

Basic Features of the Rural Tourism from Lăpuşului Land (Țara Lăpuşului, Maramureş County, Romania)

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Abstract: - The present research highlights the main results of a study about the rural tourism from Lăpuşului Land. We present the results of a field investigation taken through the technique of questionnaire applied directly, through operators upon a sample made of 24 households from 12 localities. The questionnaire elaboration and the assessment of the field inquiry results were based upon the analysis of the following problems: presentation of the households' specific features that practise rural tourism; effects of the contacts with the foreign countries; the motivation of practising rural tourism from the perspective of the implied actors; the way in which the actors appreciate their own level of life compared to that established at the level of country and its possible implications upon tourism; the way in which the households attract tourists, offered services and foreseen improvements, places for accommodation, practised prices; seasonality problem and of the tourist flow; incomes from tourism; the character of tourism and the origin areas of tourists; the degree of satisfaction/dissatisfaction, reasons for dissatisfaction and the intention to continue or give up rural tourism. Finally, the main conclusions were drawn on the basis of field inquiry processing and assessment.

Key-words: - *tourist resources, ethnographic region, rural tourism, field inquiry, questionnaire*

1 Introduction

Lapusului Land overlaps one of the clearly defined depression units that is the north-west side of the Transylvanian space, located in the eastern part of the tectonic-erosive depression channel Baia Mare - Copalnic - Lapu and it is incorporated by eight administrative-territorial units (with a total population of 33846 inhabitants in 2002). Among these, seven are localities (Baiut, Coroieni, Cupseni, Grossi Tiblesului, Lapus, Suci de Sus, Vima-Mica - having no less than 24 settlements), respectively, a town from the category of small urban centres (Targu Lapus, with 5844 inhabitants) which has in its subordination 13 villages.

The long evolution of the society from Lapusului Land in social, historic and complex natural conditions has allowed the individualisation of Lapusului Land as being one of the most representative ethnographic regions from the Romanian ethnic space, which has earned a special place in the local cultural and rural civilisation as a consequence of its perpetuation of numerous archaic material and spiritual elements of culture, revaluated on a tourist level through the means of rural tourism. The present study (having as basis a similar one enrolled during the period 2000-2001 that aimed at the analysis of the rural tourist phenomenon micro-regionally and locally - see Benedek and Dezsi, 2001 and 2006) with the purpose of capturing the phenomenon at the scale of the entire country, is focused on the analysis of the rural tourism features unfolded in the perimeter of Lapusului

Land based on the identification and the analysis of the active households features where rural tourism is practised. For this purpose, a field investigation was performed through the questionnaire technique, directly applied through operators.

2 Methodology

A major problem in the drawing up of the sample constituted the choice of households that were to be questioned, because of the relatively reduced number of households which were listed in the evidences of the profile institutions and which practised rural tourism and were thus certified and authorised according to the criteria in force. The field investigation performed in 2009 lead us to the conclusion that there was a series of households which either left the formal networks or practised this activity without legal forms or were not officially certified. Thus, in the context of official evidences corroborated with the information obtained following the field investigation which indicated the presence of a relatively reduced number of hostels at the level of the region, it was decided to question all the households identified. As a consequence, the statistic population included all the localities (12) that contained hostels integrated in the formal and informal tourist circuits, all the households identified (24) and disseminated on all the territory analysed, being questioned: Târgu Lăpuş (5 hostels), Băiuţ, Suci de Sus and Groşii Țibleşului (each

with 3 hostels), Rohia and Răzoare (each with 2 hostels), respectively Borcut, Dumbrava, Libotin, Stoiceni, Suci de Jos and Vima Mică with one hostel each.

The applied questionnaire and the evaluation of the field investigation results were based on the analysis of a set of problems (containing 84 variables): a. the emphasis of the features of the households that practised rural tourism: the number of persons in the household, the number of persons active in the household, the gender, the age, the education, the occupation and the social mobility of the person which practised rural tourism, the telephone, the car; b. the motivation for practising rural tourism from the perspective of the actors involved (the manner of appreciating their own level of life in comparison with the one from the whole country and the eventual implications of it on tourism); c. the manner in which the households attract tourists, the services offered (estimated improvements); d. the number of accommodation places and services offered to tourists; e. the features of the tourist flow (intensity, seasonality); f. the features of tourism (internal, international) and the tourists' areas of origin; g. the prices and the incomes achieved from tourism; h. the degree of satisfaction/dissatisfaction, the reasons for the latter and the intention of continuing / abandoning rural tourism.

