

The Rural Tourism in and its Impact on Local Development in the Mountainous Banat (West Development Region, Romania)

CĂTĂLINA ANCUȚA, MARTIN OLARU, ANA IANĂȘ

Department of Geography
West University of Timișoara
4, B-dul V. Pârvan, 300223, Timișoara
ROMANIA

cancutafr@yahoo.com, martinolaru@yahoo.com, anaianas@yahoo.com
<http://www.geografie.uvt.ro/personal/>

Abstract: - The paper analyzes the level of development of the rural tourism in the alpine Banat (situated in the South-West of Romania), using the potential and the multiple aspects of this activity as starting points. The following methods were employed: statistical analysis, direct field observation, semi structured interviews, SWOT analysis. We can appreciate that the importance of rural tourism for the local and regional development is a modest one, at the time being, the future development having to be accomplished from a perspective of durability, with peculiar emphasis on quality and competitiveness.

Key-Words: - Mountainous Banat, rural tourism, local development, entrepreneurship in tourism, SWOT analysis.

1 Introduction

Rural tourism includes all forms of tourism that takes place in rural areas and utilizes local tourist resources - natural, cultural and economic as well as tourist facilities and equipment, including pensions and agro touristic pensions, which is being managed and accomplished by the local population [8].

With a long tradition in Europe [3], rural tourism has developed in Romania in the 1990s after the fall of Communism. The sharp decline of industry has determined the switch in the direction of migration of population, from cities into villages, also in the context of the recovery of ownership over land and immovable property and of free manifestation of entrepreneurship [1].

These flows of people returning to the rural areas have even more emphasized the needs for a functional diversification of the Romanian village, which had exercised - with rare exceptions - only its agricultural function for 50 years.

Rural tourism appears to be a desirable option because of its multiple positive effects.

Rural tourism contributes to the economic life of the village on a long term through the following actions:

- creating sustainable for the village;
- encouraging the local traditional activities (craftsmanship, commerce, new workplaces);

- becoming a support for new businesses and workplaces, determining development on local and regional scale;
- raising the income of the local population (putting to good use the local agricultural products, local resources, the touristic potential etc);
- stimulating factor for raising the standard of living in the rural areas [4].

The potential of the Romanian village for rural tourism has proven to be remarkable: the presence of traditional architecture, including historic buildings, the perpetuation of the occupations, habits and traditions.

The awareness concerning these advantages has led to the creation of an institutional framework aimed at developing rural tourism: the Romanian Federation for Alpine Development (created in 1992), the National Association for Ecological and Cultural Rural Tourism in Romania (ANTREC, created in 1994), the Ministry of Tourism have formulated strategies, laws and projects designed to encourage initiatives in the field. Based on detailed criteria established in accordance with relevant international literature and experience of other countries, an assessment of the Romanian tourism potential of rural areas has been accomplished and typologies and hierarchies have been established [10]. Of course, the success of these projects has much depended on the ability of local actors to

attract funds and to adapt to the fluctuating and complex social and economic context.

2 The characteristics of Mountainous Banat from the perspective of rural tourism

Mountainous Banat is the mountain area in the country's southwest, which covers about 5500 square kilometers and concentrates about 300 000 inhabitants. It corresponds to the homonymous mountains, which are a part of the Western Carpathians, and it is characterized by a great morphographic variety: it includes a central area that reaches 1400 m in height, with an alpine appearance and offering opportunities for the practice of winter sports - and several peripheral groups, with lower elevations and a complex karstic landscape. Valuable elements of flora, fauna, geology, and landscape have led to the delimitation of three National Parks and of over 40 natural reservations (including fossiliferous points) [9].

Within this scenery with a great natural value, rural settlements are the main element of humanization. The presence of smoothing surfaces has determined the early development and subsequent perpetuation of pastoral activities; the karstic plateaus, the depressions and well developed terraces of the valleys have offered opportunities for the cultivation of plants. In fact, the upper limit of the habitat reaches the alpine level, due to the large number of temporary settlements - some of which being transformed into permanent settlements over time [1].

An area of old and continued inhabitation, the Mountainous Banat has an impressive historical heritage, which brings together: prehistoric and Roman archeological sites, medieval fortresses, historical monument churches, ensembles of folk techniques, ensembles of traditional households.

The valorification of mineral, coal and wood resources, and the development of mining and industrial centers, with increasing intensity since the eighteenth century, culminating in the Communist era, has insured the persistence of the rural population in this area, exactly in consequence of an advantageous financial status (provided equally by industry and agriculture), as well as the consistent perpetuation of the rural occupations and folk ethos.

