

Research on the 'Nera Gorge' Touristic Potential Growth

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Abstract

The theme of this article exhibits high interest regarding the knowledge and highlighting of the tourist resources and destinations in Romania, both for the academic and economic environment. By getting familiar with the main tourist regions in Romania, the graduates thus receive a suggestive image on the tourist potential Romania has and the current stage of capitalization. The research was carried out in the main tourist areas in the mountainous region of Banat, mainly the Nera Gorges.

The data were also processed based on surveys and group discussions with accommodation unit managers. Through its offer, tourism appraises the human, natural, cultural and climatic potential, which constitutes the wealth of a territory only if the numerous varied actors, public and private, also contribute to its creation, promotion and development.

Key words: touristic management, analysis, accomodation, mountain tourism

J.E.L. classification: Z32

1. Introduction

Banat is a territory with inherited very old structures, but constantly renewed by the succession of influences and dominations it has endured throughout its history. The identity of Banat is paradoxically conveyed by its ability to assimilate and harmonize values of different origins, in a symphony in which, although the initial nuclei lose firm contours, rarely are they completely "melted" into forming a homogeneous mass. Respect for the specifics of others is a lifelong rule set here, confirmed by the lack of intercultural tensions in a region traditionally characterized by an extraordinary fusion of nationalities, religions, customs, mindsets and internal organization.

All these represent powerful arguments for the purpose of this article, namely the assessment of tourism development over time in Banat, this Romanian territory being successor of a multicultural material and spiritual patrimony of high value not extensively known and included in the national and international tourist circuits. In specialty literature, tourism is described as a solution to all the economic problems a country or region could face, also being responsible for balancing the payments balance as capital investment generator in many fields of activity (Neacsu et al., 2016, p.14). Tourism is a complex phenomenon that also involves social and economic trends and material values circuit between countries, in the process of spending free time.

Tourism geography encompasses the analysis of any particular in terms of spatial distribution and relationships with other particulars, dealing only in spatial terms. Although, this is an important feature of geography in general they do not meet the requirements of researchers in tourism geography. Thus, dynamics examination and facts evolution in time or the analysis of the connections or causal relations within a system cannot be forsaken.

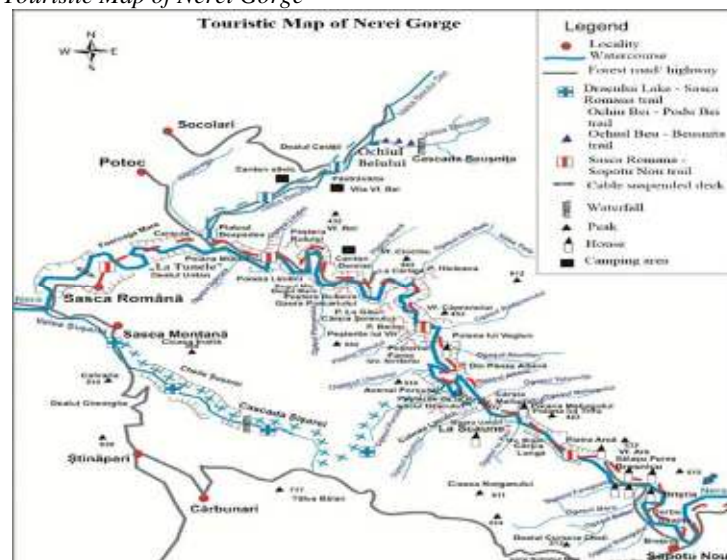
2. Theoretical background. Current and future requirements of Nerei Gorge touristic potential

Although the area of the Nerei Gorges was studied less and later from a tourist point of view and not only, it was explored since the Roman Empire when an access road was built at the western end of the gorges, several small tunnels being dug in limestone. Its construction was initially linked, strictly to the mining operations and to the access to the Danube valley, but now, the tunnels represent the access to the gorges and one of their tourist attraction points. The attractiveness of these gorges is mainly rendered by the multitude of ecotourism activities that can be practiced here.

Nerei Gorge, which is part of the Nerei-Beusnita Gorge Natural Park, is located in the southwestern part of Romania, more precisely in Caras-Severin County and separates two mountain units, the Locva and Anina mountains, crossing a limestone area between Sasca Romana and Sopotu Nou.

The map with the main tourist attractions in the Nerei Gorge area is presented in figure no. 1.

