

## STUDY ON THE INFLUENCE OF THE PANDEMIC ON THE INDICATORS CHARACTERIZING THE TRAFFIC AND QUALITY OF TOURIST SERVICES AT A BOARDING HOUSE IN DOLJ COUNTY

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### **Abstract**

*The paper presents a complex study on tourist traffic and the impact of the pandemic on the main indicators of quality of tourist services, at Simona boarding house - Dolj. The boarding house under study built its activity on a niche route, which caught on very well in the area, as it is primarily based on leisure activities and spending time outdoors, away from the noise and pollution of big cities. It is located in a more secluded area, at a greater distance from the main road, in an area with smooth hills and a special climate, which plays an important role in attracting tourists, a fact proven during the pandemic. In the first part of the paper, we focused on characterizing the area in terms of natural and anthropic tourism resources, after which an analysis was made of the main indicators that define the quality of services offered to tourists. Finally, based on the study and the results obtained, we concluded that Boarding house Simona - Dolj practices a modern management of the highest quality, as evidenced by the values of indicators that define the quality of tourism activities, which are at a higher level, high compared to similar ones at the national level, even in the severe and restrictive conditions of the pandemic period.*

**Key words:** agritourism, boarding house, management, rural tourism, tourist resources

### **INTRODUCTION**

The study was conducted at the boarding house "Simona" located in Perișor commune, Dolj county, in southwestern Romania, in the Oltenia Plain, a position that is more disadvantaged in terms of landforms with an interesting appearance to attract tourists [6]. The town is located 40 km from the city of Craiova - a city located in the center of the historic Oltenia region and 49 km from the town of Calafat. In terms of accessibility, the host commune for boarding house "Simona" is crossed by the national road DN56, which connects the city of Craiova and the bridge over the Danube from Calafat, being one of the most populated roads in the region, given that Calafat is a border town that connects Bulgaria to Vidin. Internationally, it is recognized as the European road E79 and is part of the road network that starts in Hungary, enters Romania and passes through the cities of Oradea, Deva, Petrosani, Targu Jiu, Craiova and Calafat, crosses Bulgaria and ends in Thessaloniki, Greece.

From the point of view of the relief, the locality is more vitreous compared to those located in the mountainous and submontane areas, in which the varied relief with sculptural forms and unique appearance can attract a larger number of tourists. Although the area is not attractive from this point of view, in the area and especially in the locality of Perișor, more and more rural tourist boarding house have started to appear and develop. This was primarily due to the successful example of Boarding house Cristian, which emerged as a pioneer in this area, but which has developed and evolved continuously [18]. With this example, several guesthouses have gradually emerged that are mainly focused on leisure and relaxation tourism and the promotion of traditional local gastronomic products, which are mainly addressed to the population of the city, who want to spend an unforgettable stay in the middle of the traditional atmosphere of the plain village, in the southern part of Oltenia. The development of this activity was mainly due to the fact that the locals realized the many advantages that derive from practicing

an agrotourism and rural tourism activity as: the possibility of superior capitalization of local agricultural products, by direct sale or serving them to tourists at a price closer to their true value [3, 19], the possibility to obtain additional income from the tourism activity, in addition to the basic ones obtained from one's own household, the creation of new jobs and the acquisition of a new qualification in the field of tourism [14, 20], the conservation of the material and intangible heritage of the traditional Oltenian village [4, 8, 17], the enrichment of the level of culture and civilization of this rural area, through relationships with tourists from other parts of the country or abroad and others [1, 15], aspects reported by other researchers in the country and abroad [22, 24, 25].

Its location in a quiet area away from the main road, with a position on a higher area with geographical coordinates  $44^{\circ}14'30''$  latitude and  $23^{\circ}49'95''$  longitude [5], which offers a certain panorama over the area and locality. Through the services offered to tourists, this guesthouse began to be visited more and more by tourists and especially during the pandemic, when many residents of the city tried to take refuge in such a place, where they feel as safe as possible.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

First of all, we had to make a documentation on the main natural and anthropic tourist resources existing in the area, which are the main assets in attracting tourists, to Boarding house Simona, especially during the pandemic. The documentation was made by studying and analyzing the main bibliographic sources about the area, such as: monographs, studies on flora and fauna, study on village customs, traditions and rituals, relief maps, tourist and thematic, study on tangible and intangible heritage, etc. [2, 26, 32]. We also went to the boarding house to complete and verify all the data collected from the National Institute of Statistics (NIS), regarding the evolution of the main indicators that define the quality of the tourist services provided [16], which had to respect all the additional

conditions imposed during the difficult period of the pandemic.

