

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC ON RURAL TOURISM IN EUROPE

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Abstract

This paper seeks to analyze the development of rural tourism in Europe and the tourist specifics of countries with renowned destinations, focusing on the impact of COVID-19 from 2019 to 2022 and its influence on tourism trends. By utilizing data and documentation from the pandemic period, we aim to identify emerging trends in Europe and evaluate the sector's ability to recover to pre-pandemic levels. The analysis and conclusions are inevitably shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic period, with its effects compared against specified parameters. The statistical analysis, utilizing specific indices, shows that the pandemic had a negative impact on tourism activities, resulting in significant declines and underscoring the sector's vulnerability during crises.

Key words: rural tourism, COVID-19 pandemic, tourist flow, number of overnight stays, Europe

INTRODUCTION

The World Tourism Organization defines tourism as "travelling carried out for the purpose of recreation, rest or business", and rural tourism as "a form of tourism that includes any tourist activity organized and conducted in rural areas by the local population, capitalizing on local tourist resources (natural, cultural-historical, human), as well as facilities, tourist structures, including guesthouses and agro-tourism farms." [2].

"Rural tourism is a concept that includes all the tourist activities that take place in the countryside", this being a statement accepted by most partners in the world of rural tourism [3, 8].

Rural tourism is done on a small scale, in their own households, by family members, as a source of income or as a supplement to it.

By early 2020, tourism had a global growth rate of at least 3% or higher [15]. This growth contributed to the development of rural areas in Europe and consequently boosted the rural tourism sector [1]. Rural tourism has

developed in recent years as an alternative economic branch, especially in rural regions with a rich cultural heritage, special and as natural landscapes, or activities specific to the rural environment [16].

At the same time, rural tourism created new jobs, compensating for losses in the agricultural or forestry sectors, which did not develop as much.

In countries where infrastructure and transport have been developed, rural tourism has seen significant growth since the 1970s. Tourism can stimulate and enhance various aspects of the tourism industry, as well as other economic sectors, both directly and indirectly contributing to economic growth.[11].

The COVID-19 pandemic began in early 2020 and spread rapidly globally, causing major disruptions in all economic sectors, including tourism. Rural tourism, characterized by activities and accommodation in rural areas, often in isolated and less populated places, was the one affected. This form of tourism is vital to many European rural communities, providing an essential source of income and employment opportunities [8]. In recent years,

because of the national and international recognition of some protected areas, such as UNESCO's conservation programs, rural tourism has attracted more and more tourists every year [10].

An important role in attracting tourists, in the rural environment, is represented by the traditional character, the hospitality of the hosts and the quality of the products, the prices and tariffs lower than in the urban area, the proximity to nature, aspects that contribute to the satisfaction of the visitors and make them return. The promotion mix in the tourism field involves, among other things, the establishment of a promotion policy, a strategy for presenting tourist services but at the same time attracting as many tourists as possible to increase the efficiency of tourism [8].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study utilized statistical analysis of data sourced from Eurostat, the World Tourism Organization, national statistical institutes of various countries, as well as specialized websites and articles. This data pertained to the number of tourists and the GDP of countries where rural tourism significantly impacts the economy. Additionally, bibliographic research of specialized literature was conducted, enabling comparative analysis and providing a robust interpretation of the data.

After the SARS epidemic of 2003 and the global economic crisis of 2009, the Covid-19 pandemic, 2020-2022, seems to be the biggest crisis to affect the tourism industry.

In Europe, too, the tourism crisis was keenly felt, which also significantly influenced rural tourism, which was manifested by a sudden drop in demand, which tended to zero, during the lockdown period, which led to the closure of many related activities this sector and automatically this drastically affected the labor market [14]. Analyzing the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on rural tourism, we want to identify some ways for people to spend their free time in an enjoyable and comforting way [9].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In 2020, many European countries implemented stringent travel restrictions such as border closures and mandatory quarantines, significantly limiting both international and domestic travel. These measures directly impacted rural tourism, leading to substantial declines in tourist numbers and a consequent drop in sector-generated revenue. According to the UNWTO, international arrivals decreased by 74% in 2020, the year most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic [3]. In 2020, numerous European countries enforced strict travel restrictions, including closing borders and mandating quarantines, which significantly curtailed both international and domestic travel. These measures had a direct effect on rural tourism, resulting in a sharp decline in tourist numbers and a substantial reduction in sector revenue [10].

In certain countries, like Germany and Ireland, tourism businesses have received substantial government support to prevent widespread insolvency and the loss of thousands of jobs [12, 6].

In Europe, tourism represents 10% of GDP. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a drastic impact, serving as an economic shock to the GDP of many countries, with the effect being much more severe in nations where the tourism sector is highly developed. Countries such as France, Spain, Italy, Germany, Greece, and Great Britain are among those significantly affected. According to the World Tourism Organization, during the lockdown imposed in 2020, the effect was a 98% decrease in the number of international tourists compared to the same period in 2019. In Germany, the number of overnight stays in March 2020 decreased by 90% compared to the same month in 2019, followed by a 50% decline during the summer months. Overall, throughout 2020, there was a 60% reduction in the number of accommodation places compared to 2019 [12]. In Italy, in 2020, the number of tourist arrivals decreased by approximately 60% compared to 2019, a percentage which was not recorded until 1960, when air travel was considered a luxury.

