

PERCEPTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURISM IN VÂLCEA COUNTY

PERCEPȚIA ȘI DEZVOLTAREA TURISMULUI RURAL ÎN JUDEȚUL VÂLCEA

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Abstract: The research provides an overview of rural tourism current situation in Vâlcea county, focusing on the existing natural and man-made tourism resources and also on the perception of travellers on this type of tourism, as well as a quantitative analysis of tourism in the area. An online survey underlined the benefits of this type of tourism on rural communities and development, such as employment and income growth, social and economic improvement and revitalization of crafts and traditions. Moreover, rural tourism can be an experience in the countryside, encompassing a wide range of attractions and activities that take place in the northern non-urban areas of the county. The rural tourist activities can be very well associated with ecotourism, cultural and heritage tourism and adventure and sport tourism. Thus, rural tourism can have major implications for the economic, social and cultural development of the traditional villages in the studied county.

Keywords: *rural tourism, tourism development, rural space, Vâlcea county, perceptions*

Cuvinte cheie: *turism rural, dezvoltare turistică, spațiu rural, județul Vâlcea, percepții*

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is not a clearly homogenous industry because of the fragmentation of the tourism services offered or sold to tourists; tourism requires accommodation, transport, food services, tourism attractions, etc. This diversification of the tourism supply makes it difficult to define the term `tourism`.

Tourism creates substantial economic benefits as one of the most dynamic industries globally, as well as an important generator of change and creator of new jobs (Drucker, 1985). It is one of the economic sectors in which entrepreneurship is encouraged (Ball, 2005) and oriented towards environmental protection in the sense of stopping the pressure on natural resources `the consumption of natural resources knowing that they are limited` (Ionciă et al., 2016).

Rural tourism (RT) suits perfectly the travellers who seek authentic and unique visits and who enjoy experiencing local lifestyles. The rural tourism implies

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exploring natural, unspoiled landscapes and staying in authentic accommodation. Rural communities have most of the times great resources to offer experiences, such as cultural experiences, interaction with locals, as well as agrotourism.

Rural tourism has many definitions, but it relates mainly to the rural areas, communities and experiences, bringing real economic benefits to the rural communities by creating income and employment, while preserving their environmental and cultural assets. Other benefits target the improvement of infrastructure, sanitation and electricity networks. This type of tourism interrelates very well with ecotourism, cultural and heritage tourism and adventure tourism.

The personalised experience of the countryside implies participation in activities where travellers can observe the lifestyle and traditions of rural communities. Normally, a rural traveller rents rural accommodation and uses local natural and socio-cultural resources, combining with visits to rural attractions. The rural tourist product should reflect the unique character of the area and its heritage.

The literature review shows that rural tourism refers to multidimensional activities through a combination of natural tourism, adventure and sports, food tourism, wine tourism, ecotourism, and cultural tourism. Various rural tourism-related studies have shown that landscape is one of the essential factors influencing customer experiences (Figueiredo & Raschi, 2012). The various natural landscapes allow tourists to have rich visual experiences (Frochot, 2005). Tourists want their experiences to be in opposition with the negative emotions generated by urban life (Figueiredo & Raschi, 2012). In other words, the main reason for urban people to choose rural tourism is to relieve themselves from the civic life stress (Kastenholz et al., 2018).

The concept of rural tourism has a wider scope than agrotourism; it is an alternative to traditional, classic tourism, carried out in resorts and tourist centres, as well as to the 'standard' industrial tourism supply (Rusu & Isac, 2008).

In accordance with Kelliher et al. 2018, a rural destination is a sparsely populated geographic area below 1000 inhabitants located outside cities and towns, interspersed by small settlements and mainly relying on specialized economic activities. The definition of rural tourism remains unclear and only a few studies have mapped the current state of knowledge in this field. The analysis of definitions reveals four key aspects of rural tourism that include location, sustainable development, community-based features, and experiences (Rosalina et al., 2021). Among other activities, rural tourism is increasingly viewed as a mean to enhance the attractiveness and vitality of rural areas, to mitigate demographic challenges, reduce migration, and promote a range of local resources and traditions while upholding the essence of rural life (UNWTO, 2020).

Rural tourism means the movement of a person to a non-polluting rural area, where one is accommodated for at least 24 hours in a tourist accommodation structure suitable for the rural environment, with the aim of spending leisure time in the most diversified way possible, in close harmony with nature, culture and local community art, provided that there is the possibility of eating fresh natural food (Bran et al., 1997).

In Recommendation 1296/1996 on the European Charter for Rural Areas, the Parliamentary Assembly of the European Commission considers that the meaning of 'rural area' refers to an inland or coastal area, including villages and small towns, where the majority of the land is used for agriculture, forestry, economic and cultural activities of the inhabitants of these areas (crafts, industry, services, etc.) and for developing recreational areas.

