

## STUDY ON THE TOURISM POTENTIAL AND THE REACTION OF THE RURAL TOURISM AND AGROTURISM MARKET IN MEHEDINTI COUNTY TO THE EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC

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### **Abstract**

*The study aims to analyze the total tourism potential of Mehedinți County and the way the rural tourism market reacted and adapted to the effects and impact of the pandemic on it, during the period 2019-2023. It was mainly focused on the analysis and characterization of the adaptation of the specific structures of rural tourism and agrotourism. In the first part, the value of the tourism potential as a whole in this county was inventoried and analyzed, which contributed decisively to the return and readaptation of the tourism market to the new conditions imposed by the impact of the pandemic on the entire economic activity in the county, but especially on tourism activity. In the second part, a series of indicators were analyzed based on which the effects of the pandemic on the rural tourism market in the studied county were first established in 2019 and 2020, after which in 2021-2023, its reaction and adaptation to the new conditions and realities that emerged after the pandemic were observed. Based on the data analyzed in the tables included in the paper, a series of conclusions and recommendations were formulated that aimed at the possibility of rapid adaptation, so that the negative impact of the pandemic would be as low as possible and its effects on the circulation and tourism activity in the county would be as short-lived as possible.*

**Key words:** agritourism, the effects of the pandemic, management, tourist market

### **INTRODUCTION**

The current issue is that the national and regional tourism development strategy should be updated and adapted to the new context of international tourism development, generated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis due to the armed conflicts in Eastern Europe and Gaza. The health crisis that began worldwide at the beginning of 2020, through its progressive restrictions up to the stage of total lockdown, has led to a drastic decline in tourism activities, a true “paralysis” of the entire field, a fact noted in the Report on the development of an EU strategy for sustainable tourism of the European Parliament’s Committee on Transport and Tourism (2020) [1, 11, 13].

The revitalization and updating of the appropriate development of the tourism sector and the provision of services can only be guaranteed through quality education and training in the field. In order to better understand the skills and competences needed by the tourism sector in Romania, they must be

analyzed in a broader socio-economic context. The European Commission estimates that less than 20% of high school and university graduates choose to work in the hotel and tourism sector. They work on a temporary basis and are mostly employed with short-term contracts [4, 8, 25]. On the other hand, there is another phenomenon, that of overqualified personnel working in the tourism sector, with university degrees, but in another field, not related to tourism. In this sector, the need for skills development is felt, at the level of execution but also of management [2, 5, 16]. For this reason, at the national and European level, due to the new challenges in the evolution of the tourism industry, the question of the role of the European Union in the field of tourism is raised in terms of how to approach and solve the new issues that have arisen in this field. The answer to this issue can be found by carefully following the evolution of the tourism market in particular, both at European and global level, correlated with monitoring tourist satisfaction which could be achieved in addition to consumer protection measures and

through those of diversifying and personalizing the tourism product (revitalizing and revitalizing cultural and rural tourism in particular).

It is also necessary for the European Union to continue to benefit from a legal framework through which to provide assistance to the tourism sector by creating a favorable environment for tourism, improving professional training in the field, protecting the environment [10, 12]. The future protection of the interests of the tourism market can be achieved through coherent, established and predictable policies in the field of taxes, infrastructure, competition, etc., while creating a basis for cooperation between Member States and stimulating dialogue in the future approach to tourism issues. Effective and continuous dialogue between all parties involved at regional, national or international level is the essential element of a common and efficient action plan [12, 18, 27].

The development of tourism represents a viable activity in the life of an area or a county, and it involves human, material and immaterial potential, having significant implications for the evolution of the entire local community. Rural tourism can be considered as one of the best businesses at the county level, it contributes to a large extent to increasing the local product, it is an important source of jobs and a very good capital investor. In the economic sense, rural tourism can be considered as a driver of progress in all related fields, in the rural areas where it was implemented. Rural tourism represents a priority sector for the area under study because, through the resources it involves and the interconnections with other branches of the local economy, it is the main factor of progress of rural localities, this depending on the ability to capitalize on the huge potential it has, on the ability to permanently adapt to the demands of tourists and to increase the quality of this activity from all points of view [7, 19, 26, 28]. In the new conditions that have emerged, a more careful and realistic assessment of the tourist potential of the areas under study, of the role of rural tourism in promoting local development, is required to think about sustainable and optimal development strategies

for the future. In our country, with the increase in urbanization, areas that have significant natural potential (unique landscapes, rich cultural-historical values or biodiversity) have become increasingly attractive tourist destinations. At the same time, the resources indispensable to tourism, such as the quality of services and infrastructure, the transport network, waste management and others, must be managed properly in order to have a positive impact on local communities and the environment, so the principles of sustainable tourism must be applied [7, 19, 26, 28].

In order to show that the area under study (Mehedinți County) can quickly adapt to the new conditions outlined above, we have reevaluated in this briefer study, the natural and anthropic tourist potential by inventorying all the resources it has and analyzing very carefully their special value in supporting a tourism activity.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The research method used was based on identifying the tourism potential of Mehedinți County, by inventorying and classifying all existing natural and anthropogenic resources, without insisting too much on it and analyzing the impact of the pandemic on rural tourism and agrotourism activity. Also, this study attempted to bring to the attention of small agricultural landowners in this county, that one of the complementary activities to the basic agricultural activity, with substantial and significant advantages, which can be successfully practiced in rural areas, is the activity of agrotourism and rural tourism [27]. An important issue addressed in this paper is that of the use of boats and river vessels in tourist accommodation, similar to the accommodation spaces in the Danube Delta. This aspect can be successfully used in this area, because it has the two largest water accumulations in our country, the Iron Gates I and II reservoirs and on the Danube navigable channel, aspects that must be exploited to their maximum potential. Based on data taken from the National Institute of Statistics (NIS) [17] and documentation from thematic monographs and maps analyzed, as well as from numerous

field studies, a well-documented radiography of the situation of tourism activities in Mehedinți County and the impact of the pandemic on this activity was also made.

By carefully and professionally evaluating the results obtained, several conclusions and recommendations were developed that would have the effect of revitalizing tourism and agrotourism activities in the area, especially after the pandemic, and that would also lead to awareness of the need to practice sustainable tourism, based on ecological principles, since the area abounds in reserves and protected natural areas [6].

