

STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON EXPERIENTIAL TOURISM AND TRANSFORMATIVE TOURISM

Liviu MARCUTA, Mihaela Gratiela ONEA (STANCIU), Alina MARCUTA

University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Bucharest, 59 Marasti Boulevard, District 1, 011464, Bucharest, Romania, Phone: +40213182564, Fax:+40213182888, Mobile:+40723 2923 41, Emails: liviumarcuta@yahoo.com, mihaela.stanciu@mikatravel.ro, alinamarcuta@yahoo.com

Corresponding author: alinamarcuta@yahoo.com

Abstract

Over time, the way people have practiced tourism has evolved, the reasons being both income growth, increased mobility due to globalization, but also a change in thinking or changing priorities in terms of living. In this way it has gone from the simple leisure in tourist destinations, to more complex concepts such as ecological tourism, slow tourism, experiential tourism, and now to the concept of transformative tourism, which during the Covid-19 pandemic it seemed to be even more current than before, considering the fact that this moment was considered to be one of resetting, of rethinking the way in which humanity will continue its activity and life. Therefore, in this paper the purpose was to analyze the way in which experiential and transformative tourism have evolved worldwide, but also the ways in which these forms of tourism can be developed for the benefit of tourists and destination countries. The research methodology involved the bibliographic study of the literature, the collection of information from domestic and international databases, their processing using statistical indicators, their interpretation and the formulation of conclusions on the development prospects of these forms of tourism. The data analyzed in the work show that tourism in general recorded losses during 2020 and 2021, and that, in turn, transformational tourism recorded losses. The advantages of transformational tourism are real, they bring numerous personal benefits, but also related to environmental protection, contributions to the sustainable development of less developed areas. The conclusions we reached demonstrate the fact that there are different forms of transformational tourism, both in the world and in Romania, but they are not sufficiently regulated. Their development could contribute both to the sustainable development of tourist areas, but also to the promotion of a tourism that is much closer to the aspirations of the new generations.

Key words: transformative tourism, experiential tourism, sustainability

INTRODUCTION

As people managed to meet their basic needs, they wanted more and had the resources to meet more and more complex needs, reaching their cognitive needs: knowledge, exploitation, understanding, self-realization or self-transcendence. These needs contribute to personal development, one of the aspects to which the present generations attach great importance.

Therefore, the development of modern society has contributed not only to the development of tourism, but also to the development of practices that contribute not only to protecting the environment and reducing resource consumption, but also to reconnecting with origins, ensuring physical health and mental development of the people, which together

means the development of the hospitality industry. Over time, there has been talk of concepts such as eco-tourism, sustainable tourism, slow tourism, experiential tourism, as modern forms of tourism, and at present the term transformational tourism is current [8].

If experiential tourism, which is not a new form of tourism, but rather a rediscovered one, is defined by 4 factors, namely: short duration of stay; satisfaction with the tourist experience; the interaction between the tourist and the locals or natives; environmental protection [2, 5, 14], being a form of tourism that is based on cultural, gastronomic, social values, transformational tourism also explores the emotional side, relying more on emotion than on experiences, more on living the moment, than on sharing that experience with others through social media, which requires

transforming the way the hospitality industry responds to these new challenges.

Technology also contributes to this. The fact that at the moment tourists are better informed, they are much more adaptable and always looking for authentic things is one of the advantages of the development of technology, of the way of communication, of globalization. And most of the time, authenticity is related to tradition, emotion, spending time offline and creating unique experiences that lead to meeting those cognitive needs.

Therefore, transformative tourism based on experience and innovation, can contribute to the development of the existing tourist offer at regional level, attracting tourists concerned about culture and environment, but also tourists who through experiences will be able to benefit from a development process, regardless of age who have it or their social status [12].

Therefore, the difference between experiential tourism and transformative tourism lies in the fact that tourists want more than an unforgettable experience, they pursue more intensely the inner transformation, knowledge of another culture, but borrowing that culture, deepening it, so as to there is a post-travel effect with favorable implications for the community they come from. That is why transformative tourism is considered to be that form of tourism that produces lasting changes, significant changes in the lives of those who practice it [3].

The 3 elements that underlie transformative tourism are considered to be by Luke Bailes: authenticity - understood as a way to protect the environment and the local community; the connection - with nature, with the local culture and personalization - because each one of us is unique, which makes the travel preferences different.