3 The results of the field investigation

3.1 The basic features of the rural households which practise rural tourism

As a whole, the households made of one person have an insignificant share (7.2%), the highest percentage (71.4%) being held by the *households made up of 2-4 persons*. This situation may be explained by the complexity of the activities in rural tourism (accommodation, catering, and other types of services) that could be difficult to cover by the households formed of a smaller number of persons. Thus, even if the great majority of the active members of the family are engaged in various other activities (service, silviculture, health, agriculture), they are actively involved in the activities of rural tourism from the family business, sharing an important part of their free time for it. This way an important contribution is brought to the diversification and the optimisation of the activities and services placed at the disposal of the tourists. To support the above mentioned, we have to mention the relatively high share of the active persons from the households involved in rural tourism, the *category of households with one or two active persons* holding the highest share (64.3% of the total). On the contrary, the share of 7.2% of the households with no active persons involved in tourism activities is given by a sum of causes: the high "adherence" of this form of tourism in the rural environment, in general recorded in the last decade,

together with the increase of the number of inactive persons following the massive firing from the industry of the last 20 years, respectively as a consequence of the reduction of the retirement age and of the large number of request retirements and the retirements due to illnesses, part of this category of persons, with an extra budget of free time, redirecting towards rural tourism as an alternative to the social and economic situation of the long transition period undergone by Romania.

The analysis of the basic occupation of the persons involved in the tourism enrolment reveals a high cumulated share of a relatively heterogeneous group of people from a point of view of the social status (intellectuals and persons with lower education), besides the categories mentioned the occupational spectrum of the persons involved in the rural tourism phenomenon consisting of the presence -to a great extent (42%) - of the basic occupation of hostel administrator, fact which shows a tendency to specialise and professionalise the activities performed and of the services offered. The above mentioned category is filled by persons whose occupation falls into a diverse spectrum of sectors (engineer, secretary, security agent, instructors, nurse), but who manage and perform tourist services specific to this form of tourism.

The important share held by the category of "intellectuals" (grouping occupations like engineers, managers, secretaries, instructors, teachers etc.) results from the revaluation of the advantage offered by the very high cultural capital in comparison with the other social categories, respectively the easier adaptation to the rigours imposed by the competition from the profile market, but especially, the knowledge of one or more foreign languages -favourable premise and generally revaluated for the achievement of larger incomes from the tourism activity. The possibilities of communicating with foreign tourists have facilitated, in time, the setting of a collaboration relationship, which continue to this day, allowing the easier setting of contacts with persons from abroad, including their attraction and the transformation from "occasional consumers" into loyal customers. In this way, at a general level, one may notice a higher level of occupation of the foreign tourists in the households managed by persons from the intellectuals' category (71.4%). The important share (14.2%) which is held by the retired people derives, on the one hand, from the fact that they can allocate the greatest part of their time to the activities afferent to rural tourism and, implicitly, to the efficient organisation of these activities, on the other hand, and, on the other hand, the perspective of completing their budget or gaining additional incomes offered by rural tourism, taking into account that the two social categories of people mentioned occupy an unprivileged position regarding the quantum of the real incomes obtained.

The analysis of the level of education of the tourist services offerers from the rural environment reveals the presence of a cumulated high share (92.9%) which is held by the social category with a medium and high cultural capital, respectively the graduates of medium and high level of education (that is, the rural tourism from the region constitutes, almost exclusively, the occupation of this category). This fact reveals the higher impact and their superior receptiveness regarding the involvement in rural tourism, to which a more realistic perception and a more rapid adaptation related to the operation of the economic mechanisms of the rural tourism activity under the conditions of a competitive market are added. These categories have earned larger profits compared to the lower educated categories.

The assurance of the necessary conditions for the rapid circulation of information and the mobility of the persons are, in the case of the great majority of the households involved in this activity, ensured. Thus, the *degree of endowment of the households* with telephones reaches percentage values of 92.9% (the value is higher than the national average of the Romanian rural space) while the share of the owners of cars reaches maximum values (100%), fact that reflects, on the one hand, the reaching of a certain welfare degree, which allows them to purchase such products, and on the other hand, the fact that the car has become an absolutely necessary "accessory" in order to efficiently manage the activity.

