

Rural Tourism and Agro-tourism in Romania

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Abstract

Rural tourism is an important form of sustainable tourism, because it has a low negative impact on the natural environment, capitalizes and protects natural and cultural resources and contributes to the welfare of local communities.

By harnessing natural and cultural resources of rural space, rural tourism is an important form of tourism, which generates important tourist flows. Agro-tourism or agri-tourism is an important segment of rural tourism, which contributes to satisfying the needs of tourists with activities and products made in their own household.

In Romania, after 1990, the transition from the centralized economy to the market economy based on private property determined the development of rural areas and consequently of rural tourism, including the development of agro-tourism.

Key words: tourism, rural tourism, agro-tourism

J.E.L. classification: L80, L83

1. Introduction

The concept of sustainability has become a mediating term in bridging the ideological and political differences between the environmental and development lobbies, a bridge between the fundamentally opposed paradigms of eco and anthropocentrism (Wearing and Neil, 1999, p.15). Tourism has been both lauded and denounced for its ability to develop and therefore transform regions into completely different settings. (Fennell, 2003, p.4).

Sustainable tourism is a form of tourism that has a minimal impact on the natural environment, ensuring its preservation and protection and rational exploitation of natural resources, but also taking into account the impact on the cultural and socio-economic environment, by harnessing cultural resources and by contributing to the welfare of local communities.

J. Swarbrooke, in “Sustainable Tourism Management” considers the following types of tourism which are highly compatible with the concept of sustainable tourism (Swarbrooke, 1999, p.19):

- ecotourism;
- cultural tourism which involves visitors learning about the history and culture of an area;
- urban attractions which provide new uses for derelict sites;
- small-scale rural “agro-tourism” which brings income to farmers;
- conservation holidays where tourists do conservation work during their vacations.

Thus, if rural tourism, including agro-tourism, does not turn into mass tourism but is practiced on a small scale, it is an important form of sustainable tourism alongside ecotourism.

2. Rural tourism - the important form of tourism in Romania

Rural tourism is closely linked to the rural area that constitutes the tourist destination. For holiday tourism especially, the attraction of a destination typically reflects scenic resources and climate, and the arts, heritage, culture and lifestyles of a local population (Middleton and Hawkins, 1998, p.87).

One geographical aspect of the development of tourism in an area is that it leads to improvements in the infrastructure, which also benefits the local population and their opportunities for local recreation (Aronsson, 2000, p.137). Thus, tourism can play a positive role in diversifying and developing the economy of rural areas where traditional activities like agriculture are in decline, salaries are low and depopulation rife (Swarbrooke, 1999, p.164).

Rural tourism can be defined as a tourism product that accentuates the importance of the supply management and marketing activities within rural areas (Lee and Stanculescu, 2011, p.15).

Rural tourism is often identified with farm tourism but rural tourism is a wider concept and includes also such specific features as the development of nature trails, picnic sites, interpretation centers and agricultural and folk museums (Medlik, 1993, p.129). Farm tourism is a holiday tourism centered on a working farm, which takes various forms but invariably includes accommodation and often other services for users. Farm tourism may be seen as a form of rural tourism and is also called agricultural tourism or agri-tourism and vacation farm tourism (Medlik, 1993, p.61).

Rural tourism is a form of tourism that unfolds in rural areas and has a functional structure of services and heterogeneous accommodation. The revenues from rural tourism have a permanent character and the services are offered by an employed and specialized staff (Dinu, M., 2002, p.261).

Agro-tourism is achieved by harnessing the natural environment, the accommodation offer and the various agro-tourism services provided by agro-touristic households and farms. The incomes obtained from agro-tourism have a complementary character because the household or agro-touristic farm realizes the basic incomes from agricultural activity or other types of activities, such as: processing of agricultural raw materials, handicrafts, etc.) (Abargaonitei, 2010, p.101)

From the point of view of the accommodation space, agro-tourism can be defined as an activity that exploits the existing accommodation surplus in the peasant household, prepared and arranged especially for the reception of guests (Platona, 2002, p.28). Agro-tourism uses only tourist boarding houses and agro-tourist boarding houses for accommodation and meals, benefiting from an unpolluted and picturesque environment, natural tourist attractions and cultural-historical values, the traditions and customs present in rural areas, the farmer's hospitality (Nistoreanu, Gheres *et al*, 2010, p.114).

In Romania, the agro-tourism can contribute to sustainable development in rural areas through (Glavan, 2003, p.146-147):

- sustainable use of tourism resources and maintaining the natural, cultural and social diversity of rural areas;
- integration of agro-tourism into national and local development planning and strategy;
- supporting local economies in the social and economic development of the community, but also in protecting nature and cultural values;
- development and promotion of local tourist offer.

