

Sustainable Development of High Tourist Potential Rural Communities in Southern Transylvania

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present an analysis of the sustainable development of rural communities with a rich tourism potential in Transylvania, an important region that is well known for its culture, traditions and values. Rural well-being offers a sustainable approach to healthy lifestyles that are based on a balance of many complex components including social, economic, and environmental issues.

This paper is based on the research of secondary sources namely data accessed online provided by the Institute of Statistics, the Ministry of Tourism, the Ministry of Agriculture and similar websites as well as on a primary research that targeted 33 mayoralities of the localities with a rich tourist potential in Transylvania.

Under this paper, we analyse the current state of sustainable development of the region from the natural-ecological, social, economic, and cultural perspective. We also identified a few examples of good practice and ideas for the future development of the localities with a rich tourist potential.

Key words: sustainable development, rural communities, tourism assets, Southern Transylvania

J.E.L. classification: Q01, R11, P25

1. Introduction

The rural area represents a significant pillar in the history, civilization and national identity of a country, both by the means of spatial and demographic dimensions and the economic, social, cultural and ecological dimensions. Consequently, sustainable principles hold an important place in the development of the rural areas of South Transylvania.

The best-known definition of the concept of sustainable development was adopted in 1987 by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in the report entitled "Our Common Future" (Brundtland Report): "Sustainable development represents a form of growth that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

According to the World Tourism Organization (WTO), sustainable tourism can be defined as: "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities".

An interesting approach is emphasized by (Bakers, 2006), he considers that sustainable communities could be defined as the communities that proceed with expand and increase sustainability, which has the aim to develop the environment and make part of it.

The aim of the present article is to present an analysis of the sustainable development of rural communities with a rich tourism potential in Southern Transylvania, an important region that is well known for its culture, traditions and values.

2. Literature review

According to (Handmer & Dovers, 1996, p. 485), sustainable development implies changes and development that sustain the elements of the system, while respond to the needs of the present inhabitants.

(Trukhachev, 2015), explains the fact that sustainability in rural areas need to comprise the economic, cultural, social and environmental aspects. The author considers that tourism play an important role, tourism is mixed between investments and the most important assets.

Due to the complex form of sustainable tourism, of tourism management and marketing, is establish the natural and economic integrity of the environment and exploit reasonably the natural and cultural resources, also is conserve the necessary potential for the next generations (Ionciță and Petrescu, 2016).

In addition, (Carballo & León, 2018) state that tourist destinations could reach sustainability. Also, offer the possibility for tourists to have different experience in function of the environmental factors, natural resources, local culture of the tourist destinations.

Rural well-being is measured in many ways. Degrees of rural well-being are traditionally determined by the measuring stick of economic, social, and environmental values.

Rural communities represent the connection between society and the natural environment. Through this aspect, it is emphasis the significance of their continuity and to consider them for the study of sustainability (Summer, 2007).

(Peltier, 2013) considers that rural communities could evolve if there are employment opportunities which sustain a normal standard of living. The add value of the rural areas, are highlighted by the unique resources and opportunities for economic development.

Authors (Delanty, 2003) and (Ledwith, 2005), state that communities could be defined as a compound, active and persistent changing.

3. Research methodology

This paper will focus on the analysis of the stage of sustainable development of the localities featuring a very rich tourism potential in the rural area of Southern Transylvania. At the level of the partnership of the PORT Cultural project, it was agreed that we use the concept of 'Southern Transylvania' in relation to the following counties: Sibiu, Braşov, Covasna, Mureş, Harghita, and Alba.

