

COULD THE ALL-INCLUSIVE SYSTEM INCREASE THE APPEAL OF THE ROMANIAN SEASIDE?

ESTE DE AJUTOR SISTEMUL ALL-INCLUSIVE ÎN CREȘTEREA ATRACTIVITĂȚII LITORALULUI ROMÂNESC?

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Abstract: The tourist infrastructure built during the Communist period on the Romanian seaside had a toilsome opening towards all-inclusive services, in 2023 less than 15% of the total number of hotels offering AI or AIL services. For the last 20 years, many Romanian tourists have become loyal to destinations abroad, easily accessible, some of them known to offer predominantly all-inclusive services. Using semi-structured interviews, the study analyzes the perception of a sample of Romanian tourists related to the development of the all-inclusive system on the Romanian seaside. Applying the thematic analysis procedure, 3 main themes emerged regarding the AI system: diversity, benefits for families and quality issues. Based on them, implications for managers and other stakeholders are discussed.

Key-words: *all-inclusive resorts, Romanian seaside, destination competitiveness, semi-structured interview.*

Cuvinte cheie: *resorturi all-inclusive, litoralul romanesc, competitivitatea destinatiei, interviu semi-structured.*

1. INTRODUCTION

While a type of an all-inclusive system was introduced for the first time in holiday camps from Britain in the 1930s, Club Med is considered to have developed and popularized the concept globally in the 1950s (Issa & Jayawardena, 2003). The concept was aimed especially at families with children, including a wide range of activities and entertainment (Rayna & Striukova, 2009), and having an adaptable budget (Bayrakci et al., 2021), but in the 1990s the "adults only" resorts also started to appear (Rayna & Striukova, 2009). Currently the all-inclusive concept is very popular in the "Sea, Sun and Sand" ("3S") destinations all over the world (Wong & Kwong, 2004; Alegre & Pou, 2008; Ozdemir et al., 2012; Farmaki et al., 2017; Arbelo-Pérez et al., 2019; Wall-Reinius et al., 2021),

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especially in developing countries where the quality of complementary services (restaurants, entertainment) may not provide enough confidence (Calveras, 2019).

The all-inclusive (AI) concept came up as a marketing and pricing system in which all services, including breakfast, lunch, dinner, entertainment and even transportation, are offered in one package at a fixed price (Keskin et al., 2021). The all-inclusive services in a resort include accommodation and meals at one or more restaurants, alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks during and between the main meals, snacks between the main meals, free use of sunbeds at the pool area and often on the private beach or free services at the beach sector arranged for the hotel if the beach is a public one, entertainment and activities during the days and evenings.

With air, land transfers, lodging, meals, activities, taxes and tips included in the rate, many travelers deposit their wallets in the room safe and never take it out until it's time to depart (Club Med + Skif, 2015). Part of the AI package is provided by the resort, accommodation, meals, beverages, and activities during the stay being included, and the rest of the services in the case of packages that include transport (flight, land transfers, tourist assistance, trips to attractions) are provided by the tour operators. In our study, we will analyze in particular the all-inclusive part offered by the resorts for which we use the name AI system / concept and less the packages that also include transport to the destination, that will be named "package(s)".

The tourists who prefer the all-inclusive system are generally considered having a low level of income (Bilgili et al., 2016), but the AI concept is also applied by the luxury resorts in "3S" destinations, for people with high incomes, who are very busy during the year and do not want to look for restaurants or activities outside the resort where they are staying. For these types of people, sometimes, the luxury resorts transformed the traditional all-inclusive system in which the meals are buffet, into a-la-carte all-inclusive and activities could also include golf courses, bowling, yoga lessons, burnout workout, functional training, cinema, or adventure parks.

In different countries, the AI system seems beneficial for tourists who want to know all the costs right from the moment of purchase of the holiday or for those who want to have everything at their disposal at a high-quality level, but how is the Romanian seaside influenced by the development of AI resorts? Could this type of services lead to an increase in demand or competitiveness on the Romanian seaside?

The present study aims at analyzing to what extent the development of AI system could influence Romanian tourists when they choose to spend their holiday in a "3S" destination from Romania or abroad.

The structure of this paper is as follows: Section 2 includes a brief review of the literature related to the all-inclusive system from abroad and its emergence in Romania as well as data regarding the number of AI hotels and aspects of public tourist areas on the Romanian seaside. Section 3 describes the research design, data collection and processing. Results are discussed in Section 4 and some implications

for resort managers and authorities are mentioned in Section 5, followed by Conclusions.