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study was conducted in Mehedinți County, which is located in the South-West of Romania, in the lower Danube River basin, on the border with Serbia and Bulgaria, between the counties of Caraș-Severin, Gorj and Dolj, crossed by the parallel of 45° north latitude and the meridian of 23° east longitude. In terms of accessibility, the county is crossed by the European road E70, and the commissioning of the Rhine-Main-Danube Canal put the county seat, the municipality of Drobeta Turnu Severin, in direct contact with all the riverside cities from the Black Sea to the North Sea. The bridge at the Iron Gates Hydropower and Navigation System shortened the road distances between Drobeta-Turnu Severin and various European cities [3, 9, 21].

### 3.1. Inventorying the natural tourist potential of the area.

**The relief** is dominated by the Danube River and its gorge, unique in the country. In addition, the Mehedinți Mountains are one of the major attractions. They have an average height of 1,200 meters, the highest being Stan's Peak (1,466 m), the highest being grouped in their central part. At the foot of the Mehedinți Mountains is the Mehedinți Plateau, with special characteristics, in structure and relief it is similar to mountains, and in altitude it is similar to hills. It is a plateau unit made up of crystalline schists and limestones, with altitudes between 400 and 600 m. The sinkholes, of great beauty are: the Topolnița

karst complex, the Balta karst formations, the Bulba karst phenomena [14, 15, 22].

**Climate and bioclimate** are of increasing importance in the development of tourism in the area, the most important being the influence of the sub-Mediterranean climate that overlaps with the temperate continental climate characteristic of the entire country. Climatic conditions must be known by tourism operators in order to adapt their offers according to the most favorable periods, so that the viability of the tourism sector can be supported, generating economic and social benefits for local communities and improving the experience of tourists [3, 9, 14].

**The hydrography of the area** is dominated by the Danube, the second river in Europe in length and flow, after the Volga. The lower sector of the Danube (the Romanian one), 1,075 km long, begins with the spectacular and impressive Iron Gates gorge, 144 km long, which crosses the southwest of the Southern Carpathians, having a 9 km long section with Cauldrons, steep limestone slopes. Another important component of the hydrographic network is the Cerna River, a tributary of the Danube, with a length of 84 km and a basin area of 1,433 km<sup>2</sup>. The Motru River is a tributary of the Jiu River and is 120 km long and has a basin area of 1,900 km<sup>2</sup>. In the subsoil of Mehedinți County, important groundwater resources have been identified, located in hydrogeological basins with important reserves of underground drinking water: Strehaia basin, Poiana Gruui, Jiana Mare-Vânju Mare, and with mineral and thermal water, Schela Cladovei-Gura Văii basin, Bala - Crainici. At the regional level, there are springs or outcrops with unexplored mineral waters, identified in the localities: Colibași, Lupșa, Baia de Aramă, Balta, Vârciorova [9, 21, 23].

**The vegetation** of the study area is composed of a rich variety, from mountain forests to plants adapted to the subcarpathian areas and river meadows. Mountain forests extend over a significant part of the county and they host a variety of tree species, such as firs, beeches, spruces, and spruces. Some species, such as the mountain carnation, are endemic to the Parâng Mountains. The hill forests of the

subcarpathian areas host deciduous forests, such as oak, hornbeam, hornbeam, and coniferous forests with fir and pine. These forests provide natural resources, but also recreation for local residents. The river meadows are populated by vegetation specific to alluvial areas [9,15, 24, 31].

**Fauna.** The area hosts a number of wild mammals, including species such as red deer, wild boar, fox, brown bear, wolf, and lynx. The red deer is an emblematic species of the mountainous areas of the Parâng Mountains. Wild boars and foxes are found in the forests and sub-Carpathian regions, and the brown bear is less common, but can be found in the higher areas. The area is an important birdwatching destination, with a variety of migratory and resident species. Numerous bird species can be observed here, such as the bald eagle, the falcon, the great owl, the magpie, the white-winged thrush and many others. The Iron Gates Natural Park offers diverse habitats for waterfowl, such as the common pelican and the great Corcovado. The fresh waters in the area provide habitat for various species of aquatic animals, such as crabs, snails and aquatic invertebrates, which contribute to the ecological balance of freshwater ecosystems. The Iron Gates Natural Park, located on the Danube River, is one of these protected areas and hosts valuable aquatic ecosystems and a variety of bird species [9,15, 24, 30].

### **3.2. Inventory of the anthropogenic tourism potential.**

The area has a wide range of cultural facilities that contribute to the promotion and preservation of the cultural and historical heritage of the region. These cultural facilities include museums, theaters, libraries and other institutions that support and develop the cultural life of the county. The main museum objectives are; The Iron Gates Region Museum, the Drobeta-Turnu Severin Art Museum [3, 9, 22,23, 21, 30, 31].

**Monasteries, cathedrals and churches.** The wooden church "Saint Nicholas" - from Ponoarele is an important historical and architectural monument located in the commune of Ponoarele. Other representative churches are: The wooden church of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul from Brebina - a

historical monument and a popular religious architecture, representative of the wooden churches in Oltenia [9, 29]. The wooden church of the Holy Voivodes in Godeanu - a historical and folk religious architecture monument, dating from the period 1783 - 1786. The wooden church of the Holy Voivodes in Isverna - a historical and folk religious architecture monument. The Holy Trinity Monastery in Cerneți - a historical and religious architecture monument, The Church of the former monastery of the Holy 24 Voivodes in Baia de Aramă - a historical and religious architecture monument [3, 9, 21, 22, 23, 30, 31]. Gura Motrului Monastery - was founded in 1512 - 1521 by Neagoe Basarab. Vodița Monastery built in 1364 - 1370 by the monk Nicodim. The Strehaia Fortress Monastery was probably built around 1500 and rebuilt in its present form by Matei Basarab in 1645. The Topolnița Holy Cross Hermitage - was built in 1646 by Lupu Buliga, a captain in Matei Basarab's army.

**Monuments and sites.** Trajan's Bridge - built by Apollodorus of Damascus on the orders of Emperor Trajan - is a remarkable historical structure, located near the municipality of Drobeta-Turnu Severin, recognized as an important archaeological site and a historical monument, and was included on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1982. The Statue of Decebalus - is one of the largest stone sculptures in Europe [9, 20, 22, 23, 31].

**Ethnographic and Folkloric Values.** The area is distinguished by its wealth of ethnographic and folkloric values, which represent an important part of the cultural identity of the region. These values reflect the traditions, customs and creativity of local communities and include aspects such as traditional architecture, folk installations and techniques, folk costumes, musical, choreographic and literary folklore, folk celebrations, festivals, village traditions and rituals. Wooden houses in the villages of the area, with hipped roofs, which preserve the architecture specific to the area. Pottery: An important part of the Mehedințe tradition and the ceramics of the area are known for their traditional patterns and handmade decorative vessels and objects [3, 9, 20, 21, 22, 23, 30, 31].