Figure no. 1. Touristic Map of Nerei Gorge



Source: editing after Dobre, G.A., 2016, p.38

Thus, together with Beusnitei Gorges, they form a protected area of national interest located on the administrative territory of Sasca Montana, Sopotu Nou and Carbutari Communes, reservation included in Nerei-Beusnita Gorges National Park, established in 1990. This national park stretches from the Anina Mountains (southern part) to the northern part of the Locva Mountains, with an area of 36,758 acres which includes 6 declared reservations and one proposed to be approved. Nerei Gorges are considered the longest gorges in Romania, having roughly 22 km of which 20 km are actually represented by gorges. The tourist potential of the Nerei Gorges is significant, the great variety of the natural setting here, the richness of the flora and fauna with many southern elements determined the creation of the Nerei-Beusnita Gorges natural reservation. The gorges themselves, attract through their wildness and beauty and are considered a tourist attraction but also appeal through the natural tourist objectives they boast.

As Victor Tautu states in his monographic work about Sasca Montana “in the Nerei-Beusnita gorge reservation the following activities can be practiced: hiking on marked trails, flora and fauna observing and studying; observation of the karst relief (limestone gorges and walls, rubble, limestone pavements, sinkholes, springs, waterfalls, over 400 caves), rafting, mountaineering, speleology, cycling, zip lining, abseiling, horseback riding” (Tautu, V., 2010, p.276), activities that represent possible sources for the development of mountain tourism in this area.

3. Research methodology

This endeavor used as working methods consulting the bibliography, field trips with the elaboration of photographic materials and Corel modeling of the tourist map. Hence, in this part of the paper we proposed a touristic analysis and on a more specific segment, ecotourism, of the Nerei Gorges and which aims to capitalize on these gorges, capitalization that can be beneficial for the economic development of the area but also for the preservation of a splendid natural environment. The research was also based on: the National Rural Development Programme 2014–2020, the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union, the Strategy for Sustainable Development in Mountain Regions as well as the current Legislation with the regulations regarding the classification of tourist accommodation structures.

The approached methodology started from an initial stage of identification, selection and evaluation of heritage values as well as other elements of interest for cultural tourism, in the second stage the strategic proposals for cultural tourism development in Banat were elaborated. In accordance with an opinion expressed by a specialist in the field, we consider that one of the trends in the development of mountain agritourism is the return to nature, in a healthy, harmonious environment, consistent with the desire of authentic (Ungureanu, D., 2016. p .133). It manifests itself in all countries where the current post-industrial civilization created the need to escape from the urban, polluted and stressful environment. Especially tourists from countries with advanced economies seek to escape the unleashed atmosphere surrounding their homes and urban agglomerations and find places where nature has remained unharmed by modern civilization.

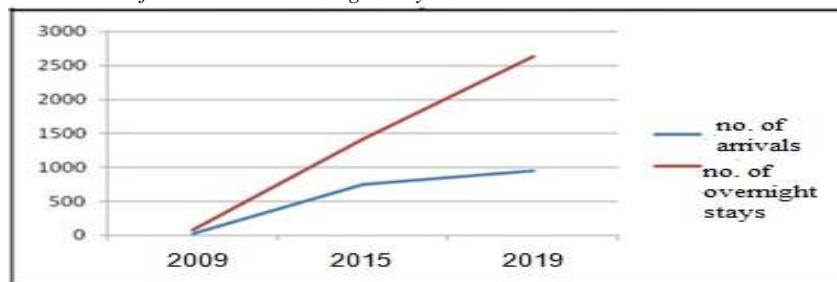
4. Results. Research on capitalizing on the tourist potential of the area

Tourist infrastructure is quite insignificant in the area, in relation to the tourist potential it has, although lately the field of tourism has become more and more expanded and many bed-and-breakfast have been built over a few years. However, the area is still insufficiently exploited from this point of view, and the existing development possibilities are varied. Agritourism is also achieved through the presence of villages as access points, the development of this type of tourism being in full swing, especially in Sasca Montana where the initiative to build many guesthouses was taken and the tourist demand has increased in recent years. As already mentioned, the inhabitants of Sasca Montana commune have been practicing tourism since the 19th century when they went on trips on Nerei Gorges, Susarei and Bei valley, these being sprinkled with chalets and leisure places. Although there are still many ruins and abandoned houses, due to the closure of mines and economic decline, there were people who, attracted by the picturesque area and the multitude of objectives offered, built or bought and rebuilt houses here at higher standards.