2. THE ALL-INCLUSIVE SYSTEM ON THE ROMANIAN SEASIDE AND IN “3S” DESTINATIONS FROM ABROAD

Club Med, the all-inclusive pioneer, has been welcoming guests since 1950 in locations from Europe, Africa, the Bahamas and the Caribbean, the United States, Mexico, Asia, the Indian Ocean and the Middle East (Club Med + Skif, 2015). Also, the business of tour operators, customers suppliers for AI resorts, was created and has developed mostly in Europe (Čavlek, 2000), German, British, and Italian operators playing key roles in spreading the club holiday through Europe, Asia, and Africa (Poon, 1998). Main German tour operators, such as TUI, Neckermann Reisen, REWE Group – ITS Reisen, have implemented AI system in tourist destinations from Spain, Turkey, Greece, Italy, Austria, Switzerland, Kenya, Sri Lanka, Tunisia, Senegal or Thailand with resorts operated by themselves like Robinson Club, Club Calimera or Club Aldiana (Voss, 2003; Ayik et al., 2013).

Specialists' opinions regarding the development of all-inclusive resorts are both pros, because they lead to an increase in the number of tourists (Duman & Tosun, 2010), but also cons, the system being considered as leading to a decrease in tourism income for locals (Kondo, 2008) or as limiting the interaction of tourists with the local community (Freitag, 1994).

The competitiveness of a destination is the ability to “attract and satisfy potential tourists” (Enright & Newton, 2004), the ability to sustain its market share and improve it through time (d’Hauteserre, 2000; Kozak et al., 2009) or the feature of the destination to have a: “superior productivity, either in terms of lower costs than rivals or the ability to offer products with superior values that justifies premium price” (Porter & Linde, 1995).

Numerous studies have confirmed that tourists' perception of the destination or hospitality and satisfaction levels may vary depending on the origin of the tourists and highlight the importance of market segment research for the development of tourism destination strategies (Kozak, 2002). Many factors can influence the choice of a holidays, such as age, personality, income, costs, distance, risks or motivation, and these factors have been grouped into “push factors”-related to the intrinsic desires of tourists and “pull factors” related to the attributes of the destination (Kozak, 2002). Pull factors show the attractiveness of a destination and help the tourists choosing a destination (Uysal et al., 2009).

Romanian tourism was strongly influenced by the ideology of its Communist leaders. During the '60s and '70s Romania made investments in tourism infrastructure, especially on the Black Sea coast, where tourists from Central / Eastern European states were attracted and a Ministry of Tourism and Sports was established in 1971 (Light & Dumbrăveanu, 1999). A network of hotels was developed, where access was facilitated for Romanian employees through the Trade Unions. The stays included accommodation and 3 meals per day with a fixed menu, the same for all tourists in the respective hotel. During the mid '70s the

political climate in Romania changed, having implications for foreign tourists who would have come to Romania and during the '80s tourism declined rapidly. As a consequence of the often low standards and suspicions related to foreign tourists in Romania, the hospitality industry was in decline by the late 80s, while tourism in neighboring states Bulgaria, Hungary, and Yugoslavia was booming (Light & Dumbrăveanu, 1999). After the fall of Communism, in the 1990s, the hotels on the Romanian seaside were not privatized, but "given in location management" either to the former managers of the hotel, or to other people, close to the government. This form of administration did not prove beneficial to tourism, the new administrators not having the financial strength to make investments in the hotels they took over (Moise, 2008). At the end of the '90s an unsuccessful privatization process of Romanian hotels was started. The accommodation structures were sold at low prices to businessmen close to the circles of power, people without previous experience in tourism, which did not bring any modernization to the acquired assets, consequently, the tourist sector was not at all encouraged (Tudor, 2011).

In 2003, the only all-inclusive hotel on the Romanian seaside was Club Tismana 3* from Jupiter, owned by a family of Romanian investors and contracted by the German tour operator ITS Reisen (Capital, 2003). Comparatively, in the 2000s, in the Dominican Republic it was considered that over 70% of hotels offer AI services (Tavares & Kozak, 2015); in Turkey the all-inclusive system was becoming very popular in the 2000s, more than 80% of international tourists visiting Antalya choosing AI resorts (Duman & Tosun, 2010). In 2009, on the Romanian seaside, there were 3 hotels affiliated to international chains (H. Ibis 3* Constanta – ACCOR chain, the former hotels Jupiter-Junona 4* Mamaia – RIU chain, H. Savoy 4* Mamaia - Best Western chain) the last two offering all-inclusive services (Brânză, 2009). Jupiter – Junona hotel from Mamaia had an interesting management trajectory: it was affiliated for a short time to the RIU chain, then to the Golden Tulip chain and since 2016 to the Top International Hotels chain.