Based on data collected from the field and from the National Institute of Statistics (NIS), we performed an analysis and characterization of the evolution of quality indicators in 2017-2020, as well as a diagnosis regarding the impact of quality of agrotourism activities on traffic of the boarding house and customer loyalty, which as it turns out were the basic elements in the proper functioning of the activity of the boarding house, even during the pandemic. At the same time, we analyzed the tourist offer of the boarding house, comparing it with a similar one from the locality, but classified at a higher number of daisies and we determined based on the data the use index and the occupancy rate of the boarding house, in the studied period 2017-2020 [11].

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Study on natural tourist resources

According to the studied literature, the commune of Perișor was founded in 1864, and its name comes from a pair plantation on the old hearth of the village. The first documentary attestation of the locality dates from 1570 in the charter of Alexandru Voievod [12, 13].

The **relief** of the area is generally a more monotonous plain, without shapes with a special appearance that would be a strong element in attracting tourists [29]. The town is located in a hilly area, between smooth hills. The relief of the region includes the Danube meadow area, the plain and the hill area. The altitude increases from 30 to 350 m above sea level, from south to north of the area, and according to the main agent that generated the landforms on most of its territory falls perfectly in the category of the Danube area [13].

The **climate** of the studied region and of Perișor locality belongs to the temperate climatic zone, with Mediterranean influences due to the south-western position. The position and the depressional character of the land it occupies, determine, on the whole, a warmer climate than in the central and northern part of the country, with an annual

average of 10-11.5<sup>0</sup>C and lower precipitations, with an average between 525-650 mm annual [12].

**Vegetation.** Most of the south of Oltenia is covered by rich fields, the vegetation being specific to the forest-steppe and steppe area, with extensive deciduous forests, especially oak, poplar and acacia. Strong and aggressive intervention on the natural environment has led to the large-scale replacement of natural vegetation as a result of deforestation, crops and uncontrolled urbanization. The vegetation includes a wide range of grassy and tree species, depending on the variety of soil and climate. In the northern part of the area, with higher hilly lands, there are forests of *Quercus cerris* and *Quercus frainetto*, *Quercus petraea*. Along with these, there are other deciduous species that appear in the lower hills and even in the plains, such as: linden, elm, ash, hornbeam. There are also oak species in association with hazelnut, rosehip, sea buckthorn, etc. [28].

The **fauna** has been severely impoverished in the last two centuries due to human intervention, which has led to the transformation of the forest area into an anthropogenic steppe. Large mammals live in the area of deciduous forests and undergrowth, such as deer, wild boar, rabbit, fox, etc. Among the birds, the small, singing ones are specific: the nightingale, the cuckoo, the blackbird, the turtle, the tit, the goldfinch, which are also common in the streams near the waters. In the plain, rodents (field mice, gray rats, woodpeckers) and small predators (ferret, weasel) are present, and among larger mammals, the fox and the rabbit. Among the most common birds are: quail, partridge, woodpecker, starling, and porpoise and swallow often nest in the muddy or sandy banks of the relief steps. In the ponds found in the area there are fish species such as redfish, catfish, perch, zander. The terrestrial and aquatic fauna has undergone changes caused by abusive hunting and fishing, many of the species that populate the territory surviving in small numbers or disappearing altogether [12, 30].

**Hydrographic network and water mirrors.** From the network of running waters that drain

the territory, the Danube, the main collector, and the Jiu River, the hydrographic axis with north-south orientation, stand out first of all. The hydrographic network is completed by the tributaries of these two major arteries. At the edge of Perișor commune there is the accumulation lake into which the Perișor brook flows, located in the Desnățuiului Plain. It is populated with fish, but is not sufficiently exploited for tourism or sports purposes. Also, the Jivan brook crosses the plains of Perișor commune. Among the most important lakes and ponds in the area we mention Bistreț Lake, Fântâna Banului, Maglavit, Golenți and Ciuperceni [12,13].