A comprehensive definition using these characteristics is given by Nagaraju & Chandrashekara (2014, p. 43) who state that rural tourism is 'any form of tourism that shows rural life, art, culture and heritage in rural areas, thereby the local community benefiting economically and socially as well as enabling interaction between tourists and locals for a richer tourism experience'.

Lane & Kastenholz (2015) stated that the rural tourism has existed since the late 19th century on the European and American continents, but the 1970s and 1980s saw "a new type of rural tourism that was driven by markets, rural people and communities, and governments, regardless of their status as scenic or protected areas". Thus, rural tourism brings economic income and jobs; governments and researchers credit it with slowing population loss in rural areas (Augustyn, 1998; Flisher & Felsenstein, 2000).

The rural tourism has two basic features: it engages rural residents and involves recycling and upgrading existing rural infrastructure and heritage resources as accommodation and tourist attractions (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015). Although Barbieri (2013) questions 'the link between rural tourism and a valued and sustainable traditional rural landscape', in general, the rural tourism is still a vigorous trend worldwide. It should be understood not only as a type of tourism, but also as a tool for the preservation and regeneration of the rural society and the rural culture. In practice, the key issues are how to balance the needs and perspectives of different stakeholders and manage them fairly and effectively.

'Rural tourism is a concept that covers the tourist activity carried out and run by the local population and based on local natural and man-made tourism potential'. This definition is one that could be accepted almost universally, distinguishing between rural tourism and the classical tourism activity carried out in resorts or cities, where the number of visitors and the nature of the activities eliminate the direct contact between the tourists and the local population (Cândeia et al., 2003). Neacșu et al. (2011) stated that 'the rural tourism is an alternative to the traditional, classic tourism, carried out in resorts and tourist centres as well as to the standard industrial tourism offer'.

For Polo (2010) the development of the rural tourist activity is very suitable for improving the development of the rural areas. Likewise, Marzo-Navarro (2017) stated that rural tourism promotes the development and economic growth of the destination areas, for which it is a priority to achieve the objectives of economic, socio-cultural, and environmental sustainability. Concluding, the main benefits of expanding and developing rural tourism in an area is closely related to the process of revitalization, creation of new jobs with higher incomes, diversification of tourism supply, preservation of identity and culture (traditions, customs, and crafts) and conducting rural activities that are interesting for the tourists.

Rural tourism positioning on the market is considered a tool to differentiate one destination from other destinations taking into account its own distinctiveness (Lopes, 2011). Thus, tourism development should take into consideration the opinions of visitors and local communities and should understand their perceptions, attitudes and values in order to avoid any negative social and cultural impact that tourism may cause.

The study is thus focused on finding the degree of rural tourism development and perception assessment of tourists that visited the county. The main objectives are to identify the important tourism resources of the area and the connection of rural tourism with other types of tourism (1), to analyse quantitatively the rural tourism elements, infrastructure and tourist arrivals in order to assess the current situation of tourism development (2) and to identify the perceptions of rural visitors of Vâlcea county in terms of preferences, degree of satisfaction concerning tourist services and landmarks, frequency of travels, all these in order to underline the strengths and weaknesses of rural tourism (3).

2. DATA AND METHODS

The methodology used for this research consisted of several stages. Different sources of information, starting from specialized materials regarding the notions of rural tourism and others describing geographically the county were used to perform a tourism analysis of Vâlcea county, identifying the attractions and types of tourism and their importance for the local communities. Then a quantitative analysis was conducted using statistical data collected from the National Institute of Statistics in Romania at county level, including accommodation capacity, the utilization rate of accommodation capacity in operation for the villages of Vâlcea (as the ratio between number of overnights stays and accommodation capacity in operation, as percentage) and visitors' arrivals. Several fieldtrips and observations of the county were conducted in 2021 and 2022 on the rural communities and their tourist attractions. With an aim to have a better overview of the rural tourism, an online survey was conducted in the summer of 2022 to underline the perceptions of visitors and to target the demographic market to which rural tourism can address. The obtained primary data was processed and analyzed.

Survey design and sample size

A representative sample (183 respondents, sampling error of $\pm 2.45\%$ and a confidence interval of 95.5%) was formed of tourists over 19 years old who visited the rural areas of Vâlcea county and stayed in a rural tourism establishment (Table 1). The questionnaire consisted of three constructs with a total of 17 items, six for the socio-demographic profile of the visitors, three items for the 5-point qualitative Likert scale and eight items for tourist motivation and satisfaction.

Study area

Vâlcea county is located in the central-southern part of Romania, more precisely in the South-West Oltenia Development Region (Fig. 1); the northern boundary is the spring of the Scara stream (a tributary of the Topolog river), located below the ridge of Scara peak (2285 m), situated in western end of the northern ridge

of the Făgăraș Mountains, continuing through the peaks of Suru (2285 m), Tătaru (1890 m), and Chica Fedeleșului (1819 m) and descending in a south-westerly direction into the Olt gorge, in the north of Râu Vadului village.