**The folk costume is traditionally worn at cultural and festive events.** Traditional Music - the area has a rich tradition in folk music, with instruments such as the flute, bagpipes and violin. These ethnographic and folkloric values contribute to the preservation and transmission of local traditions, as well as to the promotion of the cultural identity of the area. The immense treasure of the rural space of Mehedinți is highlighted through manifestations related to various religious or secular events, which bring together generations in exceptional manifestations [3, 9, 21, 22, 23, 30, 31].

### 3.3. Analysis of the impact of the pandemic on the tourism market

From the analysis of centralized data for Mehedinți County and Romania, we can observe several important trends and developments in the number of tourist reception structures with accommodation functions, both at the national level and specifically for Mehedinți County (Table 1).

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, these data allow us to observe the impact that restrictions and changes in tourists' behavior have had on tourism. General observations:

- At the national level, the total number of accommodation structures has steadily

increased from 8,402 in 2019 to 12,697 in 2023 (+51.12%). This increase is a sign of the expansion of the tourism infrastructure in Romania, a phenomenon that has manifested itself much more strongly in Mehedinți County.

- In Mehedinți County, the number of structures has increased significantly, from 83 in 2019 to 170 in 2023 (+104.82%). This growth suggests that Mehedinți County has managed to diversify and enrich its tourism offer in recent years, with a positive trend that can also be attributed to the development of new types of accommodation units.

- If we analyze the dynamics from 2019-2023 according to the type of accommodation units, we can observe 3 distinct trends, as follows:
  - o Tourist villas and Tourist cottages which have recorded a significant increase at the national level, a trend that is not maintained at the MH county level;
  - o Tourist guesthouses which have recorded a significant decrease at the national level, a trend that has not been maintained at the county level;
  - o Agritourist guesthouses which have recorded significant increases both at the national level (+15.75%) and at the county level (+73.17%).

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

Types of structures of tourist reception	Total	Years					
		1990	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
<b>TOTAL</b>	Romania	3,213	8,402	8,610	11,736	12,201	12,697
	Mehedinți	22	83	96	146	165	170
<b>Inns</b>	Romania	:	3	3	3	4	5
<b>Tourist villas</b>	Romania	1,551	709	752	752	758	756
	Mehedinți	4	4	5	5	5	4
<b>Tourist chalets</b>	Romania	226	222	226	222	220	223
	Mehedinți	1	1	1	1	1	1
<b>Holiday villages</b>	Romania	:	9	8	8	8	10
<b>Tourist cottages</b>	Romania	:	82	92	112	127	155
	Mehedinți	:	:	:	1	1	2
<b>Tourist guesthouses</b>	Romania	:	1,669	1,729	1,745	1,696	1,642
	Mehedinți	:	13	14	14	14	12
<b>Agritourist guesthouses</b>	Romania	:	2,800	3,022	3,460	3,484	3,498
	Mehedinți	:	41	50	61	70	71
<b>Accommodation on river ships</b>	Mehedinți		24	27	25	24	29

Source: processing based on own data and from NIS [17].

- A particular specificity of MH county is represented by accommodation structures on cruise ships. Their number fluctuated slightly (from 24 in 2020 to 29 in 2023), which

suggests a stability of this tourism segment, but also a possible post-pandemic revitalization, as tourism on the Danube recovers. Impact of the

COVID-19 pandemic on accommodation structures:

- During the period 2020-2021, against the backdrop of the pandemic and the distancing/isolation rules, there was stagnation or slight variations for classic accommodation structures, and a strong increase in structures positioned in rural areas, which facilitate access to nature and in areas with lower population density: Tourist cottages and Agritourist guesthouses. If for Tourist cottages a strong growth is observed only at the national level, which is not maintained at the county level, in the case of Agritourist guesthouses there were strong increases both at the national level (+14.49%) and at the MH county level (+22%).
- These trends have been maintained in the post-pandemic period, increasing the addressability for Tourist cottages and Agritourist guesthouses, while the addressability for Tourist guesthouses has steadily decreased, suggesting a trend of appreciation of rural tourism. It is noted that in the post-pandemic period, Mehedinți County has recorded a significant increase in the

number of accommodation structures, especially in the agrotourism guesthouse sector, which reflects a tendency to adapt to the demands of a tourist market that seeks more peace, isolation and unforgettable experiences. The pandemic had a significant impact in the first part of the period, but with the relaxation of restrictions, tourism recorded a strong recovery, and Mehedinți County benefited from a diversification of the tourist offer. A greater preference for smaller and more intimate accommodation structures, such as agrotourism guesthouses and tourist cottages, can also be observed, which align with the general trends of sustainable tourism and proximity to nature. Analysing the dynamics of tourist accommodation capacity expressed in available accommodation places, both at the national level and for Mehedinți county, we observe significant developments, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this paper, we analyse the developments according to the types of accommodation structures and the impact that the pandemic has had on them.

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

Types of structures of tourist reception	Total	Years					
		1990	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
<b>TOTAL</b>	Romania	353,236	356,562	358,119	410,291	422,114	433,487
	Mehedinți	2,407	2,429	2,661	3,361	3,621	3,653
<b>Inns</b>	Romania	:	80	80	80	90	120
<b>Tourist villas</b>	Romania	46,757	16,665	17,124	17,325	17,457	17,450
	Mehedinți	400	24	48	48	48	42
<b>Tourist chalets</b>	Romania	12,430	6,216	6,331	6,356	6,256	6,067
	Mehedinți	110	10	10	10	10	10
<b>Holiday villages</b>	Romania	:	477	375	375	456	688
<b>Tourist cottages</b>	Romania	:	2,503	2,662	3,122	3,518	4,012
	Mehedinți	:	:	:	8	8	24
<b>Tourist guesthouses</b>	Romania	:	35,198	35,312	35,387	34,587	33,930
	Mehedinți	:	244	266	266	266	234
<b>Agritourist guesthouses</b>	Romania	:	49,053	52,389	55,778	56,850	58,086
	Mehedinți	:	716	830	928	1,032	1,048
<b>Accommodation on river ships</b>	Mehedinți		846	901	831	839	897

Source: processing based on own data and from NIS [17].

### Increasing accommodation capacity in Romania and Mehedinți (Table 2)

At the national level, accommodation capacity has steadily increased from 356,562 places in 2019 to 433,487 places in 2023. This indicates a general expansion of the tourism infrastructure, which reflects the trend of diversification of the tourism offer in Romania.