From the point of view of natural resources, the absence of natural landscapes and anthropic transformations determine a reduced tourist potential, but which is compensated by natural reserves and natural monuments, such as: Ciurumela Forest from Poiana Mare; Bucovăț fossil point; The ornithological reservation from Ciuperceni Noi (south of Calafat) is the only place that has not remained untouched; The wild peony reservation from Plenița - unique in Romania; Nicolae Romanescu Park in Craiova - Made according to the plans of the French architect E. Redont between 1900 and 1903 [18, 27].

**Study on anthropic tourist resources  
Museums, monuments, sites and  
architectural ensembles.**

The Perișor locality has housed the "Heroes" Monument since 1927, built in honor of the martyred heroes who fought in the First World War. There are also two Neolithic archeological sites. At the level of Perișor locality there is a museum in which objects related to the aviation pioneer Henri Coandă are exhibited, emphasizing the holidays spent with grandparents, in Perișor commune, Dolj county. The "Henri Coandă" Museum operates in the old town hall building where there are two rooms dedicated to the memory of the great scientist. In another room, the museum presents various ethnographic cultural assets. In front of the museum was placed a bronze bust of the great scientist Henri Coandă and an IAR-93 plane, one of the first Romanian aircraft to which he

contributed. The museum can be visited on request [27, 30].

**Monasteries, cathedrals and churches.** Within the locality there are three churches, namely: in Perișor commune 2 churches, and in Mărăcine village, located 5 km from Perișor commune, a church. The churches in Perișor are declared historical monuments [31]. They were built in 1700 ("Saint Nicholas" Church), respectively in 1500 ("Saint Nicholas" Church in the village of Mărăcine, Perișor commune) [27].

**Cultural facilities.** In the commune of Perișor there is a cultural home established in 1972, which is in a state of degradation and is to be rehabilitated by the local administration. At the same time, within the new construction of Perișor City Hall there is a library with over 15,000 copies and the second library which is located within the General School "Henri Coandă" - Perișor [13].

**Ethnographic and folkloric values.** Within the commune there is a folk ensemble called "Peony" which constantly participates in various competitions and shows. Next to the town hall there is an open-air stage where cultural events are organized at which the ensemble performs artistic demonstrations. Perișor commune day has become a tradition for the commune's citizens. It was celebrated before the pandemic, every year in October, after the fruits were harvested. Citizens could also enjoy two more folk festivals that coincide with the Christian holidays, namely the feast of Saints "Constantine and Helen", in which the villagers gathered at "fairs". The second feast is represented by the "hora" performed on the second day of Easter, when the villagers shared food, to commemorate those who passed away [7, 12, 13].

**Tourist services offered by Boarding house Simona**

In addition to accommodation in rooms with three daisies, guests receive a complimentary breakfast. It is made from traditional food produced and prepared by the hosts themselves or from local producers, adapted to the season. For example, in the hot season, breakfast can contain fruits (apples, pears, plums, melons, strawberries, cherries), vegetables (tomatoes, cucumbers, radishes,

etc.) and dairy products (cheese, milk, yogurt, cheese). In the cold season, customers can enjoy pork dishes (haggis, bucket meat, sausages), pickles or preserves (stew, zacusca, jam, compote) made by the host. Boarding house "Simona" has its own kitchen, well equipped that tourists can use to prepare food for other meals [7].

**Recreational services.** According to travel agencies for online bookings and other travel products, boarding house "Simona" offers the following activities: for nature lovers - cycling (there are bicycles for all ages on site), hiking (on the meadows near the boarding house admiring the accumulation lake from Perișor or Perișorului Forest) or fishing on the nearby lake. For the more adventurous, at the location I find two ATVs (for any season) and a snowmobile (for the winter period), these activities being for a fee [21].

Moreover, at the location there is a multifunctional court for sports activities (football, table/field tennis) and a place for children, and from 2020 the guests of the boarding house, but not only, can enjoy the sun, at the swimming pool in the courtyard of the boarding house. There are two swimming pools, one for adults and one for children. Around the pool, many sun loungers are waiting for their guests, and soft drinks are put up for sale on the pool terrace [7].