Table 1 The socio-demographic traveler profile of the rural tourists

Gender	Frequency (%)	Age (years)	Frequency (%)	Education level	Frequency (%)
Male	45.6	19-35	51.7	Highschool	9.4
Female	54.4	36-45	27.2	Bachelor Degree	87.3
		46-65	17.2	Master Degree	3.3
		Over 65	3.9		
Residence	Frequency (%)	Income (lei)	Frequency (%)	Occupation	Frequency (%)
Urban	56.1	Under 1499	46.7	Student	46.1
Rural	43.9	1500-2999	22.8	Employee	49.4
		3000-3999	22.8	Unemployed	0.6
		4000-5000	6.7	Retired	3.9
		Over 5000	1		

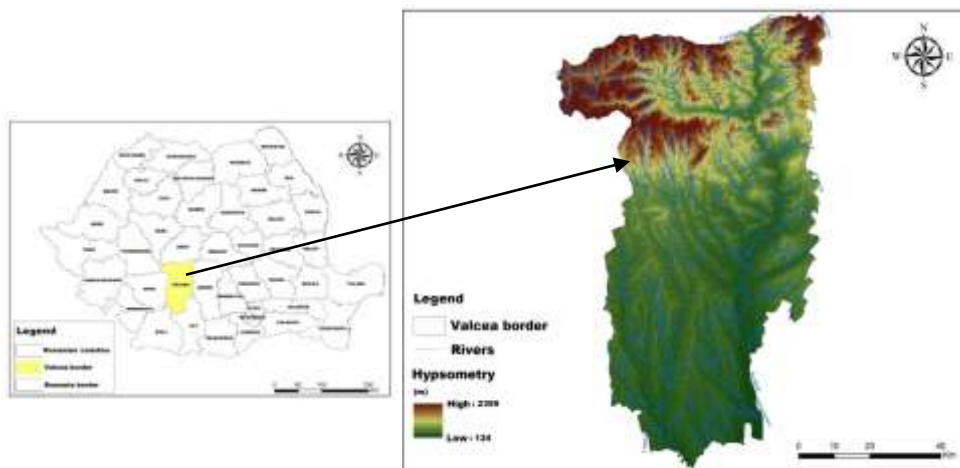


Fig. 1 The geographical location of Vâlcea County at national level and the hypsometry of the county

(Source: ArcGIS 10.1 data processing <http://www.geo-spatial.org/>)

Most of Vâlcea territory, about $\frac{2}{3}$, is located between 400 m and 800 m altitude and includes the piedmont and the Subcarpathians. Approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ of the same area is represented by mountains, with altitudes ranging between 800 and over 2000 m. The relief is laid out from north to south from the highest peak, Ciortea 2422 m, in the Făgăraș Mountains to the lowest point, 130 m, in the Olt valley, south of Drăgășani). The highest mountains, as well as the Subcarpathians, are arranged in ridges and massifs from east

to west, and between them there are depressions that look as true corridors. The climate is temperate continental with average temperatures ranging from 11°C in the south to -2°C in Făgăraș Mountain in the north. The entire river network of Vâlcea County belongs to the Olt River catchment area.

The villages of the county are settlements with poor technical and sanitary facilities, low number of population and density and low number of buildings. The main economic activities are agricultural ones, with extended areas of arable land and pastures.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 Tourism resources

Rural tourism is reflected in the equipment level of accommodation, food and transport in the non-urban places. In the case of rural tourism, this range of offered services can be extended at the request of the tourist who wishes to carry out certain activities in or near the household of the locals (horse-drawn carriage rides, bicycle rides, fishing, hunting, horse-riding, herb picking, etc.).

This type of tourism must be formed of optimal quality-price ratio, uniqueness on the market, providing a wide range of tourism elements and last but not least an image (perceptions of visitors). If the infrastructure and quality of tourist resources are correlated, various areas suitable for tourism can be observed in Vâlcea county, focusing on one type of products or on a mix of tourism types and products (Fig. 2).

Agrotourism focuses on the experience offered to tourists in the households/farms and sometimes with direct involvement of the tourist in agricultural activities. This tourism is especially observed in the northern villages of the county.

Some activities can take place in nature, specifically in protected areas/nature reserves, ecotourism with its cultural and educational (nature conservation) activities can be practiced in Cozia National Park and Buila-Vânturarița National Park. Adventure and leisure tourism, types of tourism practised individually or in groups (with family, friends) may involve activities such as collecting medicinal herbs, berries and mushrooms, bird watching or animal watching, riding ATVs, motorbikes.

