

CASE STUDY ON THE ANALYSIS OF THE POTENTIAL AND AGROTURISM ACTIVITY OF A GUESTHOUSE IN THE MUNICIPALITY OF TURCINEȘTI - GORJ, ROMANIA, IN THE PERIOD 2019-2024

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Abstract

The case study started from the premise of presenting a real and viable possibility of practicing a profitable and sustainable family economic activity, by implementing and developing a rural tourism or agrotourism activity in the area. The first part presents the rich natural tourist heritage of the area bordering Turcinești commune, which can constitute an essential advantage in the implementation and development of such activities specific to the authentic rural space of Gorj County, Romania. As can be seen from the results obtained, the activity of agrotourism and rural tourism can be viable solutions for reconversion and revitalization of the workforce and economic activities in the Gorj area, which has been particularly hard-pressed in recent decades, due to the closure of most economic activities. In addition to the exceptional natural tourist potential, the study demonstrated that the area also has a series of rich and valuable anthropic tourist attractions that can constitute a real magnet in attracting tourists. From the analysis of the situation of agritourism activity in the area, we came to the conclusion that it developed more strongly especially after 2000, primarily focusing on qualitative aspects, but also neglecting aspects regarding the promotion and popularization on a wider scale of the rich and original tourist offer that this area has.

Key words: agritourism, family business, original tourist offer, professional retraining

INTRODUCTION

From existing studies and specialized literature, it has been observed that tourism is described as a solution to many economic problems of a country or region, being also responsible for balancing the balance of payments, as a generator of capital investments in many fields of activity [1, 2]. Therefore, the tourism industry is particularly linked to the creation of new jobs, the generation of income for the host population and taxes and duties for the local or national budget, as well as regional development [5, 6]. The basis of the movement of tourists to a certain destination is the tourist potential of the area, evaluated by value, composition, capacity, its degree of attractiveness, these directly influencing the intensity and constancy of tourist flows [11, 15].

In order to be used by tourists, this potential must be arranged and equipped in such a way as to satisfy a wide range of needs and expectations [17, 30, 33]. Also, the

competitiveness of tourism is closely linked to its sustainability, as the quality of tourist destinations depends largely on their natural and cultural environment and their integration into a local community [10, 14, 16]. The sustainability of tourism covers many aspects: the responsible use of natural resources, taking into account the impact of activities on the environment (waste generation, pressure on water, soil and biodiversity, etc.), the use of "clean" energies, the protection of heritage and the preservation of the natural and cultural integrity of destinations, the quality and permanence of jobs generated, the positive impact on the local economy or the quality of reception [9, 12, 19]. Responsible tourism is one of the most important catalysts for economic growth and can contribute to the sustainable development of the area of Rugin village and Turcinești commune from an economic, social and environmental protection point of view. Sustainable development is based on an important tourist potential, due to geographical areas with rich

biodiversity (mountainous, depressional, hilly areas), protected natural areas, national parks, natural reserves and natural monuments, a large number of caves - over 2,000 representing about 1/6 of the speleological potential of Romania, the diversity of flora and fauna (some of them species unique to Romania) [20, 25].

In support of the development of responsible tourism in the area, this paper attempts to bring to the attention of local and central authorities that rural tourism, agrotourism and ecotourism are the most viable forms because they present a very competitive advantage mainly related to authenticity and originality, with the help of which a rich and diversified tourist offer can be created. These specific forms of tourism can be practiced especially in the area at the base of the mountain range in the north, being closely linked to detachment from the accelerated life of the present, by accessing the slow and relaxing time of the Romanian village of Gorje and by reconnecting with the healthy roots of humanity.

Practicing such tourism requires collaboration between authorities (which have legislative, economic, social instruments), economic agents (which initiate development projects and tourist services), important actors who campaign for environmental protection and the preservation of cultural heritage, local tourism service providers, tour operators and travel agencies and, last but not least, tourists. The development of responsible and sustainable tourism satisfies the needs of the present customers of the host regions, at the same time as protecting and increasing the chances and opportunities for the future. It is seen as a way of managing all resources, so that economic, social and aesthetic needs are fully satisfied, maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological dimensions, biological diversity and the life system [26, 28].