Moreover, authenticity is linked to tradition, emotion, spending time offline and creating unique experiences that lead to the satisfaction of cognitive needs.

Therefore, this form of tourism opens new perspectives, while challenging the field of hospitality to find ways to organize leisure,

much more creative, allowing tourists to discover both their passions and their destination suitable tourist. In addition, it must provide them with additional information on how they can visit their respective destinations and how they will influence the environment, which makes this form of tourism a much more responsible tourism.

Transforming tourism can aim to learn about traditional cuisine, folk customs, food festivals, volunteer experiences, yoga retreats or other forms of wellness tourism. To these can be added "stayable experiences", "animal experiences" or space tourism.

The practice of transformative tourism does not exclude the cities from the organization of such routes or the technology, which used properly, can simplify the development of the stay and the observance of the criteria for defining it.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The analysis of the forms of transformative and experiential tourism was made on the basis of some indicators that characterize the tourist activity, namely:

- (i) total number of trips worldwide;
- (ii) recorded revenues and expenditures, on different forms of tourism;
- (iii) the share of tourism, by regions of the world;
- (iv) the share of tourist volunteering, by categories of activities;
- (v) the total number of tourists, for Romania;
- (vi) the total number of overnight stays, for Romania

Data on the global situation were collected from reports published by the Global Wellness Institute, as well as from other international databases, and those on Romania were taken from statistics published by the National Institute of Statistics.

The study took into account the period 2017-2020.

Fixed base indicators as well as structure indicators were used for data processing and interpretation. Their calculation was made according to the following formulas:

- Fixed base index [4]:
 $I\% = (X_t/X_0) \times 100$ (1)
 where:
 - X_t - the level of the indicator X in the year t,
 - X_0 - the level of the indicator X in the basis year.”
 - The structural index (SI%)[4]:
 $SI (\%) = \frac{f}{\Sigma f}$ (2)
 “where:
 f- the size of the analyzed phenomenon,
 Σf – the volume of the analyzed item.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Starting from the existing data in the domestic and international databases, we proposed that in this paper we analyze how different forms

of transformative or experiential tourism (wellness tourism, spa tourism, thermal tourism, volunteer tourism) are carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic. Wellness tourism is defined as any form of travel associated with the activity of maintaining or improving personal well-being [7, 15]. Although compared to other forms of tourism, wellness tourism was less affected than other forms of tourism, the general data show that if in 2017 its value amounts to 617 US \$ trillion, in 2019 the increase was 17% (720 US \$ trillion). The Covid-19 pandemic, the closure of borders and the suspension or limitation of travel brought the value of wellness tourism to just US \$ 438 trillion in 2020, a 39% reduction from the previous year.

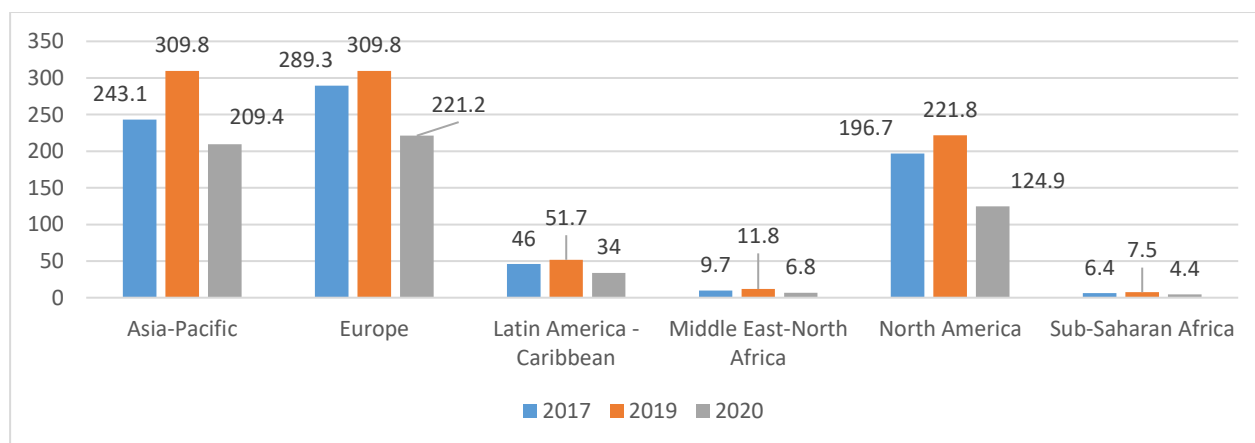


Fig. 1. Number of trips in wellness tourism, by geographical region in the world
 Source: Own processing [6].