In Mehedinți county, accommodation capacity has increased from 2,429 places in 2019 to 3,653 places in 2023, with a very strong increase compared to 2021. This increase is significant and suggests that the county has invested in the development of tourism infrastructure, thus contributing to the increase

in the number of tourists and the diversification of the experiences offered.

### **The impact of the pandemic on accommodation capacity**

Similar to the evolution of the number of accommodation units, during the pandemic period (2020-2021) there is a stagnation or slight variations for classic accommodation structures, and a strong increase in structures positioned in rural areas, which facilitate access to nature and in areas with lower population density: Tourist cottages and Agritourist guesthouses. For Tourist cottages, a strong increase is observed only at national level (+17.28%), a trend that is not maintained at county level, and in the case of Agritourist guesthouses, increases were recorded both at national level (+6.47%) and at MH county level (+11.81%). At the same time, a decrease in accommodation capacity on Accommodation on river ships (-7.77%) is observed.

### **Post-pandemic trends and adaptations**

*Agritourism guesthouses* continue to be a significant growth area both in Romania and in Mehedinți. Nationally, the number of accommodation places in these units has increased steadily, from 49,053 places in 2019 to 58,086 places in 2023 (+18.41%). In Mehedinți, the growth is remarkable, from 716 places in 2019 to 1,048 places in 2023 (+46.37%), indicating that the county has capitalized on the increased interest in rural tourism and authentic experiences.

*Tourist cottages* have registered a significant growth in Romania, from 2,503 places in 2019 to 4,012 places in 2023 (+60.29%). In Mehedinți, however, this type of accommodation was much more limited in the period 2019-2021, with only 8 places in 2021, but their number increased significantly in 2023, to 24 places. This suggests a trend of adaptation to market requirements and a greater diversification of the tourist offer in the county.

*Holiday cottages and tourist villas* have recorded a stagnation or even a slight decrease in accommodation capacity, which may be related to the decrease in demand during this period, especially in the case of some types of

accommodation that did not adapt quickly to the new realities of post-pandemic tourism.

*The accommodation capacity on Danube cruise ships in Mehedinți County* has had a relatively constant evolution, with a small decline in 2021 (from 901 places in 2020 to 831 places in 2021), but has returned slightly to higher levels in 2023 (897 places). This suggests that river tourism was affected, but has had a gradual recovery in the post-pandemic period, as restrictions have been relaxed.

From the analyzed data, it can be seen that in the post-pandemic period, tourism in Mehedinți County has recorded a strong recovery, with a significant increase in accommodation capacity in sectors such as agrotourism guesthouses and accommodation on cruise ships. This suggests a paradigm shift in the preferences of tourists, who have sought more tranquillity and safety, which has favored the development of rural tourism and authentic experiences. In contrast, larger accommodation structures, such as tourist villas and holiday cottages, have experienced slower growth or even a decrease in capacity, possibly due to changes in post-pandemic travel behaviors and the need for more privacy and isolation. Overall, Mehedinți County has managed to diversify its tourism offer in the post-pandemic period, and this has been reflected in the increase in accommodation capacity. This diversification could represent an important opportunity for the future, especially for attracting a more sustainable type of tourism oriented towards nature and local experiences.

By analyzing the data on tourist accommodation capacity expressed in places-per-day, both at the national level and for Mehedinți County, we can analyze the developments and trends in the tourism sector, taking into account the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on it (table 3). We will observe in particular how accommodation structures have evolved during the period 2019-2023, a period marked by restrictions, changes in tourist behavior and adaptations to the new conditions.

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

Types of structures of tourist reception	Total	Years					
		2001	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
<b>TOTAL</b>	Romania	51,882,465	88,789,656	64,040,595	87,217,823	93,007,230	98,293,110
	Mehedinți	425,990	717,328	514,675	751,150	819,218	868,635
<b>Inns</b>	Romania	70,864	28,580	22,237	24,890	27,268	37,240
<b>Tourist villas</b>	Romania	2,488,256	3,753,539	2,780,569	3,485,815	3,590,100	3,588,609
	Mehedinți	:	3,480	8,616	11,514	11,514	11,514
<b>Tourist chalets</b>	Romania	1,880,532	1,494,759	995,642	1,371,743	1,378,194	1,361,159
	Mehedinți	:	2,340	1,610	2,140	1,590	1,830
<b>Holiday villages</b>	Romania	13,140	114,390	66,680	93,224	112,698	182,007
<b>Tourist cottages</b>	Romania	311,211	230,114	225,344	299,693	334,975	475,147
	Mehedinți	:	:	:	736	368	1,968
<b>Tourist guesthouses</b>	Romania	1,026,975	10,454,735	7,290,415	8,784,339	8,804,999	8,862,371
	Mehedinți	:	76,848	65,483	78,512	75,899	58,551
<b>Agritourist guesthouses</b>	Romania	1,105,724	12,615,982	9,195,563	12,228,257	13,269,082	13,973,610
	Mehedinți	:	157,775	139,469	209,743	235,816	252,446
<b>Accommodation on river ships</b>	Mehedinți	81,011	59,670	49,025	31,276	30,296	29,254

Source: processing based on own data and from NIS [17].

### Total accommodation capacity in Romania and Mehedinți (Table 3)

At the national level, the total accommodation capacity expressed in places-per-day has steadily increased from 88,789,656 in 2019 to 98,293,110 in 2023. This suggests a significant expansion of the tourism infrastructure and a diversification of the accommodation offer, which has contributed to attracting an increasing number of tourists to Romania. In Mehedinți County, the accommodation capacity has increased from 717,328 places-per-day in 2019 to 868,635 places-per-day in 2023, reflecting a similar trend of expansion of the local tourism sector.

### The impact of the pandemic on accommodation capacity

During the pandemic (2020-2021), there has been a significant decrease in accommodation capacity nationwide, especially in 2020, when capacity decreased to 64,040,595 places-per-day, compared to 88,789,656 places in 2019 (-27.87%). This reflects the direct effects of travel restrictions, accommodation closures and the decrease in tourism demand due to the pandemic. Mehedinți County followed the national trend, with a decrease in capacity from 717,328 places in 2019 to 514,675 places in 2020 (-28.25%). After this decrease, the county managed to recover and even increase accommodation capacity, recording an increase from 751,150 places in 2021 to 868,635 places in 2023, suggesting a strong

return of local tourism in the post-pandemic period.

