

RURAL TOURISM IN ROMANIA - EVOLUTIONS AND DISCONTINUITIES

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the evolution of rural tourism since the early '70s, the time of onset, and indicates the discontinuity recorded especially after 1989 until the brink of the preparation for Romania's joining the European Union and the present state, one far behind the countries with extremely high degree of urbanization and industrialization, probably as a result of a lack of strategy for this form of tourism in which the beneficiary is the Ministry of Tourism, as the health tourism and ecotourism have recently had. The location of many villages in areas of outstanding natural landscapes, the richness and variety of cultural heritage that endows them, are issues related to an increased tourism potential that can be capitalized and those unique tourism products that can not be seen, admired and offered by other countries.

Key words: Rural tourism, Rural heritage and cultural tourism, Ecotourism, Agrotourism, Farmhouses.

JEL Classification: Q26, Z10

1. INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism across Europe, the trend is in continuous expansion, already becoming common to most countries (www.itir.awf.krakow.pl). In Europe, the rural tourism as a trend, is expanding, becoming a common thing for most countries, but different when it comes to the stage of evolution. In post-communist countries and recent members of the European Union, like Romania, the rural tourism is at the beginning although twenty years have passed since coming back to the market economy, unlike the countries with an extremely high degree of urbanization and industrialization where the rural space is not unknown anymore, the capitalization of the tourist potential reaching high levels.

For Romania the 70's mean the beginning of the rural tourism (Glavan, 2003, pp. 63-64), through promoting the tourist programme "Wedding in the Carpathians" by ONT Carpați - Bucharest (in the villages Bogdan Vodă - Maramureș County; Sibiel – in the etnofolcloric area Mărginimea Sibiului and Lerești - Argeș County) followed by the legal experimental declaration of 13 places as "tourist villages". But this type of tourism has remained far behind countries with political stability, highly urbanized and industrialized. This type of tourism remains in an incipient stage, unlike the situation in the politically stable countries, strongly urbanized and industrialized. Here, since the 70's the changes generated by the economic restructuring and the farms' crisis have limited the options of economic development of the rural areas making less viable the older development strategies and forcing many people to look for untraditional methods to survive (Wilson, Fesenmaier et al, 2001). One of the most popular

untraditional strategies of development was the tourism and the additional entreprenuering opportunities, because of its ability to bring income, of generating jobs and of supporting the economic development.

2. THE ROMANIAN VIEW ON RURAL TOURISM – AN INCOMPLETE VIEW

Many people wonder why the rural tourism in Romania is in this stage when the tourist potential is huge.

Even if the western countries are advanced and can be examples and models in practising the rural tourism, the perception of the rural tourism in the Romanian view, starting from the government to the local authorities, and the other way around, explains a series of the characteristics of the content, promotion and development of the rural tourism. Sometimes defining the rural tourism and the types of tourism included in it are very important, especially when the government is in charge of this. Therefore, other reasons or other views do not matter.

In the "Master Plan for the national tourism of Romania 2007-2026", initiated by the Romanian Government in order to lay the basis of implementing a permanent approach of the development of tourism in Romania the rural tourism is considered to comprise, widely, entertainment in a rural landscape or a rural environment in order to participate and experience some activities, events or attractions that are not available in urbanized areas. Here one can include national parks and natural reservations, open rural regions, villages and farmland areas. It contains *ecotourism* and *agrotourism*.

2.1. Characterization of the forms of rural tourism

2.1.1. Rural heritage and cultural tourism

For the rural tourism this component that aims at the inheritance, leads to a connection between past and present, because it offers us a historical depth and a permanent pattern of the world in a continuous change. That is why the tourism in the rural areas seems to be influenced and idealized today through the myth of nature and the search of "an original *communitas*" and is often associated with the mental perception of the rural region.

The contemporary villages from the Romanian territory largely preserve the main elements that characterize the inland village and these elements, along with the modern marks, grant its own characteristic, authenticity of cultural and social interest for the whole European community. As Jacinthe Bessière (1998, pp.21-34) stated, the inheritance must be considered a mark of identity and a distinctive feature of a social group, of a village, although it can be about an object, an inherited skill or a symbolic representation.

