

WHAT CONTRIBUTES TO THE ATTRACTIVENESS AND POPULARITY OF A RURAL TOURISM DESTINATION? EXAMPLE OF GOOD PRACTICES – PORUMBACU DE JOS COMMUNE, SIBIU COUNTY, ROMANIA

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Abstract

The attractiveness and popularity of a rural tourism destination depend on a whole series of factors, the most important of which refer to the beauty of the landscape and the provision of unique, memorable and authentic experiences. The commune of Porumbacu de Jos is part of the ethnogeographic area "Țara Oltului", is located in the mountainous area of Sibiu County, Romania, with 34% of its surface covered with forests and is the access point to the mountain hiking trails in the Făgăraș Mountains. The initiative of some tourism entrepreneurs who built here some unique attractions, such as the "Clay Castle" ("Castelul de Lut") and the "Calendar Story" ("Povestea Calendarului") theme park, have brought thousands of tourists to the commune annually. Currently, there are 35 accommodation facilities operating in the commune, generally, these are rustic houses, decorated in the traditional style of peasant houses in Transylvania. In the commune, there is a registered a family-owned restaurant and a local gastronomic point. The operational accommodation capacity in 2024 was 6,944 bed-days. The highest values of tourism indicators were recorded in 2022 (tourism traffic density was 2.13, and tourism traffic intensity was 3.98). The tourism operation rate in 2024 was 0.108. The local tourism offer is promoted on various information and booking platforms, with tourists praising the quality and comfort of the accommodations, the tranquillity, the beauty of the landscape, the hospitality of the hosts, and the uniqueness of the experience. In the future, sustained efforts are needed to improve market-oriented promotion and to digitally transform the tourism offer.

Key words: rural tourism, agrotourism, attractivity, popularity, sustainable development, Porumbacu de Jos, Romania

INTRODUCTION

The competitiveness of tourist destinations is becoming increasingly important for countries seeking to develop their tourism market [35]. In the 2024 edition of the Travel & Tourism Development Index, published by the World Economic Forum, Romania achieved a score of 4.19, ranking 43rd out of 119 countries evaluated. This index assesses a set of factors and policies that contribute to the sustainable and resilient development of the tourism and travel sector, providing insight into the competitiveness and potential of countries in this field [41].

Tourism competitiveness is a complex indicator that includes a wide range of both quantitative and qualitative variables [2].

The attractiveness and competitiveness of a rural tourism destination depend on the local community's ability to provide tourists with high-quality services and innovative, niche offers, while sustainably utilizing local natural and cultural tourism resources [35].

Rural tourism, in all its forms, can contribute to the diversification of economic activities in rural households, the creation of jobs, especially for young people and women, the reduction of depopulation, the generation of supplementary income alongside agricultural revenues, the enhancement of local cohesion,

the preservation of landscapes and cultural values, and the revitalization of rural areas. [26, 40]. The development of rural tourism and agrotourism involves the efficient utilization of all natural and cultural resources, bringing numerous economic, socio-cultural, and environmental benefits to rural communities [28], serving as a valuable tool for sustainable local development [17]. The success of tourism activities also depends on the type of tourism structure, without being significantly influenced by its location in an urban or rural environment [32].

The main criteria for choosing a rural tourism destination are the beauty of the landscape, the quality of services, and the diversity of activities for leisure [38].

Seasonality also has a major influence on rural tourism and agrotourism, due to its direct connection with agriculture and the lifestyle of agrotourism guesthouse owners. The results published by Gordan et al. (2024) show that the impact of seasonality can be reduced through a better utilization of tourism potential [14]. The duration of a tourist stays and its extension into the off-season are also influenced by the bioclimatic potential of the area, particularly by the thermal comfort index, which determines the feasibility of outdoor activities or the utilization of local therapeutic resources [21].

Some authors associate rural tourism and agrotourism with creative tourism [20] or regenerative tourism [17], highlighting that it takes place on a small scale, is based on a specific community lifestyle, originates in local traditions and culture, and emphasizes social, economic, cultural, and environmental sustainability.

