

STUDY ON THE EVALUATION AND CHARACTERIZATION OF THE POTENTIAL AND ACTIVITY OF RURAL TOURISM AND AGRITOURISM IN ALBA COUNTY, ROMANIA, IN THE PERIOD 2018-2023

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Abstract

The study aims to evaluate and characterize the tourism activity in Alba County as a whole, from the point of view of potential and resources, but the main direction targeted is focused especially on the rural tourism and agritourism activity practiced in principle in tourist and Agritourist guesthouses, but also in other types of structures that have not been exploited to their maximum potential, both at national and local level. In order to bring this aspect to attention, structures such as Inns, Tourist villas, Tourist chalets, Holiday villages, Tourist cottages were also taken into study, structures that we discovered during a preparatory study in France, as being widely used in the development and promotion of rural tourism in general. The research methodology was a classic one, but in which a series of new aspects were also addressed, which aimed at the need to diversify the types of structures used in rural tourism, leading to a diversification of the original and personalized tourist offer, both at the level of Alba County and at the national level. The conclusions highlighted the fact that at the county level, rural tourism activity, but especially agritourism activity in which farmers also practice a primary activity, through which they provide tourists with traditional local products with a very good taste, "the taste of grandparents", is well developed, but insufficiently promoted and exploited to its true potential.

Key words: agritourism, tourist attractions, original tourist offer, tourist potential, rural space

INTRODUCTION

The scope of agritourism is very wide, being a real, specifically human activity, in a process of continuous development. The main factor determining the continuous growth of the interest of citizens in agritourism is: "where does food come from and how is it produced" [17, 23]. Agritourism is an activity that includes a vast area of knowledge with the possibility of development in almost all rural areas of our country [3, 16, 37]. The economic importance of agritourism is crucial, in the context of income generated from plant and animal production. Most farmers obtain insufficient income to meet their own material needs [8, 10, 15].

Additional income from non-agricultural sources is imperative for the continuity, development and especially to avoid the abandonment of farms. Economic and social policies in European countries aim to maintain

the population in rural areas and stop the exodus to cities [2, 9, 20]. Rural space plays an important role in the practice of rural tourism and agritourism and represents a complex concept, which arouses great interest from the scientific community and international organizations. In defining the area of interest and treating the main components, there are a multitude of approaches, using different criteria (statistical, administrative, functional, legislative, etc.) [1, 13, 22].

Therefore, rural space presents certain particularities from which the following stand out: pluriactivity (simultaneous development of agricultural and non-agricultural activities); attractiveness (landscape beauty, natural and cultural heritage unaltered by the passage of time, more humanized social environment, etc.) specificity (typical atmosphere of country life, local culture, traditional spirituality elements - traditions, customs,

etc.) [28, 36]. The term rural derives from the Latin word "ruris", which means country, village, territory occupied, inhabited, arranged and worked by man. The characteristics of rural space vary greatly depending on the country or region. From a geographical, demographic and economic perspective, rural areas do not constitute a homogeneous whole, but they are not abstract spaces either. Major discrepancies arise when we compare rural areas in economically highly developed countries with those in countries under the former communist bloc or even less economically developed countries. The comparison does not make sense either in terms of the socio-economic characteristics of the population or when we refer to the coordinates of the geographical environment [33, 34].

The criteria applied in the hierarchy of localities and areas as rural or urban present major differences. For example, the criteria used in the classification of rural settlements at European level are differentiated in accordance with national specificities. Each country has a certain degree of autonomy in the administration of its own territory, distinct standards and levels that determine a different typology from one country to another. The level of development of rural settlements in the European space is measured by the existence of a modern rural territorial infrastructure – branched and modernized road network, new residential spaces, housing with a high degree of comfort, technical equipment of households, the infrastructure necessary for the production and use of energy from renewable sources, water and natural gas supply networks, sewage and thermal energy installations, etc. [35, 41].

Romania as an EU member state should align itself with this level of development and organization of rural space. The policy favoring urban administrative-territorial units during the communist period determined the maintenance of a significant gap between the village and the city. In recent decades, the Romanian countryside, from an economic, social and demographic point of view, has developed at a different pace, determining distinct forms of rural life. The Romanian

village presents a pronounced heterogeneity, while some rural settlements have developed economically, many other communes seem not to have overcome the stage of underdevelopment inherited from communism. The low level of development of these localities is determined mainly by the precarious level of local infrastructure and the lack of attractiveness for investments [11, 30, 32].

From the studies and research carried out by most researchers in the field of agritourism and by us, research previously published in various journals in our country and abroad, it is very clear that agritourism can play an essential role in the development and emancipation of rural areas in our country and can ultimately lead to the reduction or total elimination of the glaring gap that has existed until now, between rural and urban areas in Romania [5, 36, 40].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Starting from this goal aimed at developing rural areas in our country, the authors oriented the research method towards highlighting and quantifying the agritourism potential of Alba County, a county in which this activity has developed greatly in the last 30 years after the Revolution. The choice of this county was also due to the fact that the area is known to us, being also the birthplace of the authors. The area has been traversed by us over time, making contact with the local people and with all the resources available to this wonderful area.

Based on the studies carried out on the ground and the data from the various published monographs and articles, a thorough and detailed analysis of the rich natural and anthropogenic tourist resources available to the region was carried out and an attempt was made to create a clear and realistic image of the level of development of agritourism activity in this area. At the same time, based on data and indicators regarding tourism activity in general, data collected from the field and from the National Institute of Statistics (NIS), the level of development of this activity was analyzed, but especially the

level of development of agritourism activity, this being the main objective of our research [6, 7, 18].