The destructure that mining and quarrying have underwent since 1997 - along with the withdrawal of state subsidies - marked a turning point in the evolution of Mountainous Banat

villages, which have lost a significant part of their economic base.

Associated processes were: the high rates of unemployment, flows of departures for other regions (where the workforce needed during the maximum development of the industry had been brought from), and the departure of the young population, demographic aging [1].

In parallel, however, the land properties and real estate recovery, the progressive legislative regulations of the market economy and the emergent possibilities for entrepreneurship have caused flows of population from urban into rural areas, including flows from cities located outside the alpine area itself.

The relaunch of the economic dynamism of the regional urban pole - Timisoara - located in the Northwest of the region, in the plain area, was another positive factor, due to the gradual shaping of a demand for quality food as well as for appropriate places for week-end proximity tourism taking place in areas with high quality natural environment and a rustic lifestyle.

In this context, an intensification of the traditional activities - agriculture and forestry - in the rural areas of alpine Banat has been registered, together with the launch of rural tourism [2].

3 Quantitative and qualitative evaluation of rural tourism

The study aims to assess the development of rural tourism and its importance in the context of local development.

The research applies a multi-stage strategy: the diagnose analysis of the touristic offer, based on statistical data, field observations and inquiries with the active households in rural tourism, SWOT analysis.

3.1 Diagnose analysis of the touristic offer

Statistics show still limited importance of the rural environment for the tourism in the area, still dominated by tourist resorts.

Nevertheless, the development of the number of touristic structure in rural area in the last 10 years has been an important one, as pointed out by the annual growth rate of 25%.

Several areas of concentration of rural touristic pensions have been highlighted:

- the older areas of extent of the touristic function, in the proximity of tourist resorts (Valiug)

- along the major communication axes (Mehadia, Teregova), but also
 - the areas of recent affirmation of the touristic function, where they differentiate into: former mining pools (Sasca Montana, the Danube Valley) and rural areas that define their attractiveness by reaffirming their ethnic specificity (Caraşova, Brebu Nou, Sf. Eelena).

The analysis of the generations of rural pensions by their year of opening, points out the mechanisms behind the development of this activity.

The oldest pensions are those which have emerged in the immediate proximity of tourist resorts, having benefited from infrastructure allowing access into the resorts, as well as from and the customers of those resorts, whom they have easily attracted, given the advanced state of degradation in which these resorts were in the early 1990s (the Communist state having ceased to invest in these resorts in the 1980s, and the privatization of state structures in tourism having been one of the poorest privatization processes in the Romanian economy, having resulted in the complete ruin of these resorts).

The second generation of rural pensions has occurred on the eastern outskirts of the mountain area, along the major axis that links the Western and the Southern regions of the country, taking advantage of the opportunity for transit tourism.

The third generation corresponds to a former mining complex, with very good location in relation to numerous touristic objectives belonging to the alpine space.

The fourth generation is complex in terms of location and includes pensions opened in a former mining area (the last one of the mining areas introduced in conservation after 1989), as well as pensions located on the European road E70, pensions in rural communities with a strong ethnic specificity, and pensions in proximity of the most important city of the alpine area - Resita.

The overall importance of rural tourism in the space of the alpine tourism is modest, as villages can account for only 17% of the arrivals and 8.8% of the beddings. It is significant that in the 200 – 2010 period the number of arrivals has increased more than that of the beddings – 63% as compared to 39% - which reflects the reduction of the medium stays, from 3 days, to 2.5 days. Also, seasonality is emphasized, as almost all touristic circulation takes place during summer.

3.2 Field study results

Field research aimed to reveal, from a qualitative perspective [6], the relationship between rural tourism and its insertion environment. The methods used were direct observation and semi structured interviews.

Direct observation was aimed at the following elements:

a. the predominant aspect of the rural landscape (the share of traditional households, the density of built areas),

b. functional characteristics of the villages (daily animation in relation to the presence of active population, the quality of access infrastructure and engineering services, the development of public spaces),

c. the insertion of the pensions in the countryside landscape, the type of architecture (materials, ornamentation) and the interior design (furniture, ornaments),

d. the organization of other specific facilities (parking lots, green spaces, courtyards, terraces, playgrounds for children)

e. tourist information centers, as well as information, guidance and tourist sign systems.