Data released by the GWI show that in Sub-Sharan Africa, Middle East-North Africa and Latin America - Caribbean are regions where wellness tourism is not as well represented as other regions of the world. Moreover, this form of tourism is based on international tourists, compared to other regions where domestic tourism also contributes to its practice. Globally, in 2020 there will be a decrease in the number of wellness trips of 36%. The smallest decreases were recorded in Asia-Pacific (32%), and the largest decrease in North America (44%). However, Europe and Latin America also had decreases of 32%, due to the fact that wellness tourists are mainly domestic tourists. Another characteristic of

this category of tourists is that they spend larger amounts of money compared to the amounts spent on other forms of tourism. Global wellness tourism spending fell by 60% in 2020 compared to 2019. However, the largest declines were in Latin America-Caribbean, Middle East-North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa where spending fell almost in half. The smallest decrease was in Europe, this being 35%, this being due both to the travel restrictions that appeared later, to the relaxation of these restrictions during the holidays, but also to the change of travel destinations from Asia-Pacific areas for example, to areas closer to the country of origin.

Table 1. The situation of wellness tourism expenditures, in the period 2017-2020, by regions (US\$ billions)

	2017	2019	2020
Asia-Pacific	119	145	80
Europe	217	248	160
Latin America - Caribbean	28	32	16
Middle East-North Africa	10	12	6
North America	239	277	170
Sub-Saharan Africa	5	6	3
WORLD	618	720	435

Source: Own processing [6].

Another form of tourism is spa tourism. According to the GWI definition, spa tourism is that form of tourism that provides therapeutic and professional services in order to create well-being, not only by ensuring the health of the body, but also by renewing the spirit and mind [6].

At the level of 2019, there were over 165 thousand tourist units in the world that offered spa services and that obtained revenues of approximately 111 billion US \$, increasing by

18% compared to 2017. In 2020, however, they decreased by almost 40%.

Data for the period 2017-2020, by region, show that again the largest decreases in income in 2020 were recorded in the Middle East - North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa regions, which were reduced by half compared to 2019. In North America, Asia-Pacific and Europe, spa tourism revenues fell by about 38%, and in North America they fell by 35%.

Table 2. The situation of spa tourism revenues, in the period 2017-2020, by regions (US\$ billions)

	2017	2019	2020
Asia-Pacific	26.4	31.3	19
Europe	33.2	39.8	25.1
Latin America - Caribbean	6.5	7.4	4.1
Middle East-North Africa	2.7	3.8	2.0
North America	22.8	26.1	16.4
Sub-Saharan Africa	1.5	2.1	1.1
WORLD	93.1	110.5	67.7

Source: Own processing [6].

In turn, thermal or spa tourism is that form of tourism that creates well-being or recreation by offering services that consist of treatments that use thermal waters or mineral waters.

Statistical data show that in 2019 there were over 34 thousand such tourist units in the world, the largest share of which (76%) being in the Asia-Pacific region.