After 1990, rural tourism started to develop in Romania. The core was the Moieciu-Bran area, and then the phenomenon spread throughout the country, as tourists began to prefer unpolluted air and tranquility in rural areas instead of hotels (Bran *et al*, 1997, p.128). Thus, the facilities for the development of rural tourism in the mountain area, the Danube Delta and the Black Sea coast were started.

The Romanian village is an original tourist product that generates tourist flows because it is based on (Nistoreanu *et al*, 2003, p.208):

- a wide range of natural and cultural resources;
- various tourist facilities and tourist experiences;
- traits of the specificity and uniqueness of our country: people, history, culture, traditions and customs.

In Romania, rural settlements with a tourist function, namely tourist villages, are not homologated and legalized by legislation, therefore they have not been identified, organized, arranged and promoted. In the rural area only the rural tourist boarding houses is promoted, without mentioning the ethnographic area it belongs to (Glavan, 2006, p.143). Therefore, in many rural areas, rural tourist boarding houses were built without respecting local specific architecture and

without the use of environmental friendly building materials. This is very dangerous for rural tourism because it leads to the loss of local identity and the transmission of specific elements of urban settlements.

Table no.1. Establishments of tourist's reception with functions of tourists' accommodation and the tourists' accommodation capacity, by type of establishments, in Romania

	2004	2007	2009	2011	2012	2013	2014
Existing accommodation capacity (number of beds)							
TOTAL	275941	283701	303486	278503	301109	305707	311288
Hotels	160370	168857	179479	175149	181702	183330	186236
Motels	5992	5614	5836	7219	8078	8493	7883
Tourist inns	385	186	136	77	81	61	143
Hostels (The hotels for youth included)	1180	3522	4396	6140	7562	8482	9116
Tourist villas	16107	15333	15772	12590	14775	14074	13812
Bungalows	4854	4461	4553	2481	2663	2834	2722
Tourist chalets	6215	5577	5887	5928	5150	5183	5128
Holiday villages	56	160	215	307	352	372	717
Camping sites	26894	25006	25475	12801	12816	11945	12925
School and pre-school camps	30198	20320	18875	10689	10908	9851	9759
Tourist halting places	1226	1152	2025	1813	1847	1800	2209
Tourist boarding houses (Urban tourist boarding houses)	8100	13429	16653	20499	25019	27325	27295
Agro-tourist boarding houses (Rural tourist boarding houses)	9405	15448	19783	20683	27453	28775	30480
Houselet-type units	4365	4120	3945	1732	2199	2665	2398
Ship accommodation places	594	519	456	395	504	517	465

Sources: realized by author, based on data provided by National Institute of Statistics (*Romanian Tourism in Figures*, 2007, p.16; 2010, p.23; 2014, p.22; 2015, p.22).

The development of private property in Romania has led to an increase in accommodation capacity in agro-tourist boarding houses. Thus, according to the data in table no. 1, there is an increase in the number of accommodation places of the agro-tourist boarding houses from 9405 in 2004 to 30480 in 2014, which represents a growth of 3.4 times. This increase is due to the demand for holidays in rural areas of Romania, especially the demand from foreign tourists.

As seen in figure 1, from 2004 until 2014, the trend of increasing accommodation capacity in agro-tourist boarding houses has been maintained, even during the economic crisis of 2007-2011.

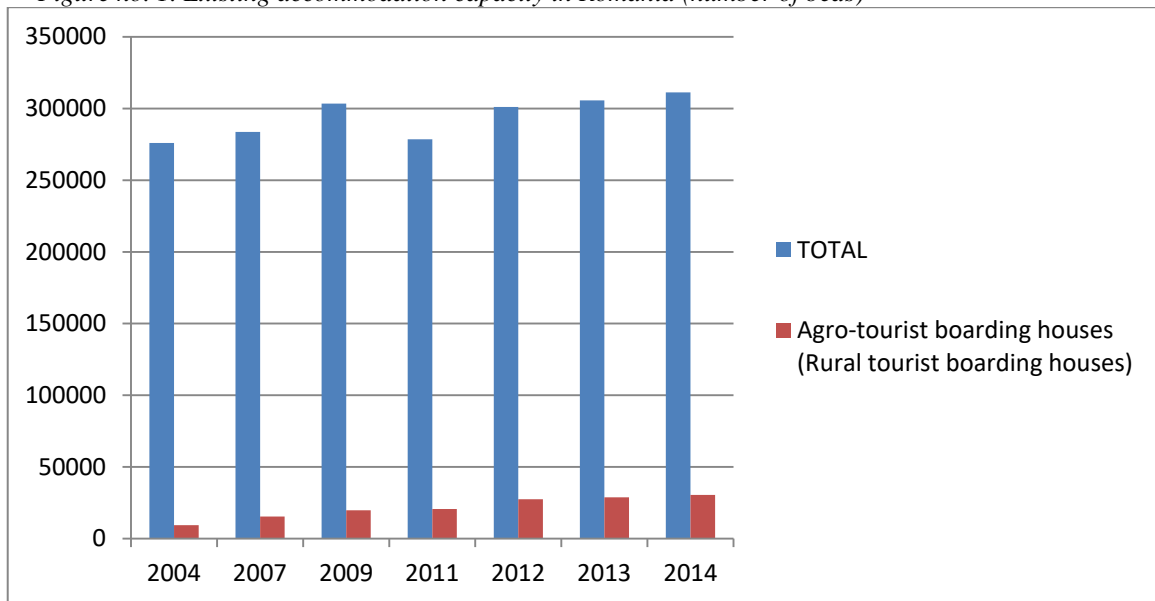
This growth is based on investments made in rural areas in order to start a family business as a source of permanent income generated by rural tourism or as an additional income from agro-tourism.