In 2012, the number of accommodation structures on the Romanian seaside that offered all-inclusive services increased to 12, but it was considered that Romania did not have the necessary infrastructure to offer AI services, neither in terms of hotels (they did not have enough restaurants for example), nor from a legislative point of view (Ionescu, 2012).

A recent study focusing on the Romanian tourists' reasons for choosing their sea, sand, and sun destination shows that approximately 70% of them chose the Bulgarian seaside, which is known for the predominance of all-inclusive services and for the very low rates (Popescu et al., 2023).

During the 2023 summer season, the number of hotels from the Romanian seaside, operating in an all-inclusive regime has reached 53, one of them being a 2* hotel, 26 of them being ranked as 3*, 24 of them 4* and two 5* hotels. Among the 53 hotels, 7 of them offer an all-inclusive light regime, a new concept introduced on the Romanian seaside. The AI light implies a reduced diversity in terms of food and drinks, but also other services (e.g., some hotels do not have a swimming pool

yet available and this year they offered the AI light version, when all facilities are ready, they will switch to the AI system). The AI light regime in the 2023 season, on the Romanian seaside, meant the inclusion of alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks in the package only during the meals in the main restaurant, not between meals, the other bars in the hotel (pool bar or lobby bar) being a-la-carte bars and with additional payment.

The hotels that offered AI services in the 2023 summer represented approximately 15% of the total number of hotels distributed through tour operators and travel agencies. Apart from these hotels, there are other accommodation units such as villas, guesthouses, apartments, or small hotels that use other distribution channels, mainly web applications dedicated directly to tourists, but it is unlikely that these accommodation structures would offer AI services. Consequently, the share of accommodation units offering AI services is very low. The distribution of AI hotels on the Romanian seaside is represented in Table 1.

Table 1 The distribution of AI & AIL on Romanian seaside in 2023

Touristic area	AI / AIL hotels
Mamaia	11
Eforie Nord	5
Eforie Sud	2
Costinesti	1
Neptun - Olimp	9
Jupiter - Cap Aurora	9
Venus	10
Saturn	5
Mangalia	1
TOTAL	53

(Source: Authors' research)

The seaside tourist infrastructure differs from one country to another, being influenced by a number of factors such as specific architecture, length of the coast, landform, climate, economic development, etc. The touristic infrastructure of the Romanian seaside, mostly built in the communist period, generally does not allow accommodation units to offer many outdoor facilities for tourists (e.g., more swimming pools, private pools, amphitheatres, sport fields, a-la-carte restaurants, etc.), since land reserves are scarce, unlike the case of the resorts from Antalya – Turkey. Although in the neighboring state, Bulgaria, many accommodation units were built after 2000, not all of them have large surfaces, and yet the AI system proved to be very attractive for the Romanian tourists (Popescu et al., 2023).

However, despite the investments made by the private sector within the resorts/hotels, many of the public spaces managed by the authorities are in a rather poor condition. Pedestrian areas in the very center of destinations such as Venus or Costinesti are unkept, with numerous potholes and algae are found abundantly on the beaches in some areas.

3. DATA AND METHODS

3.1 Research Questions & Research Design

Starting from the results of a previous study (Popescu et. al., 2023), according to which approximately 70% of the Romanian tourists interviewed chose the Bulgarian seaside and not Romania as their summer destination, we set out to analyze to what extent tourists consider that the development of AI services on the Romanian seaside would make Romania more attractive and more competitive compared to other “3S” destinations.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, we formed no hypothesis a priori, but the questions which we aimed at gaining an answer to are the following:

Q1. Could increasing the number of AI resorts on the Romanian seaside lead the Romanian destination to regain at least part of the Romanian tourists that currently choose the Bulgarian seaside?

Q2. Would trust in the services offered on the Romanian seaside (lodging, food, drinks, entertainment, private beach) increase if they were offered by the same operator in the form of an AI system?

In order to determine the perception of tourists regarding the relationship between the AI system and the attractiveness level in the case of resorts from the Romanian seaside, we considered appropriate to apply the semi-structured interview (Fylan, 2005; Galletta, 2013), a qualitative interviewing techniques (Kelly, 2010), choosing a non-random sampling technique, purposive sampling (Campbell et al., 2020). The semi-structured interview permits interviews to be focused while still giving the investigator the autonomy to explore pertinent ideas that may come up in the course of the interview (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021).

