

THE POTENTIAL OF CYCLING TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN GRĂDINARI COMMUNE, GIURGIU COUNTY, ROMANIA: ECONOMIC AND TOURISTIC IMPACTS OF ESTABLISHING CYCLING ROUTES

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Abstract

This paper explores the potential development of cycling tourism in Grădinari Commune, Giurgiu County, Romania, focusing particularly on the economic and touristic benefits derived from establishing dedicated cycling routes in the region. Located in North Eastern Giurgiu, adjacent to Ilfov County and bordered by the Argeș River, Grădinari commune comprises three villages: Grădinari, Tântava, and Zorile. The area's rich historical heritage, including landmarks such as the Oteteleşanu Manor and the historical churches, combined with favorable geographical conditions, present significant yet underutilized opportunities for cycling tourism. Through qualitative analysis of demographic, infrastructural, and historical data, this study argues that promoting cycling tourism would enhance local economic activity, boost rural tourism, and preserve cultural and natural heritage. The findings suggest substantial benefits, such as employment growth, increased local revenues, improved infrastructure, and heightened community well-being. The paper concludes that targeted investment and sustainable planning in cycling infrastructure could position Grădinari as a notable rural tourism destination, stimulating broader regional development.

Key words: cycling tourism, economic impact, Grădinari commune, rural tourism, sustainable development

INTRODUCTION

Nature, ecosystems and biodiversity are a part of our environment which gives us an incentive not to forget our origin [1].

Ecotourism and its various forms and rural tourism are alternatives to spend spare time outside in the middle of nature [2].

Rural tourism is highly preferred by Romanians which stimulated the appearance of agri and tourist guesthouses, rural routes to various natural and cultural attractions [3, 4].

Innovative initiatives and strategies are destined to sustain rural tourism and environment protection [5, 6, 7].

Territorial development by tourism involves the responsibility at the Government level, but also at the local administrative bodies and NGO-s. [8, 9, 11, 12] which give a chance for all the regions for economic and social development [16].

The pandemic confirmed the importance of rural tourism, agritourism and ecotourism for adopting a healthier life style [10, 15, 18].

The future belongs to new forms of tourism like adventure tourism, creative tourism, cycling tourism, biking tourism, riding tourism and other multiple alternatives in fresh air [13, 14, 17, 19, 20].

Cycling tourism, increasingly recognized globally as a sustainable form of recreation and travel, is becoming a key element in the economic and touristic revitalization of rural areas.

The development of cycling routes represents not only a strategy for enhancing tourism potential but also an important tool for local economic stimulation, regional connectivity, and environmental sustainability.

In the counties in the proximity of Bucharest, the capital of Romania, there are many routes of high interest for those who love cycling as a way for making sport, getting knowledge about

unknown places, developing rural tourism with its splendid landscapes, rural life, gastronomy and hospitality.

Also, cycling has been quickly developed taking the example of other countries and encouraging people to maintain the physical condition of the body, getting fresh air far away from the civilized world.

The shops are full of various types of bicycle with various performances and prices are suitable for everybody's pocket.

Grădinari commune, located in Giurgiu County, Romania, offers a unique combination of natural landscapes, historical heritage, and favorable geographic positioning that can significantly benefit from the implementation of cycling tourism initiatives. Grădinari commune, historically known as Grădinari-Fălcoianca, consists of three villages: Grădinari (the administrative center), Tântava, and Zorile (Wikipedia, 2025) [21].

Strategically placed between several main national and regional roads, including DN5 and DN6, and traversed by secondary routes linking significant urban centers such as Mihăilești and Bolintin-Vale, the commune is positioned advantageously for the development of sustainable tourism initiatives such as cycling trails. Despite these strategic advantages, the potential of cycling tourism remains largely unexplored in the region and also for discovering what's new in agrotourism (Smedescu et al., 2013)[16].

The commune's rich cultural and historical heritage, including monuments like Oteteleşanu Manor and historical churches dating back to the 19th century.



Photo 1. Oteteleşanu Manor
Source: Wikidata, Grădinari,
<https://www.wikidata.org/wiki/Q5118240>. [22].

Together with the picturesque banks of the Argeş River, they provide appealing contexts for cycling tourists.