Other authors explore aspects related to the assessment of service quality from the perspective of ecotourism or nature-based tourism, concepts closely related to rural tourism and agrotourism. Glamping is considered a form of sustainable tourism that emphasizes service quality [27] and targets tourists with a sustainable mindset or those willing to change their travel habits to be more environmentally friendly and transition toward a circular economy [3]. The awarding of the ecological label in agrotourism is based

on mandatory and additional criteria [11]. The analysed criteria mainly refer to energy consumption, water usage, public transportation, and management systems [7].

The sustainable development of tourism also depends on the level of tourist satisfaction [1, 6, 15, 18]. Some authors have highlighted age-related differences in satisfaction levels regarding the quality of services and offers in Romanian rural tourism. Older tourists appreciate authentic experiences based on the involvement of local communities in promoting the natural and cultural resources of the area [10].

Authentic agrotourism involves serving culinary dishes prepared according to traditional recipes specific to the region, made from fresh, seasonal ingredients sourced from the household's own farm or other local producers [4], contributing to the creation of an authentic and memorable experience [9].

The purpose of the paper

Starting from the premise that there are major challenges for rural communities and local public authorities in stimulating development and improving living conditions for residents [19], we have chosen to analyse the state of rural tourism and agrotourism development in Porumbacu de Jos commune, Sibiu County, Romania. The commune is among the preferred rural tourism destinations in Romania in recent years, and we aimed to identify the elements that have contributed to its attractiveness and popularity.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research work was based on documentary research, literature review, statistical analysis of secondary data, field visit, observations, and on the collection of information from the case study in Porumbacu de Jos commune.

The methodology included at the beginning desk research methods and procedures to collect the primary data from official information sources and data bases regarding lodging and travel services provided. In this case it was used the site of The National Authority for Tourism under the coordination of the ministry in charge of tourism activities. Also, the data were picked up from the

National Agency of Mountain Area. After setting up the data collection for this research work, there were calculated some tourist traffic indicators of rural tourism in Porumbacu de Jos commune, Sibiu County. These indicators are tourist traffic density, tourist traffic intensity and tourist operation rate [36].

Tourist traffic density (TD) is the indicator that directly links tourist traffic with the resident population (on January 1). It is calculated as the ratio between the number of tourists arriving in the area (TA) and the resident population of the area on January 1 (P).

$$TD = \frac{TA}{P} \dots \dots \dots (1)$$

The intensity of tourist flow was determined dividing the number of overnight stays to the resident population in the village (on 1 January).

$$TI = \frac{Os}{P} \dots \dots \dots (2)$$

where:

Ti = tourist traffic intensity

Os = number of tourist overnight stays

P = total population on 1 January

To assess the size of the tourist development in the studied area, it was evaluated the *tourist operation rate*, whose formula involves calculating the ratio between the total number of accommodation units and the resident population.

$$Tfr = Tacu/P \dots \dots \dots (3)$$

where:

Tfr = tourism function rate Tacu = total number of accommodation units P = total population on 1 January

Excel, v. 365 Microsoft, was used for data processing.

The main research objectives are:

O1. Description of the rural tourism and agrotourism potential of Sibiu County, Romania

O2. Obtaining general information regarding the tourism potential of Porumbacu de Jos commune, Sibiu County, Romania

O3. Obtaining data on the number of tourist structures, by type, degree of comfort and their accommodation capacity

O4. Calculation of the main indicators of tourist circulation

O5. Identifying the presence of tourist structures in the village of Porumbacu de Sus on various promotion and reservation platforms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

O1. Description of the rural tourism and agrotourism potential of Sibiu County, Romania

Sibiu County covers an area of 5,432 km² and had a resident population of 393,776 inhabitants as of January 1, 2024, of which 37.2% lived in rural areas [31]. Sibiu County is among the counties with high rural tourism potential, primarily due to its natural tourist resources in the mountainous region and the existence of villages where traditions and the lifestyle derived from the residents' main occupations are well preserved, complemented by the authenticity of the area. The mountainous area of Sibiu County represents approximately 30% of the county's surface and is a region where rural tourism and agrotourism blend with mountain and adventure tourism. Within the county, there are two ecotourism destinations: "Mărginimea Sibiului" and "Colinele Transilvaniei", which are part of the Discover Romania network.