The agritourism potential of the studied area was emphasized because it was considered from the beginning that this activity is a viable, efficient, fast and safe solution to put into practice, especially in this area, which would lead to the emancipation and elimination of the economic, social and cultural gap between rural and urban areas in the county. In the research methodology, we focused on the tourist structures specific to rural tourism and agritourism activity, such as Tourist Pensions and Agritourist Pensions, but also on other structures that are widely used in European countries in practicing such an activity, such as: Inns, Tourist Villas, Tourist Cabins, Holiday Villages and Tourist Cottages.

We also presented the level of development of these forms of tourism, in such structures, because we tried to highlight the fact that, compared to countries in Europe or other countries around the world, the level of use and promotion of these structures in our country is much lower, although their potential may be relevant in increasing the total accommodation capacity in certain areas [24, 21, 19].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Alba County is located in the central-western part of the country, in the historical province of Transylvania, with the capital in the municipality of Alba Iulia. It is part of the Centru development region and consists of 4 municipalities (Alba Iulia, Aiud, Blaj, Sebeș), 7 cities (Abrud, Baia de Arieș, Cugir, Câmpeni, Ocna Mureș, Teiuș, Zlatna), 67 communes and 656 villages. In terms of accessibility, this is easy, being ensured by a network of communication routes, roads, which ensure the connection between localities such as, A 1, A 10 and A 3, national roads DN 75, DN 14 B, DN 1, DN 74, DN 7, DN 67 C, 59 county roads (DJ) with a length of 1,086.262 km and 197 communal roads, with a total length of 1,130.290 km [12].

Also, a railway network has been developed that runs mainly in the lowland and plateau areas, crossing the county from one end to the other and ensuring the connection with the main railway nodes in Transylvania. In the area of the Apuseni Mountains and the Șureanu Mountains this is not present, access to the area can be achieved exclusively on road routes.

There are no airports or airfields located in Alba County, but it has easy connections with several international airports in neighbouring counties: Sibiu International Airport, Avram Iancu in Cluj, Transylvania Târgu Mureș and Oradea [12].

Analysis of the natural and anthropogenic tourism potential of Alba County

Relief. Predominantly mountainous, mountains occupy 52% of the surface, hilly and plateau areas 26%, and plain areas including river meadows 22%. The mountainous area is made up of the Apuseni Mountains, located in the north-west, comprising the Bihor Mountains (see Curcubăta 1,849 m) with the Găina massif (1,486 m), Muntele Mare, the Metaliferi Mountains, the Trascău Mountains and the Muncei Vintului. The Southern Carpathians in the south, represented by the Șureanului (Sebeș) Mountains with the Pătru Peak 2,130 m and partly the Cindrelului Mountains. The area of hills and plateaus is made up of the piedmont hills of Sebeș, those of Trascău and the Transylvanian Plateau, the area of depressions is made up of depressions located in the valleys of: Abrud, Cîmpeni, Lupșa, Mogoș, Ponor, Sălcia, Trascău, Almașului, Zlatna, Ampoi – Ampoița, and the corridor unit is made up of the Mureș corridor that separates the Apuseni Mountains from the Transylvanian Plateau and the Orăștie corridor that stretches between the Apuseni Mountains and the Southern Carpathians [12, 31].

Climste is temperate - continental with slight shades of excess in the lower areas but moderate and more humid in the mountainous area. Due to its position, Alba County is in an area where the influence of the western circulation is felt, over which the influences of the south - west and north - north - east

circulation are also superimposed. It is found that during the year the highest temperature is recorded in July (20.6 degrees Celsius) on average, and the lowest in January (-2.7 degrees Celsius) on average, the multiannual temperature reaches about 9 degrees Celsius. The amounts of precipitation fallen during the year reach an annual average of 600 mm. When precipitation falls below 450 mm, the years are dry, but during the year rainy years have also been recorded, with high precipitation of 650 mm. Usually, in June the confluence of Atlantic air intensifies and torrential rains bring large amounts of water. In contrast, during spring and autumn, there is a low intensity and long duration of liquid precipitation. In winter, solid precipitation in the form of snow reaches an average thickness and persists for 60 days.

Hydrography. It belongs entirely to the Mureş River basin, a river that enters the county upstream of the confluence with the Arieş (270 m) and exits downstream of the confluence of the Băcăinţi Valley (202 m). The most important tributaries are the Arieş, Aiudu, Geogiu, Galda and Ampoi on the right and the Târnava, Sebeş, Pian and Cugir on the left. The lakes constitute part of the water reserve cantoned in the natural lakes Iezerul Şureanu, Iezeruşul Cârpa and Iezerul Ighiel but also in the anthropogenic ones in the surroundings of Roşia Montana or in those in the Sebeş Valley [12, 21].

Vegetation. Beech and coniferous forests still cover large parts of the Metalic Mountains, Trascău and Sebeş. In the region of gold mining (Roşia, Abrud, Zlatna, etc.) they have long been cut down. The same fate befell the oak forests on the plateau and in the Mureş plain. In the northern part of the county, the steppe has penetrated the forest domain. In Alba County there is only one natural park, namely the Apuseni Natural Park, which is characterized by a special beauty given by the karst landscape. The caves, sinkholes, ravines, dry valleys, gorges, waterfalls, karst plateaus and the spring, offer a unique landscape variety in which a rich fauna and flora develop. Natura 2000 sites cover 26.13% of the area of Alba County and were created for the protection of extremely valuable species

and habitats, namely: - 178 species of flora and fauna of community interest (including: 14 species of flora, 13 species of fish, 4 species of amphibians, 2 species of reptiles, 103 species of birds, 15 species of mammals and 27 species of invertebrates); - 47 types of habitats of community interest [12, 38].