Additionally, the existing demographic structure, predominantly Romanian ethnic population (86.38%) and Orthodox confession (84.74%), suggests opportunities for promoting local traditions and customs through tourism. Nevertheless, Grădinari faces demographic challenges, with a noticeable population decline from 3,578 inhabitants in 2011 to 3,217 in 2021, underscoring the urgency of fostering local economic activities that could stabilize and potentially increase the commune's attractiveness (Grădinari City Hall, 2025) [23].

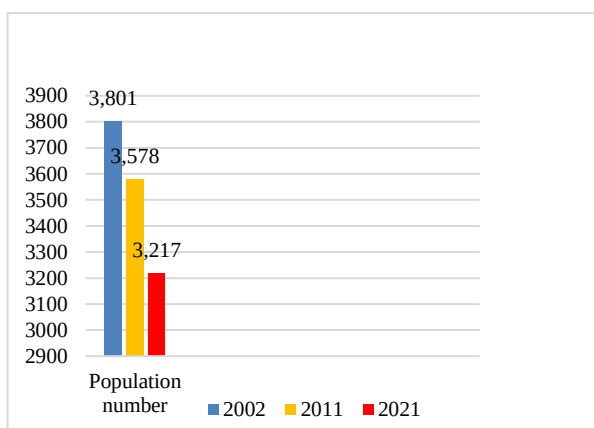


Fig. 1. The demographic evolution of Grădinari commune after the last 3 censuses

Source: Own design based on NIS data, 2025 [24].
investigates the economic and touristic.

This paper advantages of developing cycling routes in Grădinari commune, assessing how cycling infrastructure could boost local economy through increased visitation, stimulate the growth of local businesses, and preserve the area's environmental and cultural assets.

Additionally, it explores the implications for rural revitalization, sustainable local development, and regional tourism competitiveness.

The analysis will include an evaluation of the current infrastructure, identification of potential cycling routes, community perceptions, and projected economic impacts resulting from increased visitor flows. Furthermore, comparative insights from similar successful projects across Romania and

Europe will serve as a basis for recommendations tailored specifically to Grădinari's context.

Through this comprehensive exploration, the paper aims to highlight the multifaceted benefits of cycling tourism, positioning Grădinari as an exemplary case for rural tourism enhancement through sustainable and eco-friendly development.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research conducted in Grădinari Commune, Giurgiu County, applied a comprehensive methodological approach designed to evaluate the potential of developing cycling tourism, with an emphasis on economic, touristic, social, and environmental dimensions. The study focused explicitly on Grădinari Commune, comprising the villages Grădinari, Tântava, and Zorile, strategically located along the Argeş River and intersected by key regional roads such as DJ412A and DJ401A [23].

To thoroughly assess the area's potential for cycling tourism, a mixed-methods approach was implemented, combining qualitative and quantitative research techniques. Historical, geographical, and demographic data were collected from authoritative sources, including the Romanian National Institute of Statistics, Giurgiu County administrative records, local archives, and historical documents. These sources provided essential baseline information on population dynamics, economic activities, infrastructure status, and heritage landmarks within Grădinari Commune.

Field research involved direct observations and extensive interactions with the local community between October 2024 and February 2025. Structured and semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including local business owners, public administrators, representatives of the Giurgiu County Council, and residents. Interviews focused on evaluating current economic conditions, identifying attitudes toward cycling tourism development, gauging perceptions of potential impacts, and gathering

suggestions regarding route locations and infrastructure needs.

Additionally, comprehensive field observations and photographic documentation of existing infrastructure, natural landscapes, and cultural landmarks were carried out to evaluate the current state and suitability for cycling tourism. Infrastructure assessments included on-site inspections of existing road networks, trail quality, and available public amenities to determine their suitability for cycling tourism.

A Geographical Information System (GIS)-based mapping analysis was performed to propose potential cycling routes effectively integrated with the commune's existing infrastructure. Routes were selected to optimize the use of natural landscapes, historical monuments, and connectivity to nearby localities. Spatial data from local and national cartographic databases, including open-source platforms and satellite imagery, were employed to ensure accurate and feasible route planning.