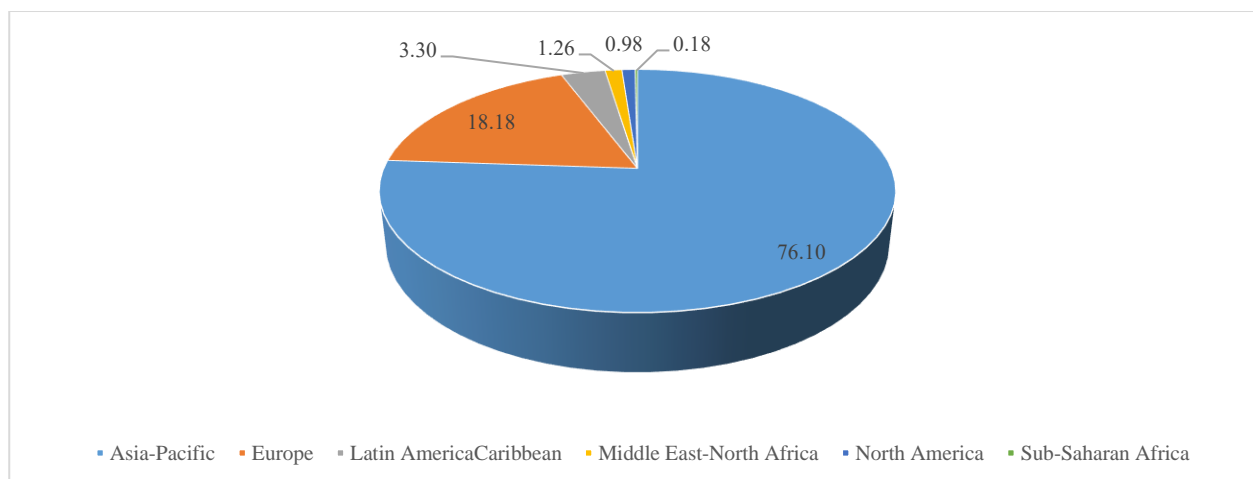


Fig. 2. The share of thermal tourist units, by regions, in 2019

Source: Own processing [1].

Europe also owns more than 18% of its total, while North America is close to 1%. The sub-Saharan region of Africa is the least developed in terms of thermal tourism, given the climatic and hydrographic characteristics of the area. The revenues registered worldwide from thermal tourism highlight the same trend as in the case of wellness and spa tourism, that is, a decrease in the period 2017-2020 (Table 3). However, the largest decrease in 2020 compared to 2019 was in the Middle

East - North Africa region (60%) and also in the Sub-Saharan Africa (55%) and Latin America - Caribbean (50%) regions.

The Asia-Pacific and Europe regions, as regions that are best represented from the point of view of this form of tourism, the decrease of incomes being of 38%, respectively 39%, which, although significant, ranks it among the least affected region providing thermal tourism services.

Table 3. The situation of thermal tourism revenues, in the period 2017-2020, by regions (US\$ billions)

	2017	2019	2020
Asia-Pacific	31.6	36.7	22.7
Europe	21.7	24.1	14.6
Latin America - Caribbean	1.5	1.6	0.8
Middle East-North Africa	0.5	0.5	0.2
North America	0.7	0.9	0.7
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.08	0.09	0.04
WORLD	56.08	63.89	39.04

Source: Own processing [6].

Another form of transformational tourism is volunteer tourism, a niche tourism, which offers its practitioners the opportunity not only to travel to different parts of the world, but at the same time to live new experiences, away from established tourist destinations and which it allows them to put their altruism into practice in relation to individualistic or consumerist practices [13]. Volunteer tourism is considered to be the best way to experience what is called cultural immersion. Volunteer tourism has been criticized by the media for the fact that in many cases other

interests were hidden behind volunteering or for the fact that the principles of volunteering were often violated, which slowed down the pace of development of this form of tourism. Among the advantages of volunteer tourism are: increasing social inclusion, increasing the income of the native population and increasing the standard of living, etc. [1]. The practice of this form of tourism presupposes the existence of three actors, namely: tourists, voluntary organizations and local communities.

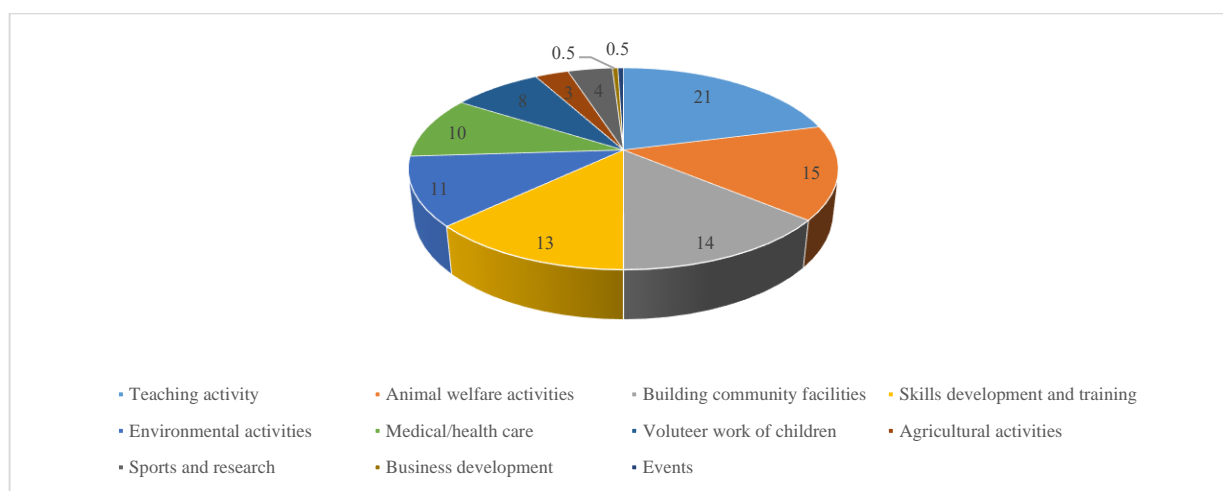


Fig. 3. The structure of volunteering
 Source: Own processing [1].