Flora and fauna. Among the most important flora species encountered are the spruce, fir, beech, mountain ash, birch, acacia, blueberry, juniper, raspberry, rosehip, etc., and among the fauna species encountered, there are: wolf, otter, bear, lynx, brown toad, yellow-bellied pond otter, newt, lizard, lizard, adder, viper, woodpeckers, jay, cuckoo, mountain grouse, raven, great horned owl, otter, Carpathian deer, lynx, brown bear, etc. Alba County is one of the counties that presents a great faunal and floristic diversity in Romania. Over 25% of the county's territory has the status of a protected natural area. At county level, there are 245 protected natural areas, of which: 83 natural reserves of national interest; 1 natural park; 25 Natura 2000 Sites (20 sites of community importance and 5 special avifaunistic protection areas); 10 nature reserves of county interest; 126 natural monuments of county interest. As can be seen from the above, the county has an extremely rich nature, which generates a very high and diversified natural tourist potential.

The mountainous relief is predominant and reaches heights greater than 2,000 meters, in the south of the county and over 1,800 meters in the northwest. The southern area of Alba County has experienced significant tourist development, the Şureanu Mountains with the existing ski area, have become a tourist destination for practicing winter sports, preferred by many tourists. Due to this and the fact that the county is crossed by the Transalpina high road, the flow of tourists has increased significantly, especially in the summer season [12, 25, 21].

Regarding the anthropic tourist potential, we can say that it has been significantly influenced by the historical evolution of this area, which has been extremely tested over time. Some of the most important events in Romanian history took place here, the best known being the Union in the year 1600

under Michael the Brave, the Union on December 1, 1918 and the Coronation of the Kings of Great Romania on October 15, 1922, in Alba Iulia. But the story of these places has been fascinating since prehistoric times, with numerous fortresses found on the territory of Alba County, such as those at Cugir, Cetatea de Baltă, Piatra Craivii and Căpâlna, the latter included on the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage List. Numerous silver and bronze objects have been preserved from the Dacians, true treasures, discovered at Lupu (Cergău commune), Saracsau (Șibot commune), Săliște and Inuri, demonstrating a true mastery in metalworking [12, 21].

The colonization of Saxons in Transylvania began in the 11th century, with their first communities being established in Cricău and Ighiu, from which they inherited religious and civil buildings such as: the Roman Catholic Cathedral of Alba Iulia, the Aiud Fortress, the Evangelical Church of Sebeș, the Fortified Church of Călnic, and this one included on the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage List. The beginning of pre-modernity coincides with the first major event in the history of the unification of the Romanians, namely the unification of Wallachia with Transylvania and Moldavia carried out by Michael the Brave in 1600, the capital of the new state being Alba Iulia.

The administrative role, as the capital of the Principality of Transylvania, was obtained after the abolition of Hungary, following the Battle of Mohacs (1526), as a result of which the Principality of Transylvania was established as an independent state formation and which was later called the Grand Principality of Transylvania.

True emancipation took place in the 18th century through the Transylvanian School in Blaj, whose precursor was the visionary Bishop Inocențiu Micu Klein. During this period, Blaj assumed a very important role in the national struggle; in 1848, one of the most important moments of the Revolution of 1848 took place on the Freedom Plain, where the National Program of the Romanian Revolution in Transylvania was drafted. One of the prominent leaders of the time was

Avram Iancu, a symbol of Romanians [12, 29, 21].

As is well known, the most important event that took place in the lands of Alba was the Union of December 1, 1918, when delegates gathered in Alba Iulia, in the current Union Hall, decided to unite Transylvania with Romania, this event also giving rise to the National Day of Romania. The event was immortalized by the young Samoilă Mârza from Galtiu, the only one who took photos on that historic day. Later, on October 15, 1922, it hosted the Coronation of Kings Ferdinand and Maria as Kings of Greater Romania.

From the studies carried out, it was found that the territory of Alba County includes 686 historical monuments listed in the List of Historical Monuments LMI 2015, of which monuments of national interest - category A - 187; UNESCO monuments - 3 - Călnic Fortress, Dacian Fortress from Căpâlna and the Roșia Montana Site. The area also has a rich archaeological heritage: Dacian Fortress from Căpâlna; Dacian Fortress from Cetatea de Balta; Dacian Fortress from Craiva (Apoulon or Ranistorum); Ancient cities from Apulum: Colonia Aurelia Apulensis and Colonia Nova Apulensis; The XIII Legion's Camp Gemina from Alba Iulia [12, 26, 21]. Also, on the territory of the county there are ethnographic areas with specific architectural and identity features, including: Saxon Villages, Târnavă Valley, Trascău Valley, Sebeș Valley, Golden Land, Arieș Valley, Trascău Peak, Moților Country, Stone Villages. A specificity of the county is the diversity of religious cults, the Orthodox, Catholic, Evangelical, Reformed and Jewish communities have built extensive architectural monuments that enrich the cultural heritage, these being made up of churches and monastery complexes, private property of religious cults - the Romanian Orthodox Archdiocese of Alba Iulia; the Roman Catholic Episcopate; the Roman Catholic Archdiocese; the Franciscan Church, etc. [12, 21, 39].