Also to develop the offer in the area, the authorities must support businesses in the agritourism field, by simplifying the regulatory acts necessary for the approval/authorization of agritourism guesthouses, with the aim of encouraging investments in agritourism, registering private

accommodation units, as well as perpetuating culinary recipes, traditional products specific to the regions, by preparing and serving meals for tourists, from products from their own household, obtained by cultivating the land and raising domestic animals [31]. Capitalizing on crafts, at risk of extinction under the impact of technology, with the effect of increasing the prosperity of locals by: identifying (by specialized institutions) villages with high handicraft production, to ensure assistance for the development of crafts, selecting folk crafts, identifying the export market and support for the creation, promotion and marketing of traditional handicrafts; supporting the creation of centers for the production, exhibition and marketing of handicraft products, etc., in the main ethnographic areas; stimulating socio-cultural entrepreneurship, in order to preserve and transmit crafts and folk traditions; supporting regulations regarding the marketing of traditional, Romanian-specific handicrafts in tourist attractions [29, 31, 18].

Starting from these desiderata, which mainly aim to contribute to the well-being of local communities, by preserving and promoting cultural authenticity, this case study attempted to present a possibility of improving economic, social and environmental conditions by reconversion of the workforce in the Gorj area, where the aggressive exploitation of the natural environment (mining, ballast pits) took place, and orienting the workforce towards the tourist area and especially towards practicing forms of tourism specific to rural areas, such as agrotourism and rural tourism.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research method is a classic one and widely used in research in the field of rural tourism and agritourism. Within it, a case study was carried out in which, in order to identify the natural and anthropic tourist potential of the area, master's students from the specialization in Agrotourism Management and the Quality of Agri-Food Products [7, 8] were involved in a multidisciplinary research project with a

complex study character. They went to the field to carry out the preliminary research stage which consisted primarily in observing and describing the real situation of the development and evolution of the tourist activity in the area, which has been affected recently, as well as the entire Gorj County, by the phenomenon of depopulation and economic regression, due to the almost complete closure of mining and energy industry activities. The data collected from the field were rigorously processed, obtaining a series of significant results and based on them, several conclusions and recommendations were formulated regarding the future development of rural tourism and agritourism in the area [7, 8].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

As part of the case study, we also made an inventory of the natural and anthropogenic tourist heritage of the area surrounding the Pensions under study, over a radius of over 30 km, a distance from which all tourist attractions must be taken into account in any major tourist study carried out. The area of interest for the pension is delimited to the north by the parallel of 45°58' north latitude, which passes near the town of Țântăreni. The eastern limit is near the towns of Alimpești and Polovragi, passing by the meridian of 23°39' east longitude. The western limit is represented by the Dobru peak in the Godeanu Mountains, located on the meridian of 22°6' east longitude. The 45° parallel crosses the territory through its southern part.

The study area is well equipped in terms of transport infrastructure, communication routes and accessibility to the Danube ports and the sub-mountain tourist area [13]:

- favorable, relatively central position of the Țârgu Jiu municipality at the intersection of major traffic axes (Craiova – Deva and Râmnicul Vâlcea – Drobeta Turnu Severin);
- most cities are adjacent to a DN National Road (except Țicleni) and there is a good degree of coverage of the territory with road arteries (39.3 km - 100 km²), but not qualitatively;

- railway accessibility and density is good (34.4 km / 1,000 km²), the area is located near the Bucharest – Craiova highway;

- Sibiu International Airport is 95 km away, and Craiova International Airport is 120 km away.