The APEC report published in 2018 shows that the structure of activities in which volunteers are involved in areas where they provide support is diverse, starting with teaching activities (21%) or skills development and training (15%), but also environmental activities (11%), medical care (10%), sports and research (4%) or business development (0.5%). Volunteering can be combined with tourist activities: safaris, adventure activities (bungee jumping, diving, climbing, surfing, boating, rafting etc.).

Worldwide, however, statistics show that in 2017, volunteering was worth US \$ 173 trillion. This form of tourism is developed primarily in the less developed regions of the world, which places it in Sub-Saharan Africa

or North Africa. But there are also other countries in the world where volunteering takes the form of tourism.

The Covid-19 pandemic also affected volunteer tourism, which on the one hand faced reduced mobility, and on the other hand the accelerated support provided by international organizations to countries with vulnerable health systems and which needed additional support during this period.

Romania also registered a decrease in the revenues obtained from these forms of transformative tourism.

In Romania, there are, in 2020, a number of 620 tourist units that offer thermal or spa services and that total a number of 36,554 accommodation places.

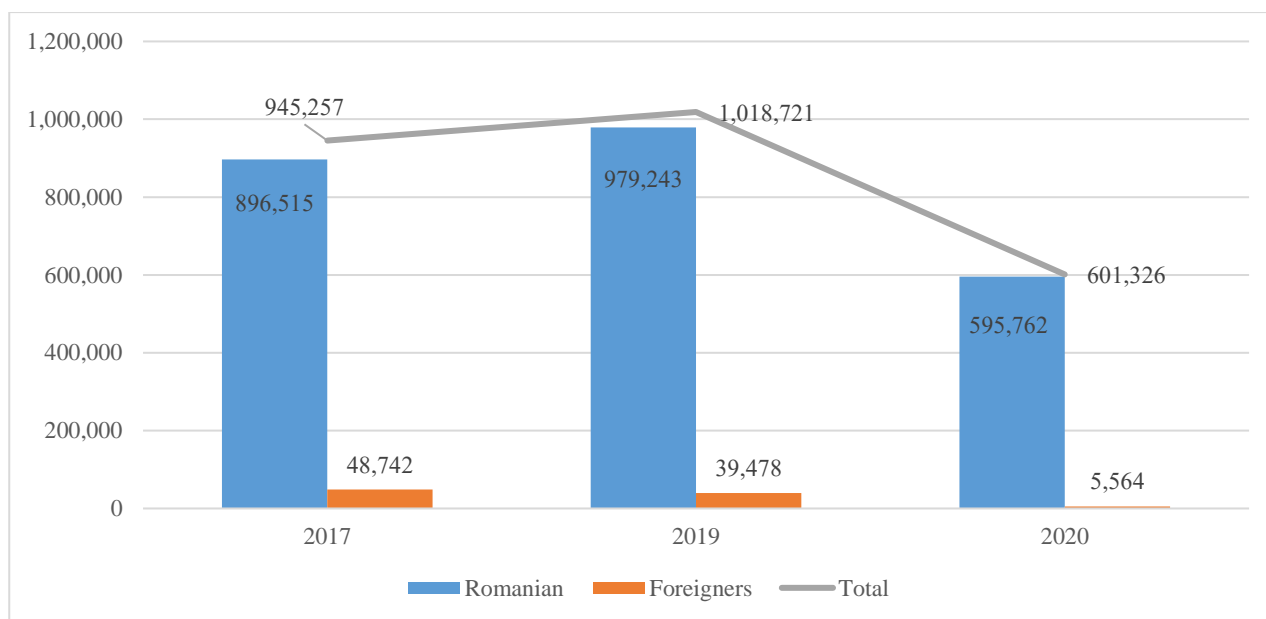


Fig. 4. The evolution of the number of tourists, during 2017-2020, in Romania
 Source: Own processing [3, 9, 10, 11].