On its territory are also present the Saxon settlements with fortified churches in Transylvania, included in the UNESCO heritage since 1993, such as: Biertan, Calnic,

Darjiu, Prejmer, Saschiz, Valea Viilor and Viscri. Also present are architectural ensembles with cultural heritage value such as: The birthplace of the poet Lucian Blaga, the interesting civil architecture reserves in Alba Iulia, Sebeş, Aiud, Blaj, Abrud as well as the rural sites in Călnic, Rimetea and Roşia Montana, where we find street fronts and spatial organizations around central squares. A central place in an itinerary of fortresses is occupied by the Alba Carolina Fortress, the largest bastion fortress in Romania, in which it preserves the two symbols of ecclesiastical architecture: the Roman Catholic Cathedral of Saint Michael and the Orthodox Coronation Cathedral.

Famous crafts have developed throughout the territory of this county, such as: that of the Romanian church painters, names like Simion Silaghi, Simion Belgrădeanul, Savu, Simion and Toma have changed the face of religious art, through the murals of the wooden and brick Orthodox churches in Apuseni. Icon craftsmen, through the glass icons of the Poienari family from the village of Laz, famous throughout the world for the craft of painting on glass, according to the oldest canons. Wood crafts emerged and diversified over time, as the technical means for processing various wood essences were perfected, numerous villages in the hilly and mountainous areas specialized in wood processing, Tara Moţilor is the most famous area in terms of wood processing, through the making of conifer wood vessels. Some specialized in carpentry and wood carving for construction, especially shingles, others as traveling coopers, who made vessels from the clients' material [12, 29, 21]. In recognition of the value of the various iconic craftsmen, potters, furriers, folk craftsmen, rhapsodes, etc., people who capitalized on Romanian traditions and crafts and passed them on unaltered by modernity, 11 Romanians from the county received the title of "Living Human Treasure of Alba County". The first Romanian declared a "Living Human Treasure", in 2010, was the folk artist Maria Deac Poenaru, recognized as the last representative of the iconic painters from Laz. Following her: Eugen Gavrilă from Pianu

(woodworking); Constantin Petra from Ceru Băcăinţi (woodworking); Ana Neamţu from Cut (horitor, spirituality – singer – vocal music); Olivia Tima from Sălcuia (weaver); Nicolae Muntean from Vinerea (icon painter); Nicolae Coroiu from Avram Iancu (instructor and folk craftsman – titre); Nicodim Gligor from Vidra (traditional woodworking); Mariana Gligor from Vidra (creator of folk costumes and performer of the tulnic); Maria Dulău from Biia (spirituality – singer – traditional vocal music); Florin Nicolae Poenari from Laz (icon artist/carpenter) [12, 29, 21].

Traditions and customs represent a valuable cultural heritage, due to the original architecture of the houses from Arieşeni, Gârda, Vidra, Avram Iancu, Albac, Mogoş, Ponor, Râmeţ, Rimetea, Săsciori, Şugag, etc. The Moţilor Land is a center of folk art and customs, with the following localities being distinguished: Avram Iancu - traditional hearth of the tulnic used by women; Bucium - the richest and most interesting Romanian folk costume in this part of the country; Căpâlna - customs related to the existence of shepherds; Laz - folk art school: weaving, sewing, painting on glass; Săsciori - glazed and unglazed red ceramics; Şugag - folk art school: wood carving; Vidra - typical Moţ settlement, with tulnicari and ciubăraş craftsmen. A good part of the customs and habits of the elders are still preserved today in localities in the county, these are closely linked to certain religious holidays and ancestral rituals, being true performances of music, dance, traditional costume, local cuisine, artistic skill, creativity and play. Among these, the most special artistic manifestations are: "Butea" from the Secaşelor area, "Căluşul" or "Căluşorul", "Înmormântarea Fărşangului" or "Purtata Fetelor de la Căpâlna" and others. Folklore lovers will feel at ease at the annually organized celebrations, which have become traditions, in which soloists and folk craftsmen from all over the country take part [12, 29, 21].

As for the tourism activity in general and agritourism, this has continuously developed and diversified on the territory of Alba

County, the most practiced forms of tourism are mountain tourism, rural tourism and agritourism, cultural tourism and that generated by the existence on the territory of the county of several elements included in the UNESCO world heritage. Rural tourism and agritourism have recorded a spectacular dynamic especially in recent decades, the number of tourist guesthouses in the rural area being almost 300 units, offering over 5,000 accommodation places. This form of tourism attracts especially foreign tourists interested in Romanian culture, customs and traditions, and local gastronomy, being a direct means of getting to know the authentic traditional civilization. Agritourism is one of the forms of tourism best represented in the Apuseni Mountains through the area of the upper Arieș (Albac, Garda de Sus, Arieșeni, Avram Iancu, Vidra) and through the commune of Rimetea in the Trascău Mountains [12, 29, 21].

In order to best highlight, revitalize and promote the county's tourism offer, during 2020 the Alba County Council created four

cultural-tourist routes for which it received the certification of "regionally developed cultural-tourist routes" from the Ministry of Economy, Energy and Business Environment, as follows:

- The Apuseni Transcultural Route is located in the northwestern part of Alba County and follows the route of two county roads through the localities of Rimetea, Aiud, Râmeț, Mogoș, Bucium and Abrud.
- The Icon Road Route crosses the central area of Alba County through the localities of Alba Iulia, Teiuș, Stremț, Geoagiu de Sus and Valea Mănăstirii.
- The National Unity Route 1848-1918-1922 passes through the localities of Blaj, Sântimbru, Alba Iulia, Zlatna, Abrud, Câmpeni and Avram Iancu.
- The Via Aurea route targets the gold quadrilateral of the Ore Mountains, delimited in Alba County by the area of Zlatna and Roșia Montana with the adjacent areas of Almașul Mare, Bucium and Baia de Arieș, areas very rich in precious metal [12, 29, 21].