Table 1. Number of overnight stays in tourist accommodation units during 2018-2022 (thousand)

Country / Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Austria	125,229	127,891	79,133	66,709	115,063
Croatia	89,568	91,178	40,771	70,172	90,005
France	442,760	446,554	257,875	324,389	449,778
Germany	419,556	436,955	260,758	266,103	400,409
Greece	142,940	143,594	38,475	73,887	132,746
Italy	428,845	436,739	208,447	289,178	412,009
Ireland	35,071	32,581	16,140	14,930	34,931
Netherlands	116,082	123,443	85,415	101,094	132,638
Portugal	74,408	77,594	30,158	42,444	76,948
Romania	28,461	29,890	14,454	20,658	26,614
Spain	466,949	469,814	144,677	259,580	451,625

Source: Eurostat [5, 7].

Additionally, Spain experienced substantial negative impacts on turnover, with Madrid and Barcelona being the most affected areas. Across the European Union, tourism was severely impacted during the pandemic, with varying effects observed in different countries, as illustrated in Table 1. According to EUROSTAT, tourism was one of the most economically affected sectors during the Covid-19 pandemic. Within the European Union, in 2020, the number of nights spent in tourist accommodation decreased by 51% compared to 2019. The EU accommodation sector started to recover in 2021, with 28% more nights spent compared to 2020, reaching nearly two-thirds of 2019 pre-pandemic levels [13].

In 2020, at the level of the European Union, tourist trips were made, for personal purposes, with several 51 million fewer inhabitants, compared to 2019, in which 243 million Europeans made at least one tourist trip with overnight stays. In percentage terms, this number decreased by 21% to 193 million in 2020. Expressed as a share of the population (aged 15 and over), 52% participated in tourism in 2020, down from 65% in 2019 [5]. The evolution of overnight stays in the period before, during and after COVID-19, of a selection of countries, with more frequented tourist destinations, was as follows [4]:

From the data provided by EUROSTAT, we can see that in countries like Austria and Ireland, the downward trend continued in 2021, and countries like Greece, Spain or Croatia recovered quite easily, having an upward trend from 2021 compared to 2020.

At the level of 2022, the year in which the restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic no longer existed, growth continued in all the countries analyzed.

To emphasize this point, the number of overnight stays was compared using 2019 as a benchmark, given it was a peak year. This calculation aimed to assess the tourism sector's recovery capacity in the analyzed countries and to highlight the impact of COVID-19 on this sector.

The study will be continued in 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic reached its highest levels, to observe the tourist's preference for domestic tourism, in favor of international tourism, as evidenced by the data in Table 2.

Table 2. Share of the number of overnight stays in tourist accommodation units, in the period 2018-2022

Country	Total no. nights (thousands)	Internal %	International %
Austria	61,846	59.2	40.8
Croatia	19,449	78.9	21.1
France	849,090	90.8	9.2
Germany	777,642	58.6	41.4
Greece	56,908	93.8	6.2
Italy	191,721	86.2	13.8
Ireland	30,872	57.9	42.1
Netherlands	159,862	58.1	41.9
Portugal	60,603	90.8	9.2
Romania	42,926	93.2	6.8
Spain	388,330	90.9	9.1

Source: Own calculation based on Source: Eurostat [5].

As part of the research, a graphical representation was created to illustrate the preferences of tourists within the European Union for destinations within their country of residence during the pandemic.

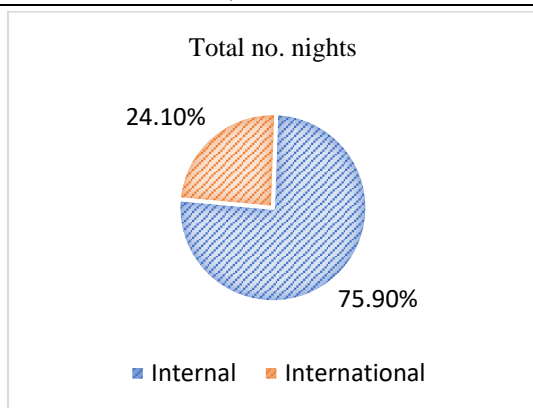


Fig. 1. Total number of nights spent in tourist accommodation units, in 2020 at domestic and international level.

Source: Own graph based on EUROSTAT data [5].