Although in 2019 compared to 2017 Romanian tourists became more concerned about their physical and mental well-being, so that their number increased by 9%, in 2020 the decrease was in line with the world trend, so that the total number of tourists who used services thermal or spa decreased by 41%. Even if at the domestic level the decrease was 39%, the 2 percent were due to the fact that the number of foreign tourists coming for such treatments decreased from over 39

thousand in 2019 to just over 5 thousand in 2020, which in percent represents about 80%. In terms of the number of overnight stays, they had reached almost 4.5 million in 2019, which means an average per stay of 4.3 nights. In 2020, however, the number of overnight stays has decreased much more than the number of tourists, the decrease being 50% for total tourists and 85% for foreign tourists. For Romanian tourists, the number of overnight stays decreased by 49%, which means that the average stay was 3.7 days.

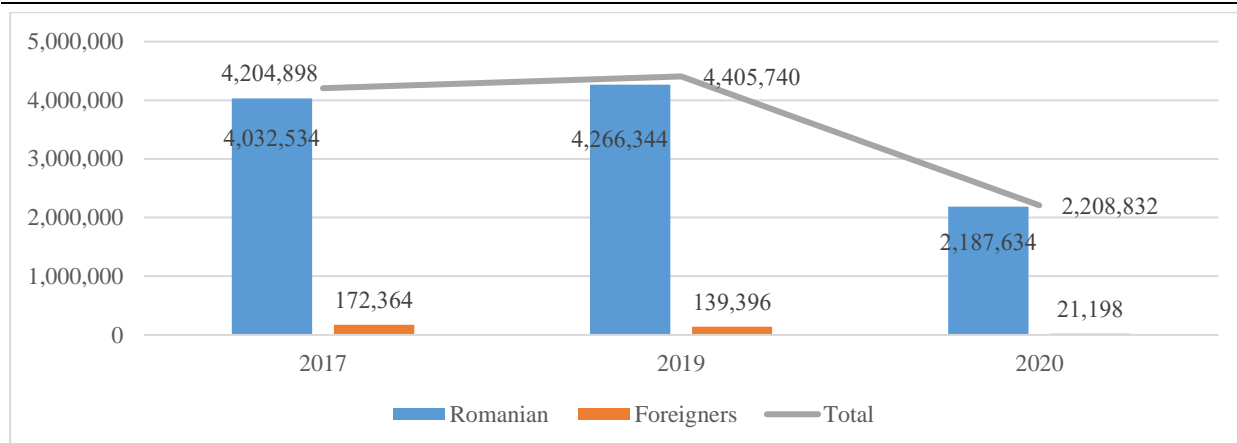


Fig. 5. The evolution of the number of overnight stays, in the period 2017-2020, in Romania
 Source: Own processing [3, 9, 10, 11].

Regarding the other forms of tourism considered as transformative and experiential, there are not enough data in the databases to allow us to perform an analysis, but correlating the data reported at national level and those existing worldwide we can appreciate that they are part of the same trend. On the other hand, as we showed earlier, transformative tourism takes different forms, and one of them is "open-mind" tourism, a tourism in which people live in cohesion forming a tolerant, diverse, welcoming society that combines religions, cultures and traditions.

In one of the rankings made at European level, the city of Sibiu is among these "open-mind" places, being on the 8th place in a ranking of 15 destinations. Sibiu is considered a cosmopolitan city, with a sustainable tourism, with a high quality of life, with a rich cultural heritage, with modern infrastructure and countless tourist facilities. Along with Sibiu and other cities in Romania, they can fall into this category: Cluj, Oradea, Timisoara, Sighisoara, which will create new opportunities to attract foreign tourists, but also Romanian tourists.

CONCLUSIONS

Transformational and experiential tourism is not only a way to travel, but also personal development, interaction with different cultural environments, learning a new language, developing communication skills, thinking, access to new and creative ideas.

As in any other field of activity, tourism also registered losses between 2020 and 2021. The decrease in the number of tourists and incomes was much higher in 2020, the year in which the restrictions related to mobility were much higher than in 2021. De also, in the transformational and experiential tourism there were decreases, as well as in the other forms of tourism. Although the decreases existed in all regions of the world, they were more or less affected areas, the reason being both the level of development of various forms of tourist services in those areas, but the degree of mobility required by national regulations.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had the effect of recognizing that we need physical and mental well-being to meet the new challenges we face in the modern world. Holidays are not only a period of pause, but also of transformation, of our care, of reflection on holistic concepts regarding our own life, social activity, environment, creativity, nutrition, etc. and which aim to reduce the stress we face on a daily basis.