Table 1. Evolution of the number of tourist reception structures with tourist accommodation functions, by type of structure in Romania, Alba County

| Types of structures of tourist reception | Total | Years | | | | | | |
|--|---------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|--------|--------|
| | | 1990 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 |
| TOTAL | Romania | 3,213 | 8,453 | 8,402 | 8,610 | 11,736 | 12,201 | 12,697 |
| | Alba | 38 | 204 | 196 | 227 | 305 | 333 | 357 |
| Inns | Romania | : | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Tourist villas | Romania | 1551 | 695 | 709 | 752 | 752 | 758 | 756 |
| | Alba | : | 12 | 10 | 29 | 23 | 22 | 20 |
| Tourist chalets | Romania | 226 | 231 | 222 | 226 | 222 | 220 | 223 |
| | Alba | 6 | 6 | 7 | 6 | 4 | 6 | 5 |
| Holiday villages | Romania | : | 10 | 9 | 8 | 8 | 8 | 10 |
| Tourist cottages | Romania | : | 73 | 82 | 92 | 112 | 127 | 155 |
| | Alba | : | : | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 4 |
| Tourist guesthouses | Romania | : | 1,709 | 1,669 | 1,729 | 1,745 | 1,696 | 1,642 |
| | Alba | : | 29 | 30 | 27 | 29 | 30 | 28 |
| Agritourist guesthouses | Romania | : | 2,821 | 2,800 | 3,022 | 3,460 | 3,484 | 3,498 |
| | Alba | : | 119 | 113 | 126 | 131 | 132 | 139 |

Source: processing based on own data and from NIS [27].

Also, in order to be able to highlight and highlight the tourist activity in Alba County, several indicators were studied in the period 2019-2023 on the basis of which to characterize the tourist activity and to assess its quality level as accurately as possible. In our analysis, we focused in particular on the activity of tourist reception structures specific to rural tourism and agritourism activities,

because the present study wanted to be one focused especially on these forms of tourism, which have developed, as we have shown above, at a faster pace, in recent decades, in this county [12, 29, 21].

A very important indicator regarding the evolution of tourism activity in general in the county under study is the dynamics of the

number of tourist reception structures, presented in Table 1.

Table 2. Dynamics of tourist accommodation capacity expressed in existing places by type of tourist reception structures, Romania/Alba

| Types of structures of tourist reception | Total | Years | | | | | | |
|--|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| | | 1990 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 |
| TOTAL | Romania | 353,236 | 353,835 | 356,562 | 358,119 | 410,291 | 422,114 | 433,487 |
| | Alba | 3,419 | 5,278 | 5,218 | 5,688 | 7,273 | 7,798 | 7,864 |
| Inns | Romania | : | 101 | 80 | 80 | 80 | 90 | 120 |
| Tourist villas | Romania | 46,757 | 16,555 | 16,665 | 17,124 | 17,325 | 17,457 | 17,450 |
| | Alba | : | 346 | 296 | 517 | 467 | 450 | 396 |
| Tourist chalets | Romania | 12,430 | 6,384 | 6,216 | 6,331 | 6,356 | 6,256 | 6,067 |
| | Alba | 250 | 140 | 149 | 129 | 93 | 143 | 113 |
| Holiday villages | Romania | : | 493 | 477 | 375 | 375 | 456 | 688 |
| Tourist cottages | Romania | : | 2,782 | 2,503 | 2,662 | 3,122 | 3,518 | 4,012 |
| | Alba | : | : | 24 | 12 | 12 | 36 | 42 |
| Tourist guesthouses | Romania | : | 35,823 | 35,198 | 35,312 | 35,387 | 34,587 | 33,930 |
| | Alba | : | 608 | 651 | 599 | 641 | 652 | 655 |
| Agritourist guesthouses | Romania | : | 48,574 | 49,053 | 52,389 | 55,778 | 56,850 | 58,086 |
| | Alba | : | 2,157 | 2,140 | 2,383 | 2,459 | 2,505 | 2,596 |

Source: processing based on own data and from NIS [27].

Analyzing the data from Table 1, it can be seen that in the reference year 1990 the situation of tourist reception structures intended especially for rural tourism and agritourism activities was not very poor, because in this year there were no tourist reception structures in the county, with a specific rural tourism or agritourism activity. Subsequently, in the study years 2018 -2023, it is found that the rural tourism and agritourism activity has developed considerably, this being practiced in almost all types of structures analyzed, with such a specificity. A significant element in this analysis is the appearance after 1990 of tourism structures very representative of rural tourism activity, such as tourist and Agritourist guesthouses, the number of which has continuously increased, reaching 30 tourist guesthouses in 2022 and 139 Agritourist guesthouses in 2023, these being the maximum values reached in the analyzed period.

From Table 2, it can be seen that the dynamics of accommodation places at the total level of tourist reception structures in Alba County followed the same growth trend as that at the Romanian level, reaching the level of 2023, at the maximum value of 7,864 accommodation places, a year in which the value at the national level was also the highest at 433,487 accommodation places. Also, from

this table it can be seen a difference between the evolution of the dynamics of accommodation places at the national level, compared to that at the Alba County level, in terms of the number of accommodation places in structures specific to rural tourism in general. Thus, the number of accommodation places in rural tourist guesthouses has continuously increased, albeit at a slow pace, reaching 655 in 2023, and that in Agritourist guesthouses 2,596 places. This fact demonstrates the maximum attention given by local authorities and local people to the more sustained development of this specific form of sustainable tourism, which lends itself very well to the specifics of the area.