The cultural and heritage tourism implies cultural aspects offered by the villages of Vâlcea county, mainly ethnographic and folklore festivals, annual fairs, traditional customs, and visits to landmarks such as Anton Pann Memorial House, Vâlcea Village Museum, Nicolae Bălcescu Memorial Museum, Arutela Roman Camp and traditional pottery and textile processing centres; natural tourism attractions: Earth Pyramids from the Stâncioiului Valley, the Olt Valley, Trovants Museum Natural Reserve. This type of tourism can be very well correlated with rural tourism and religious tourism. Across Vâlcea county, many monasteries are located in villages (Cozia Monastery, Govora Monastery, Frăsinei Monastery, Hurezi Monastery, Stânișoara Monastery, Bistrița Monastery, Arnota Monastery) and offer a true historical approach of the area (Fig. 3).

Other types of tourism focus on the sport and mountain areas, especially the speleological one (Bats Cave, Pagodas Cave, Lake Cave) and white tourism - winter sports (Transalpina Ski Resort, Perișani ski slope).

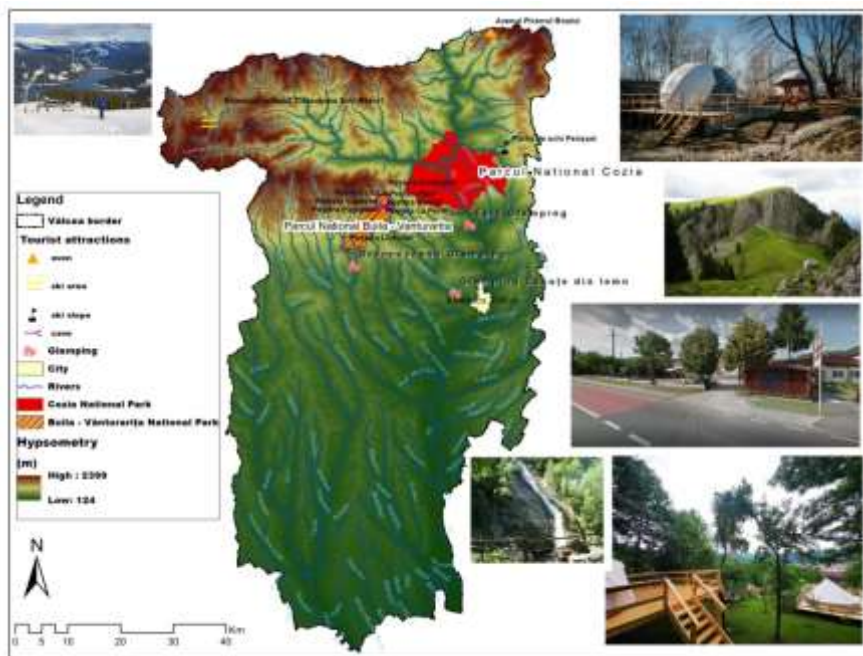


Fig. 2 The mix of tourist types and their location in Vâlcea county
 (Source: ArGIS 10.1 data processing by authors <http://www.geo-spatial.org/>)

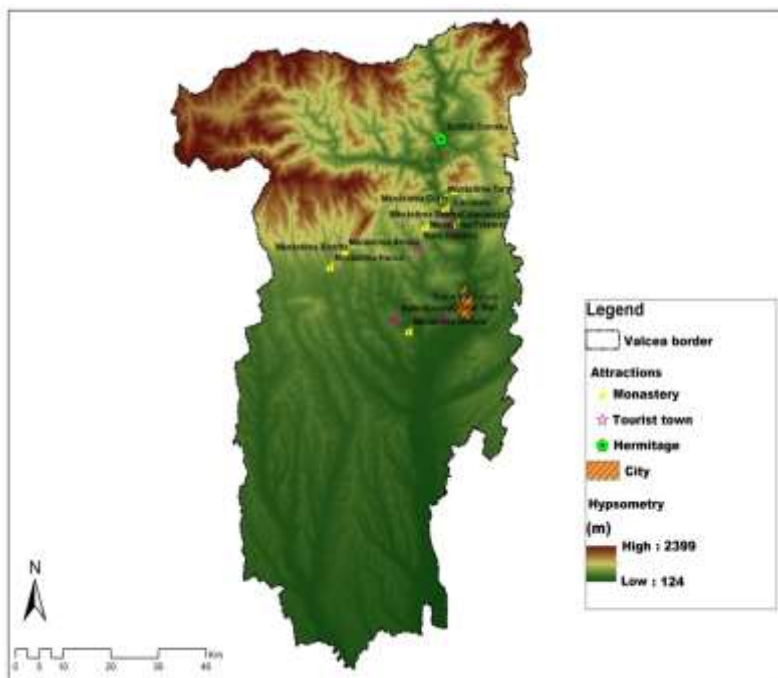


Fig. 3 The cultural and religious tourism types located in Vâlcea county
 (Source: ArGIS 10.1 data processing by authors <http://www.geo-spatial.org/>)

Rural tourism develops activities that produce alternative income, creating new possibilities for the development of the rural areas. In other words, more interest should be given to the promotion of the rural tourism in Vâlcea county, which, through relevant marketing together with numerous forms of support, should contribute to a better development and exploitation of the existing tourism potential.