**Study of statistical indicators that define the quality of rural tourism activity in Boarding house Simona**

*a. Accommodation capacity*

The boarding house has an accommodation capacity of 10 places, respectively 4 rooms, with equipment corresponding to the comfort category, for which it received the classification of 3 daisies [9].

Table 1. Number of tourists arriving, 2017-2020

Year	Number of tourists arriving
2017	275
2018	237
2019	270
2020	135

Source: processing according to data collected from the field and from NIS [23].

*b)The number of tourists arriving at the boarding house*

In the period 2017-2020, according to table 1, it was relatively constant until 2019 inclusive, being over 237 tourists. In 2020, it decreased a lot, by almost 50%, reaching only 135 tourists, due to the large restrictions imposed in the pandemic.

*c) Overnight stays*

The number of overnight stays at the boarding house during 2017 - 2020, according to table 2, was relatively increasing, except for the year 2020, as follows: 2017 - 373 overnight stays, 2018 - 398 overnight stays, 2019 - 468 overnight stays, respectively 2020 - 269 overnight stays, due to the same phenomenon that also led to a drastic decrease in the number of tourists arriving at the boarding house.

Table 2. The number of overnight stays in the period 2017-2020

Year	Number of
2017	373
2018	398
2019	468
2020	269

Source: processing according to data collected from the field and from NIS [23].

*d) Tourism demand indicators*

Tourist demand for rural tourist boarding houses in the locality in the period 2017 - 2020, according to Table 3: Tourist boarding house 1: - 4 daisies (in this case represented by Boarding house "Cristian").

Table 3. Tourist demand for rural tourist boarding houses in the locality during 2017-2020

Specification	No. tourists arriving at boarding houses			
	2017	2018	2019	2020
Tourist boarding house 1 - 4 daisies	328	298	229	95
Tourist boarding house 2 - 3 daisies	275	237	270	135

Source: processing according to data collected from the field and from NIS [23].

The number of tourists arriving at the boarding house was in 2017 - 328 tourists, 2018 - 298 tourists, 2019 - 229 tourists, 2020 only 95 tourists.

Boarding house 2: - 3 daisies (represented by Boarding house "Simona"): the number of

tourists arriving at the boarding house was in 2017 - 275 tourists, 2018 - 237 tourists, 2019 - 270 tourists, 2020 - 135 tourists.

It can be stated that, although the Boarding house "Simona" is qualified with 3 daisies, it did not register significant differences of clients compared to the competing boarding house. It can be noted that in 2020, although the specific conditions imposed by the pandemic at national and even international level were unfavorable, the boarding house in question had a higher number of customers compared to 4 daisies, due to the pool put into operation during the season of that year and other related activities, outdoor leisure [7, 18].

*e) Average number of tourists*

The average number of tourists arriving per day at the boarding house 2017 - 2020, according to table 4, on average the number of tourists arriving at the boarding house, compared to the days was relatively constant, being generally over 0.65 tourists/day, except 2020 where there was a sudden decrease, to only 0.37 tourists/day, due to the reduction of the number of tourists admitted to the boarding house, according to the covid infection rate of over 10%, registered in Dolj County during that period.

Table 4. Average number of tourists arriving per day in the period 2017-2020

Year	Average number of tourists arriving per day
2017	0.75
2018	0.65
2019	0.74
2020	0.37

Source: processing according to data collected from the field and from NIS [23].

*f) Number of days - tourists*

The number of days tourists staying in the boarding house during 2017-2020, according to Table 5, fluctuated from year to year, as follows: in 2017 there were 102,575 tourists, in 2018 there were 94,326 tourists, in 2019 there were 126,360 tourists, and in 2020 36,315 tourists. This indicator correlated very well with the number of tourists arriving and overnight stays, which varied depending on the specific conditions encountered in the boarding house in that year [10].