The main observed aspects were:

a. the Mountainous Banat villages that have rural pensions in their hearth, present us with a landscape which has not changed during the recent years, and which is characterized by the large share of traditional ground floor households.

b. these villages maintain their functionality within the limits of traditional activities, particularly subsistence agriculture. The low efficiency of these activities is reflected in the modest appearance of the built space (most buildings would require renovation work). On the other hand, the presence of traditional activities enables tourists to consume specific products, as well as to observe and even experience those.

The road access infrastructure qualifies as satisfactory, as a result of the progress made through SAPARD or ISPA type programs with European funding. Installation engineering services are only punctually present, which hardly creates the prerequisites for the development of tourism.

c. The rural touristic pensions of the Mountainous Banat differ in appearance in relation to their opening dates, their location as well as the specificity of the undertaken tourist activities.

Most of the pensions which have entered the tourist circuit as early as the 1990s, have been built or renovated in an urban style (in what concerns designs and materials) in times when the tourists' need for comfort was higher than their interest in the

rustic character and the authenticity of pensions. It is the case of most first generation pensions.

In the case of the other pensions, several subcategories can be distinguished:

- former family homes, almost unchanged, which comply with the regional tradition (in style and materials) [2] and where modern facilities have been implemented in order to improve comfort;
- pensions built in a neutral rustic style, which is not traditionally specific to the region;
- recent pensions, mostly built as results of accessing European funds, are located outside the village hearths, on the outskirts or on access roads, and which have modern architecture, a high level of comfort, their focus being on the quality of services provided, and of the interior and auxiliary facilities.

d. As most pensions have been developed mainly by the conversion of spaces that had originally been designed as single-family residences, the land available for erecting additional facilities is restricted. Thus, there are only few rural pensions which have facilities such as parking lots, covered garages, or sport courts. Most have courtyards and terraces for outdoors leisure. A smaller number of them can offer wider land areas, such as orchards or meadows.

e. We can estimate that signs and advertising are generally poor. Information available on the internet is not updated, being restricted to the most popular areas. Only one rural community has now a tourist information center, and signposts are present only locally.

Semi structured interviews (of the life story type) have focused on finding out the story of each landlord in order to identify elements with a high degree of generality, as well as those that are highly exceptional, particular.

Most owners are not locals; they come from the major towns of the region. They have chosen rural tourism for the pleasant environment and for profit. Half of the owners have retired many years before. All the interviewed have declared that they have built up their businesses with patience, hard work and passion, but also that their satisfaction is comparable to the effort, the businesses being profitable ones. The quality of it being a family business is a guarantee of their success.

90% of the tourists come from the region, namely from the regional pole; the purpose of the owners over the years was customer loyalty through quality services and a warm, friendly, open welcome. This also explains the lack of interest in means of modern advertising (internet), because the owners consider the advertising that their clients do in their own circles of knowledge to be more

valuable (more credible). Also, the small size of the businesses and customer loyalty explain why the effects of the economic crisis were minimal here.

Everyone is confident in what future is concerned, aiming to expand and to diversify their business profiles through the increase of its agricultural character and through its transformation into an agro-touristic pension.

3.3 SWOT analysis

This type of analysis is a summary of various aspects of a phenomenon analyzed in relation to the internal environment and external environment grouped into four categories: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

The following characteristics describing the rural tourism in the alpine Banat have been identified:

Strong points:

- good connection from the surroundings.
- richness and diversity of landscapes; protected areas: natural parks and reservations, biodiversity and geodiversity.
- the visual value of many morphological and hydrological components;
- the presence of an extended forest area and a river network that offer many opportunities for leisure, recreation, hunting, fishing;
- the proximity of an important skiing area, due to the presence of snow for 4-5 months a year, at altitudes of 1000-1500 m (Valiug, Garana, Brebu Nou, Poiana Marului, Borlova etc);
- the conservation of an original material and spiritual culture (the layout of the rural household, popular clothing and songs, craftsmanship and occupations, popular architecture and technique, folklore events etc); local gastronomy;
- the establishment of the Cooperative of the Owners of Agro Touristic Pensions in the Mountainous Banat [10];
- the affiliation with the National Association for Ecological and Cultural Rural Tourism in Romania.

Weak points:

- the uneven distribution of touristic resources;
- low development and bad condition of the transport and rural communication infrastructure;
- deficient public services infrastructure;
- low array of touristic products promoted on the touristic markets;
- an underdeveloped tourism infrastructure (information centers and orientation panels, marked routes, maps, souvenir shops, specific products);
- underdeveloped tourist services (guidance services on tourist routes).