3.2 Quantitative analysis of rural tourism

The analysis of the accommodation capacity in the villages of Vâlcea county shows an average number concentrated only in some rural areas of the county due to the demand for the landscapes, spa services and lastly for customs and traditions. So, over time, rural tourism has expanded mainly in some villages where the locals tried to adapt and offer tourists a countryside lifestyle. In the majority of the villages, the tourist activity and accommodation recorded low levels.

According to the statistical data from NIS, 2022, in 2021 the highest number of beds, i.e. existing accommodation capacity, whether they are in hotels, motels, rural boarding houses was recorded in Voineasa and Malaia (Fig. 4). Being given the mountain area with a leisure role, Voineasa resort attracted tourists of all ages. A constant number of accommodation units and number of beds is recorded in villages such as Măciuca, Costești, and Sălătrucel. The number of beds-days (accommodation capacity in operations) shows the same trend, with high values in Măciuca (140,000) and Voineasa (200,000). These are places where tourists come to relax and get in touch with nature, to experiment the traditions, customs and handicraft products, in other words, to experiment actually the life "in the countryside".

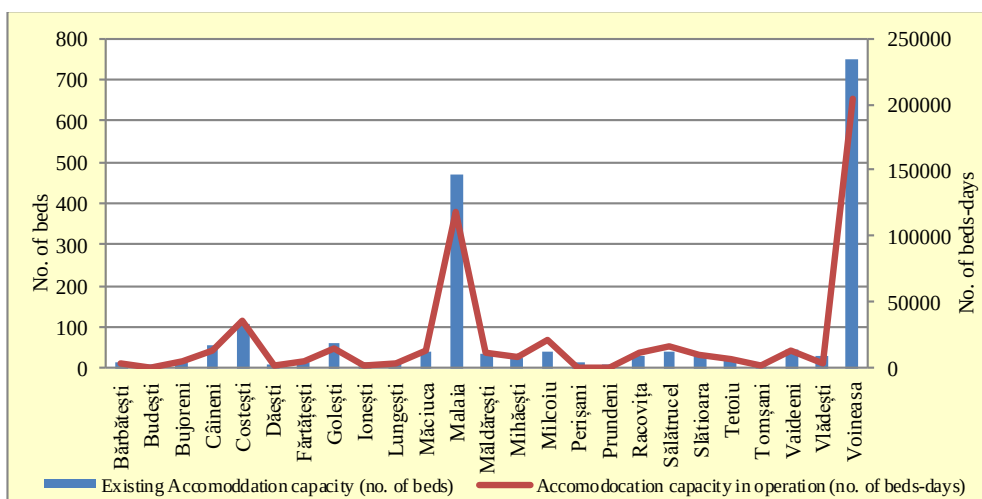


Fig. 4 The accommodation capacity existing and in operation in the villages of Vâlcea county, 2021

(Source: processed data from NIS, 2022)

The analysis of the dynamics of agrotourism boarding houses shows for the 2012 - 2021 period (Fig. 5) a continuous development, from 12 agrotourism guesthouses in 2012 to 19 in 2020 in Malaia, respectively from 17 agrotourism

guesthouses in 2015 to 23 in 2019 in Voineasa. The existing tourist accommodation capacity (no. of beds) in agrotourism guesthouses shows an increasing trend for the 2016-2020 period from 157 beds in Malaia in 2016 to 295 in 2021, respectively from 260 beds in 2015 reaching 380 beds in Voineasa in 2021 (Fig. 6).