Regarding the *motivation of practising rural tourism*, the conviction that rural tourism can contribute to the increase of incomes and, on a long term, even to the accumulation of capital, have been the ones that mattered in the option of entrepreneurs to engage in such a business. Practically, all the persons questioned indicated as the main motivation, as it had been expected, the financial reasons. To these, one may add, with not negligible frequencies, but with differentiated shares, a larger spectrum of people for whom other reasons mattered as well: the relationships between people, the contacts and the friends, the exchange of information, ideas - 85.75% mentioned this reason, the pleasure of doing this activity - 21,4%, or the promotion of the image of the locality - 7,1%. Thus, as a whole, one may state that rural tourism selectively stimulates the local population in order to diversify the occupations through new activities, requested by the tourist demand, this undergoing a continuous process of diversification and "searches" as well.

3.2 The features of rural tourism practised by the households

In the context in which the rural tourist phenomenon from Lapusului Land initially had as "engine" of implementation and development the Land branch of ANTREC (the main NGO in the field with a national

coverage, with an active involvement in the promotion and the management of the rural tourist phenomenon) and, then, the Rural Tourism Association "Lapusul", the role of the tourist networks gradually became less and less active, and at the moment the network's involvement in the attraction of tourist is minimal.

However, even if the attraction through personal relations of tourists (combined with other factors, with a lower share, but increasing) holds the most important cumulated share (85.7%), and more than 43.5% from the total number of households attract more than 50% of the tourists accommodated through personal relations), the attraction of tourists through the means of the formal tourists networks remains important, even if it has lost much of its importance lately (24.4% of the offerers mentioning the merits of the tourist network in attracting the tourists, of course, in combination with other factors, like tourists, advertising on the internet, personal connections). The ones that follow are the personal connections network (39%) and the advertising one (29%). The relevant results from the investigation emphasise the increasing importance in attracting tourists of the relational capital of the households, based to a large extent on the experience accumulated in the last few years and on the circle of tourists who used during this period the tourist services offered by the rural tourist hostels, underlining thus the importance of attracting tourists through the means of the information transmitted by their former tourists, the majority of the offerers having an already stable network of tourists. The less relevant role of the NGOs and of the tourist networks in the promotion of rural tourism in the analysed region is illustrated by the reduced share held by these related to the source of information on the possibility of practising rural tourism (only 21.4% mentioning their involvement, but in combination with other factors and without filling a first rank position in the hierarchy indicated), the investigation showing that the personal relationships fill the first place in the supply of information (well informed connections and relatives), in combination with, in order, the mass media and the state institutions (85.7%) or the category "other sources".

Another important fact is that the majority of the hostels have understood the fact that placing at the disposal of tourists, besides accommodation and food, of a more diversified range of auxiliary services constitutes a competitive advantage which can translate to an increased attractiveness, a higher degree of occupation, the increase of the duration of the stay and, implicitly, earning higher incomes. Based on this, the majority of the existing tourist structures offer a range of auxiliary services and activities different from a case to another according to the financial possibilities, the inventiveness of the offerers and, of course, the desires and exigencies

of the tourists, like: organising hiking trips in the local area and trips/thematic circuits or mixed in Lapusului Land or at the objectives outside the region (85.7% of the total number of households which offer other services). To these one may add other different leisure and sports activities (with a cumulated share of 35.7%), the organisation of cultural programs or the participation in diverse activities related to the traditions of the local culture (7.2%). Also, one may notice the fact that the use of auxiliary activities and services (other than accommodation and food) constitutes a constant, in the context of the isolation of the region and the remoteness related to the major axes of circulations which lead to, on the one hand, a larger duration of the stay in comparison with other regions, and, on the other hand, to the difficulty of organising recreational activities on their own in the local or regional area. This fact constitutes an advantage which is largely used by the offerers from Lapusului Land who try to adapt and to answer the various necessities and options, aspect revealed by the intention expressed by the absolute majority of the hostels of improving the infrastructure and the services offered to the tourists which aims at an extremely diversified register: sport courts (volleyball and tennis), swimming pools, ponds, the possibility of practising extreme sports - rafting etc.). Interesting is the relatively reduced share (14.3%) of the answers who expressed their intention of executing improvements which require a higher capital investment (for instance the increase of the number of accommodation places and/or the increase of the comfort degree of the existing facilities), as a consequence of the reduction of the incomes, because of the decline in the number of tourists based on the economic crisis whose effects have started to manifest since 2009 (although the majority of the interviewed persons has understood by now that the constant investments in the household which allow the continuous diversification of the activities and the services offered is a compulsory condition for the increase of its attractiveness). Moreover the absolute majority of the hostels (85%) are classified in inferior categories of comfort (2 daisies), the rest (15%) in the immediately superior category.