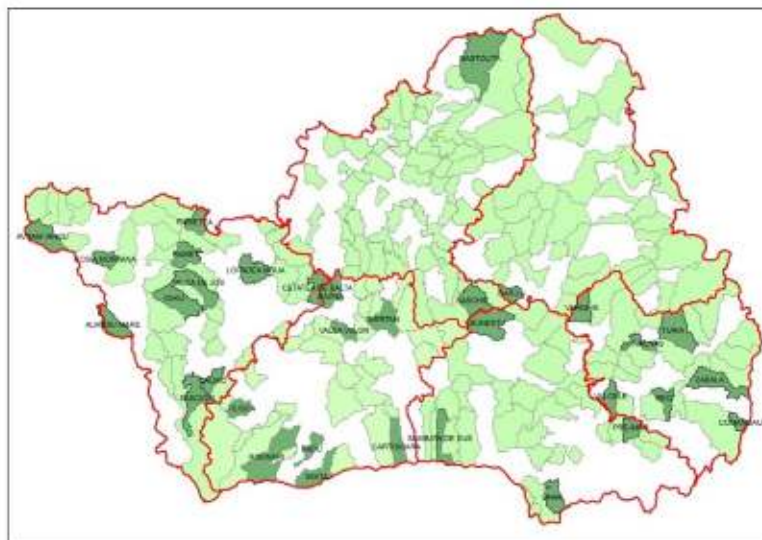
In order to select the localities with a rich tourism potential from the region we referred to the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 142 / 2008 Regarding the Approval of the Plan for the Development of the National Territory, Section VIII – Areas Featuring Tourist Resources, approved by Law no. 190/2009.

According to the normative act, 234 out of the 355 localities in the rural area of Southern Transylvania (65.9%) are considered large territorial and administrative divisions with rich natural and anthropic resources (201 localities) and very rich natural and anthropic resources (33 localities). Of them, there were selected the localities with very rich resources i.e. 33 localities (see Figure no. 1)

The research methodology includes secondary and primary source research, the entire analysis being drawn according to four perspectives: natural-ecological, socio-human, cultural, and economic. The secondary research establishes the evolution trend of sustainable development within the 33 localities by analysing the results of the different studies. On the other hand, the primary research is complementary to the secondary research.

Thus, a primary research was applied, a pilot study based on the survey method featuring the questionnaire as its research instrument. The research was conducted in March 2019, the questionnaire being sent both by e-mail and by fax to the mayoralties of the previously identified 33 rural localities with a rich tourism potential in Southern Transylvania. Of them, 20 territorial and administrative divisions answered the questionnaire. The answer variants of the questionnaire include both one-answer and multiple-choice answers as well as open questions. Out of the 32 questions included in the questionnaire, the most relevant ones were selected to be considered for analysis in this paper.

Figure no. 1. Rural territorial and administrative divisions with rich natural and anthropic resources of Transylvania



Source: drawn by the authors (2018)

4. Findings

4.1. The socio-human perspective

Human capital is one of the most important resources at the level of a region, being on the one hand an important factor contributing to its sustainable development, and on the other hand the main beneficiary of the development.

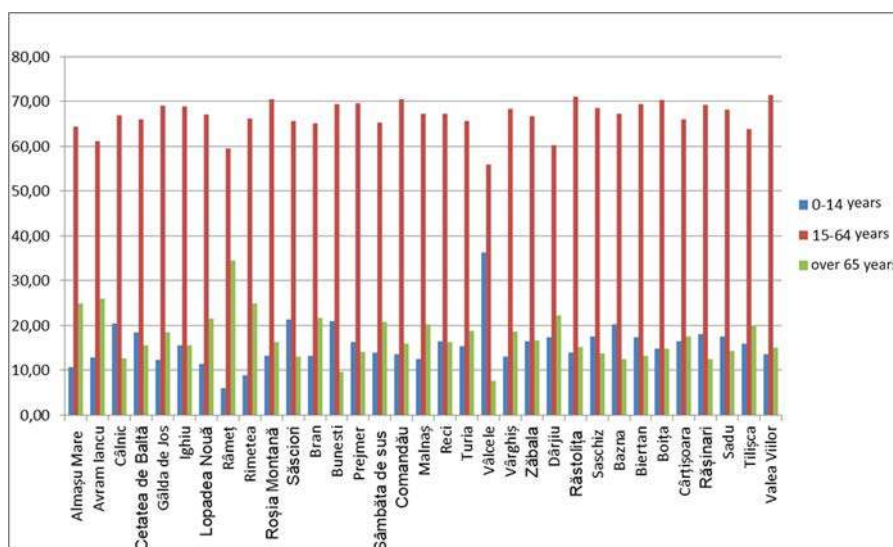
A very important aspect that is analysed in this research is the demographic situation of the 33 localities with tourism potential in the rural area.