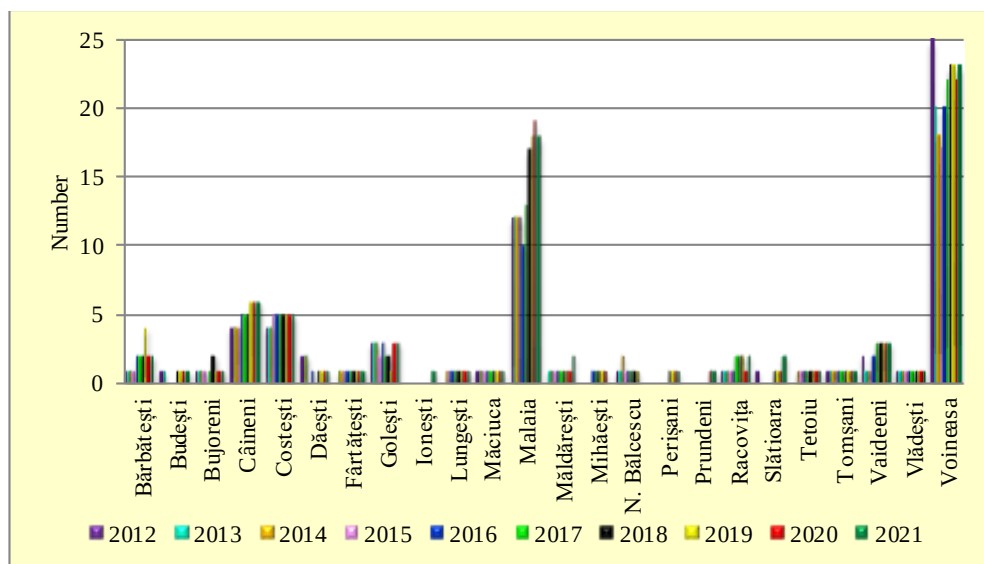


Fig. 5 The number of agrotourism boarding houses in the rural area of Vâlcea between 2012 and 2021

(Source: processed data from NIS, 2022)

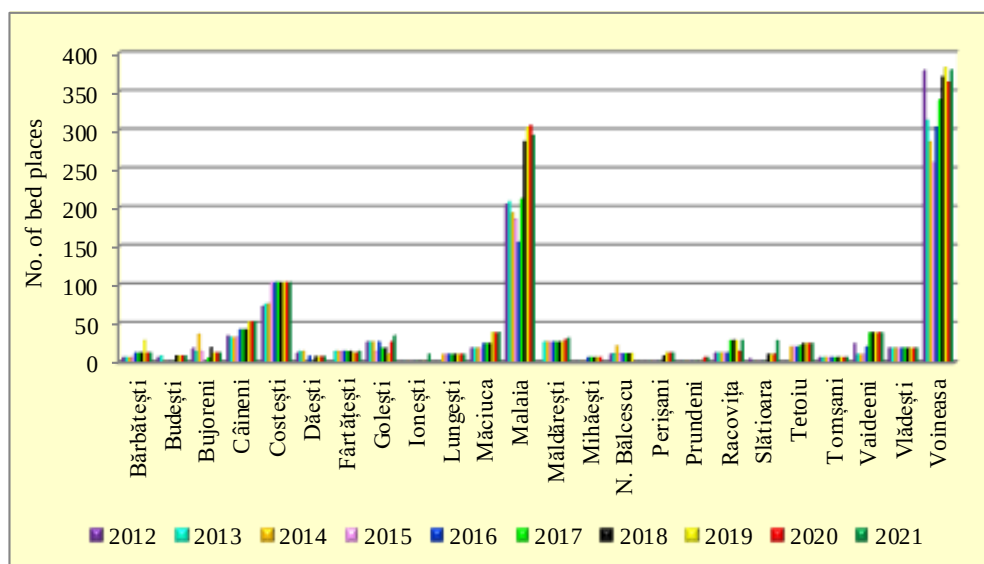


Fig. 6 The evolution of the existing accommodation capacity in agrotourism guesthouses, in Vâlcea rural area (2012-2021)

(Source: processed data from NIS, 2022)

In terms of tourist accommodation capacity in operation (in agrotourism and tourist guesthouses) (Fig. 7), during 2012-2020 period, Voineasa recorded the highest increase in 2019 - 122,616 number of bed places-days; in opposition, only 240 occupied beds were recorded in Tomșani in 2020. The analysis reveals that few villages from Vâlcea recorded high values for the accommodation capacity that was found mainly in the most touristic ones: Voineasa, Malaia and Măciuca.

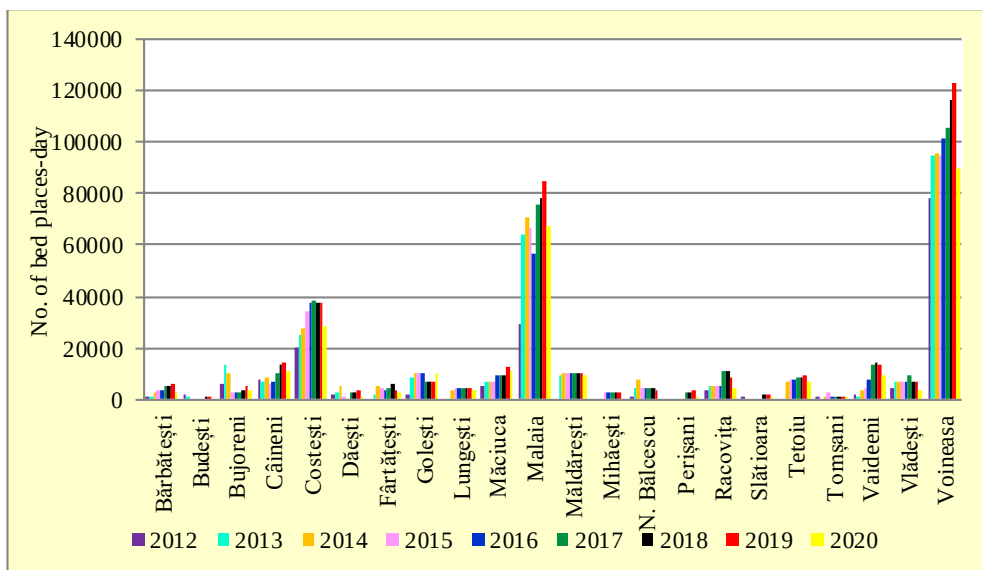


Fig. 7 The evolution of tourist accommodation capacity in operation (agrotourism and tourist guesthouses) in Vâlcea county in the 2012-2020 period
(Source: processed data from NIS, 2022)