Thus, the locality has acquired a neat appearance and at present it looks like a small climatic mountain resort. All these leisure possibilities, together with the tourist potential, give this destination a complex character and, therefore, the possibility to become a successful destination. Transport infrastructure contributes to increasing the access to a region, which is why it is very important for regional and local development. At the same time, this is a decisive factor in maximizing tourist attractions.

As shown in Figure 2, the number of arrivals as well as the number of overnight stays recorded an increasing trend, with the highest peak over the 11 years between 2009 and 2019.

Figure no. 2. Number of arrivals and overnight stays in Sasca Montana between 2009 and 2019

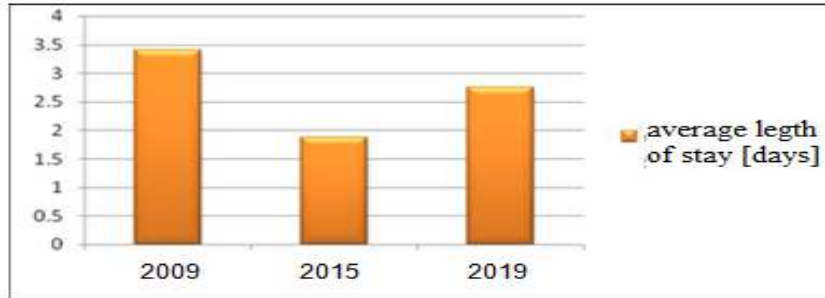


Source: created by the author based on statistical data collected from DJS (County Direction of Statistics)

The accommodation opportunities in the area are not numerous, most of them being located in the commune of Sasca Montana and especially in the village of Sasca Romana. Regarding the touristic traffic in Sasca commune, the course of accommodation demand is still being analyzed. Provided with the official data on the number of arrivals and overnight stays available, we proceeded to calculate the length of stay.

Their ratio yielded an average length of stay which decreases and then increases. According to the data presented in figure 3, in 2009 the average length of stay was about 3.5 days. In 2015 it reached almost 2 days, but in 2019 it returned to the positive trend, this year tourists registering an average stay of about 3 days.

Figure no. 3. Average length of stay in Sasca Montana between 2009 and 2019

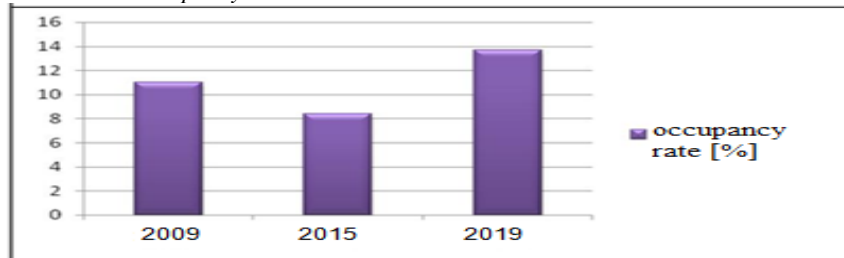


Source: created by the author based on statistical data collected from DJS (County Direction of Statistics)

The same evolution characterizes the occupancy rate, with 11% in 2009, a value that decreases to 8.4% in 2015 and increases to almost 14% in 2019. The evolution of the tourist occupancy rate in Sasca Montana in the analyzed period is presented in figure no. 4.

Therefore, analyzing the official data provided by the INS (National Institute of Statistics), we can note that tourism in the Nerei Gorge region is currently in a underdeveloped state, intensified by the economic crisis. The analyzed tourist region, with the exception of a few areas in Caras-Severin county, in particular, is outlined as a tourist destination to a lesser extent than the counties or neighboring regions (Timisoara county or southern Hunedoara county).

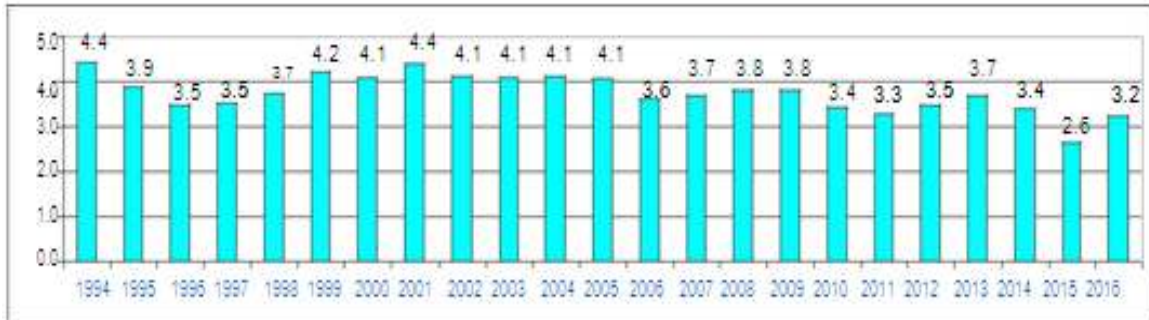
Figure no. 4. Tourist occupancy rate in Sasca Montana between 2009 and 2019