Economic impact analysis was conducted by referencing comparable cycling-tourism projects from similar rural contexts in Romania and Europe. Economic indicators, such as increased visitation rates, tourist spending patterns, and employment opportunities, were evaluated based on analogous cases from regions successfully implementing cycling tourism projects. Examples from established cycling destinations in Romania (e.g., Sibiu and Braşov counties) and recognized European rural cycling tourism areas (e.g., Tuscany in Italy and Provence in France) were critically analyzed to extract best practices, lessons learned, and transferrable strategic approaches. To ensure robust and reliable findings, the research integrated multiple data sources, including official statistical databases from the National Institute of Statistics of Romania, local administrative reports, and relevant historical archives documenting the commune's socio-economic evolution. Economic impact models were employed to estimate future economic scenarios, highlighting potential revenue streams and employment increases derived from projected visitor growth.

The analytical framework adopted was designed to allow reproducibility and transparency. Clear criteria were established for the selection and evaluation of data sources, stakeholder input was systematically recorded and categorized, and spatial analyses were rigorously documented. This comprehensive methodology provided a solid foundation for drawing robust, evidence-based conclusions on the feasibility, potential impacts, and practical recommendations for developing sustainable cycling tourism initiatives in Grădinari Commune (Stoicea et al., 2021) [18].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Cycling tourism in Grădinari Commune holds substantial promise for generating significant direct and indirect economic benefits. Through increasing visitation and attracting both domestic and international tourists, cycling tourism is anticipated to stimulate the local economy considerably. Field interviews conducted with local stakeholders, including business owners, residents, and local authorities, consistently underscored a high level of enthusiasm toward cycling tourism initiatives. Respondents expressed expectations of direct economic benefits such as increased consumer spending at local shops, restaurants, accommodation units, and other tourism-related establishments.

Cycling tourism has shown notable economic impacts in comparable rural areas, as demonstrated by the analysis of successful case studies from other Romanian regions. In Transylvania, particularly in counties like Sibiu and Braşov, dedicated cycling routes have significantly increased local business revenues, with some enterprises reporting revenue growth exceeding 20% after infrastructure implementation. Stakeholders in Grădinari Commune anticipate similar outcomes, forecasting at least a 15% boost in local business revenues within the initial two-year period following the establishment of cycling routes.

Developing cycling infrastructure typically promotes entrepreneurial ventures related directly and indirectly to cycling activities. Services such as bicycle rental, maintenance

and repair shops, bicycle equipment retail, guided tours, and hospitality services (e.g., guesthouses, camping sites, and agrotourism facilities) are likely to emerge. Historical data from similar Romanian rural contexts demonstrate that cycling tourists exhibit a stronger inclination towards patronizing local products and services, thereby directly benefiting small-scale, local entrepreneurs and artisans.

Indirect economic impacts, such as employment generation, also hold considerable promise. Experiences from other Romanian rural cycling projects illustrate significant local employment opportunities emerging in sectors like hospitality, catering, retail, and specialized cycling services (bike rentals and repairs). Estimations for Grădinari Commune indicate the potential creation of at least 30 new local jobs related directly and indirectly to cycling tourism within the first three to five years. These employment opportunities could particularly benefit young adults and women, demographics traditionally at risk of migrating to larger urban centers due to limited economic opportunities.

Cycling tourism has a pronounced seasonal extension benefit, potentially expanding the traditional tourism period beyond peak summer months, thus ensuring a more stable and sustainable year-round economic activity. Successful examples from European rural regions, such as Tuscany in Italy and Provence in France, have demonstrated effective strategies to extend the tourism season through cycling-related events and promotions, attracting visitors even during off-peak periods and significantly stabilizing local economies.

Infrastructure investments, while initially representing a financial challenge, have been proven economically sustainable due to the relatively moderate cost and high return potential. European Union funding mechanisms and national funding opportunities dedicated to sustainable tourism and rural development could facilitate infrastructural investments, reducing the financial burden on local authorities. Comparative economic analyses from similar rural tourism developments across Europe confirm the viability and long-term financial

sustainability of targeted investments in cycling infrastructure.

The economic benefits of developing cycling tourism in Grădinari Commune are substantial, promising increased visitor expenditures, entrepreneurial stimulation, employment opportunities, and strengthened local economic resilience. These positive outcomes provide a compelling justification for stakeholders and policymakers to actively pursue and support cycling tourism initiatives, fostering economic revitalization and sustainability within this rural region.