The distribution of the number of accommodation places at the level of the hostels reveals the nuanced situation, the highest cumulated share being held by the ones under 12 places 65% (among these, the ones with 5 accommodation places having 20,8%, the ones with 10 places 12,5%, with 4 and 5 places 16.7%, and the ones with 12 places 8.3%), the majority are functionally re-adapted through the transformation of the old households in order to answer the classification criteria, while the majority of the structures with a higher number of accommodation places represents the more recently elevated buildings through the own financial effort or

with the contribution of some community programs. This aspect reveals the fact that these have been built in the context of an ascending evolution stage of this type of activities, where the households have aimed at the maintenance of the ascending trend, interpreted as a sign of the intensification of the tourist circulation and demand.

The average prices for the accommodation service shape, compared to the other regions with a similar profile, a region with average prices, there existing several territorial differences within it, identifying localities which practise higher prices (with nuances, sometimes significant, according to the category of comfort), like Targu Lapus and Grosii Tiblesului, followed by other localities with average prices (in the majority of the cases), like Rohia, Razoare and Grosii Tiblesului and the ones with the lowest prices (Vima Mica, Baiut). Also, the prices are ranging between 25 and 70 lei for a night, with an average value of 45 lei, noticing that a high cumulated share of the quantum ranging between 40 and 50 lei per night, without finding positive correlations between the level of the prices and the country of origin of the tourists.

The phenomenon of *seasonality* shows its effects in the case of rural tourism from Lapusului Land, even if these are less seen compared to other regions. The problem of seasonality is present in almost half of the hostels, the majority of the tourists being recorded during the summer season (64.3% from the hostels recording the maximum flow of tourists during summer) and only 14.3% in the winter season. There is a series of hostels (21,4%) which are demanded by tourists exclusively during the peak season of the tourist demand (in summer or winter), situation which places them in a more advantageous position compared to others which manage, to different extents, to attract tourists all year round. The latter have comparative and competitive advantages derived from their location in areas with more diversified tourist resources and more developed tourist and access infrastructure, but also due to the quality and the diversification of the auxiliary services offered.

The number of night stays achieved reveals the reduced intensity of the tourist flows to the region, including during the summer and winter seasons, when not less than 21.4% of the households recorded only 1-2 night stays per week. Also, the share of the households with the least advantageous situation which do not manage to attract tourists outside the season (21.4%) or which record at the most one night stay (14.3%) reaches high values. At the opposite pole, although far from the indicators which ensure the expected efficiency, there are the hostels (28.6% of the total) which manage to accommodate 4-5 persons per day during the summer season. Overall, in 42.9% of the households, 3-5 night stays are recorded per day during the summer season,

which constitutes a favourable premise and in general reevaluated for the record of larger incomes from the tourism activity. However, almost a third of the households does not manage to attract a sufficient number of tourists, which ensures satisfactory incomes. The majority of the households which are accessed outside the season records a reduced tourist flow (1-2 night stays per day in 35.7% of the total), there existing a nucleus of households (21.4% of the total) where the frequency of the night stays is higher (3-4 night stays per day). A more advantageous situation is found in the villages located in the mountainous and pre-mountainous areas (Grosii Tiblesului, Baiut, Suci de Sus) with the possibility of practising hiking or which preserve better the traditional side of the rural life or which have important religious objectives (Rohia).