Regarding this indicator listed in table 3, it can be seen that at the level of Alba County, the total accommodation capacity in operation has increased very significantly, being almost five times higher in 2023, reaching 2,503,909, compared to the reference year 2001, when it was only 505,096. Also from this table, it can be seen that for this indicator, the tourist reception structures specific to the rural area, tourist and Agritourist guesthouses, have achieved a significant increase, in terms of the number of accommodation places-days in tourist guesthouses, in which it increased 13.5 times compared to the reference year 2001, reaching 216,571 in 2023. Another gratifying thing is the fact that the number of

accommodation places-days has also increased in Agritourist guesthouses, by over 34 times, compared to the same reference year 2001. This phenomenon manifests itself with the increase in accommodation capacity expressed in accommodation places, which has increased continuously, reaching the maximum value for these types of guesthouses in 2023. This evolution can only

be explained by the increasing interest of guesthouse owners in increasing the quality of services offered to tourists, by increasing accommodation areas and adapting the number of tourists in the guesthouse, so that they can be given more attention, in accordance with the new guesthouse classification criteria.

Table 3. Tourist accommodation capacity in function by types of tourist reception structures in places - days, in Romania, Alba County

| Types of structures of tourist reception | Total | Years | | | | | | 2023 |
|--|---------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| | | 2001 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | |
| TOTAL | Romania | 51,882,465 | 89,075,891 | 88,789,656 | 64,040,595 | 87,217,823 | 93,007,230 | 98,293,110 |
| | Alba | 505,096 | 1,575,437 | 1,566,155 | 1,064,249 | 1,711,700 | 2,182,758 | 2,503,909 |
| Inns | Romania | 70,864 | 36,173 | 28,580 | 22,237 | 24,890 | 27,268 | 37,240 |
| Tourist villas | Romania | 2,488,256 | 3,738,166 | 3,753,539 | 2,780,569 | 3,485,815 | 3,590,100 | 3,588,609 |
| | Alba | 3,836 | 105,383 | 106,398 | 93,873 | 120,992 | 128,006 | 129,081 |
| Tourist chalets | Romania | 1,880,532 | 1,508,188 | 1,494,759 | 995,642 | 1,371,743 | 1,378,194 | 1,361,159 |
| | Alba | 20,636 | 38,679 | 43,679 | 23,971 | 31,237 | 27,618 | 45,341 |
| Holiday villages | Romania | 13,140 | 109,663 | 114,390 | 66,680 | 93,224 | 112,698 | 182,007 |
| | Alba | : | : | : | : | : | 3780 | : |
| Tourist cottages | Romania | 311,211 | 230,040 | 230,114 | 225,344 | 299,693 | 334,975 | 475,147 |
| | Alba | : | : | 2,952 | : | 6,876 | 11,280 | 13,590 |
| Tourist guesthouses | Romania | 1,026,975 | 10,644,927 | 10,454,735 | 7,290,415 | 8,784,339 | 8,804,999 | 8,862,371 |
| | Alba | 16,028 | 193,297 | 199,171 | 135,926 | 166,581 | 190,383 | 216,571 |
| Agritourist guesthouses | Romania | 1,105,724 | 12,498,050 | 12,615,982 | 9,195,563 | 12,228,257 | 13,269,082 | 13,973,610 |
| | Alba | 23,198 | 582,685 | 605,567 | 422,227 | 588,956 | 687,299 | 795,139 |

Source: processing based on own data and from NIS [27].

Table 4. Dynamics of tourist arrivals in tourist reception structures by type of structure and number of people in Romania, and Alba County

| Types of structures of tourist reception | Total | Years | | | | | | 2023 |
|--|---------|-----------|------------|------------|-----------|------------|------------|------------|
| | | 2001 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | |
| TOTAL | Romania | 4,874,777 | 12,905,131 | 13,374,943 | 6,398,642 | 10,205,322 | 12,588,333 | 13,910,956 |
| | Alba | 59,901 | 194,818 | 201,840 | 119,741 | 184,719 | 231,640 | 252,738 |
| Inns | Romania | 3,670 | 2,630 | 2,911 | 759 | 697 | 1,345 | 1,820 |
| Tourist villas | Romania | 174,956 | 440,497 | 463,600 | 267,338 | 382,473 | 420,838 | 437,492 |
| | Alba | 34 | 11,638 | 13,639 | 10,898 | 12,371 | 13,418 | 10,633 |
| Tourist chalets | Romania | 104,049 | 144,182 | 153,374 | 95,370 | 130,051 | 131,805 | 137,390 |
| | Alba | 554 | 1,997 | 2,219 | 1,314 | 1,195 | 1,417 | 1,195 |
| Holiday villages | Romania | 1,862 | 4,841 | 6,341 | 2,987 | 5,986 | 8,420 | 38,944 |
| | Alba | : | : | : | : | : | 70 | : |
| Tourist cottages | Romania | 18,358 | 16,350 | 20,556 | 20,086 | 27,673 | 31,348 | 48,795 |
| | Alba | : | : | 178 | : | 666 | 1,836 | 1,247 |
| Tourist guesthouses | Romania | 106,129 | 1,234,295 | 1,254,476 | 654,397 | 893,859 | 977,694 | 1,037,475 |
| | Alba | 3,209 | 33,486 | 34,700 | 19,320 | 25,648 | 31,572 | 35,329 |
| Agritourist guesthouses | Romania | 41,658 | 1,173,455 | 1,272,878 | 755,436 | 1,087,327 | 1,181,699 | 1,306,683 |
| | Alba | 1,151 | 50,901 | 57,334 | 42,408 | 54,561 | 55,475 | 65,937 |

Source: processing based on own data and from NIS [27].