The research identified substantial opportunities for leveraging local cultural heritage in Grădinari Commune, notably through integrating prominent historical sites into cycling tourism routes. Historical and manor style tourism sustains in encasing the Oteteleşanu Manor alongside the historic churches of Grădinari and Tântava, beautiful but neglected treasures. The churches, which are centuries old, showcase brilliant architecture, which would add value as culture and tourism spend grows. To increase foster engagement and contraction of tourism, the integration heritage landmarks enable educational intersections alongside cycling routes, elevating cultural stops. These particular landmarks attract tourists with an interest in history and culture. Educational tourism is advanced through documentaries and narrative panels that detail the examinations left behind.

To strengthen the statement arguer concede restate cites foreign cycling tourism works construct paired cultural tourism marked zones motives for the riders increase engagement with routes heavy laden with architectural wonders. In Romanian rural areas the augmentation of marked sensitive routes historians would add cultural information resulted not only in the increase of tourist attention but more importantly to the appreciation of the local heritage. Similarly, through cycling tourism, the promotion of these sites could be instrumental in safeguarding local heritage. Educating tourists is often associated with better preservation, upkeep, and restoration activities supported by the local administration and

patrons. Greater visibility of sites such as Oteteleşanu Manor and historical churches also has the potential of attracting additional funding, in particular, from national funds aimed at the protection of heritage sites or from cultural initiatives financed by the European Union.

The inclusion of cultural heritage sites in cycling tourism initiatives provides educational benefits by offering informal educational platforms for visitors and locals alike. Cycling tourists typically express strong interests in exploring the local culture and history, suggesting potential for effective educational outreach through interpretive materials such as information panels, brochures, mobile applications, and interactive digital platforms designed specifically for cyclists.

The educational component can further involve community participation, encouraging locals, particularly youth, to actively engage in heritage interpretation and preservation, fostering greater community identity and pride. This, in turn, strengthens social cohesion and promotes awareness about the historical significance and cultural richness of the commune.

The valorization of cultural heritage through integration into cycling tourism not only promises direct tourist benefits but significantly contributes to education, preservation, community engagement, and identity consolidation. In the long term, such integration ensures sustainable management of historical assets while creating unique and enriching experiences for visitors, adding significant value to the cycling tourism proposition of Grădinari Commune.

The development of cycling tourism in Grădinari Commune presents considerable opportunities for social revitalization and sustainable community development. By attracting increased tourist flows, the commune stands to benefit significantly from enhanced community interactions, preservation of local traditions, and improved quality of life.

Cycling tourism promotes social cohesion through interactions of the residents and the locals, which fosters a collective community

pride and identity. This tourism style promotes cultural exchange through meaningful interactions between tourists and local residents, thus enriching community life while enhancing residents' pride in their locality. Cycling tourism experiences in Romania from regions like Maramureș and Bucovina showcase great success in community involvement towards local traditions and customs, actively promoting regional handicrafts and gastronomy.

Cycling tourism fosters job opportunities that attract the youth, thus decreasing rural to urban migration shifts. Tourism related jobs such as biking and event planning, along with accommodation and guided tour management, serve as great motivations for local youth to remain in the region. Comparative case studies indicate tourism-based economies in rural areas lead to successful population retention and even repopulation.

The implications of community involvement on the social maintenance of cumulative tourism development projects span over a greater duration. Economic and social inclusivity are likely to be stimulated by the involvement of local community members, including young women, into independent ventures associated with cycling tourism. Encouraging active participation offers hope to the younger generation and has the potential to mitigate out-migration and demographic shrinkage to urban centers.

The dedicated cycling infrastructure has the potential to upgrade community amenities including routes, signage, rest areas, and recreational areas, as well as the living conditions of residents and visitors.

Thus, the strategic implementation of cycling tourism initiatives offers a robust framework for socially sustainable community revitalization, encouraging demographic stability, economic inclusivity, and cultural vibrancy in Grădinari Commune.

The implementation of cycling tourism in Grădinari Commune presents significant potential for fostering environmental sustainability and ecological preservation. Cycling tourism, as a non-motorized mode of transportation, inherently contributes to reducing carbon footprints by limiting

emissions associated with conventional motorized transportation. This sustainable form of tourism helps mitigate air pollution and contributes positively towards regional and local air quality improvement.

Research highlights the alignment of cycling tourism initiatives with global sustainability goals, particularly concerning climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies. Reduced use of motor vehicles directly correlates with decreased carbon emissions, thereby contributing to broader environmental objectives both at local and national levels. Furthermore, cycling tourism encourages a more sustainable use of natural resources, as visitors typically have a minimal environmental footprint compared to conventional tourism.