3.2 Data Collection

We considered that tourists who have recently traveled to the Romanian seaside or to a “3S” destination from abroad, not too far, accessible by car and where they benefited from all-inclusive services would constitute the most appropriate sample to meet the purpose of our research. As one of the authors of the study works in a travel agency in Craiova city, Romania, we decided to create a representative sample of people for our study (38 persons), among the tourists who bought a holiday from that travel agency in 2022 and 2023. This is not a large sample by any means, but given the empirical character of the research and the fact that we were searching for a proof of principle, representativeness is not required (Dolnicar et al., 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2016). Face-to-face interviews took place at the travel agency during July-September 2023.

The sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 2.

Using the purposive sampling, with maximum variation sampling (Etikan et al., 2016) respondents were interviewed based on a semi-structured frame of topics, including their perception about the appearance and increase in number of the all

Inclusive resorts on the Romanian seaside, their intention to spend their vacation in these resorts, the quality-price ratio, but also their opinion about the management of the resorts and the public area on the Romanian seaside.

Table 2 Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample

Age (years)		Marital status		Income (Euro / month)	
	%		%		%
18-24	7.89	Single	13.16	<800 euro	34.21
25-34	7.89	Couple without children	10.53	801-900 euro (national average)	31.58
35-44	13.15	Family with children under 18 y.o.	39.47	>1000 euro	34.21
45-64	44.73				
65 and over	26.32	Family with children over 18 y.o.	36.84		

(Source: authors' own calculations, based on interviews)

3.3 Data Processing

Interviews were transcribed to provide verbatim quotes. The second step consisted in codification of the obtained information in order to identify similarities and differences in the interview data (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). In the next stage, coded data was categorized into themes following a thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis is a commonly used method of analysis in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2012; Vaismoradi et al., 2013; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018) and also the most often used for the interpretation of written documents such as interview transcripts being considered a rigorous and valid means of analyzing tourism texts (Walters, 2016).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

From the analysis of the results and the grouping of the obtained codes, 3 main themes emerged: diversity, family benefits and quality issues.

Theme 1. Diversity

The first theme was related to diversity, in terms of amenities, catering services and offering, beach facilities and entertainment options. Most of the interviewed tourists consider the development of AI resorts on the Romanian seaside to be opportune and auspicious. They argue this either through the benefits of diversity in general, tourists thus having more holiday options from which to choose the suitable type for them, or they consider it to be a fashionable trend abroad that is good to develop in Romania as well, or by emphasizing the intrinsic features of All-inclusive resorts: having everything conveniently in one place, the higher standard of services inside the resort or because the holiday budget is better known and each family can choose a vacation according to their income, also benefiting from all services.

When they were asked why they would choose a holiday in an all-inclusive resort on the Romanian seaside, many tourists answered: *“I don't want to run to the terraces for meals on holidays and I don't want to go to a beach if it's crowded”* or *“on the terraces outside the resorts, hours are wasted waiting for the order at the table and there is no hygiene standard as it happens inside the resorts”*. The

explanations received from the Romanian tourists interviewed fit into the motivations of international tourists who choose all-inclusive resorts: convenience and relaxation, economies of resources as well as safety and security in their vacationing processes (Anderson et al., 2009).

Among the tourists who have not yet been consumers of all inclusive services on the Romanian seaside, but would like to be, there are also tourists who think they could afford such a holiday if they purchased it long in advance, benefiting from “Early booking” reduced rates or if they went at the beginning or at end of the season, when the tariffs are lower.

However, 13% of the tourists interviewed consider it preferable for hotels and restaurants to be separated, resorts with all-inclusive services limiting the holiday experience. In their opinion: *“the hotels on the Romanian seaside would not have large enough areas to offer you diversity in spending your free time”, “the specificity of the Romanian seaside rather offers you opportunities to walk, to discover new restaurants, a club and in addition, not many people would afford to go to an all-inclusive resort; many Romanians go to the public beach with a towel and a beer from take away, and the costs are indisputably lower”, “not in resorts like Costinesti or Vama Veche, tourists going there for something else, like clubs, fun and interaction with other young people; maybe it will be suitable in other resorts, specifically for families with children”.*

Another aspect on which the interviewed tourists were asked for their opinion was the AI light regime, introduced this year on the Romanian seaside and which implies a lower diversity regarding choices for food and beverages, it does not offer drinks and snacks between main meals, but it covers the basic needs of a holiday, at lower rates. Only 5% of the respondents considered that AI light would not be satisfactory (*“if I choose a resort with AI, I will not want to look for ice cream or soft drinks on the terraces”*), the largest majority, 95%, consider it sufficient, the alcoholic drinks or overeating, not being a goal itself of the holiday.