Relief is formed by three large physical-geographical units that descend in steps from north to south. 1. The Southern Carpathians, a mountainous area represented by the southern slopes of the Parâng, Vâlcan and Godeanu Mountains; 2. The Getic Subcarpathian area - consisting of two rows of hilly peaks and two depressional gullies; 3. The Getic Plateau is made up of sedimentary deposits (sands, gravels, clays, marls) of materials eroded from the mountains, carried by rivers and deposited in the Getic Basin. These three landforms, arranged in steps from north to south, descend from an altitude of 2,519 m, the highest altitude, in the Parângu Mare Peak, to the lowest altitude of 100 m in the Jiu meadow, in the Picu locality, in the Ionești commune [13, 31, 34].

Climate. The climate is mainly temperate continental, with a wide variety of nuances, as a result of the geographical position, atmospheric circulation and the relief components present. The average annual temperature records different values from north to south: 0 degrees C on the peaks above 2,000 m and 10.1 degrees C in Țârgu Jiu. Precipitation has an uneven distribution in the territory and decreases from north to south as follows: 1,200 mm/year at above 2,000 m, 865 mm/year in Novaci, 750 mm/year in Țârgu Jiu, 585 mm/year in Țântăreni. The snow cover has an uneven distribution, in the high mountain area above 1,500 – 1,600 m it lasts 180-200 days (Parâng, Vâlcan, Godeanu). In the middle mountain area, the duration is only 140-150 days and decreases to 60-80 days/year in the plateau [13, 31, 34].

The flora and fauna consist of over 2000 plant species and include: the alpine meadows located at high altitudes; - the coniferous forests, between 1,400-1,700 m, the predominant species being spruce and fir; - the deciduous forests include: beech, hornbeam, hornbeam. The fauna is very varied and includes - the ibex on the alpine

peaks, the bear, the wild boar, the wolf, the deer, the roe deer, the wild cat, the ferret in the deciduous forests, some Mediterranean species: the horned viper, the land turtle, numerous bird species 8 as well as a large aquatic fauna in the mountain rivers (trout, carp, etc.). The diversity of the fauna of the area is an important attraction especially for foreign tourists for whom there are offers that include hunting and fishing activities [13, 27, 31, 34].

The hydrography is represented by the rivers: Jiu, Gilort and their tributaries, the Olteț and Cerna Rivers. There are several important glacial lakes: Gâlcescu, Tăuri, Slăveiu, Mija, Pasărea and Godeanu. The lakes are few and are artificially created to mitigate floods (Ceauru) or to produce electricity (Motru, Cerna, Valea lui Ivan). The area is also rich in groundwater such as karst waters coming from the limestone mountain bar where the two springs at Runcu and Izvarna were also captured, with a flow rate of over 100 liters/second each. Groundwater at shallow depths of about 2–3 m is found in the subcarpathian depressions and in the river meadows in the plateau area used by the inhabitants through wells. Mineral waters appear at Săcelu in springs, used for baths [13, 31, 34].

From the point of view of human-made tourist resources, we highlight the fact that the Pension is located in the Turcinești commune, which is attested by the document of August 5, 1424, in which the village of Turcinești is mentioned for the first time. The second document attesting to the existence of the village of Turcinești dates back to October 28, 1428, issued in Bratislava. The village of Turcinești is later mentioned in the document of January 18, 1480, in which Basarab the Younger gives Ticuci and his brothers several villages and parts of villages, and another document is from April 3, 1635, given by Matei Basarab [13, 31, 34].

Among the very important human-made cultural-historical objectives, we mention: – The “Elvira Godeanu” Dramatic Theater in Târgu Jiu, the professional artistic ensemble “Doina Gorjului”, 203 libraries, of which 62 are public. Museums: Gorj County Museum

“Alexandru Ștefulescu”, Gorjești Folk Architecture Museum in Curtișoara, Lelești Village Museum, Arcani Village Museum, Tudor Vladimirescu Memorial House in Vladimir village, Ecaterina Teodoroiu Memorial House in Târgu Jiu, Padeș Proclamation Monument [13, 27, 31, 32, 34].