The gross incomes achieved from the rural tourism activity (calculated by multiplying the number of stays per day and the accommodation tariff indicated by each household, without subtracting the operational expenses and, as appropriate, the percentage retained by the network, the extension of the tourist season being considered to be four months, respectively between 15th of May and 15th of September) reached the value of 222640 lei and an average value of 15900 lei, with a relatively large range, between 3360 lei and 35840 lei, revealing the existence of wide inequalities between the households related to the revaluation of the tourist offer and of the localities and areas they belong to. The analysis of the incomes recorded on major categories (<5000lei, 5001-10000 lei; 10001-15000; 15001-20000; 20001-25000; 250001-30000 and > 30000) reveals the existence of an obvious balance between the hostels integrated in the first part of the hierarchy (the ones which record incomes under 15000lei) and the ones whose earnings place them above the average value. The households which achieve higher incomes (over 25000 lei) represent 21.4% from the total number of hostels.

The analysis of the correlation coefficients reveals the significant correlations between the incomes and the following items: the basic occupation, the duration of the tourist season, the demand from Bucharest, Timis, Constanta, Piatra Neamt, respectively the international one (especially from Germany, France and USA), the contribution to the budget of the household, the number of night stays recorded, the prices, the importance of the personal relations and of the former tourists in attracting new tourists etc.

The correlations established between the different items lead to the conclusion that obtaining certain financial results over the regional average is determined by: the accommodation capacity of the rural tourist hostels; the intensity of the tourist flow, corroborated with a satisfactory intensity of the tourist flows outside season,

the level of the accommodation tariffs, the social or relational capital of the household in attracting tourists. There, also, is the correlation with a high level of significance between the basic occupation and the level of training, on the one hand, and the level of the achieved incomes, on the other hand. Thus, the categories of higher and very high incomes are made of a great share of persons with a high or average level of training. This fact reveals the clear relation between the level of training and the cultural and social capital, the persons with a higher cultural capital having higher chances of success and recording, generally, higher incomes. To this the contribution of other factors is added, like the tourist offer of the locality and of each hostel in part. We could not establish a positive significant correlation between the role of the personal relationships in attracting tourists and the incomes recorded, the situations being diverse and sometimes even contradictory. Related to the correlation between the level of incomes achieved from rural tourism and its share to the formation of the household budgets, significant connections were not found.

The most important share (57.1%) is held by the households whose incomes contribute with less than 25% to the family budget, while the households registered in the group of 25-20% hold only 28.6%. Significant is the fact that 14.3% of the households achieve their incomes from the activities connected to the rural tourism in proportion of 50-75%, fact illustrated by the appearance, through self-identification, of the basic occupation of hostel administrator, which, as it has been mentioned, represents another significant leap to the improvement of the situation of rural households involved in the practice of rural tourism. As a consequence, the analysis of *the share of incomes achieved from tourism in the budget of the household* reveals, in the majority of the cases, the subordinated, complementary feature of the tourist activity in the rural space, none of the households being specialised and oriented exclusively towards this activity, the incomes achieved not offering the financial independence and the achievement of a plus which could be reinvested in order to develop this activity.

The evaluation by the actors involved from the part of the tourist offer of *the level of life*, the results show the tendency to appreciate it as being higher compared to the one of the whole country, mentioning that, on a scale of intensity from 1 to 10, besides the importance of the average-high incomes (between the levels 7 and 8, with a frequency of 71.4%) one may notice a slight shift of options between more positive appreciations (the value 9, with a share of 14.3%). Also, in the case of the evaluations of the own level of life, the absence of the maximum values (10) and the ones from the inferior categories (between 1 and 4) is noticed. The evaluations of the level of life at the scale of the whole country

(belonging to the same actors) are recorded for a larger and more heterogeneous group, despite the fact that most of these appreciations are directed towards the average levels (5 and 6 which group 64.3%), noticing the tendency to shift the qualifications towards the average-superior levels of the hierarchy (levels 3 and 4 hold 21.4%), in the detriment of the superior ones (level 7 is absent, and level 8 holds 14.3%). Based on this, one may establish a direct correlation, even if it is not significant ($r=0.19$), but at an acceptable level of significance ($p=0.05$) - between this attitude and the beneficial effects of rural tourism, appreciated through the items of income achieved or the contribution to the family budget. Consequently, we may state that the development of rural tourism in Lapusului Land is confirmed by this correlation, the increase of the incomes from tourism in the budget of the households being noticeable in the evaluation of the own level of life. This attitude may be the effect of the social desire or the protection of the ego through the mechanism of attribution, each rural household trying to find various management strategies under the crisis conditions, rural tourism being one of them.