The age group structure of the population in the analysed region reflects a quite high share of young people aged 0-14 (15.4%), one that is higher than the national average (14.7%). At the same time, the proportion of people aged over 65 is lower in this region compared to the national level (16.0% compared to 16.3%).

At the same time, an analysis at the level of each locality in particular highlights the high weights of the young population: Vâlcele (36.3%), Bunești (20.9%), Călnic (20.4%), Bazna (20, 2%); of the elderly population: Râmeț (34.4%), Avram Iancu (25.9%), Almașu Mare (24.9%), Rimetea (24.9%), Dârjiu (22.2%); and of the active population: Valea Viilor (71.3%), Răstolița (71.0%), Roșia Montană (70, 6%), Comandău (70.5%), Boița (70.4%).

At the opposite part, there are registered low weights of the young population: Râmeț (5.9%), Rimetea (8.8%), Almașu Mare (10.7%), Lopadea Nouă (11.4%). In this case, the effects could be extremely adverse in the medium and long term should no measures be taken to stimulate the increase of the number of births and to create new jobs; also, the localities with a low weight of the elderly population (persons aged over 65 years) are: Vâlcele (7.7%), Bunești (9.6%), Bazna (12.5%), Rășinari (12.5%), while those with low shares of the active population include: Vâlcele (55.9%), Râmeț (59.5%), Dârjiu (60.2%), Avram Iancu (61.1%).

Figure no. 2. Population structure by age group, broken down by localities (2018)



Source: done by the authors, INS, 'Tempo' online database

4.2. The natural and ecological perspective

This perspective stands out due to the diversity of the relief forms, the existence of large areas of forest, of grazing areas and glades, of soil resources, of an extensive hydrography network and of the surfaces with protected natural areas – all of these underpinning the cultural dimension represented by the tangible and by the intangible cultural heritage – and having made their mark on the economic and social development of this region.

The territory of the 33 localities with a rich tourist potential comprises a very high concentration of natural and anthropic resources.

Thus, given the high share of the mountain and plateau area, forests cover considerable areas in Southern Transylvania (47% of the region).

The main environmental hazards identified in the analysed area are represented by floods (in 8 of the 20 localities that answered the questionnaire). Pollution of the water (5 locations), pollution of the soil (4 localities), air pollution (3 locations), landslides (3 localities), plastic waste (1 locality) are other hazards identified by the representatives of the local public authorities.

In order to prevent and fight back the environmental hazards 12 of the 20 mayoralities that answered the questionnaire (60%) stated that they are carrying out (have carried out) certain projects aimed at: sanitation (in 4 localities); building of the sewerage network (2 localities); embankment / reinforcing of river banks (2 localities); fighting against pollution (1 locality); un-silting a stream (1 locality).

4.3. The economic perspective

The research carried out showed that the economy of the localities with tourist potential in South Transylvania has undergone important transformations, marked by a transfer of activities from the primary and the secondary sector (agriculture and industry) to the tertiary sector (services).

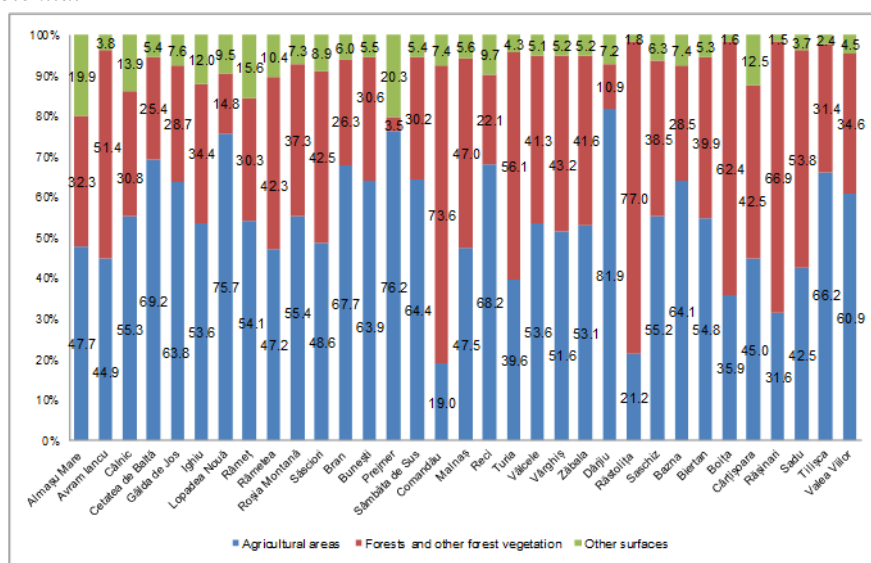
According to the answers received from the mayoralities, the economy of the area is based on trade (10 localities, representing 50.0% of the answers), tourism (8 localities, representing 40.0% of the answers), agriculture (8 localities, representing 40.0% of the answers), wood exploitation activities (8 localities, representing 40.0% of answers), animal husbandry (6 localities, representing 30.0% of answers), and wood processing activities (6 localities, representing 30.0% from the answers).