Opportunities:

- the production and sale of specific products fruit syrup, woodwork, dairy products, wine and craft products;
- multiplying the fairs, festivals, special events;
- organizing recreation and leisure activities in nature;
- agricultural activities with educational role: assistance and participating in activities such as cattle raising, horse riding, apiculture, collecting fruits, collecting medicinal plants; experiencing cooking.
- the awareness of political and institutional factors concerning the potential importance of rural tourism for the local and regional development. Rural tourism has been declared a priority of the development strategy of Caraş-Severin County, of which the Mountainous Banat is a part. As a result, several projects that have a particularly beneficial effect on the future development of this field were initiated within the regional development strategy and the Integrated Development Strategy for Tourism in Mountainous Banat – Romania and South Banat – Serbia, within the Vicinity Program Romania – Serbia.

The projects aim at:

- adopting common strategies for the development of tourism and the „hospitality industry”, based on the eurocean vision which emphasizes that quality is based both on good turistic services and associated services;
- the development of a network of agro-touristic units;
- common collaboration protocol, common touristic packages, common promotion and collaboration materials, common touristic guides;
- information campaigns about the possibilities of practicing rural tourism and the advantages that it presents;
- information campaigns about the possibility of accessing european funds for investments in rural and agro-tourism;
- giving facilities for encouraging the practice of rural and agro-tourism;
- the creation of a cross-border brand for the Mountainous Banat – a European destination of excellence [11], based on the uniqueness of the Banat touristic village is a result of the cultural and multi-ethnic mix. Se promovează produse turistice Nature – Culture – Spirituality, which proposes two themes: „Traditional culture, art of craftsmanship and gastronomy” (Slogan: Through the empire’s kitchen Golden Mountain) and „Life at the countryside”(Slogans: Holiday in the house of the „Banatean”, Treasures of identity, Sleep in the hay shed, Guests in the road room); theme routes: Wine

Road, “Tuica” Road, Potters’ Road, Spiritual routes, The Road of Emperors and Kings, Iron Route, Banat Christmas, “House with keys”, “The room at the Road” etc through which are visited households that still produce such traditional products.

4 Conclusions

We can estimate that rural tourism in the alpine Banat is present at a modest level, as compared to the complexity, value and spatial distribution of the regional potential, as well as compared to other regions of the country.

The importance of rural tourism for the local and regional development is a modest one. Explanatory factors include:

- the spatial concentration of pensions in several areas;
- the limitation of services supplied to accommodation services, and - sometimes –food;
- the quasi complete lack of complementary services and facilities;
- the large gap (of about 10 years) between the time when rural tourism entrepreneurs launched their business through self-effort, and the intervention of the authorities - in words only, for the time being, that is in documents concerning the local development;
- the lack of financial support mechanisms that allow investors to access European funding;
- the weaknesses of human capital: the village populations is generally old, lacks education, information and availability necessary for attracting capital and modern management [9].

In this context, rural tourism has not been able and is still unable to initiate significant territorial dynamics.

The study has revealed the fact that rural tourism in the alpine Banat addresses mostly a regional clientele, namely the population of Timisoara, the regional pole. Its best features are proximity and the high quality of the environment.

The future development of the rural tourism in the alpine Banat is to be accomplished from a perspective of durability, by focusing on quality and competitiveness [7].

Ritchie and Chrouch (2000) have highlighted a pyramid of the elements involved in the competitiveness of a touristic destination, which consists of the following categories, in a bottom to top order:

- area’s DNA: human resources, physical resources, knowledge resources, capital resources, infrastructure, tourism superstructure, historical and cultural resources, size of the economy;

- supporting factors and resources: infrastructure, accessibility, facilitating resources, hospitality, enterprise;
- destination management: resource stewardship, marketing, finance and venture capital, organization, human resource development, information, quality of service, visitor management;
- destination policy, planning and development [5].

The prospective analysis of rural tourism carried out by employing the model for the competitiveness of a touristic destination detailed above, has underlined the dissatisfactory character of a large number of elements from the lower levels of the pyramid: human resources, knowledge resources, capital resources, infrastructure, tourism superstructure, size of the economy – from the first category; facilitating resources and infrastructure- from the second one; and almost all from the third category presented above.

The success of the formulated strategies points out the necessity of a prospective analysis of this system of factors which occur in rural tourism development, for the definition of the most efficient measures in terms of the quality/ price relation and, most of all, in a supralocal concurrent context.

Acknowledgement

This contribution is based on the research conducted in the PN II Idei project CODE 1074 VESTPROSPECT contr. no. 971/2009, financed by the National Council of Scientific Research in Higher Education from Romania.

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