The inhabitants of mountain villages generally have a more developed entrepreneurial spirit, with many starting rural tourism businesses that contribute to the sustainable development of villages and stimulate local economic and social growth. The development of tourism in Sibiu County was influenced by the designation of the county's capital city as the European Capital of Culture in 2007 and the achievement of the title European Gastronomic Region in 2019. Additionally, in 2021-2022, Sibiu hosted EuroRando, the largest European hiking event, with the support of the European Ramblers Association. All these efforts have resulted in the international recognition of Sibiu County, the development of a network of tourist

information centres, the creation of thematic tourist routes, the marking and maintenance of mountain trails, and the organization of numerous tourism programs and events. Notable examples include "Anii Drumeției" (The Hiking Years) and the Ecotourism Fair, held under the patronage of the Sibiu County Council and the Sibiu County Tourism Association [33]. At the beginning of 2025, the tourism accommodation infrastructure in Sibiu County included 1,060 accommodation units [13]. By type, the largest shares were held by rental rooms (30.85%), tourist guesthouses (26.60%), rental apartments (18.96%), and hotels (8.96%), together accounting for over 85% of the county's total accommodation offer. The rural localities with the highest number of tourist accommodation structures in Sibiu County are: Săliște and its affiliated villages Galeș, Fântânele, Sibiel, and Vale (61 units), Cârțișoara (48 units), Porumbacu de Jos, including its villages Colun, Sărata, and Porumbacu de Sus (35 units), Gura Râului (34 units), Rășinari (31 units), Poplaca (26 units), Șelimbăr (32 units), Bazna (19 units), and Biertan (16 units). The tourist accommodation structures in the rural areas of Sibiu County are generally small-scale and highly diverse, including tourist

guesthouses, agrotourism guesthouses, cabins, villas, hostels, campsites, camping cottages, rental rooms, and apartments. However, a few hotels can also be found in the rural areas of Sibiu County. The evolution of the number of tourist and agrotourism guesthouses in Sibiu County between 2022 and 2024 is presented in Figure 1. Compared to 2022, there is a declining trend in their number.

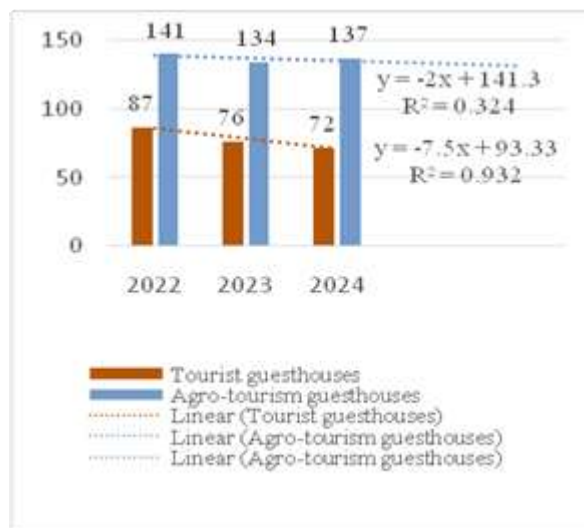


Fig. 1. Evolution of the number of tourist and agrotourist guest houses in Sibiu County, Romania, 2022-2024.

Source: [24].

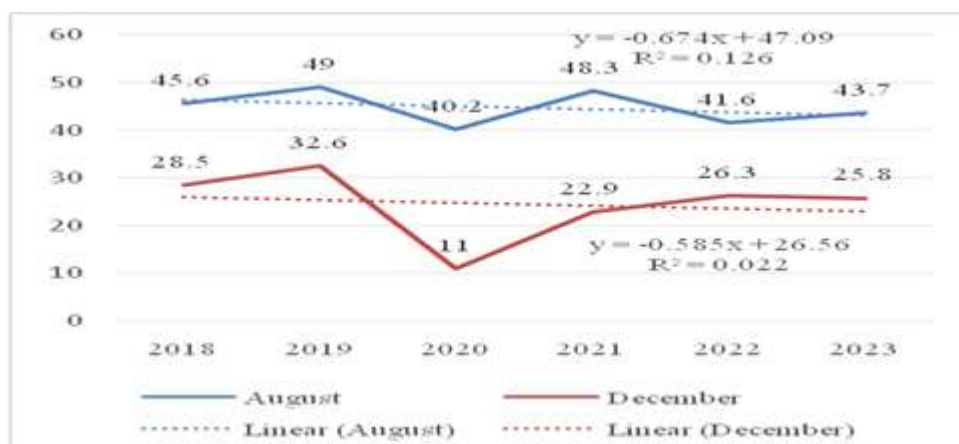


Fig. 2. Evolution of the net utilization index of Accommodation capacity in Sibiu county, during 2018-2023

Source: [24].