Thus, a special role in the sustainable development of the 33 localities is represented by agriculture and forestry as basic economic activities undertaken in the rural localities with a rich tourism potential in Southern Transylvania.

Cumulatively, in the 33 rural localities with a rich tourism potential, the area covered by the forest fund represents 42.1%. In this respect, the following localities stand out: Răstolița (77.0% of the land fund of the locality); Comandău (73.6%), Rășinari (66.9%), Boița (62.4%), Turia (56.1%), Sadu (53.8%), Avram Iancu (51.4%).

With regard to the 33 localities analyzed, the agricultural land covers 50.9%. Rich weights of agricultural land are recorded in the following localities: Dârjiu (81.9%), Prejmer (76.2%), Lopadea Nouă (75.7%), Cetatea de Baltă (69.2%), Reci (68, 2%), Bran (67.7%), Tilișca (66.2%), Sâmbăta de Sus (64.4%), while at the opposite pole there are the following localities: Comandău (19%), Răstolița (21.2%), Rășinari (31.6%).

Figure no. 3. Structure of the land fund in Southern Transylvania in the rural localities with a rich tourism potential



Source: done by the authors, INS, 'Tempo' online database

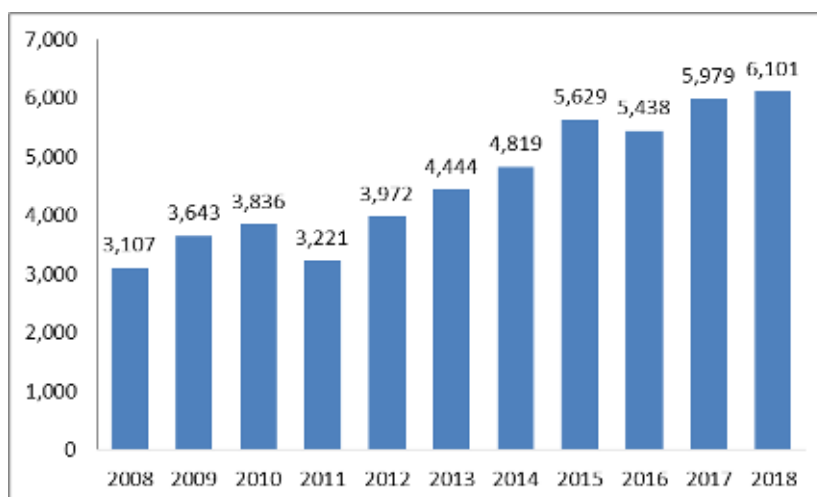
As mentioned earlier, in the last 20 years, tourism has played an important role in the sustainable development of this region.

An important factor in the sustainable development of the localities is the distribution of the accommodation units for tourists. That is why the accommodation capacity largely determines the volume of tourist flows in a certain tourist destination.

According to the existing data, in the database of the Institute of Statistics (2018), at the level of the whole region are classified 2,369 tourist structures with accommodation functions with a total of 70,696 bed-places.

Cumulatively, in the 33 localities in the rural area with a rich tourism potential in Southern Transylvania, 275 tourist structures with accommodation functions are classified (representing 11.6% of the total number of the units in the analysed region), with a total of 6,101 bed-places (8.6% of the total units in the analysed region).