Cultural heritage area is huge, if we think of villages as ethnic and religious character, the organisation of the households, the hospitality influenced by the ethnic characteristic, the religious buildings and the entrenched buildings (some of them part of the UNESCO heritage - Dacian fortresses, the wooden churches from Maramures, the monasteries with external frescos from Bucovina), the variety of folk and inherited tradition well preserved and practised in everyday life, the rich schedule of traditional fairs and folk events throughout the year, the traditional cuisine and regional specialities and so on. All these are elements that belong to the inheritance, and that is why the inheritance and cultural tourism should not have been neglected in "The Master Plan for the Romanian national tourism 2007-2026". Through this component of rural tourism one could have deduced the complexity, difficulty of approaching the rural tourism and would have changed reasons and so on. Therefore, the gap created on the work agenda of the Ministry of Tourism thus justifies the absence of a national strategy of development of this form of tourism, as a distinct one, as there is in the case of spa tourism and ecotourism, the absence of some investments, which would have called for the urgent solving of some problems the Romanian village is dealing with. It is very important to mention that "The Master Plan for the Romanian national tourism 2007-2026" represents the safety policy which includes different plans and strategies, described in such a way as to optimize the contribution of tourist sector to the national economy. This strategy covers a period of 20 years, by 2026, comprising a programme of action of six years (2007-2013) in connection with the financial support through

structural funds – Romania has access to, as a result of the integration in the European Union in January 2007.

However, the National Strategic Programme of Rural Development compensates for this omission and the lack of some directions from The Ministry of Tourism meant to develop the rural tourism. The rural tourism is seen as a sub – sector with potential of development, being at the same time a possible alternative source of jobs for the rural population, a way to diversify the rural economy and a factor of stabilization for this population. The tourist activity could also be an opportunity to diversify the activities of the little owners of exploitations / rural households, offering the possibility to perform secondary or main activities that will involve mainly women.

2.1.2. Ecotourism

Although the enforcement of the present principles of the development of a stable tourism in natural areas has led to the appearance of ecotourism as a *distinct form of tourism*, meant to respect the integrity of natural landscapes, of the ecological biodiversity, in accordance with the requirements of some categories of tourists, who want to spend their holiday in nature, this can be also viewed as a part of rural tourism.

Unlike the other types of tourism included in the rural tourism, ecotourism has received the best impulse in promoting and development at national level, the start being given and maintained by the Ministry of Tourism itself, although, for the time being, it deals with numerous problems, such as: the weak cooperation at local level, the modest promotion at national and international level, the existence of a limited offer, poorly diversified, the weak development of the specific infrastructure of ecotourism at the level of protected areas, the migration of work forces, the reduced level of education of those employed in this domain.

Achievement first, a legislative framework in the pre-accession to the EU followed the declaration and establishment of a national network of protected areas of different categories, solved more problems and more courses of action open to promote and develop ecotourism. The network of natural areas to ensure the conservation and sustainable use of natural, objective public interest and fundamental component of national strategy for sustainable development and improved quality of life in rural areas located within or adjacent to protected areas and diversification economy of their communities have different properties or activities conducted within or near protected areas. It improves the legal and institutional environment and ecotourism direction in accordance with good practice at EU level. Ecotourism is defined for the first time on this path and also remains the only form of tourism defined, while including a number of

terms like "green destination", "ecomuseum", "green label", etc.

Also, there is amplification of the role of Romanian professional organizations, including the newly established, specialized in ecotourism, not only in supporting the development of ecotourism. Later, in September 2009, has developed "Ecotourism Development National Strategy" in order to promote ecotourism as a main form of tourism in protected areas as tourist destinations at the expense of traditional forms of tourism, and increasing the role that ecotourism plays in economic development and prosperity of these area for the local population

In this sense we can say that the rural tourism, only through the component-ecotourism, has as development space almost 20% (<http://www.madr.ro>) of the surface of the country - 27 major natural protected areas of national interest, namely The Reservation of The Danube Delta Biosphere, 13 national parks (from which 12 are under the supervision of The National Administration of Forests - Romsilva), 13 national parks (10 are under the supervision of The National Administration of Forests - Romsilva) as well as the area of the sites included in the European Network Natura 2000. The National Administration of Forests- Romsilva which has in its custody, through forest departments, over 200 reservations (228) and monuments of nature situated in the forests promotes and ensures the development of ecotourism through tourist programmes and the network of tourist chalets.