During the period 2018–2023, as expected, the net occupancy rate of accommodation capacity in Sibiu County recorded its lowest values during the Covid-19 pandemic, specifically in 2020. That year, the occupancy

rate was 40.2% in August and dropped to 11% in December (Figure 2).

O2. General Information on the Tourism Potential of Porumbacu de Jos Commune, Sibiu County, Romania

The Porumbacu de Jos Commune is located in the Făgăraș Depression and is part of the ethnogeographic region known as "Țara Oltului". It has been documented since the year 1223. The commune consists of five villages, covering a total area of 18,468

hectares, of which 10,378 hectares are agricultural land (of which arable land is 2,921 ha). Additionally, 34% of its territory is covered by forests and forest vegetation (Figure 3).



Fig. 3. The location of the village of Porumbacu de Sus (a) on the map of ethnogeographic areas of Sibiu County (b), and (c) images from the tourist attractions in the village ("Clay Castle" and "The Story of the Calendar", 2024)
Source: own design based on: [34].

In "Țara Oltului", the traditional occupation of the locals was animal husbandry and agriculture. In many villages within this area, the craft of leather processing developed in close connection with the needs of the inhabitants. Traditional folk attire in the region still includes numerous leather and fur garments, such as sheepskin coats (cojoace), vests (pieptare), and hats (căciuli). Between the 16th and 18th centuries, glass manufacturing workshops also emerged in the area.

The village of Porumbacu de Sus is administratively part of the Porumbacu de Jos commune. It is located in the mountainous area of Sibiu County, at the foot of the Făgăraș Mountains, approximately 40 km from Sibiu, the county seat. The village lies at

the base of Negoiu Peak in the Făgăraș Mountains and covers an area of approximately 91 hectares. According to the 2011 census, the village had a population of around 832 inhabitants [29]. As of January 1, 2024, the total population of the commune was 3,245 inhabitants.

According to the local development strategy, the Porumbacu de Jos commune offers various types of tourism products, with notable highlights including mountain tourism, leisure tourism, and adventure tourism.

From the village of Porumbacu de Sus, visitors can access hiking trails leading into the Făgăraș Mountains. Thanks to the facilities provided by local tourism businesses, visitors can engage in a variety of

activities, including fishing and hunting, cycling, horseback riding, hiking, ATV rides, climbing, snowboarding, paragliding, zip-lining, and even outdoor movie screenings in the forest. Additionally, tourists can enjoy the local gastronomy, experiencing traditional culinary delights. The commune has preserved the tradition of "Şezătoarea" (traditional gatherings) and the customs specific to winter holidays, keeping the local cultural heritage alive.

The local public administration has implemented various projects, including the rehabilitation of a public recreational space and the development of a multifunctional area for hosting cultural events.

Future plans include the construction of a bicycle path, the development of a parking area in the tourist zone, and the creation of a bypass road around the village to provide direct access to the tourist area [29].

Out of the 33 local gastronomic points registered in Sibiu County between 2018 and 2025, two are in the analysed commune, specifically in the villages of Colun and Porumbacu de Sus [22]. These establishments can accommodate groups of up to 15 people for dining, offering visitors a taste of the region's culinary traditions.

In addition, the commune is home to two local producers registered in the national "Mountain Product" register, managed by the National Agency for the Mountain Area [23]. One producer, based in Sărata village, specializes in organically grown vegetables, while another, from Porumbacu de Sus, produces and sells various types of honey, contributing to the preservation of traditional and sustainable agricultural practices.