Figure no. 4. Distribution of bed-places in the analysed area broken down by locality

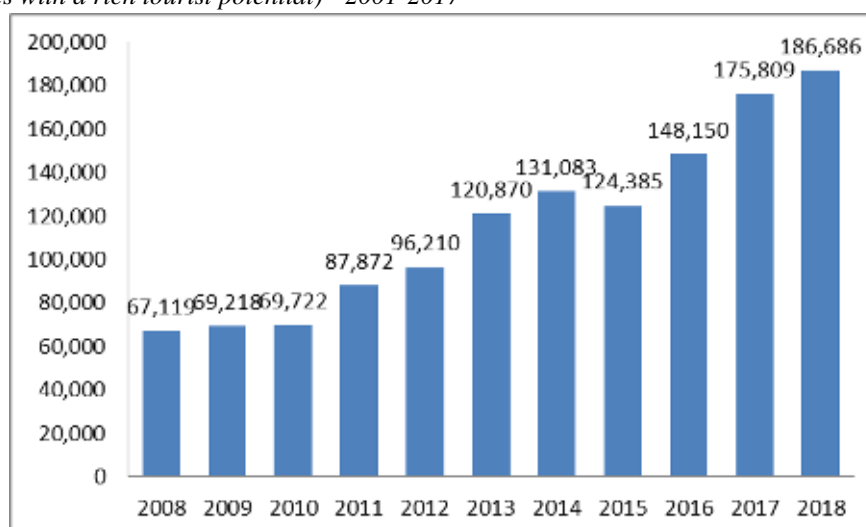


Source: done by the authors, INS, 'Tempo' online database

In terms of the territorial distribution of the bed-places in the analysed area, a rich concentration is observed in a few localities with important tourist objectives or that are situated along tourist flows. Bran stands out in this respect, with 3,006 bed-places (49.2% of the number of places in the 33 localities), along with Sâmbăta de Sus, with 552 bed-places (9.1%), Turia, with 386 bed-places (6.3%), Rășinari, with 315 bed-places (5.2%) etc.

When it comes to the number of tourist arrivals throughout the region, between 2008 and 2018, an upward trend can be observed, with an increase of 2.4 times of the value of this indicator, from 1,291,514 to 3,053,580. In the rural localities with a rich tourism potential, the demand has increased almost constantly except for 2015. In these conditions, between 2008 and 2018 the number of tourist arrivals increased 2.8 times, from 67,119 to 186,686.

Figure no. 5. The Evolution of tourist arrivals within the accommodation units of Southern Transylvania (in localities with a rich tourist potential) - 2001-2017



Source: done by the authors, INS, 'Tempo' online database

Analysing the tourist arrivals in the rural localities with a rich tourism potential in the analysed region, it is found that most were in Bran (89,021, representing 47.7%); Turia (23,703, representing 12.7%); Bazna (13,645, representing 7.3%); Sâmbăta de Sus (10,455, representing 5.6%), Cârțișoara (9,763, representing 5.2%) etc. Localities in which data on tourist arrivals for 2018 are not recorded are: Călnic, Lopadea Nouă, Roșia Montană, Vâlcele, Vârghiș, Valea Viilor.

4.4. The cultural perspective

The analysed area enjoys a very valuable cultural-historical heritage. In the 33 localities with tourist potential in the selected region, there are eight monuments included in the UNESCO World Heritage List (fortified churches of Biertan, Dârjiu, Prejmer, Saschiz, Viscri, Valea Viilor; the peasant fortress of Călnic and the Dacian fortress of Căpâlna), another 82 monuments belonging to category A and 150 monuments being enlisted in category B.

In the localities in the analysed area, a series of projects / actions of restoration / consolidation / protection / conservation of historical monuments, cultural objectives or representative buildings, have been carried out in recent years, according to the information received from mayors: the preservation, rehabilitation and promotion of the Evangelical Church of Călnic that is a component of the UNESCO protected ensemble (Călnic Commune, Alba County); rehabilitation of the fortified church; rehabilitation of the town hall building; rehabilitation of the Old School building in Dârjiu village (Dârjiu commune, Harghita county); restoration of the evangelical church of Saschiz, and of the evangelical church of Cloașterf, of the Tower within the Architectural Assembly of the Fortified Church of Saschiz (Saschiz commune, Mureș county); renovation of Brâncoveanu Castle (Sâmbăta de Jos commune, Sibiu county); and so on.