According to the National Institute of Statistics in Romania, the utilization rate of the tourist accommodation capacity in operation is calculated by relating the number of overnight stays to the tourist accommodation capacity in operation during the period in question and is expressed as a percentage (%).

Analyzing the statistical data regarding the utilization index of the tourist accommodation capacity in operation (Table 2), for the rural area of Vâlcea county, Măciuca commune recorded the highest index of utilisation in 2020 of 74.24%, followed by Voineasa with values ranging between 14.12% and 16.89%. The rest of the villages registered the values were below 10-13%.

One of the reasons for these low values is the reduction of the trip length especially starting with 2020, when the Covid pandemic affected negatively this sector, the index recording an obvious decline. During 2001-2021, the number of tourists arriving in the area doubled. The localities that recorded the highest number of arrivals in 2021 are: Voineasa, Malaia, Măciuca and Măldărești. The lowest number of arrivals is observed in Bărbătești, Mateești, Tetoiu, below 200 arrivals (Fig. 8).

Out of all the arrivals and overnight stays recorded at the county level, the majority of tourists are Romanians (over 85%) and the rest are foreigners. One of the

reasons could be the low promotion of Vâlcea county on international markets. The quantitative analysis of tourism data shows that the accommodation capacity in the rural areas of the county is well represented only in few villages as well as the number of arrivals, being on an upward trend in the analysed period.

Table 2 The utilisation index of tourist accommodation capacity in operation (%) in Vâlcea rural areas (2010-2020)

Villages	Index 2010 (%)	Index 2015 (%)	Index 2020 (%)
Bărbătești	9.27	2.10	4.20
Bujoreni	5.17	0.50	2.08
Câineni	16.42	6.79	4,40
Costești	3.72	6.06	11.32
Golești	12.58	10.48	5.97
Măciuca	4.19	15.32	74.74
Malaia	10.93	4.66	12.74
Mihăești	8.88	2.05	3.14
Milcoiu	16.71	17.88	12.34
Racovița	7.49	6.49	4.54
Sălătrucel	1.70	7.51	8.04
Voineasa	16.89	15.07	14.12

(Source: processed data from NIS, 2022)

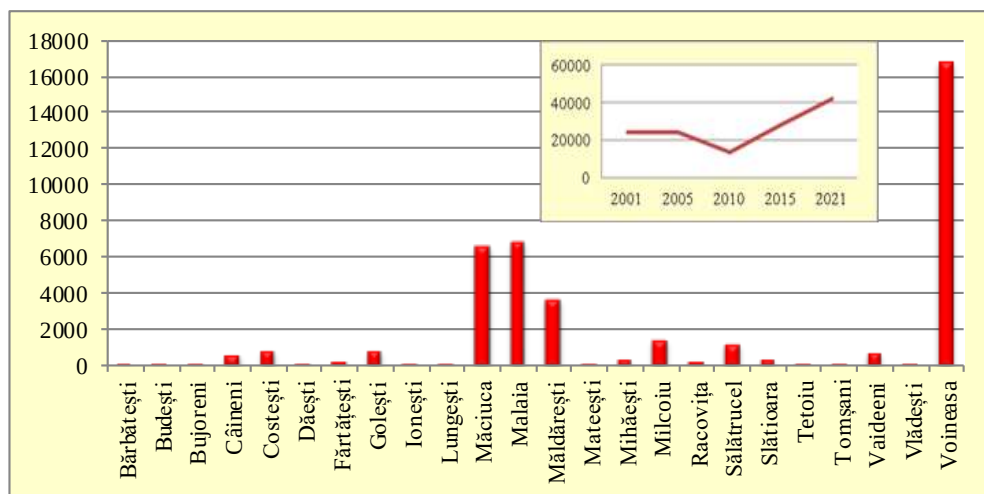


Fig. 8 The tourists' arrivals in the villages of Vâlcea county, 2021 and the evolution of arrivals from 2001 to 2021 arrivals

(Source: processed data from NIS, 2022)

3.3 Perception of rural tourism – survey results

The online survey was carried out in the summer of 2022 and aimed to evaluate the perception of tourists regarding the development and tourism

capitalization of the rural space in Vâlcea county, revealing tourist motivation, satisfaction and identifying the main areas of interest.