Table 3. Distribution of overnight stays in tourist accommodation units in 2020

Country	Total	Cities	Towns & sub.	Rural
Austria	1,038,263	117,432	191,424	729,407
Croatia	1,085,713	99,584	368,331	617,798
France	5,058,665	1,134,577	1,099,053	2,825,035
Germany	3,467,225	945,573	1,117,954	1,403,698
Greece	1,019,052	80,429	199,993	738,630
Italy	5,120,175	1,012,329	2,341,562	1,766,284
Ireland	215,499	74,830	51,951	88,718
Netherlands	1,406,166	304,042	516,463	585,661
Portugal	650,934	209,914	254,063	186,957
Romania	358,134	111,125	131,059	115,950
Spain	3,750,449	990,789	1,836,019	923,641

Source: Extract from the EUROSTAT [5].

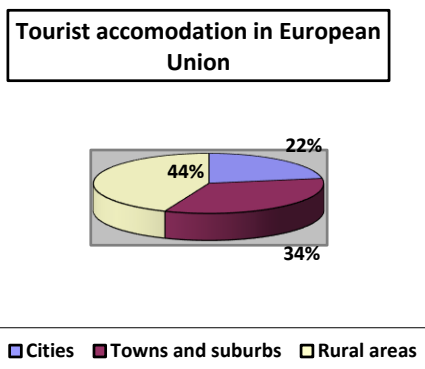


Fig. 2. Total number of overnight stays in tourist accommodation units in 2020 (urban vs. rural)

Source: Own graph based on EUROSTAT data [5].

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, tourists in the European Union showed a stronger preference for rural areas over urban environments, as illustrated in Figure 2.

For a clearer example, we will present the data, representing the number of accommodation places in tourist units, and at

the level of the selected countries, in Table 4 [7].

Table 4. Number of accommodation places in tourist facilities in 2020

Country	% 2019/2018	% 2020/2019 2021/2020	% 2022/2019
Austria	2.13 ↑	38.12 ↓ 15.70 ↓	10.03 ↓
Croatia	1.80 ↑	55.28 ↓ 72.11 ↑	1.29 ↓
France	0.86 ↑	42.25 ↓ 25.79 ↑	0.72 ↑
Germany	4.15 ↑	40.32 ↓ 2.05 ↑	8.36 ↓
Greece	0.46 ↑	73.21 ↓ 92.13 ↑	7.55 ↓
Italy	1.84 ↑	52.27 ↓ 38.73 ↑	5.66 ↓
Ireland	7.09 ↓	50.46 ↓ 7.50 ↓	7.21 ↑
Netherlands	6.34 ↑	30.81 ↓ 18.36 ↑	7.45 ↑
Portugal	4.28 ↑	61.13 ↓ 40.74 ↑	0.83 ↓
Romania	5.02 ↑	51.64 ↓ 42.92 ↑	10.96 ↓
Spain	0.61 ↑	69.21 ↓ 79.42 ↓	3.87 ↓

Source: Extract from the EUROSTAT [4].

As observed, the rural environment was preferred in most countries, with a few exceptions, likely due to the lower development of rural areas or the administrative-territorial divisions within those countries. The dynamics were represented in both table and graphic forms to highlight the evolution of tourist overnight stays in the European Union from 2018 to 2022. This representation helps to observe the impact of the pandemic crisis on tourist preferences in 2020, the year most affected by COVID-19.

As for Great Britain, which is no longer part of the European Union, the situation in 2020 is as follows:

- London recorded the biggest drop in room occupancy, just 20% in July 2020, compared to 90% in the same month of 2019;
- between March and May 2020, the workforce in accommodation units decreased by 21.5% compared to the same period in 2019;
- between April and June 2020, trips decreased by 96% compared to the second quarter of 2019;

- turnover for the tourism sector decreased by 26% from February to May 2020; Appropriate explanations accompanied the results, and finally, conclusions were reached that highlighted the main ideas from this research.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of COVID-19's impact on rural tourism in Europe reveals a complex mix of challenges and potential opportunities. To remain relevant and vibrant in the post-pandemic period, the industry must continue to adapt and innovate. From the analyzed data, we conclude that the pandemic's impact in Europe was profound and extended, with some countries not yet reaching the 2019 levels by 2022. During the pandemic, due to the restrictions imposed by each country, there was a reluctance on the part of tourists to travel outside their country of residence, but also in crowded places, preferring locations in rural areas, as close to nature and as isolated as possible. This aspect was influenced by the pandemic, which acted on human behavior, as a response of the individual to protect himself, becoming more cautious.

This fact was due to isolation, the obligation to wear a mask, working from home, etc., rules imposed during the pandemic crisis.

Also, the pandemic produced an economic shock on GDP, mainly in countries where tourism has a significant share.

We can say that the pandemic blocked the movement of people and changed their attitude towards human interaction, towards travel and towards the tourist phenomenon in general.

Considering that the evolutions of overnight stays or domestic and international destinations did not follow a certain algorithm, this topic should be explored further, possibly to identify collateral influences. Many rural tourism operators have implemented new safety protocols such as online check-in, enhanced cleaning and social distancing. Also, tourism packages adapted to the new conditions have been developed, such as private tours or outdoor activities with

small groups. Therefore, in addition to their own responsibility, there is also a need for government policies to contribute to sustainable tourism.

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