The dynamics of tourist arrivals in the different types of tourist reception structures, as can be seen from Table 4, was characterized by a continuous increase from year to year, both at the level of our country and at the level of Alba County. At the

national level, the data presented shows that it increased three times more than the reference year 2001, reaching 13,910,956 arrivals in 2023. At the level of Alba County, this increase was much more significant, because the value of the number of tourists arriving in

2023 is almost five times higher than that of the same reference year 2001, which was 252,738. This growth trend is much more significant in the case of tourist reception structures specialized in rural tourism and agritourism, thus, the number of tourists registered in 2001 in tourist guesthouses was approximately 11 times lower than that of

those arriving in 2023. In the case of Agritourist guesthouses in Alba County, this was much more relevant, because the growth rate of the number of tourists arriving in these types of structures was over 60 times higher than that of the same reference year 2001, the value of this indicator being in 2023, 65,937.

Table 5. Dynamics of overnight stays of tourists in tourist reception structures by type of structures and number, in Romania, Alba County

| Types of structures of tourist reception | Total | Years | | | | | | |
|--|---------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| | | 2001 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 |
| TOTAL | Romania | 18,121,688 | 28,644,742 | 30,086,091 | 14,579,140 | 22,747,562 | 27,044,372 | 29,691,592 |
| | Alba | 95,706 | 364,474 | 370,750 | 219,746 | 336,089 | 429,477 | 464,850 |
| Inns | Romania | 6,142 | 4,027 | 3,622 | 1,415 | 1,651 | 2,288 | 2,432 |
| Tourist villas | Romania | 792,519 | 970,413 | 1,039,641 | 593,440 | 865,471 | 885,701 | 949,886 |
| | Alba | 89 | 24,502 | 26,029 | 20,186 | 26,495 | 26,912 | 20,613 |
| Tourist chalets | Romania | 211,024 | 253,086 | 266,010 | 161,230 | 214,004 | 218,605 | 240,108 |
| | Alba | 601 | 4,311 | 5,061 | 3,281 | 2,657 | 3,241 | 2,743 |
| Holiday villages | Romania | 4,863 | 13,981 | 16,318 | 7,225 | 14,432 | 19,847 | 71,657 |
| | Alba | : | : | : | : | : | 210 | : |
| Tourist cottages | Romania | 68,994 | 39,646 | 44,298 | 49,824 | 60,127 | 64,706 | 93,546 |
| | Alba | : | : | 699 | : | 1,484 | 4,219 | 2,827 |
| Tourist guesthouses | Romania | 187,533 | 2,229,463 | 2,324,217 | 1,201,697 | 1,605,766 | 1,754,388 | 1,837,049 |
| | Alba | 3,992 | 47,421 | 50,907 | 31,277 | 39,727 | 49,690 | 54,552 |
| Agritourist guesthouses | Romania | 88,349 | 2,255,286 | 2,518,605 | 1,515,305 | 2,089,781 | 2,265,633 | 2,529,052 |
| | Alba | 3,369 | 109,678 | 126,909 | 92,991 | 113,086 | 124,083 | 144,009 |

Source: processing based on own data and from NIS [27].

Following the data recorded in Table 5, it can be easily observed that this indicator followed approximately the same trend as that of the number of tourists arriving in the different types of structures, both at the national level and at the Alba County level. The increase in the number of overnight stays was due in the case of tourist guesthouses at the national level and at the Alba level, as a result of the increase in the average length of stay from 1.1 nights in 2001, to over 1.5, in 2023. On the other hand, in the case of Agritourist guesthouses, the average length of stay decreased from 2.9 nights in 2001, to 2.2 nights in 2023. The increase in this indicator overall, at the level of Agritourist guesthouses was largely due to the increase in accommodation capacities in recent years at the county level.

The net utilization index of the tourist accommodation capacity in operation, in percentage, is a very important indicator in assessing the quality of tourist services and management in the various tourist reception

structures, both in Romania and in Alba County.

Table 6. Dynamics of the net utilization index of tourist accommodation capacity in operation in %, since August, by types of tourists reception structures, in Romania, Alba County

| Types of structures of tourist reception | Total | Years | | | | | |
|--|---------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 |
| TOTAL | Romania | 51.5 | 52.1 | 39.1 | 48.5 | 45.1 | 45.7 |
| | Alba | 37.6 | 43.3 | 41.4 | 37.4 | 34.1 | 35.1 |
| Inns | Romania | 21.4 | 11.9 | 7.8 | 3.7 | 6.4 | 8.4 |
| Tourist villas | Romania | 48.3 | 49.6 | 37.6 | 49 | 43 | 43.1 |
| | Alba | 37.5 | 46.7 | 43.6 | 46.1 | 34.1 | 31.8 |
| Tourist chalets | Romania | 32.5 | 29.7 | 29 | 27.4 | 29.2 | 28.8 |
| | Alba | 27.7 | 22.4 | 23.4 | 21.3 | 32.9 | 9.9 |
| Holiday villages | Romania | 40.2 | 31 | 15.7 | 36.7 | 34.8 | 62.2 |
| Tourist cottages | Romania | 28.1 | 36 | 39.2 | 35.8 | 28.2 | 30.2 |
| | Alba | : | 28.9 | : | 93.3 | 70.2 | 58.5 |
| Tourist guesthouses | Romania | 33.4 | 35 | 28.1 | 33.3 | 31.5 | 32.2 |
| | Alba | 39.3 | 41.2 | 41.6 | 42.3 | 40.3 | 40 |
| Agritourist guesthouses | Romania | 32.4 | 34.7 | 31.8 | 32.4 | 30.5 | 31.5 |
| | Alba | 36.1 | 39.9 | 44 | 37.3 | 35.2 | 37.9 |

Source: processing based on own data and from NIS [27].