If we consider the total accommodation capacity, there is only an increase of 12.8% in 2014 compared to 2004, when in the case of accommodation places (number of beds) in agro-tourist boarding houses and rural tourist boarding houses, there was an increase of 224%. This highlights the higher dynamics recorded by the rural tourism segment, including agro-tourism, in Romania.

However, this superior development in the case of rural tourism and agro-tourism does not indicate a mass tourism that contravenes the principles of sustainable tourism. This is evidenced by the data in Table no.1: in 2004, the accommodation in rural tourist boarding and agro-tourist boarding houses accounted for only 3.41% of the total existing accommodation capacity in Romania compared to 9.8% in 2014. It should also be noted that in Romania, accommodation is also carried out in the homes of the locals, without this being included officially in the tourist circuit. Therefore, the segment of rural tourism and agro-tourism is higher than that recorded in the statistical data, which means that rural tourism and agro-tourism represent a strong motivation

among tourists, especially foreigners.

Figure no. 1. Existing accommodation capacity in Romania (number of beds)



Source: Table no.1.

Romania has a rich natural and cultural potential in rural areas, which is a great advantage for attracting tourists to rural tourism and agro-tourism.

This is evidenced by the number of tourists staying in rural tourist boarding and agro-tourist boarding houses (Table no.2 and Figure no.2). The analysis of these data reveals the following:

- During the period 2004-2014, there is an increase in the total number of tourists accommodated in establishments of tourist reception with functions of tourists' accommodation in Romania, from 5638517 to 8277646, which represents a 46.8%
- In the period 2007-2011, as a result of the economic and financial crisis, there was a reduction in the number of tourists both on a total and in the structure
- The same trends were registered as the structure between 2004 and 2014, namely: for foreign tourists there was an increase of 53.1% in 2014 compared to 2004 and a growth of only 26.9% for Romanian tourists
- The largest decrease in the number of tourists took place in 2009, but this year there is also the largest decrease in the number of Romanian tourists as a result of the economic crisis. Thus, although the existing accommodation capacity registered the largest increase in 2009, the largest decrease in the number of tourists in the analyzed period was also recorded in that year, which is a significant loss for the owners of the accommodation units.

Table no. 2 Tourists accommodated in the establishments of tourist's reception with functions of tourists' accommodation in Romania (number of tourists)

	Total		Tourists accommodated in agro-tourist boarding houses	
	Foreigners	Romanians	Foreigners	Romanians
2004	4279023	1359494	131589	17396
2007	5420968	1550957	268065	20443
2009	4865545	306404	1275590	19282
2011	5514907	1516699	336005	24691
2012	6030053	1656436	416939	30174
2013	6225798	1717355	463563	38183
2014	6551339	1726307	507868	41434