2.1.3. Agrotourism

Except for the new E.U. members, the agriculture of the European Union is dominated by farms, which are the places of the progress and development of agrotourism. The place of most farms, within the Romanian village is taken at a low level by peasant households; the small size of farm holding and the highest proportion of all farms belonging to the new Member States (90%) especially in Romania, Lithuania, Latvia and Bulgaria (from 1 January 2007) (Nistoreanu, Ghereș, et al, 2010, p.42).

It is normal to be so because "our past history is largely peasant," the Bulgaru Mircea (1996, p487), quoting Nicolae Iorga, to add "village that match with today's peasantry is not peasants because peasants share fell to less than half the villages". However, rural tourism in the future will be even lower.

The richer peasants and their children returned to their homelands have copied the western model and have managed to transform their households into little businesses, trying to survive through agrotourism. Looking for solutions to access the European funds, they have permanently faced the severe standards of the European agricultural model, very different from the communitary way of life of the Romanian village. Even the drawback created through the Law of the Land Fund (no. 18/ February 19) from 1991, when the

Romanian peasants were given "The Title Deed" and at the same time, the parceling of the owner's lands has given a different sense to agrotourism unlike in the western countries. The little businessmen are forced to carry on activities belonging to agrotourism in more difficult conditions as a result of the transfer of tourists from a land to another, from the parcel within the village on which the household is situated (house/ agrohovel and outbuildings) to others outside the village, situated even at high altitudes, where they can have a fold (as a prolongation of their business), as well as ensuring their comfort conditions, hygiene; the transport being sometimes assured even by a waggon where this is possible and where the land permits.

For the time being, Romanian agriculture is defined by some European experts as an activity performed by an old population, with medium studies or by subsistence farms without perspective, lacking commodity markets, with low incomes, which leads to a huge disparity between rural Romania and the rest of the countries of the European Union. The rural society as well as the Romanian rural economy could remain traditional only on resizing circumstances at rates comparable to the average EU 27, of adjusting to the modern type of organic ecologic agriculture and of making it profitable (Nistoreanu, Ghereș, et al, 2010, p.42).

The agrotourism will gain due to the fact that agriculture is supported in its development as a result of the Common Agricultural Politics. For example, the Romanian agriculture has gained from a substantial financial support from the funds of Common European Agricultural Politics (PAC); only between 2007-2009 - 4,037 billions Euro, of which 60% were used for rural development, but the degree of accessing these was precarious (Nistoreanu, Ghereș, et al, 2010, p.46).

2.2. Tourist accommodation in the countryside - the value element in promoting local culture and rural economic development

The tourist accommodation establishments in rural areas, rural economy began to take shape based on the family business and as in the rest of Europe are a strategy and diversification of rural economy.

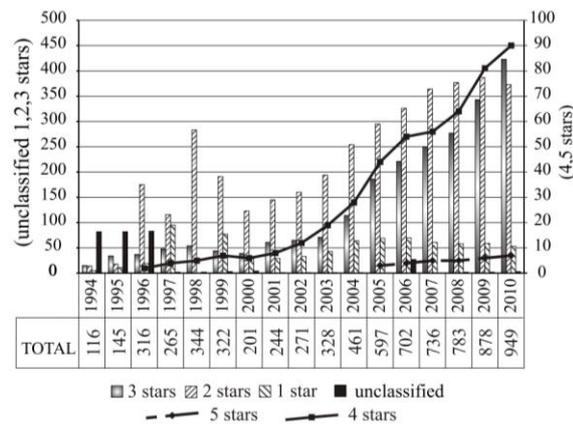
The present stage of rural tourism in Romania is reflected by a network of accommodation units of a certain type, the entrepreneurs being permanently confused by the Romanian legislation, always imprecise and confusing, with a substitution game – occurring either urban hostels/ boarding houses and rural hostels, or tourist hostels and agrotourist hostels probably due to the inexistence of a clear delimitation of the concept of hostel/ boarding house. For example, in the enforced final regulatory action *The MDRT Order no. 1296 from April 15th 2010 for the approval of the methodological norms regarding the classification of the structure of tourist welcoming,*

there are accounts of tourist hostels and agrotourist ones of 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 stars / flowers.