### Specific trends according to the type of accommodation structure

*Tourist villas:* Nationally, the accommodation capacity in tourist villas decreased significantly during the pandemic, from 3,753,539 places in 2019 to 2,780,569 places in 2020. This can be attributed to a decrease in demand and the operating capacity of the units due to restrictions and temporary closures. After 2020, the capacity started to increase slightly, but did not return to 2019 levels until the end of 2023. In Mehedinți, on the other hand, the accommodation capacity in tourist villas was relatively constant during 2020-2023.

*Agritourism guesthouses:* Another type of accommodation that was positively influenced by the behavioral changes of tourists during the pandemic was rural tourism, especially in counties with agrotourism potential, such as Mehedinți. The accommodation capacity in agrotourism guesthouses continued to increase, both nationally (from 12,615,982 places in 2019 to 13,973,610 places in 2023, i.e. an increase of +10.76%) and in Mehedinți (from 157,775 places in 2019 to 252,446 places in 2023, i.e. an increase of +60%). This suggests a strong increase in demand for more isolated and safe destinations, aspects that were favored by the pandemic.

*Tourist cottages:* At the national level, the number of accommodation places in tourist



cottages increased significantly after 2020, reaching 475,147 places in 2023, which indicates a trend of diversifying the accommodation offer in more isolated and natural locations. In Mehedinți, this type of accommodation had a remarkable increase in the period 2022-2023, from 736 places in 2021 to 1,968 places in 2023. This shows an adaptation to the post-pandemic demands of tourists who prefer smaller and more isolated accommodation units.

*Accommodation on cruise ships:* In Mehedinți County, the accommodation capacity on cruise ships on the Danube had a significant decrease in 2020 and 2021, reaching 31,276 places in 2021, compared to 59,670 places in 2019. This reflects the direct impact of the pandemic on river tourism, but after 2021 the capacity remained relatively constant, with a slight decrease in 2023 (29,254 places), which suggests a gradual return of cruise tourism on the Danube.

**In conclusion, it is noted that:**

- **Post-pandemic recovery:** After significant declines in 2020, Mehedinți County and Romania in general have seen a significant recovery in accommodation capacity. This suggests that as restrictions were lifted and tourism demand increased, the tourism infrastructure responded positively, with a continued increase in the number of accommodation places in various types of structures.

- **Search for safety and isolation:** The pandemic has led tourists to seek more isolation and security, which has favored rural tourism and agrotourism, types of accommodation that have continued to grow in Mehedinți. More isolated and intimate accommodations, such as tourist cottages, have also experienced rapid expansion.

- **Revitalization of river tourism:** After a period of stagnation, river tourism in Mehedinți County is starting to recover, but is still below previous levels, suggesting that it will take time to regain confidence and tourist numbers in this sector.

Table 4. Dynamics of tourist arrivals in tourist reception structures by type of structure in Romania/Mehedinți

Types of structures of tourist reception	Total	Years					
		2001	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
<b>TOTAL</b>	Romania	4,874,777	13,374,943	6,398,642	10,205,322	12,588,333	13,910,956
	Mehedinți	35,772	112,174	78,241	97,668	103,257	111,967
<b>Inns</b>	Romania	3,670	2,911	759	697	1,345	1,820
	Mehedinți	:	:	:	:	:	:
<b>Tourist villas</b>	Romania	174,956	463,600	267,338	382,473	420,838	437,492
	Mehedinți	:	336	2,763	3,638	4,089	3,671
<b>Tourist chalets</b>	Romania	104,049	153,374	95,370	130,051	131,805	137,390
	Mehedinți	:	921	484	536	309	474
<b>Holiday villages</b>	Romania	1,862	6,341	2,987	5,986	8,420	38,944
<b>Tourist cottages</b>	Romania	18,358	20,556	20,086	27,673	31,348	48,795
	Mehedinți	:	:	:	80	40	133
<b>Tourist guesthouses</b>	Romania	106,129	1,254,476	654,397	893,859	977,694	1,037,475
	Mehedinți	:	13,659	10,791	13,775	13,686	8,867
<b>Agritourist guesthouses</b>	Romania	41,658	1,272,878	755,436	1,087,327	1,181,699	1,306,683
	Mehedinți	:	33,323	27,997	32,262	33,967	33,490
<b>Accommodation on river ships</b>	Mehedinți	8,238	5,790	5,442	3,324	2,630	2,534

Source: processing based on own data and from NIS [17].

Analyzing the data on the number of tourist arrivals in tourist reception structures, several interesting trends can be observed, with a significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism in Romania and Mehedinți County.

**Total evolution of tourist arrivals in Romania and Mehedinți**

- Romania recorded a significant increase in tourist arrivals between 2001 and 2019, from 4,874,777 in 2001 to 13,374,943 in 2019.

However, the pandemic had a dramatic impact on tourism in 2020, when the number of arrivals decreased to 6,398,642 (-52.16%), due to travel restrictions and the closure of some tourist destinations. After 2020, the number of tourists has increased steadily, reaching 13,910,956 in 2023 (above the 2019 level), suggesting a strong recovery of the tourism industry in the post-pandemic period.

- Mehedinți followed a similar trend, with tourist arrivals falling from 112,174 in 2019 to 78,241 in 2020 (-30.25%). However, the county has seen a gradual increase in tourist arrivals in the following years, reaching 111,967 in 2023 (but significantly below the 2019 level). This suggests a fairly rapid recovery of local tourism.

#### **The impact of the pandemic on types of accommodation structures**

**Tourist villas:** Nationally, the number of tourist arrivals in tourist villas was quite affected by the pandemic, decreasing from 463,600 in 2019 to 267,338 in 2020 (a decrease of -42.33%). This reflects the fact that many accommodation units of this type were affected by travel restrictions and changes in tourist behavior, who began to opt for more isolated destinations. In Mehedinți, the number of arrivals in tourist villas was much lower, but gradually increased after 2020, reaching 3,671 in 2023.

**Agritourism guesthouses:** One of the most obvious trends that emerged during the pandemic was the increased interest in agritourism, especially in counties that benefit from this type of tourism, such as Mehedinți. Nationally, the number of arrivals in agritourism guesthouses decreased from 1,272,878 in 2019 to 755,436 in 2020 (a decrease of -40.65%), but recovered quickly after 2020, reaching 1,306,683 in 2023 (exceeding the 2019 level). In Mehedinți, the number of arrivals in agritourism guesthouses remained relatively constant, with a slight increase from 33,323 in 2019 to 33,490 in 2023, suggesting that this type of tourism was less affected by the health crisis and even benefited from higher demand from tourists looking for isolated and safer places.