Theme 2. Resorts are for families

Regarding the addressability of all-inclusive services, 58% of the interviewed tourists associate it with families with children, while the remaining 42% see it as suitable for everyone, with some sidenotes, however: *“all-inclusive services are equally suitable for families with children and for young people / couples without children, but it would be preferable that the hotel management find a solution to separate the types of customers, perhaps a wing of the hotel or at least certain floors to be adults only, so as not to be disturbed by the commotion of the children”, “it can be suitable for young people too, but only if they want a relaxing holiday, not an active one”.*

This is in line with the results of a previous study regarding the categories of tourists who prefer resorts with AI services, showing that those who choose all-inclusive on the Romanian seaside are often former clients of similar services from abroad and are generally represented by families with at least 1 child (Condratov, 2014). The all-inclusive system is generally bound to families with children, especially because it offers them various safe activities, e.g., playground, supervised

activities during the day (painting, dancing), children's pool section, entertainment (mini disco) in the evening. Furthermore, the perceived abundance of 'free of charge' food and beverage options, besides safety, security, and accessibility, make the AI system ideal for families with children (Zopiatīs et al., 2020).

The association of all-inclusive services with a certain market segment was not made by the interviewed tourists only related to the family status, but also to the income of the tourists: *"especially for families with children, but for those families with above-average incomes"*. Even if sometimes the all-inclusive system is perceived as suitable for tourists with a low or medium budget (Bilgili et al., 2016), the practice of holidays on the Romanian seaside has accustomed many tourists to only minimal accommodation services or accommodation and breakfast and for the rest of the meals self-service or take away options, with a lower total cost. Therefore, the resorts with all-inclusive services on the Romanian seaside are perceived as accessible only to the above-average income tourists.

Theme 3. Quality Issues

The study also aimed to assess the perception of tourists regarding the competitiveness of the Romanian seaside; consequently, part of the questions were about their perception of the rates and quality, the areas outside the resorts, the improvements they would consider necessary or if they anticipate that the number of tourists on the Romanian seaside will increase in the coming years.

Depending on the income of each person, the hotel and resort rates on the Romanian seaside are seen as: *"exaggerated"*, *"very high and unjustified"*, *"very high rates, however this not being the most important aspect, but the quality of services"*, *"rather high rates"*, *"acceptable"* and only a very small percentage considered that the tariffs are *"correct the for services provided"*. Discussions with the tourists indicate that the rates are not necessarily the main issue: if they were to suggest a change to make the Romanian seaside more attractive, it would be the increase the quality of hotels and public areas outside the resorts. Many of the tourists who spent their holiday abroad to AI resorts declared that they would choose the Romanian seaside, the advantage being familiarity, but only if the quality conditions were the same as those of the resorts abroad and the prices were similar. The improvements that they suggest are related to the kindness of the staff, a better maintenance of the buildings, a higher standard of hygiene in the rooms and at the restaurants, a cleaner beach, etc. But even if they choose a satisfactory resort in terms of quality, 58% of those interviewed said that this would not compensate for the unmaintained spaces outside it: *"the hotel was clean, ok, but there was a terrible smell coming from the lake next to it"*, *"walking on the sidewalk outside the hotel, there is always the risk of injuring yourself, especially in the evening, as there are so many potholes"*, *"the resort, if it is in good condition, can only compensate to some extent for the drawbacks outside of it"*.

When the tourists were asked if, in their opinion, the increase in the number of AI resorts will lead to an increase in the number of tourists on the Romanian seaside, a part of them answered that they do not see a direct proportionality

between the two; maybe in a few years, if the feedback of AI consumers will be indeed positive.

Another point on the discussion list was a comparison of the nationality of investors in AI resorts on the Romanian seaside. Among the respondents, 52% answered that there would be an increase in quality and therefore in competitiveness if the hotels were managed by international chains, which have the experience and financial strength needed to improve things. But the tourists' opinions are divided, almost half of those interviewed consider that Romanian investors can offer services to the standards of international resorts, if they had the financial resources and the initiative to invest in an all-inclusive resort.