Cycling routes in Grădinari Commune would also stimulate ecological awareness among both local residents and tourists. Through educational signage, informational campaigns, and eco-awareness activities integrated into cycling trails, visitors can be sensitized about environmental issues such as biodiversity conservation, waste reduction, and sustainable travel practices. Such initiatives enhance the environmental consciousness of visitors, promoting responsible tourism behaviors.

International experiences from countries renowned for cycling tourism, such as Denmark, the Netherlands, and Austria, demonstrate clear environmental benefits. For example, rural cycling networks in these countries have led to improved ecological conditions, conservation of biodiversity, and increased public awareness regarding the importance of preserving natural landscapes. These international case studies highlight that cycling infrastructure not only reduces pollution but also actively encourages ecological stewardship among local communities and visitors.

Local stakeholders consulted during this research emphasized a strong commitment to preserving the natural environment, recognizing the alignment of cycling tourism initiatives with their environmental aspirations. Interviewees noted the potential for cycling tourism to draw attention to local natural assets, including the scenic banks of the

Argeş River, potentially fostering conservation efforts and attracting support from environmental organizations and funding bodies.

Additionally, cycling tourism initiatives may include educational components emphasizing environmental responsibility, such as guided eco-tours, interpretive trails, and informational signage promoting local biodiversity and conservation measures. These activities contribute significantly to public education and environmental advocacy, cultivating a lasting culture of sustainability among both tourists and local residents.

Cycling tourism in Grădinari Commune offers substantial opportunities for promoting environmental sustainability, reducing ecological impacts associated with tourism, and raising environmental awareness among both locals and visitors. By investing in eco-friendly tourism infrastructure and promoting cycling as a sustainable means of exploring the region, Grădinari Commune can achieve meaningful environmental conservation and ecological benefits, aligning with both national sustainability objectives and international best practices.

A thorough analysis of existing infrastructure within Grădinari Commune, alongside proposed cycling routes, indicates significant opportunities for the effective establishment of cycling tourism. Three primary cycling routes were identified based on their potential for integrating natural, cultural, and historical landmarks, thereby offering diverse and attractive experiences for tourists.

The first route, approximately 15 kilometers long, centers around Grădinari village, prominently featuring landmarks such as the Oteteleşanu Manor, complemented by views along the banks of the Argeş River. The second route strategically connects the villages of Grădinari and Tântava, showcasing historical churches and allowing interaction with rural landscapes and traditional agricultural practices. The third route is designed to connect Grădinari commune with neighboring communes, enhancing broader regional connectivity and accessibility, particularly along existing county roads DJ412A and DJ401A.

The establishment of these routes necessitates specific infrastructure improvements, including clearly marked cycling paths, appropriate signage, rest areas, information panels, bicycle racks, and amenities such as rest stops and refreshment points. Proposed technical solutions include modest improvements to the current roads, such as expanding shoulders, paving areas designated for cycling, painting cycling lanes, and placing appropriate safety and information signs (Cretu et al., 2015)[9].

The financial needs for realizing the infrastructure works have come from analyzing other cycling infrastructure projects with similar contexts in rural Romania. These analyses indicate that there is a limited but reasonable initial financial burden which can be assumed by the local authorities, while other funds could potentially be accessed through national and European Union grants focusing on rural and sustainable tourism development. Building collaborations with private sector companies and tourism stakeholders can also further offload investment burdens, establishing economically sustainable funding frameworks (Marcuta et al., 2020)[14].

Access to the already developed regional transport infrastructure (especially roads DJ412A and DJ401A) was planned in a rational way. These proposed cycling routes use these transport corridors and provide access to Grădinari Commune from the big cities, capturing extensive visitation and maximizing economic benefits from the cycling tourism projects.

Technical solutions were also considered to sustain the route and mitigate visitor impacts efficiently. Proposed measures include the use of eco-friendly materials for construction and the provision of maintenance rest areas, bicycle parking, sanitary services, and information boards. These measures are intended to achieve operational longevity, safety for visitors, and environmental impacts for the region and surrounding areas (Cretu et al., 2019) [5].

The Grădinari commune region has the potential to achieve a high return on investment through the implementation of dedicated cycling infrastructure and increased visitor traffic as this will improve the regional links

and contribute to sustainable development in the long term. Structured actions along with adequate budget allocation and ongoing participation from the local community are fundamental to harnessing the cycling tourism infrastructure potential within the commune (Dragomir et al.,2020) [11].