The list of historical monuments attractive from a tourist point of view is made up of a number of 511 objectives: 46 monuments and archaeological sites, 352 historical monuments, 4 urban ensembles, 24 public monuments and 28 memorial monuments. Among these, the “Path of Heroes” Monumental Ensemble, included in the UNESCO heritage, in the municipality of Târgu Jiu stands out. Other specific objectives of the area are the cults, some of which are still preserved today: the Cula de la Curtișoara, the Cula Crăsnaru, the Cula din Șiacu and the Casa-culă in Glogova. Also included in this list are historical monuments such as: the wooden church with porch “Sfântul Vasile” in the village of Pieptani, the wooden church “Sfântul Ioan Botezătorul” in Fărcăsești, the wooden church “Sfântul Nicolae” in Negomir, the wooden church “Sfintii Împarați” in Curtheana and the wooden church “Sfintii Arhangheli” in Ceauru, one of the wooden churches of great architectural value and one of the oldest of this type preserved in Gorj county [3, 13, 21, 23, 31, 35].

Among the most visited religious sites, we mention the Gorj Monasteries, which attracted people who love culture and beauty through their architecture, the Tismana Monastery, which is the oldest monastic settlement in Wallachia. The Polovragi monastery complex is located at the foot of the Piatra Polovragilor Mountain near the Olteț Gorges and is 500 years old (1505). It was later painted during the reign of Constantin Brâncoveanu, who is considered its third founder. The Crasna Monastery was founded in 1636. The ensemble includes a church built in Byzantine style with fresco painting made in 1757. The Lainici Monastery, located in the Jiu Valley gorge, developed around a wooden church. It has original paintings that have been preserved since 1817. Other objectives

included in the list of historical monuments are: the wooden church with a porch "Saint Basil" in the village of Pieptani, the wooden church "Saint John the Baptist" in Fărcăsești, the wooden church "Saint Nicholas" in Negomir, the wooden church "Holy Emperors" in Curtheana and the wooden church "Holy Archangels" in Ceauru, one of the wooden churches of great architectural value and one of the oldest of this type preserved in Gorj county [4, 13, 23, 31, 35].

The wooden architecture of the area has a great artistic value, unique and unparalleled in the world remains the "Brâncușian Open-Air Museum Complex from Târgu Jiu" [13, 23, 31, 32]. Also valuable from an artistic and architectural point of view are the houses and mansions built especially between the 16th and 19th centuries: Dimitrie Măldărăscu House, in the municipality of Târgu Jiu; Cartianu House, located in the village of Cartiu, Turcinești commune; Cornea Brăiloiu House, in the Vădeni neighborhood of the municipality of Târgu Jiu; Barbu Gănescu House, in the municipality of Târgu Jiu; Vasile Moangă House, in the municipality of Târgu Jiu; Moangă - Pleșoianu House, in the resort of Săcelu [13, 23, 31]. In order to highlight the capacity to use the rich natural and anthropogenic tourist heritage presented above, we show that the Casa Hortopan Guesthouse, located in one of the most picturesque areas of Gorj, 6 km from the city of Târgu Jiu, welcomes tourists with 4 double rooms and two twin rooms classified as 3-4 daisies, with a total of 12 accommodation places [3, 4, 24, 27].

The interior and exterior design stands out by combining modern and classic style, and the high-quality finishes satisfy the most demanding requirements. As for the rooms, they stand out by their generous size, private terrace and amenities such as air conditioning, smart TV, minibar [3, 4, 24]. Tourists have a fully equipped kitchen at their disposal where they can prepare their own food, or they can opt for dishes prepared at the restaurant, which are composed mostly of products obtained in their own household. It offers accommodation with free bikes, free private parking, a bar, various facilities, including a

24-hour front desk, a shared kitchen and free WiFi throughout the property, a garden and barbecue facilities [3, 4, 24, 27]. The guest house rooms are equipped with air conditioning, a desk, a flat-screen TV, bed linen, towels, a private bathroom and a balcony with garden views, each room is fitted with a terrace and includes a seating area.