O3. Data on the number of tourist establishments by type, comfort level, and accommodation capacity

Table 1. The number of tourist establishments, comfort level, and accommodation capacity in Porumbacu de Jos commune in the year 2024

Type of tourist structure	No	Comfort level (stars/flowers)					No. of rooms	No. of seats
		1	2	3	4	5		
Porumbacu de Sus Village								
Tourist guesthouse	7	-		4	3	-	49	109
Agrotourism guesthouse	3	-	-	2	1	-	19	40
Camping cottages	1	-	-	1	-	-	2	4
Apartments for rent	4	1		3	-	-	5	35
Rooms for rent	8	-	3	5		-	35	66
TOTAL accommodation capacity Porumbacu de Sus village	23	1	3	15	4	-	110	254
Porumbacu de Jos Village								
Tourist guesthouse	4	-	1	2	1	-	25	51
Rooms for rent	2	-	2	-	-	-	12	25
TOTAL accommodation capacity Porumbacu de Jos village	6	-	3	2	1	-	37	76
Colun Village								
Tourist pension	1	-	-	-	1	-	2	4
Agrotourism pension	1	-	-	1	-	-	2	4
TOTAL accommodation capacity Colun village	2	-	-	1	1	-	4	8
Sărata Village								
Agrotourism pension	1	-	-	-	1	-	3	6
Rooms for rent	1	-	-	1	-	-	4	8
Camping	1	1	-	-	-	-	5	20
Cabin	1	-	1	-	-	-	26	111
TOTAL accommodation capacity Sărata village	4	1	1	1	1	-	38	145
Total accommodation capacity Porumbacu de Jos commune	35	2	7	19	7	-	189	483

Source: own design based on [13].

According to the Ministry of Economy, Digitalization, Entrepreneurship, and Tourism the number of tourist establishments in Porumbacu de Jos commune are classified by capacity and comfort level as presented in Table 1.

In the village of Porumbacu de Sus, there are 23 classified tourist establishments offering accommodation, with a total capacity of 254 beds. Most of these establishments consist of rental rooms and apartments (52.17%), followed by tourist guesthouses (30.43%). Most accommodations have a rustic charm,

often incorporating the traditional architectural style of Transylvanian rural houses. In terms of comfort classification, the largest share belongs to three-star/three-flower establishments (65.21%), followed by four-star/four-flower accommodations (17.39%) and two-star/two-flower options (13.04%). The village also has a single family-style restaurant, classified as a two-star establishment.

It is worth noting that there are discrepancies between the data provided by the National Institute of Statistics (NIS) and those reported by the Ministry of Economy, Digitalization, Entrepreneurship, and Tourism regarding the number of accommodation units. For the year 2025, the Ministry's website lists 35 classified tourist structures, while the NIS reports 18 tourist establishments in the analyzed commune.

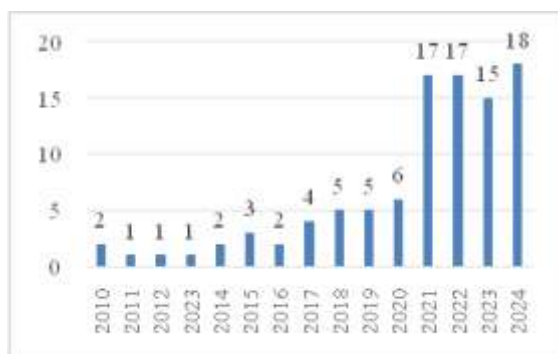


Fig. 4. Evolution of the number of accommodation structures in the commune of Porumbacu de Jos
Source: processing based on [24].



Fig. 5. Evolution of the number of overnight stays in Porumbacu de Jos commune (number of overnight stays)

Source: processing based on [24].

Based on data from the National Institute of Statistics, Figure 4 presents the dynamics of the number of tourist accommodation structures in Porumbacu de Jos commune between 2010 and 2024.

The evolution of the number of available accommodation places is shown in Figure 5. The operational accommodation capacity reached its highest value in 2024, summing 6,944 place-days, closely correlating with the increased number of tourist establishments.

O4. Determination of Key Indicators of Tourist Circulation

Tourist circulation density reflects the relationship between tourist traffic and the resident population as of January 1st. During the period 2021-2023, this indicator recorded a value greater than one, indicating a higher number of tourists relative to the local population (Figure 6).