Table 5. Number of tourist days accommodated during 2017-2020

Year	Number of tourists	Overnights	Total number of tourist
2017	275	373	102,575
2018	237	398	94,326
2019	270	468	126,360
2020	135	269	36,315

Source: processing according to data collected from the field and from NIS [23].

g) *Average length of stay*

The average length of stay at the boarding house during 2017-2020, according to Table 6, increased from year to year, the longest average length of stay, being recorded in 2020, as follows: in 2017 it was – 1.36 days/stay, in 2018 - 1.68 days/stay, in 2019 - 1.73 days/stay, in 2020 - 1.99 days/stay. This increase of almost 30%, compared to 2017, was mainly due to the desire to escape the people from the city, in nature, in the conditions of beauty and purity of the rustic environment in the village of Perișor, after more than a year of isolation conditions, imposed by the pandemic.

Table 6. Average length of stay during 2017-2020

Year	Number of tourists	Overnights	Average length of stay
2017	275	373	1.36
2018	237	398	1.68
2019	270	468	1.73
2020	135	269	1.99

Source: processing according to data collected from the field and from NIS [23].

f) *Accommodation capacity in operation*

As can be seen from Table 7, the accommodation capacity in operation (places-days) of Simona boarding house during 2017-2020, is influenced by the number of operating days of the boarding house, as follows: 2017 - 256 days/year, 2018 - 245 days/year, 2019 - 270 days/year, 2020 - 200 days/year. It should be noted that, in general, the guesthouse cannot operate all year round because maintenance activities must be carried out on the accommodation and serving meals. Moreover, in 2020, special attention was paid to the sanitation of the boarding house, which led to the unavailability of

operation for several days. Thus, in the year: 2017 - the accommodation capacity was 2,560 tourists, compared to the number of operating days, in 2018 - the accommodation capacity was 2,450 tourists, compared to the number of operating days, in 2019 - was 2,700 tourists, compared to the number of operating days, and in 2020 - the accommodation capacity was only 2,000 tourists compared to the number of operating days.

Table 7. Accommodation capacity in operation (places-days) during 2017-2020

Year	Number of operating days	Accommodation capacity in operation
2017	256	2,560
2018	245	2,450
2019	270	2,700
2020	200	2,000

Source: processing according to data collected from the field and from NIS [23].

g) *The maximum theoretical offer* at the boarding home is 365 units-days, for each year, but as can be seen in Table 7, its actual offer varied according to the number of operating days, which was 256, in 2017, it increased to 270, in 2019, after which in the peak year of the pandemic, it decreased to only 200 days.

h) *The characterization of the efficiency of using the technical-material accommodation base* was performed according to the following indicators [16. 9]: Usage index agritourist boarding house % ( $I_u$ ) and Degree of occupancy agritourist boarding house % ( $D_o$ ).

Figure 1 shows that the utilization index ( $I_u$ ) of the accommodation capacity in operation, of the boarding house in the period 2017-2020, is 40.1% in 2017, 38.50% in 2018, 46.8% in 2019 and 18.2% in 2020. The index was relatively constant, keeping a percentage between 38% - 47%, in the period 2017 - 2019, but in 2020 there was a sharp decrease, thus reaching only 18.2%. Also, from the same figure it is observed that the occupancy rate of the accommodation unit  $G_o$  (%) in the period 2017-2020, is 34.5% in 2017, 44.7% in 2018, 58.6% in 2019 and 26.3 % in 2020. It increased steadily during the period under study, the highest percentage being achieved

in 2019 - 58.6%, but in 2020 there was a sharp decrease, so the occupancy rate reaching only 26.3 %, a phenomenon due mainly to the severe conditions of the pandemic, when strict rules were imposed on the occupancy rate of the boarding house, depending on the evolution of the COVID infection rate, at national and local level.

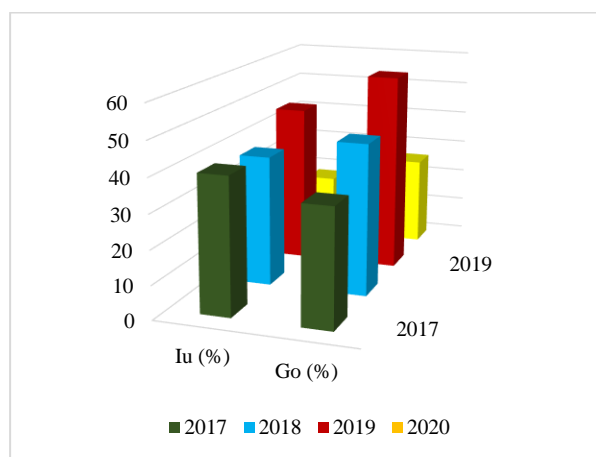


Fig. 1. Evolution of the utilization index (Iu) and the degree of occupation (Go) of Simona boarding house, 2017-2020

Source: processing according to data collected from the field and from NIS [23].