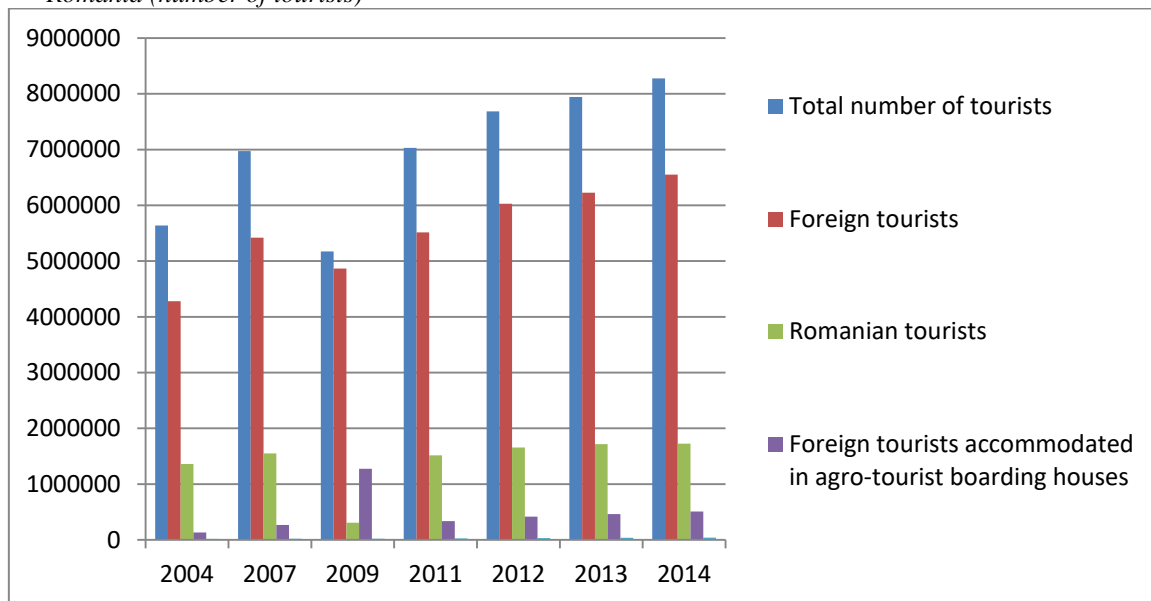
Sources: realized by author, based on data provided by National Institute of Statistics (*Romanian Tourism in Figures*, 2007, p.35-36; 2010, p.42-43; 2014, p.36; 2015, p.36).

In the analyzed period, it is noticed that the number of foreign tourists is much higher compared to the number of Romanian tourists, and this highlights the orientation of the Romanian tourists towards tourist destinations outside Romania.

If we are considering tourists accommodated in agro-tourist boarding houses, there is an upward trend in 2014 compared to 2004, both for Romanian tourists and foreign tourists. Thus, in 2014 compared to 2004 for foreign tourists it had an increase of 285% and for Romanian tourists had an increase of 138%.

These increases reflect the importance of rural tourism and agro-tourism in Romania and its attractiveness to tourists, especially in the case of foreign tourists. However, although rural tourism and agro-tourism have registered significant increases, it should be noted that the share of foreign tourists staying in rural and agro-tourism pensions in Romania in total foreign tourists was 3.07% in 2004 and 7.75% in 2014. In the case of Romanian tourists staying in rural and agro-tourist pensions, the share in total Romanian tourists was in 2004 of 1.28% and 2.4% in 2014.

Figure no. 2 . Tourists accommodated in the establishments of tourist's reception with functions of tourists' accommodation in Romania and tourists accommodated in agro-tourist boarding houses in Romania (number of tourists)



Source: Table no.2

Increasing interest in rural tourism development and agro-tourism in Romania is based on:

- hospitality offered to tourists in rural areas by hosts;
- preserving traditions, customs and their valorization within the rural areas and agro-tourist boarding houses in Apuseni, Bukovina, Maramures, Transylvania, Dobrogea, including the Danube Delta;
- the existence in many rural areas of traditional activities, a low degree of industrialized activities and pollution;
- existence of natural resources unaltered by industrial activity;
- the high quality of the services offered as well as the authentic, natural and traditional products and preparations offered within the agro-tourist boarding houses;
- possibility for tourists to participate in the activities within the household and to get in touch with the style and way of life specific to the Romanian rural areas;
- existence of associations working in the field of rural tourism and agro-tourism, which aim at developing this form of tourism, guaranteeing the quality and authenticity of rural products and services.

3. Conclusions

Rural tourism and agro-tourism represent a very important form of tourism for Romania, which contributes to the satisfaction of the tourism motivations specific to this tourist segment and also represents an alternative offered to the local communities to obtain an income.

Therefore, for its development it is necessary to consider:

- general infrastructure that negatively affects this form of tourism;
- inappropriate legislation in the field that does not provide enough facilities to local communities;
- infusion in rural areas of elements specific to urban tourism, which affect the specific characteristics of rural tourism and agro-tourism.

Consequently, in order to maintain the characteristics specific to the Romanian rural tourism, all measures must be taken to preserve unaltered and to protect the natural and cultural resources specific to rural areas and to establish strategies at central and local level for the promotion of rural tourism and agro-tourism, both internally as well as internationally.

4. References

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