A comprehensive comparative analysis with successful cycling tourism initiatives in other rural regions provides valuable insights and actionable recommendations applicable to Grădinari Commune. This analysis included detailed evaluations of best practices from Romanian rural areas as well as European examples renowned for their cycling infrastructure and tourism management strategies. Along the routes many guesthouses and agrotourist guesthouses have appeared encouraging the development of gastronomy and hospitality (Chiurciu et al.,2020) [4].

Transylvania, particularly regions such as Sibiu, Braşov, and Alba, provides successful case studies of rural cycling tourism that Grădinari could emulate. In these regions, cycling tourism has significantly boosted visitor numbers and extended the tourism season beyond traditional peak periods. For instance, in the area surrounding Sibiu, cycling routes connected historical and natural attractions effectively, resulting in an estimated increase of 30% in tourist visits within the first two years after implementation. Moreover, local businesses, including accommodation providers, restaurants, and bicycle rental and maintenance services, experienced substantial revenue increases, often reporting between 15% to 25% annual growth.

Similar findings were observed in Braşov County, where cycling tourism was effectively integrated into existing rural tourism offerings. Local authorities and stakeholders there strategically developed routes that linked cultural landmarks, such as fortified churches, castles, and traditional villages, with scenic natural landscapes. The Grădinari region's potential opportunities are further highlighted by European examples. In Italy's rural Tuscany region, cycle tourism has effectively transformed family-owned hospitality businesses, including guesthouses and regional

cuisine culinary schools, into economic drivers for the area. This tourism sector caters to wealthy foreign tourists who tend to stay longer, interact more with local culture, and positively impact small and medium-sized businesses.

An equally relevant illustration is the cycle tourism infrastructure in the Loire Valley, France, which links important cultural heritage sites such as historical châteaux and vineyards. The Loire cycle routes receive millions of visitors each year and are crucial to the region's economy and economic self-sufficiency. The provided information also shows the necessity of integrated marketing, information at promotional, and other administrative levels concerning route planning and cultivation of agrotourism in Romania (Smedescu et al.,2023) [16].

Drawing from these best practice examples regarding Grădinari, the main suggestions would be the tailored creation of the cycling routes that would highlight the cultural and natural points of interest, improvement of the region's overall image and marketing, psychological branding, enhancement of the tourism ancillary services, and sustainability to conquer the tourists' hearts (Cretu et al., 2013). The best practices identified in Romania and elsewhere in Europe offer substantial opportunities for efficiently molding cycling tourism in Grădinari Commune. Strategic planning coupled with investment into the infrastructure, community engagement, including local folk heritage, and the folklore culture of the area are the most essential factors which, if well integrated, can provide a sustainable and eco-friendly tourism development along with economic growth in the region (Buianu, 2001).



Photo 2. Cycling paths
Source: own picture from Gradinari Commune.

CONCLUSIONS

The development of cycling tourism in Grădinari Commune offers substantial economic potential through increased tourist visitation, entrepreneurial stimulation, and the creation of new employment opportunities.

Integration of cultural heritage landmarks, such as Oteteleşanu Manor and historical churches, into cycling routes significantly enhances their visibility and contributes to the preservation and promotion of local traditions and history.

Cycling tourism initiatives can effectively address social challenges, particularly by attracting and retaining younger populations, thereby reducing demographic decline and fostering community revitalization.

The ecological benefits associated with cycling tourism, including reduced carbon emissions and increased environmental awareness, align closely with sustainability goals and offer meaningful contributions to biodiversity conservation.(Bran et al.,2020)

Investment in dedicated cycling infrastructure is feasible and economically justified, providing substantial long-term returns by ensuring enhanced connectivity, safety, and attractiveness for both visitors and residents. (Dragomir et al.,2020) [11].

Successful case studies from Romanian and European contexts provide critical insights and practical recommendations, reinforcing the viability of strategic route planning, targeted marketing, and comprehensive stakeholder collaboration in achieving sustainable tourism development.

Ultimately, cycling tourism represents a strategic pathway for Grădinari Commune to achieve balanced, sustainable, and integrated local development, creating economic prosperity while preserving cultural heritage and the natural environment (Bran et al.,2020) [1, 2].

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