Despite all the drawbacks and complaints about the Romanian seaside, many tourists also find positive things to some extent. Consequently, if the AI resorts on the Romanian seaside could provide offers similar to the ones in Bulgaria for approximately the same price, most of the Romanian tourists would not have any reason to choose a destination abroad, where they must speak a foreign language or have to pay extra taxes (ferry, bridge, road tax). However, the resorts on the Romanian seaside must optimize their costs, provide larger accommodation capacities so as to be able to negotiate prices for food, promote early booking sales. This could help them have a clear forecast of the occupancy rates and the advance money could be used for buying various supplies.

Regarding the second question of the study, the answer is also positive. The interviewed tourists agree that the quality of the food is better within the AI resorts compared to most of the restaurants and pubs outside the resorts, and there are also stricter hygiene rules that apply. If the resorts managed to offer high quality services and thus attract more tourists, the other restaurants in any particular destination would have to increase their quality in order to keep their clients. So, this could be a win-win situation. Moreover, better kept beaches, managed by the resorts would also satisfy the tourists looking for a clean, less crowded beach, without algae, which are the main strengths of the 3S destinations abroad.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGERS AND AUTHORITIES

The discussions with the consumers of tourist services should be the most relevant for both resort managers and the public authorities that are in charge of the tourist areas. The tourists' feedback would be necessary both, for resort managers upon departure from the resort, and for the authorities after the holiday spent there. All tourists agreed that improvements are needed on the Romanian seaside, either outside the hotel/resort or both inside and outside the resorts. The most important factors of competitiveness, identified in numerous international studies and which managers and authorities must take into account are: the quality of services, the variety of activities, events, shopping possibilities, security, general infrastructure, destination promotion, tourist information (Cronjé & du Plessis, 2020). Considering the fact that in many easily accessible countries for Romanians, the AI resorts are well developed (Bulgaria, Turkey, Tunisia, Egypt), the solution to keep /

attract tourists in Romania is to develop the resorts on the Romanian seaside as well. Nevertheless, tourists demand a comparable quality with those abroad.

An important market segment for the Romanian seaside is made up of young people who go to the seaside for clubs and entertainment possibilities. The managers of the resorts must prioritize the organization of shows and the authorities should facilitate the development of as many events and festivals as possible outside the resorts.

Romanian employees in the public sector are granted holiday vouchers that cover part of the cost of vacations (Albă & Popescu, 2023) and are often used for stays on the Romanian seaside. This is an opportunity for the new resorts with AI services to convince tourists of the quality of the services they offer and to make them loyal for possible future periods when holidays will no longer be subsidized with holiday vouchers.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The appearance of the all-inclusive system in Romania dates to the early 2000s, when the first hotel on the Romanian seaside was transformed into a resort - club with all-inclusive services. In 2023, the number of hotels with AI services reaches 53 on the Romanian seaside. But during this 20-year interval, many Romanian tourists have become loyal customers of other countries such as Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria, where many destinations are recognized as offering all-inclusive services and lower rates. Local authorities seem to ignore the competition represented by seaside areas from other countries, easily accessible for Romanian tourists (e.g., Golden Sands, Sunny Beach) and disregard the importance of the overall appearance of the Romanian destinations, parts of tourist areas on the Romanian seaside being rather shabby or unkept, which tourists definitely notice.

In the study we carried out, we tried to see to what extent private investments and the increase in the number of hotels with AI services on the Romanian seaside would compensate for the deficiencies of public tourist areas, often degraded, or what would convince Romanian tourists to choose the Romanian seaside and not a competing destination from abroad.

Using semi-structured interviews and narrative analysis, three main themes were identified, namely diversity, resorts for families, and quality issues. The majority of respondents consider the development of AI resorts to be beneficial: on one hand, at least there is this option in Romania; on the other hand, the services offered within the same hotel / resort will have a better quality. Moreover, many tourists consider AI resorts suitable especially for families with children, for whom AI services ensure diversity regarding meals, activities, swimming pool. Regarding the third theme, quality issues, most of the interviewed tourists had something to complain about and either in the distant or recent past had a bothersome event on the Romanian seaside related poor quality of hotel and meal services, or public spaces outside the hotels. These unpleasant experiences, some of which happened a long time ago, led Romanian tourists have a negative perception of the Romanian seaside and to choose destinations abroad. Nevertheless, the Romanian seaside

could attract again the Romanian tourists choosing to go to the neighbouring country if the emphasis was placed on quality and diversity and the results are properly promoted.

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