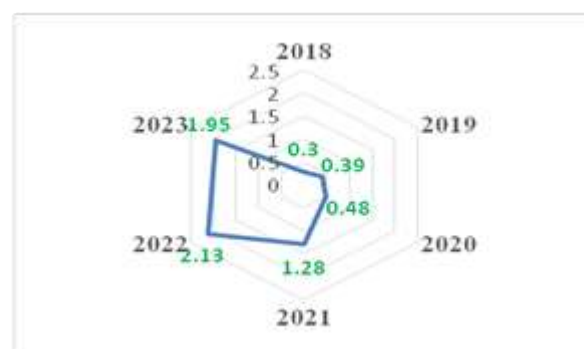


Fig. 6. Dynamics of tourist traffic density in Porumbacu de Jos commune, between 2018-2023
Source: Own calculation based on [24].



Fig. 7. Dynamics of tourist traffic intensity Porumbacu de Jos commune, between 2018-2023
Source: Own calculation based on [24].

The data in Figure 6 show that between 2018 and 2023, the tourist flow density reached its

lowest value of 0.30 in 2018 and peaked at 2.13 in 2022. In comparison, in Gura Râului, a tourist village in Mărginimea Sibiului with 34 accommodation structures, the highest tourist traffic density was 2.04 in 2022 [36]. The lowest value of tourist traffic intensity was recorded in 2019, at 0.59, while the highest value, 3.98, was reached in 2022 (Figure 7). In comparison, in Gura Râului, the highest tourist traffic intensity was 3.86 in 2022 [36].

The degree of tourism development in the studied area can be assessed based on the tourism operation rate, calculated as the number of tourist accommodation establishments relative to the resident population as of January 1st. For 2024, this indicator has a value of 0.108, significantly exceeding the corresponding value for Gura Râului commune, which was 0.08 in 2022 [36].

O5. Identifying the Presence of Tourist Establishments in Porumbacu de Sus on Various Promotion and Booking Platforms as Part of Tourism Marketing

During the Covid-19 pandemic, virtual tourism emerged as an integral part of sustainable tourism, combining virtual reality and gamification with content promoted through social media platforms. This evolution has been further enhanced by the integration of artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things, Big Data, machine learning, and GIS technologies. As part of the smart tourism ecosystem, virtual social platforms can play a significant role in promoting tourism sustainability by offering immersive experiences, improving accessibility, and optimizing resource management [25]. The profile of the smart tourist [16] describes an experienced traveller who actively uses smart technologies and maintains close connections with various tourism stakeholders. This engagement fosters interaction between different actors in the tourism sector and contributes to the co-creation of tourism content, enhancing both personalized experiences and destination marketing.

The internet is the primary source of information for tourists [37], serving not only

as a tool for gathering travel details but also for trip planning, booking tourism services, and leaving reviews after their stay [12]. In recent years, alongside the creation of web pages for tourism operators, various digital tools designed for tourism—such as virtual tours and augmented reality—have significantly contributed to the industry's growth by offering interactive sensory experiences.

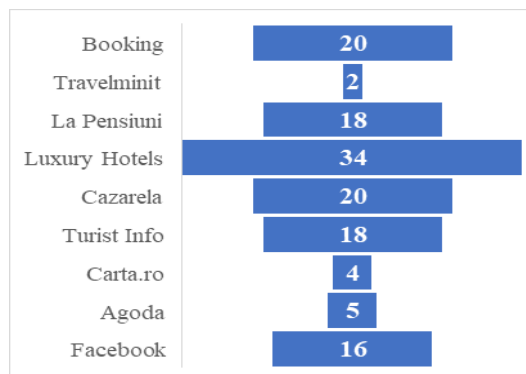


Fig. 8. Number of tourist accommodation structures in Porumbacu de Jos commune present on promotion and reservation platforms
Source: own design.



Fig. 9. Most common words found in tourist reviews
Source: own design based on [5].

A 2024 study analyzed the websites of 154 wineries to assess how wine tourism is promoted in Romania, highlighting that most winery owners have limited digital skills [40]. For Porumbacu de Jos commune, an analysis was conducted on the presence of tourist accommodation establishments on major promotion and booking platforms (Figure 8). On Booking.com, there are 1,192 reviews, with ratings ranging between 8.9 and 9.9.

Tourist reviews frequently highlight the quality and comfort of the locations, the peaceful atmosphere, natural surroundings, hospitality of hosts, attention to detail in courtyard arrangements, responsiveness to visitor needs, and the uniqueness of the experience (Fig. 9).