**Tourist cottages:** In 2020, at the national level, tourist cottages recorded a significant decrease in arrivals (from 20,556 in 2019 to 20,086 in 2020), but this type of accommodation had a notable comeback, reaching 48,795 in 2023 (an increase of +137.38% compared to 2019). In Mehedinți, the number of arrivals in tourist cottages increased slightly, reaching 133 in 2023. This suggests that tourists have started to prefer smaller and more isolated

accommodation units, which allow for better social distancing and reduced contact with other people.

**Holiday cottages and holiday villages:** In 2020, the number of arrivals in holiday villages and holiday cottages decreased nationally, but they recorded a rapid recovery in 2021 and 2022, with a significant increase in 2023. In Mehedinți, however, these structures recorded a very low number of arrivals in the period 2020-2023, which suggests that this type of accommodation is not as widespread in the county or has not been as requested by tourists in the post-pandemic period.

**River tourism:** The number of tourist arrivals in cruise ship accommodation in Mehedinți county decreased significantly throughout the period 2019-2023. This can be explained by the fact that water tourism was affected by travel restrictions and port closures. After 2021, the number of arrivals remained low, reaching 2,534 in 2023, suggesting a continued and slow decline for river tourism during this period.

#### **From the same table 4 it can be seen that:**

- **Significant recovery after 2020:** After the dramatic drop in arrivals in 2020, the tourism sector in Romania and Mehedinți showed a strong recovery in the following years. This suggests that tourists have gradually returned to their preferred destinations, and their preferences have changed to include more safety and isolation.

- **Adaptation of tourist behavior:** The pandemic has led to a change in tourist behavior, favoring more isolated and safer destinations, such as agrotourism and accommodation in smaller and less crowded places (tourist cottages, agrotourism guesthouses). This change has been reflected in both national and local (Mehedinți) trends.

- **River tourism and other structures:** Despite the general trend of recovery, river tourism and certain types of accommodation structures (such as holiday villages) have not recovered as quickly as the number of arrivals from the pre-pandemic period, suggesting that certain sectors of tourism are still facing post-pandemic challenges.

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

Types of structures of tourist reception	Total	Years					
		2001	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
<b>TOTAL</b>	Romania	18,121,688	30,086,091	14,579,140	22,747,562	27,044,372	29,691,592
	Mehedinți	119,801	232,325	154,106	206,199	221,047	230,973
<b>Inns</b>	Romania	6,142	3,622	1,415	1,651	2,288	2,432
<b>Tourist villas</b>	Romania	792,519	1,039,641	593,440	865,471	885,701	949,886
	Mehedinți	:	828	4,100	5,241	5,886	5,474
<b>Tourist chalets</b>	Romania	211,024	266,010	161,230	214,004	218,605	240,108
	Mehedinți	:	1,755	1,158	1,210	881	1,137
<b>Holiday villages</b>	Romania	4,863	16,318	7,225	14,432	19,847	71,657
<b>Tourist cottages</b>	Romania	68,994	44,298	49,824	60,127	64,706	93,546
	Mehedinți	:	:	:	120	60	241
<b>Tourist guesthouses</b>	Romania	187,533	2,324,217	1,201,697	1,605,766	1,754,388	1,837,049
	Mehedinți	:	19,813	17,302	21,343	23,446	14,005
<b>Agritourist guesthouses</b>	Romania	88,349	2,518,605	1,515,305	2,089,781	2,265,633	2,529,052
	Mehedinți	:	67,477	61,463	67,901	67,892	67,373
<b>Accommodation on river ships</b>	Mehedinți	57,516	16,272	14,380	7,586	6,332	5,149

Source: processing based on own data and from NIS [17].

Analyzing data on tourist arrivals and accommodation capacity in tourist structures in Romania and Mehedinți during 2019-2023, several significant trends and changes are observed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which have affected the tourism industry.

#### **Total evolution of the number of overnight stays in Romania and Mehedinți (table 5)**

• **Romania:** The total number of overnight stays reached 30,086,091 in 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on tourism in 2020, with a drastic decrease in the number of overnight stays (-51.54%), which reached 14,579,140. This decrease was the result of travel restrictions, isolation measures and the closure of accommodation units. After 2020, there was an increase in the number of overnight stays, reaching 29,691,592 in 2023 (significantly below the level of 2019), suggesting a significant recovery of tourism post-pandemic.

• **Mehedinți:** The number of overnight stays followed a similar pattern, with a sharp drop in 2020 to 154,106 compared to 232,325 in 2019 (-33.67), in the context of the pandemic. However, the county has shown a steady recovery in the post-pandemic years, with 230,973 overnight stays in 2023, suggesting a gradual return of local tourism, although not yet reaching the level of 2019.

#### **Evolution of types of accommodation structures**

**Agritourism guesthouses:** These structures have shown a continuous increase in the number of overnight stays, both nationally and in Mehedinți. During the period 2020-2023, the preference for isolated destinations made agritourism a favored option. At the national level, the number of overnight stays in agritourism guesthouses decreased from 2,518,605 in 2019 to 1,515,305 in 2020 (-39.84%), but recovered significantly, reaching 2,529,052 in 2023 (an increase of 66.90% compared to 2020, and a similar level to 2019). In Mehedinți, the number of overnight stays in agritourism guesthouses remained stable during 2019-2023, with a decrease in 2020 to 61,463 overnight stays, but with a rapid recovery in 2021 and subsequent maintenance at a constant level.

**Tourist villas:** At the national level, overnight stays in tourist villas suffered a major decrease in 2020 (-42.92%), falling from 1,039,641 in 2019 to 593,440. This can be explained by travel restrictions and the preference for accommodation in more isolated locations. However, the number of overnight stays gradually increased after 2020, reaching 949,886 in 2023, still below the level of 2019. In Mehedinți, the number of overnight stays in tourist villas was relatively low, but has been increasing steadily since 2020, reaching 5,474 in 2023. Although not at the same levels as in other areas of Romania, villas in Mehedinți have become a more attractive option in the post-pandemic period.

**Tourist cottages and chalets:** In 2020, overnight stays in tourist cottages and chalets suffered significant decreases, from 266,010 in 2019 to 161,230 in 2020 (-39.39%), followed by a gradual recovery until 2023. These accommodation structures, usually having a smaller number of places and located in more isolated areas, started to gain popularity in the post-pandemic period. In Mehedinți, overnight stays in tourist cottages remained almost non-existent in 2020-2021, but increased significantly in 2023, reaching 241 overnight stays.