Regarding the *tourists' origin*, the domination of the mixed variant of attracting tourists (64.3%), from the country as well as from abroad, is noticed, the households accessed exclusively by the local clientele holding 35.7%, while the households "specialised" exclusively on international tourism are absent. The highest share values are held by the tourist coming from Germany (27.6%) and France (24.3%), the hierarchy of the countries of origin being completed, in decreasing order, by the Netherlands (13.2%), Spain (9.2%), Slovakia (8.4%), the Check Republic (6.1%), Poland (4.9%) and, with a more reduced contribution, the USA (2.3%), Portugal (2.1%), Turkey (1.8%), and, surprisingly, Japan (0.4%). We could not establish a significant correlation between the origin of the foreign tourists and the preferential orientation towards certain locations in the territory of Lapusului Land, even if the domination of the German tourists could be partially explained, by the "roots" from Romania (in the case of the Germans who emigrated starting with the 70s and especially after 1990).

Regarding the internal tourism, we noticed the dominating position of the big cities, which supply the most important volume of the demand. Among these, Bucharest has the lead (71.4% of the households receive tourists from this city), followed at a great distance by Cluj-Napoca (mentioned by 42.96% of the hostels), Oradea (28.6%), Constanta and Timisoara (each with 14.3%). The above mentioned cities are the largest in the country, but also have the highest economic potential, respectively a favourable social stratification for rural tourism (the highest percentage of the average and

higher social strata).

The degree of satisfaction generated by the results obtained from the rural tourism activity is situated at very high shares, all the households involved, with one exception, expressing their wish to continue the rural tourism activity. This intention shows the increase of the trust of the persons involved in the possibilities offered by rural tourism, especially related to the achievement of substantial incomes on a short and medium term, obviously, having as basis the results obtained in the previous years. To support this statement, we have the analysis of the frequency of the answers referring to the *degree of satisfaction obtained from this activity*, which records a high share (57.1%) of pleased households, respectively partially pleased (42.9%) and the lack of the dissatisfied ones with the results obtained from the practice of rural tourism.

If the financial factor is, an easily anticipated fact, the one which motivates the majority of the persons involved, together with the possibility of establishing new connections and personal relationships, respectively hobby/pleasure (57.1%) or the exchange of ideas and information (28.3%), among the mentioned factors as dissatisfaction sources in practising this activity, the majority of the subjects mentioned as major sources the lack of financial support and the logistic necessary to improve the tourist offer, the reduced support of the local and central administrations, the poor general and tourist infrastructure, the reduced profit/great investment, the reduced contribution of the tourists (especially outside the season period), insufficient promotion etc.

4 Conclusions

The empirical analysis of rural tourism in Lapusului Land reveals the fact that the complex, diversified and complementary natural and anthropogenic tourist potential is, for now, far from being revaluated in a satisfactory manner through the means of rural tourism, whose practice, at the level of the coordinates which define the dimension and the quality of the general infrastructure and the accommodation structures involved, of the services offered, as well as from a point of view of the volume and the intensity of the tourist flows involved, cannot generate, on a short term, a spectacular economic relaunching of the rural tourism in Lapusului Land, than at the most for a relatively reduced number of households, fact that questions the "myths" formulated by many authors related to the role of rural tourism in the unfolding of this phenomenon. The causes which are the basis of this statement derive from, in a concise enumeration, the fact that this is not an activity generalised on extended areas, but it is focused in certain areas, in spaces which have special attractive resources, revaluated by a better developed tourist infrastructure than

the whole rural space of Lapusului Land and a series of facilities and more diversified services in relation with the competitive hostels, the tourist offer and the tourist programs destined to reevaluate it are poor, the less developed territorial infrastructure, the limited accessibility, which could bring the region out of the geographical isolation, not generating large and constant incomes, a sporadic local initiative, missing the focused and wide vision, together with the lack of an adequate entrepreneurial vision, the lack or the reduced involvement of the local and Land administration, the competition of other forms of tourism from the rural space, especially the one represented by the holiday residences.

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