Table 1. Dynamics of the number of tourists arrivals and the number of overnight stays

| Years | Number of tourists | Overnight stays |
|-------|--------------------|-----------------|
| 2020 | 89 | 153 |
| 2021 | 97 | 162 |
| 2022 | 85 | 125 |
| 2023 | 127 | 232 |
| 2024 | 131 | 249 |

Source: processing based on data from the Agrotourism guesthouse and NIS [22].

From Table 1 it can be seen that the tourist activity at the guesthouse has revived much after 2020, which was also the year of maximum pandemic. This year was also considered the year in which the guesthouse began to operate at its full capacity. The number of tourists and overnight stays have continuously increased, along with the increasing experience of the staff and guesthouse administrators in the field of agritourism activity. After the staff began to learn new skills in this field, the quality of services has increased considerably, which also led to a considerable increase in the values of the two indicators listed in Table 1.

Table 2. Dynamics of the number of tourists arriving per day and the average length of stay

| Years | Average number of tourists arriving per day | Average length of stay |
|-------|---|------------------------|
| 2020 | 0.25 | 1.72 |
| 2021 | 0.27 | 1.67 |
| 2022 | 0.24 | 1.47 |
| 2023 | 0.36 | 1.83 |
| 2024 | 0.39 | 1.90 |

Source: processing based on data from the Agrotourism guesthouse and NIS [22].

The average number of tourists arriving per day and the average length of stay listed in Table 2 followed the same increasing trend as

the two indicators presented previously, as there is a close interdependence between them. In 2022, a slight regression of these two indicators is observed, as the guesthouse tried to readapt to a new level of customer requirements, who came to the guesthouse especially to spend a quiet weekend stay, with children and family.

Table 3. Calculation of the total number of tourists days – arrivals at the Agrotourism guesthouse

| Years | Number of tourists | Overnight stays | Total number – tourist days |
|-------|--------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|
| 2020 | 89 | 153 | 13,617 |
| 2021 | 97 | 162 | 15,714 |
| 2022 | 85 | 125 | 10,625 |
| 2023 | 127 | 232 | 29,464 |
| 2024 | 131 | 249 | 32,619 |

Source: processing based on data from the Agrotourism guesthouse and NIS [22].

Based on the number of tourists arriving and overnight stays, the total number of days spent by tourists at this guesthouse was calculated. From the data entered in this table, it can be seen that the year 2022 is the year with the lowest number of days, of only 10,625, but after this turning point year, the guesthouse began to recover and reach a considerably improved value, in the year 2024 of 32,619 days - tourists arriving.

Table 4. Determining the accommodation capacity in operation of the Agrotourism guesthouse

| Years | Number of days of effective operation | Accommodation capacity in operation |
|-------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 2020 | 197 | 2,364 |
| 2021 | 169 | 2,028 |
| 2022 | 162 | 1,944 |
| 2023 | 219 | 2,628 |
| 2024 | 234 | 2,808 |

Source: processing based on data from the Agrotourism guesthouse and NIS [22].

As can be seen from Table 4, the owner of the guesthouse and the staff have continuously worked to increase the number of effective days of operation. The guesthouse, as previously presented, is located in the vicinity of the city of Târgu-Jiu, approximately 6 km from it, which means that the guesthouse is used at maximum capacity, especially on weekends. To compensate for this small

disadvantage, the management team has continuously worked mainly to improve the quality of the services offered, but also to diversify and personalize the leisure offer, so that tourists perceive that they have more activities to do and visit, at the guesthouse and in the area.

Regarding the dynamics of the occupancy rate (Iu) % and the occupancy rate (Do) %, it can be seen from Table 5 that the values of these indices had a progressive increase throughout the entire research period, reaching the maximum value in 2024, when it is found that the quality level of services offered to tourists is also the highest and also the management of tourist activities at the guesthouse has reached almost full maturity and performance.