This fact has also hardened their registering in statistic databases. The National Institute of Statistics mentions that in the series of data *the urban hostels have redefined themselves in tourist hostels, and the agrotourist hostels comprise the rural and agrotourist hostels.*

Out of the analysis of each year's statistics data results that: the number of agrotourist hostels (rural and agrotourist hostels) outruns the one of tourist hostels (urban hostels); unlike the agro tourism pensions (Figure 1) are recorded after 1999 (Figure 2, Figure 3), since it coincided with measures taken at the legislative level on the development of Romanian tourism, a tourism revival in rural Romanian village, increasing comfort, more especially after 2003 in the segment 4.5 flowers, respectively 4.5 stars due to the requirements of tourist market exigencies required.

The situation being reversed when it comes to the capacity of tourist accommodation in operation (number – places – days) on types of structures (Figure 3); is higher than for the agro tourist guesthouses; the capacity of tourist accommodation in operation represents the number of accommodation places available to tourists, taking into account the number of days those units are open in that period. It is expressed in places-days. The places from the rooms and units temporarily closed due to lack of tourists, reparations or other reasons are omitted.

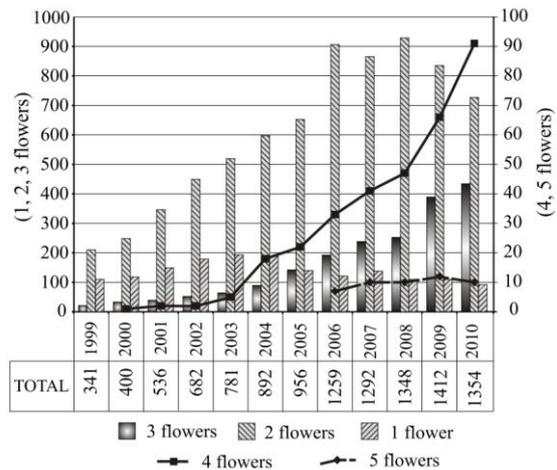


Source: The processing of the information according to the National Institute of Statistics Database TEMPO - TUR101B (accessed on 20.05.2011)

Figure 1 - Tourist boarding house

In 2008 the administrative units in which the rural tourist hostels were concentrated – in Maramures, Harghita, Braşov (with over 200 units each) and Suceava (over 100 units) coincide with those in which great tourist flows have inserted (arrivals: Braşov – 582 thousand; Maramureş – 391 thousand, Suceava – 229,1 thousand; Harghita – 231,5 thousand according to the statistic year book of Romania 2010). The recent increase of tourist flows in rural areas has also been generated by the offer of Romanian rural tourism, active on international markets, especially through the development of some

tourist national product for more categories of tourists (Agrotourism in Romania, Romania – the country of wines, Dracula, Cruises on the Danube).



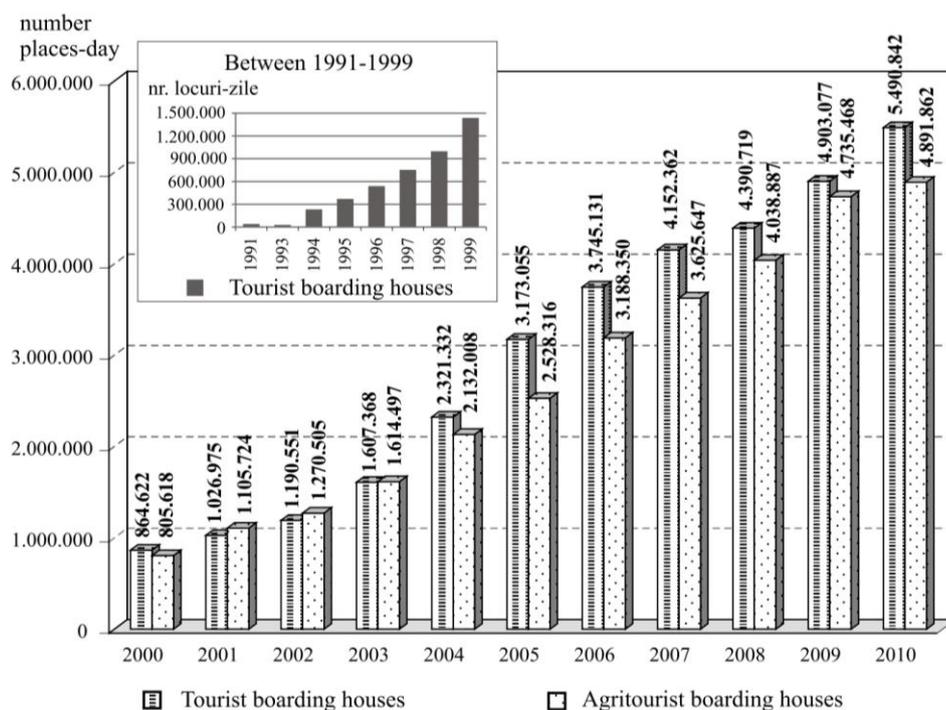
Source: The processing of the information according to the National Institute of Statistics Database TEMPO - TUR101B (accessed on 20.05.2011)