Source: created by the author based on statistical data collected from DJS (County Direction of Statistics)

From the statistical databases we selected only the localities from the rural area, from the Nerei Gorge region. Given the fact that the influence of resorts could lead to obtaining average indicators that could distort the distribution of this activity image in the territory, for certain indicators we will analyze both with and without the influence of resorts. In the graph in figure no. 5 we presented the number of accommodation structures in the scenario lacking the influence of the resorts, for the data related to the period 1994-2016.

Figure no. 5. Evolution of the accomodation structures number - no resorts, thousands of places

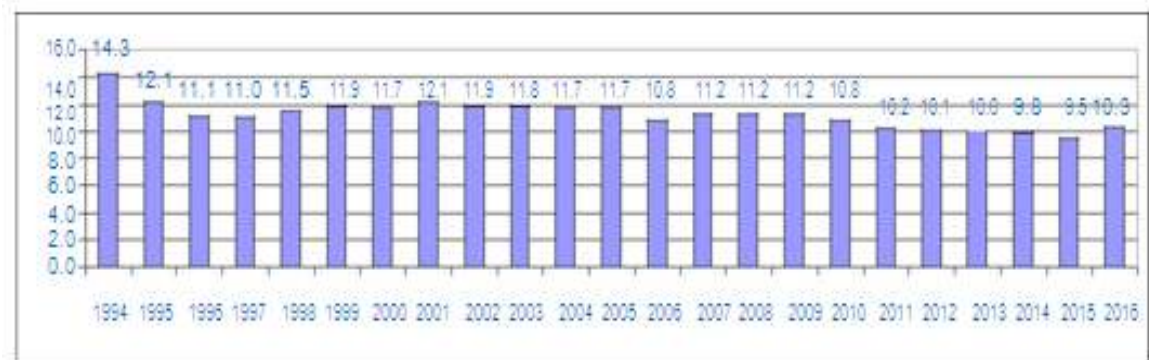


Source: created by the author based on statistical data collected from DJS (County Direction of Statistics)

Comparing the values with and without the influence of resorts, a difference of 50-65% remains almost constant. This shows that a large part of the rural accommodations is concentrated in resorts. As expected, as a result of the 20% decrease in accommodation units in the first two years after 1994, there is also a 22% decrease in the number of accommodation places. It is followed by stagnation until 2009-2010, then a decrease year by year, but of low values, reaching 9483 places in 2015, after which there is an increase of about 9% in 2016 compared to 2015.

Figure no. 6 illustrates the number of places in the rural accommodation structures, in the area of Nerei Gorge, with the influence of resorts.

Figure no. 6. Evolution of the accomodation structures number - with resorts, thousands of places



Source: created by the author based on statistical data collected from DJS (County Direction of Statistics)

As in the case of accommodation structures analysis, with and without resorts, we observe a significant influence from resorts, when the number of accommodation places is about 200% higher than in the statistics without their influence. Since the graph in figure 5 is similar to that in figure 6 (with the influence of the resorts) we infer that the evolution in one direction or the other is influenced equally by the presence of resorts or lack thereof in the analyses performed.

This aspect can be explained by the construction of new accommodation units with a much smaller number of places, such as bed-and breakfast with 6, 8 or 10 accommodation places or agritourism lodges even with 2 or 4 accommodation places. This evolution also occurred as a result of the interruption of the activity of some objectives with a large number of accommodation places - certain hotels situated in resorts, certain motels as well as camps. In the rural localities respectively without the resort localities, we can say that during the entire period between 2001 and 2012, no significant changes arose, but for the changes surged from one year to another. Perhaps there was a significant decrease after the crisis in the second half of 2008, by 23% in the analysis with the influence of resorts, while in the scenario without the influence of resorts, by only 14.5%. After this slight decrease, we find a revival every year, the year 2012 bringing an increase of 27% compared to 2009.