In addition, according to the answers received from mayoralities, in the recent years, in the analysed area there were carried out or a series of projects / actions meant for encouraging local artisans to preserve their craftsmanship (Călnic commune).

Also, several projects / actions have been carried out in the analysed area to support the local artisans according to the responses received from the mayoralities. An example is constituted by the POCU project entitled "Resources for Călnic" under which classes dedicated to studying traditional activities can be organized (Călnic commune).

Due to the support of local producers from Saschiz commune was obtained through the Local Action Group "Dealurile Târnavelor".

5. Conclusions

The availability of certain natural resources initially determined the development of a few primary economic activities (agriculture, forestry) while later secondary economic (industrial) activities were developed. More recently, these resources have also made an important contribution to the development of the tertiary sector, and in particular to that of tourism.

The hydrography network consists of two main basins – those of the rivers Olt and Mureș. Due to their rich speeds and the steep slopes they cross, these two rivers and their tributaries ensure a significant hydropower potential. This potential is exploited especially on the courses of the rivers Sebeș, Sadu and Olt. Additionally, apart from ensuring the water supply of the localities, of the businesses and of the irrigation plant, alongside the need for the regularization of the levels of water in order to prevent floods, the rivers provide very complex economic functions to the accumulation of water coming from the large anthropic mountain basin, information provided by the "Development Plan of the Central Region 2014-2020".

According to document "Central Region –Premises and Development Potential", the availability of mineral water springs and of the lakes with therapeutic properties (e.g. Ocna Sibiului, Sovata) has favoured the development of the spa tourism in this area, whose most important resorts / localities with a rich spa potential include the following: Covasna, Tușnad, Borsec, Balványos, Sovata, Ocna Sibiului, Bazna, Malnaș Băi, Vâlcele, Băile Homorod, Harghita Băi.

The rich forestry fund contributed to the development of the timber industry, but it was also an important factor in the development of the woodworking craft. Supplementary, the existence of large areas with pastures and meadows favoured agricultural activities such as animal husbandry,

but they also contributed to the development of traditional crafts such as weaving and sewing, and more recently to the development of agro-tourism activities.

Harnessing the tourism potential of rural areas in the Southern Transylvania region creates a viable alternative to the predominant economic activity of the inhabitants of the rural area, namely agriculture.

At the same time, the development of tourism entails the development of other economic and social fields (transport, craft industry, agri-food industry, various services), generating a multiplier effect in the local economy. This could contribute to reducing and even stopping the demographic decline in the future, the area being characterized by an aging population, a low birth rate, and a positive migratory balance.

At the level of this area, certain sustainable development initiatives have been implemented, both in agriculture (1,140 agricultural producers and 23 agricultural processors operating in the region have been certified in organic farming), in forestry (35 forest ranges throughout the region, administered by RNP Romsilva implemented the Forest Management System according to FSC standard), but also in the field of tourism.

Regarding tourism, certain initiatives implemented individually stand out (boarding houses or certified eco-tourism programmes – EcoRomania), but also certain initiatives implemented at destination level (five areas within the region are recognized or are in the process of being recognized as ecotourism destinations).

A good aspect is that in the area there are some examples of good practice in preserving the local architecture (Viscri, Rimetea), constituting successful models that have contributed to the development of tourism in these localities. The identification of these examples by other localities in the region offers the hope that these positive examples will be replicated. According to (INCDT, 2015), several initiatives aimed at developing sustainable tourist destinations that will receive recognition from the Ministry of Tourism as Ecotourism Destinations are being developed in this region.

In this sense, even since 2014, the Zărnești - Piatra Craiului area has been recognized as the first Ecotourism Destination in Romania.

However, the south of Transylvania is increasingly present in a series of ecotourism programmes (tours) offered for sale through local tour operators, which usually collaborate with tour operators from abroad.

Of them, stand out several operators promoted by AER, some of whom sell certified ecotourism programmes: My Romania, Carpathian Nature Tours, Interpares, Phototour, Noroc Romania, Wanderlust Tour, Tymes Tours, Outdoor Experience, Absolute Carpathian, Active Travel, Carpat Bike, Discoveromania, Explore Romania. They offer cultural and nature tours, wildlife observation programmes, active tourism programmes – climbing, mountaineering, paragliding, rafting, cycling and mountain biking, photo tours etc.

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