As can be seen from Tables 6 and 7, it was taken into study the net utilization index of tourist accommodation capacity in operation,

in order to have a greater relevance in terms of the seasonality aspect of tourism activity, both at the national level and at the Alba County level. From the data presented in the two tables, it is very clear that at the national level there is a significant difference of over 16-19%, between the occupancy index in August and the annual one, over the entire analysis period 2018-2023.

Table 7. Dynamics of the net utilization index of tourist accommodation capacity in operation in %, by years and types of tourist reception structures, in Romania

| Types of structures of tourist reception | Total | Years | | | | | |
|--|---------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 |
| TOTAL | Romania | 32.2 | 33.9 | 22.8 | 26.1 | 29.1 | 30.2 |
| Inns | Romania | 11.1 | 12.7 | 6.4 | 6.6 | 8.4 | 6.5 |
| Tourist villas | Romania | 26 | 27.7 | 21.3 | 24.8 | 24.7 | 26.5 |
| Tourist chalets | Romania | 16.8 | 17.8 | 16.2 | 15.6 | 15.9 | 17.6 |
| Holiday villages | Romania | 12.7 | 14.3 | 10.8 | 15.5 | 17.6 | 39.4 |
| Tourist cottages | Romania | 17.2 | 19.3 | 22.1 | 20.1 | 19.3 | 19.7 |
| Tourist guesthouses | Romania | 20.9 | 22.2 | 16.5 | 18.3 | 19.9 | 20.7 |
| Agritourist guesthouses | Romania | 18 | 20 | 16.5 | 17.1 | 17.1 | 18.1 |

Source: processing based on own data and from NIS [27].

Also, from these tables it can be seen that in the case of tourist reception structures specific to rural tourism and agritourism, the difference between the values recorded is smaller at national level, only 12%, but it is much higher at county level, approximately 18%, which denotes a higher degree of occupancy in August when it is considered that it is the month in which most people go on vacation. The higher value of the occupancy index in August indicates that tourist structures must focus on diversifying the tourist offer in general and especially the perception that there is more to do in the area, throughout the year, not only in summer or on vacation. Comparing the utilization index of tourist guesthouses in August in Alba with that at the national level, it is found that it is higher in Alba, by approximately 7%, over the entire 2018-2023 period, the same is found in the case of Agritourist guesthouses, but this difference is slightly smaller, only approximately 5%, with the exception of

2020, when it was approximately 13%, the year in which restrictions regarding the level of isolation due to the pandemic were maximum.

CONCLUSIONS

In terms of accessibility, Alba County is characterized by a high level of accessibility, since almost all roads and access roads have been modernized both through EU funds and local investments. As can be seen, special attention was paid to access roads to areas with specific reception structures, especially for rural tourism, which developed greatly especially in the analyzed period 2018-2023. The analysis of natural tourist resources shows very clearly that the researched area enjoys numerous, rich and varied tourist attractions, which consist of wonderful mountain, submountain and hilly landscapes, which is a very important asset, because the area largely satisfies the first of the four magical criteria, level I, based on which the quality of a future tourist destination is assessed.

Also from this analysis it is found that the county has a unique flora and fauna, made up of a wide range of valuable plant and animal species, which, as we have shown in other previously published works, favors the practice of tourism specialized in image hunting, a tourism that is beginning to be loved by more and more clients, to the detriment of tourism based on classic hunting and sport fishing [4, 5, 7, 14].

The anthropic tourist potential of Alba County is original and rich and includes 686 historical monuments listed in the LMI 2015 List of Historical Monuments, a rich archaeological heritage represented by the ancient fortresses and cities presented above. It also has ethnographic areas with architectural and identity specifics, including: Saxon Villages, Târnave Valley, Trascău Szekler, Sebeş Valley, Tara Aurului, Arieş Valley, Trascău Peak, Tara Moşilor, Stone Villages and a diversity of religious cults, Orthodox, Catholic, Evangelical, Reformed and Jewish communities that have built extensive architectural monuments that enrich the

cultural heritage. A rich heritage that is used with great success in rural tourism and agritourism in the studied area is represented by iconic craftsmen, potters, furriers, folk craftsmen, rhapsodes, etc., people who have capitalized on Romanian traditions and crafts and passed them on unaltered by modernity, of which 11 of these special people from the county have received the title of "Living Human Treasure of Alba County". Also, traditions and customs represent a valuable cultural heritage used in the development and promotion of rural tourism in general, due to the original architecture of the houses from Arieșeni, Gârda, Vidra, Avram Iancu, Albac, Mogoș, Ponor, Râmeț, Rimetea, Săsciori, Șugag, etc. Tara Moșilor is a center of folk art and customs, but other localities in the county have also preserved a good part of their ancient customs and traditions, these are closely linked to certain religious holidays and ancestral rituals.

The conclusions regarding the characterization of tourism activity in general and rural tourism and agritourism activity, which is also the specific objective of this research, are very relevant, significant and gratifying, because during the more than 5 years of study it was found that the evolution of these indices is positive, their values recorded in the tables above having an increasing trend from year to year. This was mainly due to the local people who realized that this specific form of tourism, with its two components rural tourism practiced mainly in tourist guesthouses and to a lesser extent in other structures such as villas, chalets, houses, etc. and agritourism practiced in Agritourist guesthouses, can lead to the revitalization and repopulation of the wonderful but isolated areas, characteristic of the Apuseni Mountains and beyond. The accentuated, sustained and somewhat directed development was also due to the initiative in 2020 of the Alba County Council to create four cultural-tourist routes for which it received the certification of "regionally developed cultural-tourist routes" from the Ministry of Economy, Energy and Business Environment.

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