Conducting a comparative analysis between the evolution of the number of accommodation structures and the evolution of arrivals, we notice that while the first indicator registers a consistent increase, approximately 90%, for the period 1994-2016, the second indicator registers an almost insignificant increase, 0.87%, for the same period. This comparison suggests that many entrepreneurs considered this activity promising, but the investments made did not lead to an increase in the number of arrivals throughout the region but only to a distribution of tourists on several accommodation structures.

We easily notice the big difference between the value of overnight stays in the whole rural area and their value, carrying out the analysis without resorts. As the difference between these annual average values is about 1070%, we consider that for the analysis of the rural tourism activity we should especially exploit the data from the analysis without the influence of resorts. We say this because overall rural tourism creates a relatively positive image for the entire region, but in fact this economic activity is very intense in resorts as another researcher observed in a similar study for another tourist area of the country (Barbu, I, 2014, p.72).

5. Proposed strategies for developing the tourist potential of Nerei Gorge

Given that these gorges are part of a protected area, being more precisely included in the Nerei-Beusnita Gorge National Park, especially in recent years, several capitalization strategies have been proposed, including the publication of various brochures, leaflets, information panels on marked routes, setting up information centers in the nearby localities, conducting youth education programs such as school camps, workshops and others (Dobre, GA, 2016). These strategies are characteristic especially to the ecotourism specific within these natural areas, which promotes tourism in a conservative, sustainable and educational way. However, tourism within the park is carried out both in an organized and unorganized setting. To develop the tourist activity in this area, first of all, it is necessary to build and implement an infrastructure (both tourist and urban) at a higher quality level that could support it along with the local economy development.

Ecotourism is a fairly recent form of tourism introduced in our country, which is practiced especially in these national or natural parks. The communities involved in the promotion of Nerei Gorge are mainly the localities closest to the gorges; However, Sasca Montana had the highest participation, where several bed-and-breakfast were built, which brought a significant contribution in supporting this practice of promoting the gorges. As a result the number of tourists arriving in this area increased.

The tourist and ecological infrastructure is, however, still insufficiently organized so the diversified creation of ecotourism infrastructure avoiding environmental damage to offer special experiences to visitors is required: gazebos for observing flora and fauna, rehabilitation of water mills, restoration of bridges and stairs, corner forests and dwellings. The rehabilitation of the access roads to the park and inside the park is another goal to achieve for the good tourism development in general and, also, it is necessary to provide a trained specialized staff, by setting up workshops, professional courses to support a sustainable development of ecotourism activity.

At the same time, we can include agritourism as an alternative to promote tourism in the area. This form of tourism largely overlaps ecotourism, having some common features. On the other hand, ecotourism offers real possibilities for the development of tourism in the area, both socially and economically. The community can benefit greatly from this activity and the standard of living would increase substantially in the sense of a consistent and sustainable development, which would favor nature and maintain a simple and fair as possible human-nature relationship. This is exactly what this new segment – ecotourism - wants to achieve by protecting and preserving nature and involving man in activities as non-invasive as possible.

In Romania, the action of factors such as the contribution, importance and place that tourism must occupy in the economic development of the country is not fully acknowledged. Thus, only in 2007, the Master Plan for National Tourism of Romania 2007-2026 stated “the absence of a general policy of directing and orienting the sector”, the Government wishing to lay the foundations of a “sustainable approach to tourism development in Romania”. The achievement of the Government's stated goal has led the Master Plan to have as its immediate objective the formulation of a general policy framework for the sustainable development and management of the tourism industry in

terms of natural and cultural resources. It is necessary to highlight that the Master Plan anticipates the existence of future benefits for the population, through the tourism development, which can be achieved by enhancing and preserving the cultural heritage.

Few statistical data from the Master Plan demonstrate the serious lag of the tourism development in our country. In this regard, we consider important to be known the structure and contribution the cultural field brought for the tourism development.

6. Conclusions

Through its offer, tourism values the human, natural, cultural and climatic potential that flaunts as wealth of a territory only if the numerous and varied public and private actors also contribute to its creation, promotion and development. As the tourism economy grows at a much faster rate than other economies, this produces issues with negative or positive impact on the environment, on tangible or intangible heritage and on the local population. Major decisions on how to address such issues, as well as forecasts for the future development of the sector should be taken by state authorities only after consultation and in partnership with all concerned or affected groups.

To improve the overall performance, any economic agent in the field of tourism services must react to the evolution of all aspects related to natural resources and be aware of their significance. The research was done in line with this logic and contributed both to the analysis and enrichment of information on development strategies for the tourism potential in the region.

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