Initially, a sample of 283 responses were obtained but there were selected only 183, because the study focused only on the respondents who visited the rural area of Vâlcea county and were accommodated in the area.

Among those interviewed, the female population predominates - 54.4%, and the male population was of 45.6%. They come from urban areas – 56.1% and from rural areas – 43.9%. The predominant age group of respondents is 19-35 years old (51.7%), from which 46.1% have higher education. 87.3% of the total respondents have higher education and 9.4% have high school education. 46.7% of the respondents declared a monthly income below 1499 lei, while the next categories 1500-2999, respectively 3000-3999, registered equal shares, 22.8%.

It was found that approximately 90% of those surveyed who visited the rural area of Vâlcea county stated that they are familiar with the concept of rural space and also that it is very important for them to practice and develop rural tourism in Vâlcea county.

Despite all the restrictions imposed by the authorities, due to the SARS-CoV-2 virus, tourists visited the rural area of Vâlcea county. Responding to the question "How often do you travel to rural areas, in Vâlcea county?", 37% visited the rural area two to three times a year. At the same time, the main motivations for travelling to the study area are the visits to cultural, religious and historical sites (74.4%), hiking activities (56.1%) and to practice various winter sports (52.8%).

Those who choose to stay in the rural area of Vâlcea (more than 70%) scored 5 on the Likert-Scale the following activities and services that are correlated with their accommodation and visits: various leisure and entertainment tourist activities, a better knowledge of the cultural and heritage parts of the area through interactive activities and games; lower scores were attributed to the boarding houses and public catering.

To the question "Does the tourist potential represent a strong point for the rural area of Vâlcea?" over 90% answered affirmatively. They also gave examples of these strong points of the area such as significant mineral water resources (Călimănești-Căciulata, Băile Olănești, Băile Govora, Ocnele Mari), a good skiing area in Transalpina and heritage elements represented by the center of traditional Romanian pottery and crafts – Horezu pottery and numerous monasteries of the area.

In terms of costs, compared to other types of tourism, 88.3% answered that rural tourism is cheaper, and 11.7% said it is as expensive as other types of tourism. Regarding the accommodation of tourists in Vâlcea, many of them choose to spend the night in agrotourism guesthouses - 51.1%, and only 20.6% in hotels. The quality of accommodation and public food services in the rural area of Vâlcea county was ranked as very good - 50% or excellent - 31.7%. As a conclusion of the survey, approximately 89% said that rural tourism represents an alternative for capitalizing the tourism potential of Vâlcea county. Thus, rural tourism can represent an alternative in the rural areas that are less known by tourists. It can capitalize the natural and man-made tourism potential, because it also offers multiple activities that can be practiced in different landscapes and areas, i.e. popularization of old traditions and customs, spending time in nature, conservation of tourist heritage, etc.

4. CONCLUSIONS

There is evidence that tourism can make an important contribution to rural communities and incomes, being a vehicle of economic growth and activities diversification. Rural communities have to take full advantage of tourism as a challenge to develop infrastructure and activities in order to support all year-round visitors.

This paper examined through exploration of rural areas, the development of tourism in the villages of Vâlcea county, Romania. In this research, the theoretical characteristics of rural tourism have been investigated in the context of rural communities and tourism development, providing an insight on the possibility to develop proper tourism that can bring benefits to the local economy and communities located in a county with tradition in tourism, especially in the spa and wellness sector. Rural tourism may represent an alternative for development in the studied area.

Through secondary data processing, generation of maps and field observations, characteristics of rural tourism in Vâlcea were assessed. Although there are many researches on the types of tourism, and specifically on rural tourism, the relationship between rural landmarks, tourism infrastructure, local communities and their rural population need further exploration, particularly in terms of mixed economic, environmental and social approaches.

The study also presented an analysis of statistical data in order to prove the practical implications that rural tourism can have for the development, future planning and implementation of tourism projects in the rural area under study, i.e. the villages of Vâlcea that are striving to create development possibilities.

The applied online survey revealed that the respondents were interested in the area and visited the rural spaces of Vâlcea county, focusing mainly on cultural, religious and historical landmarks, on hiking and winter sports. Rural tourism can be very well associated with agrotourism, ecotourism, mountain tourism, religious tourism, winter sports, etc. Also, the economic activities have a decisive role in the development of the tourism sector and they are always associated with the infrastructure, natural and man-made attractions capitalization.

Although the development of the valuable tourism potential, both natural and man-made, of the Vâlcea rural area is currently exploited to a lesser extent from an economic point of view, however, the future period will require a more intense exploitation of the tourism potential and of the rural area in particular. Tourism is not the solution for all rural problems, but it has a number of positive elements, representing one of the many opportunities that rural communities might consider to improve productivity and incomes. Future studies could focus on the measuring and monitoring of rural tourism development with more case studies on larger communities and with long-term observations to evaluate the impact of rural tourism development on local communities.

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