Figure 2: Agritourist boarding house

The National Association of Rural, Ecological and Cultural Tourism (ANTREC), besides offering assistance specially to small operators of rural tourism both for the development of their products and for entering the markets, is mainly a consortium of marketing for the rural accommodation, promoting over 600 units (www.cazarelapensiune.ro). The villages, in which these are located, highlight a wide space of practising the rural tourism with high intensity at the level of the above mentioned administrative units to which Alba County is added.

Another category of accommodation units that completes the first one, but included only in the protected natural areas and part of the ecotourist programmes with the support of National Administration of Forests- Romsilva is represented by chalets, including the hunting ones (223 at a national level (www.mdrl.ro, p.29).

The ones who benefit from this situation are numerous tourism agencies with internal or international activity – these welcoming structures meant to offer tourist accommodation are included in their offers all year round, including winter. The tourists' requests are high in number in the warm/ hot season of the year, especially in July and August as a result of the attractions (www.rosilva.ro) generated by: special landscapes, spectacular relief, special natural forests, lakes and rivers, special flora and wildlife; activities encouraged in natural protected areas supervised by R.N.P – ROMSILVA: hikes on official tourist trails; trips with specialized tourist guides (trips to discover the flora and the wildlife, trips in the activities of the parks, trips in local communities); riding trips on specially designed trails; mountainbiking, climbing.



Source: The processing of the information according to the National Institute of Statistics Database TEMPO - TUR103A (accessed on 20.05.2011)

Figure 3 - The capacity of tourist accommodation in operation (number of places days) for the structures of tourist receiving tourist boarding houses and agritourist boarding houses

From those two categories of accommodation units the hostels from rural areas contribute at the growth of the monthly average income per household, the improvement of the quality of life and at supporting woman's role; the monthly average income at the level of each development area in Romania, except Bucharest-Ilfov, is under 200 euros in 2010.

Studies have shown that woman's work is essential for the survival of the agricultural households. For example, the important woman's role in Spain in this activity is the result of the fact that within the rural tourism even from the first stages of development the importance has been given to the accommodation units, a traditional domain lead by women (www.itir.awf.krakow.pl) Women are assigned to wait for the guests in the rural houses, to promote the values of the local culture and to protect the environment. They usually look after the house and its surroundings, decorates the interior so that it should obey the traditional tastes. At the same time, they consider that the labour that involves the rural tourism is an extension of their household chores and they sometimes encourage even the tourists to get involved in them.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Through the efforts of the authorities at central and local, rural entrepreneurs, etc. will develop rural tourism, will have significant implications in

stabilizing the rural population through the improvement of the quality of life in rural areas and the diversification of the rural economies that at the same time representing an alternative of reducing the higher and higher pressure on some well-known tourist areas, already overdemanding from the point of view of their affordability degree.

Thus, the value of certified tourist village can become a "tourist product" highly original and branded for Romanian tourism.

The rural tourism will fully rely on an image or a set of images that are shaped by history, geography and local culture. But the images, that must be communicated in order to sell those sites with tourist potential, can be built by both tourists and sellers. Thus, through the collective image created, any space becomes a tourist destination, and rural tourism would be an example of this rediscovery of places. The transformation and the use of space and rural inheritance in order to develop the tourist activities required and require the appeal to values of authenticity, cultural identity and ethnicity. The elements of the collective image – love of nature, rural origins, a positive image of the rural environment, quality and authenticity, the growth of mobility and access, the cultural changes in the post-modernist society, the changes on the tourist market and the tourist experience – will contribute more and more to promoting and developing the Romanian rural tourism.

Probably correct and efficient development and implementation of a rural tourism strategy, whose beneficiary is the Ministry of Tourism as in health tourism and ecotourism, will ensure the promotion and development of rural tourism like many European countries already with tradition.

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