Local Tourist Attractions

The popularity of Porumbacu de Sus as a rural tourism destination has been significantly influenced by entrepreneurial initiatives. One of the key attractions is “Povestea Calendarului” (The Calendar Story), a theme park established in 2021, covering approximately 15,000 square meters. The park features 12 uniquely designed cottages, each representing a month of the year, under the “patronage” of a specific folklore character [39] (Photo 1 and 2).

Visitors to “Povestea Calendarului” can explore the folklore story of each month and take part in a variety of activities, such as

gastronomy workshops, pottery, and creative workshops in painting, sculpture, and decorative crafting, all tailored to different age groups. Additionally, the park hosts music, theater, and dance performances, enriching the cultural experience. According to park representatives, in August 2022, “Povestea Calendarului” welcomed approximately 4,000 visitors, of whom around 30% were foreign tourists, highlighting its growing international appeal.

The smooth operation of the theme park is supported by a team of 16 employees, ensuring a high-quality visitor experience. Additionally, the location features a restaurant with a seating capacity of welcoming and immersive setting.

The first man-made tourist attraction in the area was established in 2014 and has since become widely known as the “Clay Castle” (Castelul de Lut) (Photo 3 and 4).



Photo 1 and Photo 2 Images from the “Calendar Story” theme park, Porumbacu de Sus village, Romania, 2024
Original photos.

Located in a picturesque mountain landscape, near the Făgăraș Mountains, within the tourist area of Porumbacu de Sus, the Clay Castle (Castelul de Lut) has gained widespread popularity due to its unique architecture and extensive promotion on social media platforms. These factors have contributed to the attraction drawing thousands of visitors annually.

Currently, the site features a restaurant, and in 2025, a luxury hotel is set to open, further enhancing the visitor experience and accommodation options.

Other successful rural tourism businesses in the area include The guesthouse “Dealul Verde”, where the owners have created themed rooms carved into a hillside, each representing a traditional craft—such as the farmer’s room, blacksmith’s room, carpenter’s room, and weaver’s room. The guesthouse offers full board or half board, with menus based on traditional cuisine [8].

Another notable venture is a tourism complex consisting of eight restored traditional houses, owned by a well-known journalist [30].

Additionally, Pensiunea "Porumbacu 316" is housed in a renovated traditional home and is owned by a nationally renowned singer. This



location also features a local gastronomic point, enhancing its appeal to visitors seeking authentic culinary experiences.



Photo 3 and Photo 4. Images of the premises of the Valley of the Fairies ("Valea Zânelor") location – The "Clay Castle" ("Castelul de Lut"), Porumbacu de Sus, Romania (April, 2024).

Source: Original photos.

CONCLUSIONS

In addition to agriculture and animal husbandry, the residents of Porumbacu de Jos commune can and should fully capitalize on the area's natural and man-made tourism potential, bringing social, environmental, economic, and cultural benefits.

Although the commune currently enjoys significant popularity and ranks third in Sibiu County in terms of the number of established tourist structures, further efforts are needed to enhance market-oriented promotion and digitally transform the tourism offering. A dedicated website and a mobile application would be essential tools for promoting the commune's tourism potential, improving visitor accessibility, and consolidating its position as a leading rural tourism destination. In the past, Porumbacu commune was primarily known as a gateway to hiking trails in the Făgăraș Mountains. Today, however, it has evolved into a highly popular rural tourism destination, attracting both national and international visitors.

The commune boasts a well-developed accommodation infrastructure, providing tourists with authentic experiences and numerous opportunities to engage in outdoor activities surrounded by nature.

Investments are needed in the development of cycling routes, the restoration and maintenance of mountain trail markings, and

the organization of cultural events to attract more visitors. Additionally, better signage for the tourist area is essential, including the installation of directional signs and informational panels, improving accessibility and enhancing the overall visitor experience.

The local community must ensure the sustainable management of its tourism resources, as tourism serves as a key driver of local development.

The attractiveness and popularity of a rural tourism destination depend on a wide range of factors, including the location of the village, the beauty of the landscape, accessibility, the preservation of traditions and local crafts, the quality of services, the hospitality of hosts, and the availability of unique and authentic experiences. Additionally, the presence of traditional households and the effective promotion of both natural and cultural tourism resources play a crucial role in enhancing the destination's appeal.

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