After the period of isolation, of reduced mobility, people felt the need to resume their pre-pandemic travels, but were much more concerned about their health and transformation.

Therefore, we consider that the transformative and experiential tourism will recover in the immediate period what they lost in the years 2020 and 2021, there being possibilities for their continuous development.

The hospitality industry, based on surveying the preferences of its customers, will be able to create customized tourist packages that meet the deeper requirements of its customers, which will change both the way of practicing tourism and the way of response of operators in this field.

REFERENCES

- [1]APEC Tourism Working Group, 2018, Voluntourism Best Practices: Promoting Inclusive Community-Based Sustainable Tourism Initiatives, APEC Publication number: APEC#218-TO-01.1
- [2]Carli, P., Giordano, R., Montacchini, E., Tedesco, S., 2020, Experiential tourism. Research, experimentation and innovation, Essays and Researches, Palermo University Press, Palermo (Italy).
- [3]Cultour is Capital, 2018, TraCeS – Transformative Tourism across European Capital of Culture, file:///C:/Users/Hp/Documents/Alina/cercetare/2022/turism%20gastronomic/!!Tranformativ.pdf, Accessed on 10.02.2022.
- [4]David, L., 2010, Studies and researches regarding the optimization of agricultural companies dimension in Romania. Ph D thesis (Studii și cercetări privind optimizarea dimensiunii exploatațiilor agricole din România, Teza de doctorat), UASVM Bucharest.
- [5]Dorobantu, D. M., Marcuta, A., Marcuta, L., 2019, Globalization and tourism. Case study–Romania, Scientific Papers Series Management, Economic Engineering in Agriculture and Rural Development, Vol. 19(3), 197-202.
- [6]GWI, 2021, The Global Wellness Economy: Looking Beyond COVID, Global Wellness Institute. https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/GWI-WE-Monitor-2021_final-digital.pdf, Accessed on 11.02.2022.
- [7]Marcuta, L., Popescu, A., Marcuta, A., Tindeche, C., Smedescu, D., 2021, The impact of the Covid-19 crisis on tourism and its recover possibilities, Scientific Papers Series Management, Economic Engineering in Agriculture and Rural Development Vol. 21(1), 495-500.
- [8]Marcuta, A., Marcuta, L., Popescu, A., Tindeche, C., Tudor, V., Smedescu, D., 2020, Possibilities of development of the slow tourism concept in Romania. Scientific Papers. Series "Management, Economic Engineering in Agriculture and rural development", Vol. 20(4), 331-338.
- [9]National Institute of Statistics, INSSE, 2018, Romania's tourism. Statistically brief, https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/field/publicatii/turismul_romaniei_2018_breviar_statistic.pdf, Accessed on 11.02.2022.
- [10]National Institute of Statistics, INSSE, 2020, Romania's tourism. Statistically brief, https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/field/publicatii/turismul_romaniei_2017-2019_breviar_statistic.pdf, Accessed on 11.02.2022.
- [11]National Institute of Statistics, INSSE, 2021, Romania's tourism. Statistically brief, <https://insse.ro/cms/ro/content/turismul-rom%C3%A2niei-breviar-statistic-4>, Accessed on 11.02.2022.
- [12]Petrovan, M., Ganea, S., 2018, The potential of intelligent specialization in the field of tourism in the Center Region (Potentialul de specializare inteligenta in domeniul turismului in regiunea Centru), <https://uefiscdi.gov.ro/resource-85499>, Accessed on 9.02.2022.
- [13]Salvador, M.A., 2020, Volunteer tourism. Characterisation and debates of a global phenomenon, Alba Sud Editorial, Contrast Reports Series, no. 13, 2020, Barcelona.
- [14]Tedesco, S., Montacchini, E., Inssina, L., 2022, Experimenting with new ways of circular and participatory design: the case study of a traditional Sicilian architecture transformed for experiential tourism, Sustainability 2022, 14(3), 1360.
- [15]Yeung, O., Johnston, K., 2018, Global Wellness Tourism Economy. Miami, FL.: Global Wellness Institute. <https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/industry-research/global-wellness-tourism-economy/>, Accessed on 10.02.2022.