**Cruise ship tourism:** Mehedinți has seen a significant and continuous decrease in cruise ship overnight stays (from 16,272 in 2019 to 14,380 in 2020), and in 2021 and 2022, the number remained at a low level. In 2023, cruise ship overnight stays continued to be well below the 2019 level, suggesting that river tourism has not fully recovered from the impact of the pandemic.

- *Overall, but slower recovery in Mehedinți:* After the significant impact of the pandemic, tourism in Romania and in Mehedinți has started to recover since 2021, and in 2023 an overall increase in overnight stays is observed. However, in Mehedinți, this recovery has been slower, especially in terms of tourism in certain types of accommodation, such as villas and tourist cabins.

- *Increased demand for agritourism and remote locations:* The pandemic has changed the behavior of tourists, who have started to appreciate more isolated, safe places that allow for social distancing. This is why agritourism has become an increasingly popular option, even in Mehedinți, a county with significant agritourism potential.

- *Decrease in river tourism:* Cruise ship tourism in Mehedinți has suffered due to the pandemic and has not returned to 2019 levels until 2023. This may be a consequence of international travel restrictions and changes in tourist preferences post-pandemic.

- *Diversification of the offer:* Since 2021, the accommodation offers in Romania and Mehedinți have diversified, with an increase in demand for smaller and more isolated structures, such as tourist cottages and agrotourism. This can be an opportunity to

better capitalize on local resources and support the development of more sustainable and environmentally friendly forms of tourism.

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

Types of structures of tourist reception	Total	Years				
		2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
TOTAL	Romania	52.1	39.1	48.5	45.1	45.7
	Mehedinți	57.1	60.7	49.6	50.3	46.3
Inns	Romania	11.9	7.8	3.7	6.4	8.4
Tourist villas	Romania	49.6	37.6	49	43	43.1
	Mehedinți	:	100	92.2	88.6	80.9
Tourist chalets	Romania	29.7	29	27.4	29.2	28.8
	Mehedinți	100	100	100	97.7	100
Holiday villages	Romania	31	15.7	36.7	34.8	62.2
Tourist cottages	Romania	36	39.2	35.8	28.2	30.2
	Mehedinți	:	:	:	:	12.1
Tourist guesthouses	Romania	35	28.1	33.3	31.5	32.2
	Mehedinți	47.9	46.5	44.9	42.1	37.2
Agritourist guesthouses	Romania	34.7	31.8	32.4	30.5	31.5
	Mehedinți	68.4	72.3	58.7	63.1	57.1
Accommodation on river ships	Mehedinți	35.4	42.4	28.2	28.2	28.5

Source: processing based on own data and from NIS [17].

Analyzing the net occupancy rate of accommodation capacity in operation in percentage terms, both at the national level (Romania) and for Mehedinți county, during the period 2019-2023, we observe several significant trends, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 6). These data are useful for understanding the impact of the pandemic on tourism and how different types of accommodation structures have been affected during this period.

Overall evolution of the occupancy rate of accommodation capacity in Romania and Mehedinți:

**Romania:** In 2019, the occupancy rate of accommodation capacity was 52.1%. In 2020, during the pandemic, it decreased significantly to 39.1%, reflecting the direct impact of travel restrictions and isolation measures. In 2021, the index increased slightly to 48.5%, but did not fully return to 2019 levels. In 2022 and 2023, the index remained relatively constant, at 45.1% and 45.7%, indicating a partial recovery of tourism, but still below the pre-pandemic level.

**Mehedinți:** In Mehedinți county, the accommodation capacity utilization index was higher than in the rest of the country in 2019 (57.1%), and even increased in 2020, reaching 60.7%. This suggests a better adaptation of the county to the crisis, possibly due to a more

limited tourism offer, which may be easier to manage under pandemic conditions. After 2020, the index recorded a significant decrease in 2021 (reaching 49.6%) and an increase in 2022, reaching 50.3%. In 2023, the accommodation capacity utilization index reached 46.3%, reflecting a slower recovery compared to other areas of the country.

### Evolution by type of accommodation structures

**Inns:** • Romania: The occupancy rate of inns was very low in 2020 (7.8%) and remained below normal in the following years. In 2023, it reached 8.4%.

• Mehedinți: Data for inns are not available for Mehedinți explicitly, but it is clear that this type of accommodation was less in demand, especially during the pandemic, and does not seem to have experienced a significant recovery.

**Tourist villas:** • Romania: The occupancy rate of tourist villas was affected by the pandemic, falling from 49.6% in 2019 to 37.6% in 2020. After 2020, occupancy of these structures increased slightly to 49% in 2021 and 43% in 2022, but remained below the 2019 level.

• Mehedinți: The occupancy rate of tourist villas was much higher in 2020 than in the rest of the country, suggesting a high demand for these types of accommodation during the pandemic, when tourists preferred more isolated destinations. Occupancy gradually decreased in the following years, reaching 80.9% in 2023, but remaining significantly higher than the national average.

**Chalets:** • Romania: The capacity utilization rate in chalets was relatively constant, ranging between 27.4% in 2020 and 29.7% in 2019, suggesting that these types of structures were less affected by the pandemic.

• Mehedinți: Chalets in Mehedinți had a very high utilization rate in 2020, suggesting high demand during that period. After 2020, utilization decreased slightly in 2023, indicating a continued preference for these isolated and safer accommodation structures.

**Tourist guesthouses:** • Romania: Guesthouses had a significant decrease in utilization in 2020 (28.1%), but recovered slightly to 33.3% in 2021 and 31.5% in 2022. In 2023, utilization increased to 32.2%.

• Mehedinți: Tourist guesthouses in Mehedinți had a relatively constant and higher than the national average occupancy rate, of approximately 46.5% in 2020 and 44.9% in 2021. This decreased slightly in 2023 to 37.2%, suggesting a relatively lower occupancy rate compared to 2020 and 2021.

**Agritourism guesthouses:** • Romania: The occupancy rate of agritourism guesthouses was approximately 31.8% in 2020, with a slow recovery in the following years, reaching 31.5% in 2023.

• Mehedinți: Agrotourism guesthouses in Mehedinți had a very high occupancy rate in 2020 (72.3%), reflecting the increased preference for agritourism during the pandemic. In 2023, this rate decreased to 57.1%, well above the national average.

**Ship accommodation:** • Mehedinți: The utilization of cruise ship accommodation capacity has decreased from 42.4% in 2020 to 28.5% in 2023. This is a direct consequence of travel restrictions and the decrease in interest in water-based tourism in the post-pandemic period.

Analyzing data on the arrivals of foreign visitors to Romania during 2019-2023, coming from various continents and countries of origin, significant trends can be observed, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 7).