Table 5. Dynamics Index of use of accommodation capacity in operation (Iu) % and Occupancy Degree (Do) %

| Years | Index of use of accommodation capacity in operation (Iu) % | Occupancy Degree (Do) % |
|-------|--|-------------------------|
| 2020 | 21.99 | 32.89 |
| 2021 | 26.93 | 29.55 |
| 2022 | 22.46 | 26.98 |
| 2023 | 31.27 | 43.91 |
| 2024 | 33.16 | 48.76 |

Source: processing based on data from the Agrotourism guesthouse and NIS [22].

From the overall analysis of the tourism situation in the studied area, it was observed that the guesthouse contributed to the revitalization of the well-being of the local community, by preserving and promoting cultural authenticity, by retraining the workforce from natural areas where the aggressive exploitation of the natural environment took place (mining, ballast pits), by directing the workforce to the tourist area and creating a platform dedicated to farmers interested in entrepreneurship in sustainable tourism in the Carpathians, according to the Carpathian Convention. At the same time, through its own example, it draws the attention of local authorities that the quality of the tourist infrastructure depends on: the way of valorisation (reduced/high) of the tourist fund; the degree of satisfaction (complete/incomplete) of the tourist demand depending on the diversity of the tourist

services offered; ensuring a tourist consumption (lower/higher).

Attracting tourists to the area and to the guesthouse was also achieved by using local stories about people and places, both in the interaction between tourists and the local population, and in promotional actions in the online environment, by broadcasting video materials on their own websites, videos or on social networks, but also in the offline environment, in brochures or tourist guides. Increasing the visibility of the presence in domestic and foreign trade fairs (within the Romanian stand) by permanently improving the degree of diversity and attractiveness of the stand, the quality of the offer and the disseminated information, the hospitality of the representatives and exhibitors at the stand, the cultural programs presented on such occasions. Popularization was also achieved by developing gastronomic and oenological tourism by: identifying tourist reception structures with food functions, which present specialties of traditional gastronomy, appealing to creativity and modernity; developing and promoting thematic gastronomic tours; valorisation and promotion of tangible and intangible heritage, wine and vine culture and the continued development and promotion of European, national and regional wine routes.

CONCLUSIONS

The paper presents a complete and well-documented study on a successful tourism activity carried out in Gorj County, which from an economic point of view is part of the category of disadvantaged areas in our country. From the study we conducted, we believe that the closure of mining activities and the minimization of pollution, due to the cessation of many activities in the energy field, is a beneficial thing, because the area has numerous natural and anthropogenic tourism resources, which can be quickly used in the implementation and development of successful family businesses, similar to those presented by us in the case study.

We also concluded that in order to practice such tourism, local people must collaborate

with local and county authorities (which have legislative, economic, social instruments), economic agents (which initiate development projects and tourist services), important actors who campaign for environmental protection and the preservation of cultural heritage, local tourism service providers, tour operators and travel agencies and, last but not least, with tourists. Carrying out an activity in the field of rural tourism and agrotourism in this area does not require very large investments, the locals can make the free spaces they have available to tourists with a minimum of equipment and modernization, so as to achieve maximum efficiency and profitability with a low level of expenses.

At the same time, responsible and sustainable tourism must be practiced in the area that meets the needs of customers and the host population, but at the same time leads to the protection and increase of chances and opportunities for the future, as can be seen from the experience before the revolution and in the first decades after, when several irresponsible and harmful economic activities were practiced in the area, which led to the almost irreversible deterioration and degradation of the area and the surrounding environment. In our opinion, rural tourism and agrotourism are activities with a strong favorable impact on the area, and by practicing modern management oriented especially towards quality and sustainability like that of the guesthouse under study, all resources can be successfully managed, so that economic, social and aesthetic needs are fully satisfied, while at the same time maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological dimensions, biological diversity and the traditional way of life.

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