In conclusion, the “Simona” boarding house, located in Perișor commune, Dolj county, enjoyed a harmonious and ascending path in terms of the main quality indices that characterize the tourist services offered. The number of tourists has increased from year to year, with the improvement of the interior and exterior of the boarding house and the services offered, but also with the development of the commune. The boarding house awaits tourists with home-made dishes with natural products from their own production or from other local farmers. The hosts are at the disposal of the tourists to offer information about the attractions in the surroundings, but also with relaxing outdoor experiences and to tell some stories about the history and evolution of the town and the historical province of Oltenia.

## CONCLUSIONS

The analysis showed that rural tourism in the area is not developed according to the demand of the domestic and international tourism

market, the existing tourist infrastructure does not fully meet the requirements of tourists in terms of quantity and quality of accommodation and recreation places, facing currently with technical, financial and educational difficulties. At county and Perișor commune level, the aim is especially the large-scale development of tourist activities aimed at protecting and conserving the natural environment and built as: agrotourism, rural tourism and ecotourism, which make full use of Natura 2000 sites, as a sustainable opportunity for development and evolution, for humans and nature. The tourist potential of the area adjacent to Perișor commune is mainly focused on the Danube River where representative for tourism is: water mirror for cruises, boat trips or sports competitions, sport fishing area, beach areas, forest fund adjacent to the river, for rest - recreation or sport hunting.

Rural tourism and agrotourism in the area are two areas that can be developed by arranging leisure centers, rest centers, hunting camps, children's camps, hotels, guesthouses. The absence of natural landscapes and anthropic transformations have led to a low tourist potential which is offset by meadow landscapes adjacent to the Danube, with forest patches, sand dunes, water holes that attract sport fishermen, existing wineries and vineyards but especially the uniqueness and beauty of the traditional folk costumes. From the point of view of the existing anthropic resources in the area, they can be easily completed with the existing tourist attractions, first of all in the city of Craiova, Calafat and Băilești. Here, tourists can make day trips with the transport provided by the host, because the distances are short, and the experience of a day for culturalization spent in these cities can have a value of significant spiritual enrichment and be unforgettable, due to the tourist anthropic objectives with heritage value that can be visited.

Regarding the main quality indicators analyzed at Simona boarding house, it can be seen that it has a modern and very good quality management, quickly adapted to the specific, heavy conditions of the pandemic, which have been a touchstone for many

structures in the area and even from the country. As can be seen from this analysis in the run-up to the pandemic, the signs that characterize the quality of tourism in the boarding house have increased progressively, year by year, due to quality and efficient management, except for 2020, when due to restrictive conditions regarding the safety of tourist traffic depending on the infection rate, they decreased significantly, correlating with the level of restrictions imposed in this area and county and with the additional safety, hygiene and cleanliness measures imposed in such conditions.

The good quality of the tourist services offered at this boarding house is very clear from the index of use and the level of occupancy, which as can be seen from the data presented were above the national average, which was about 35%, and at hotel of about 40%, at the level of agrotourism boarding houses, of only 17%. At Simona boarding house, the occupancy rate reached a maximum level of 58.6%, in 2019, after a constant increase due to the quality tourist services offered and the diversification of the range of leisure and free time activities. Occupancy decreased significantly in the year of the 2020 pandemic, by about 50%, but it remained above the national average occupancy of all tourist reception facilities, which fell by 11%, in 2020, standing at about 22%. In 2020, as shown in Figure 1, it was lower, only 26.3%, but above the national average and well above the average of the agritourism boarding houses, at national level, which shows that the hosts of boarding houses are handled very well all the visitors who crossed their threshold, respecting all the additional norms of quality and hygiene, imposed in the pandemic conditions.

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