% of the respondents considered this activity to be important or very important to them. The second place is the swim which is important or very important for 22% of the respondents, followed by fishing with 24% and cycling with 18%. As expected, climbing, a riskier niche sport, received the most responses in the "I'm not interested" category, 72% of the respondents were not interested in this activity (Table 3).

Table 3. Respondents interest in sports activities

Activity	Very important	Important	Medium	Unimportant	Not interested
Climbing	1%	2%	1%	24%	72%
Cycling	7%	11%	21%	37%	24%
Hiking	29%	36%	31%	3%	1%
Horse riding	4%	2%	7%	32%	55%
Swimming	12%	20%	27%	18%	23%
Fishing	5%	19%	10%	14%	52%

Source: Own calculation.

Regarding the preferences for future accommodation, it can be observed that the number of respondents who would like to stay in agritourism pensions in the future is very

high, if in the past about 13.6% of the respondents stayed in agritourism pensions, in the future 24.1% of respondents expressed the desire to stay in agritourism pensions. If these wishes will materialize, the change of preferences will negatively influence the number of tourists who will stay in tourist villas with 5.4% and 3.3% the number of tourists who will choose to stay at the hotel (Fig .6).

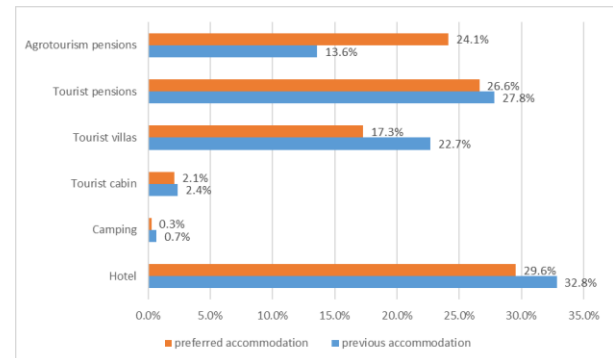


Fig. 6. Comparison between the previous choice of accommodation and the future preferred type of accommodation
 Source: Own calculation.

Furthermore, the comparison of these answers shows that at present, the offer of accommodation services in agritourism pensions is below the demand level.

Another important series of questions referred to the main tourist objectives in Hunedoara region. The list of tourist objectives included all the types of objectives that can be found on the territory of Hunedoara county, respectively cultural, religious, historical or natural objectives.

Respondents were asked if they visited the tourist attraction, if they would like to visit it in the near future, if they are interested in the tourist attraction or if they would visit it only if they were nearby [16].

The most visited tourist objective was the Prislop Monastery and the grave of Father Arsenie Boca, 52% of the respondents visited this tourist objective. The second most visited tourist attraction after the Prislop Monastery was the Corvin Castle in Hunedoara city. This medieval castle was visited by 51% of the respondents (Table 4).

The third most visited tourist objective was the Roman Sarmizegetusa. 30% of the

respondents visited this tourist objective. It can be observed that the percentage difference between this objective and the first two is large, of just over 20%, although the objective is only 30 km away from the Prislop Monastery.

Table 4. Distribution of respondents' touristic preferences by age.

Tourist attractions	I would like to visit	I'm not interested	Only if I were in the area	Visited	I would Like to revisit	Interest revisiting
The Roman baths in Geoagiu-Băi	56%	4%	32%	8%	6%	75%
The church of Densus	49%	15%	16%	20%	16%	80%
Corvin Castle (Hunians)	48%	0%	1%	51%	39%	76%
The Fortress of Deva	77%	0%	2%	21%	20%	91%
Țebea Memorial Complex	56%	12%	24%	8%	4%	50%
Dinosaur Geopark Tara Hațegului	44%	13%	35%	8%	5%	63%
Prislop Monastery (Arsenie Boca)	24%	11%	13%	52%	41%	79%
The Parang mountain	40%	4%	28%	28%	20%	71%
The Gold Museum in Brad	59%	4%	32%	5%	2%	40%
Retezat National Park	50%	4%	20%	26%	24%	88%
Hațeg Bison Reserve	32%	12%	36%	20%	11%	55%
Sarmizegetusa Regia	78%	0%	6%	16%	12%	75%
Roman Sarmizegetusa	63%	0%	7%	30%	22%	73%
Parâng tourist resort	65%	4%	15%	16%	13%	81%
Straja tourist resort	57%	3%	16%	24%	21%	88%

Source: Own calculation.

Analyzing the answers received, it can be observed that the respondents who have not so far visited certain objectives in Hunedoara County are interested in visiting most of the objectives. The percentage of those interested is directly influenced by the percentage of those who have already visited and the notoriety of the tourist objective. The greatest interest to visit is for Sarmizegetusa Regia, the former capital of the Dacian state. An important tourist objective that so far, was missed by only 16% of the respondents but,

apart from those who visited it, 78% want to visit it.

The Deva Fortress is another tourist objective that is similar to Sarmizegetusa Regia, was visited by only 21% of the respondents, but the rest of 79% are interested to visit it.

Regarding the percentage of tourists who want to review certain tourist objectives, the highest percentage is found in Deva fortress, 91% of those who have visited this tourist objective want to review it. On the second place, the Retezat National Park and the Straja tourist resort are on an equal footing with 88%, and on the third place are the Parâng tourist resort. On the fourth place are the Prislop Monastery with 79% desire to revisit.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the analysis based on the survey reveals the following aspects.

If the respondents spend their holidays in Romania, 36.9% of them prefer the agritourism instead of other types of tourism. Among those who are over 46 years old prefer rural tourism in proportion of over 50%.

Most of the respondents earn between 2,000 lei and 4,000 lei per month and they agree to pay between 1,000 lei and 2,500 lei for a week's holiday in Romania.

By far, the main mode of travel used in the holidays are passenger vehicles, and the longer travel distance is not a major impediment to them.

The most frequent stay is one week, about 40% of the respondents fall into this category. Only 7.3% of respondents go on vacation alone. 92.7% of the respondents go on vacation accompanied 29.9% travel with their partner, 25.2% are accompanied by family and other family friends. 19.7% go on leave with their life partner and children, and 17.9% go with a group of friends.

The main type of information and procurement of all the information needed to choose the holiday destination is the Internet. 38.1% of the respondents make the decision with the help of information obtained from accommodation websites or from travel blogs and forums. 35.4% is based on the recommendations of friends and

acquaintances. 23.9% are influenced by online advertising.

As a result, online advertising seems to be one of my most effective advertising methods today [6].

The services quality, the cleanliness and hygiene and the prices charged are the most important aspects

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As a result, online advertising seems to be one of my most effective advertising methods today because respondents are using it when they choose holiday destination and type of accommodation.

Regarding the categories of accommodation facilities it is observed that although up to the time of completing the questionnaire only 13.6% of the respondents stayed in agritourism pensions, in the future this category will increase significantly. 24.1% of the respondents sad that want to do rural tourism in the next years.

Respondents are interested to visit many touristic objectives from Hunedoara county, and the majority those who already visited these places are willing to return and revisit.

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