Table 7. Arrivals of foreign visitors in Romania by continent and country of origin - thousands of persons

Continents and countries	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
<b>Total</b>	12,815	5,023	6,789	12,697	14,777
<b>Europe</b>	11,878	4,830	6,480	11,929	13,868
<b>European Union</b>	6,254	2,593	3,114	4,397	5,197
<b>Other European countries</b>	127	46	83	145	169
<b>Africa</b>	43	17	25	49	52
<b>Egypt</b>	10	5	8	13	16
<b>North America</b>	281	38	94	230	289
<b>USA</b>	214	29	73	173	218
<b>South and Central America</b>	40	9	12	27	34
<b>Asia</b>	545	126	175	446	507
<b>Israel</b>	309	43	65	226	234
<b>Australia, Oceania and other territories</b>	27	3	3	15	26
<b>Unspecified countries and territories</b>	1	0	0	1	1

Source: processing based on own data and from NIS [17].

### General evolution of foreign tourist arrivals (Total)

- *In 2019*, Romania received a significant number of foreign tourists, with 12,815 thousand arrivals.
- *In 2020*, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a major decline in tourism, with the number of foreign tourist arrivals dropping sharply to just 5,023 thousand, reflecting the immediate impact of travel restrictions and isolation measures.
- *In 2021*, the number of arrivals increased to 6,789 thousand, suggesting a partial recovery in tourism as restrictions were eased and vaccinations began to be implemented on a large scale.
- *In 2022*, tourism continued to grow significantly, reaching 12,697 thousand arrivals, almost at the level of 2019.
- *In 2023*, foreign tourist arrivals exceeded this level, reaching 14,777 thousand tourists, indicating a complete recovery and even an increase in the number of tourists compared to the pre-pandemic period.

#### **Interpretations and comments**

- ***Impact of the pandemic:*** 2020 was clearly a disastrous year for tourism in Romania, and the pandemic affected all regions of the world, leading to significant decreases in tourist numbers. There was also a shift of interest to geographically closer destinations, such as countries in the European Union and other parts of Europe, to the detriment of more distant destinations.
- ***Recovery in 2021-2023:*** After 2020, tourism began to gradually recover. In particular in 2022 and 2023, Romania experienced a significant increase in the number of foreign visitors, exceeding 2019 levels, suggesting a solid return of confidence and demand in the tourism market.
- ***Regional trends:*** Europe remained the main source of tourists for Romania, and within Europe, the European Union was the most important market. After a significant decline in 2020, European tourism returned to near-normal levels in 2023, suggesting a rapid recovery in regional tourism.
- ***Slower recovery in other regions:*** Regions such as Africa, South America and Asia have seen slower and more modest recoveries, and visitor numbers in these areas have not yet reached pre-pandemic levels.

#### • ***Preference for destinations closer to home:***

As seen in the case of tourists from the European Union and Israel, the general trend in the post-pandemic period has been to choose more geographically accessible and safer destinations, to minimize the risks associated with long-haul international travel.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

From the analysis and inventory of the natural tourism potential, we came to the conclusion that Mehedinți County has rich and valuable natural resources that played a very important role in attracting tourists, both during the pandemic and in the following years 2021-2023, contributing greatly to combating the negative effect of the pandemic on tourism activity in general, in the studied area. The multitude of extremely valuable anthropogenic tourism resources, represented by historical monuments, churches and monasteries, archaeological sites, memorial houses and architectural ensembles with a unique character, crafts, village customs and rituals of inestimable value, and others, also had positive effects on attracting tourists. Thanks to this, it can be seen from the data presented in tables 1-7 that the pandemic had an extremely negative impact on tourism activity only in 2020, the year in which restrictions on the movement and health safety of tourists were the most drastic. Also, from these tables it can be seen that in the first year of the pandemic 2019, the tourist activity in the county took place due to inertia, without visible negative effects. The greatest negative impact on all the indicators studied, as can be seen from the same table, was manifested in 2020, the year of grace of the pandemic. Subsequently, due to effective measures taken both at the local and county level, as well as at the management level of the main tourist reception structures in the field of rural tourism, the values of the indicators studied began to increase slightly, in the first year 2021, these increases were very timid, their values increasing very little compared to 2020. Significant and visible increases in all these indicators were achieved in 2023, the year in which the rural tourism market in Mehedinți county showed signs of revival and

readaptation to the new realities and challenges imposed by the passage through the crisis period during the pandemic.

An interesting aspect identified in this study is that the occupancy rate of Agritourist guesthouses was highest in August 2020, at 72.3%, which indicates that these tourist reception structures, due to the family-oriented nature of their activity and the management more focused on the specific, personalized needs of customers, led to a faster reaction and adaptation capacity to new conditions arising in the context of the pandemic.

It can also be seen from the data recorded in tables 1-3 that the number of agrotourism reception structures has increased considerably by over 75%, reaching from 41 in 2019 to 71 in 2023, and the number of accommodation places in these structures in operation has increased from 157775 place-days in 2019 to 252446 place-days in 2023. These data attest to the fact that these structures are responding very well to the new challenges and that local people have understood that this activity can bring jobs and additional income for the family, both in more difficult conditions such as those during the pandemic, and afterwards. Regarding the more specific aspect of this county, that of Accommodation on river ships, it can be seen from Table 1 that their number increased from 24 in 2019 to 29 in 2023, but regarding the number of tourists arriving in these structures, it decreased considerably by over 50%, from 5,790 tourists in 2019 to only 2,534 in 2023, the same phenomenon of considerable decrease is also manifested in the dynamics of overnight stays, which decreased from 16,272 in 2019 to only 5,149 in 2023, a fact that shows that these structures, due to their specificity and the additional conditions imposed, could not quickly readjust to the increasingly greater competition in the tourism market.

We also studied Arrivals of foreign visitors in Romania by continent and country of origin - thousands of persons, in table 7, from which it can be clearly seen that the tourism market at the national level has reacted well to the new conditions, because the total number of foreign tourists who visited Romania has increased year by year after the pandemic, exceeding the

number of 12,815 thousand in 2019, reaching 14,777 thousand tourists in 2023, the majority of whom arrived from Europe, 13,868 thousand tourists, the rest under 1,000 thousand, coming from other continents.

Comparing the evolution of tourism activity in Mehedinți County with that at the national level, it is found that at this level, the evolution of the tourism market had a positive trend, the same as at the national level, attracting more and more domestic tourists, but constantly focusing on improving management and services and personalizing the tourist offer, to attract more and more foreign tourists.

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