



## ECOTOURISM AND THE SMALL FAMILY FARMS OF THE ROMANIAN CARPATHIANS

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### **Abstract**

The paper examines the development of rural tourism in the Romanian Carpathians, as a significant trend in the context of increasing co-operation and interaction between the core and peripheral zones of Pannonia. It is necessary to develop new activities to meet the challenge of the current transition which has seen a decline in manufacturing, but a large increase in small farms through land restitution. In keeping with the principles of pluriactivity and sustainability, rural tourism is being encouraged as a useful source of income that can be based on substantial scenic, cultural and recreational potentials. Consideration is given to the problems that must be overcome if an adequate infrastructure is to be created, and the achievements of the last few years are evaluated. The Romanian Agency for the Mountain Regions, along with non-governmental organisations, has stimulated an improvement in accommodation and local services while the European Union's PHARE programs are helping to improve standards and disseminate the necessary skills. Progress is slow but significant, with the prospect of enhanced recreational opportunities around the rim of the Pannonian Basin as one important element in the development of complementary economic profiles linked with growing trans-frontier co-operation.

Key Words: Rural Tourism, pluriactivity, Transition, Co-operation, Infrastructure

### **Introduction**

Romania has long been an important tourist destination and the development of mountain resorts in the last century, based primarily on hill walking and the mineral waters, was in no small measure a response to demand for medical and recreational opportunities in the adjacent lowlands. But interest in rural tourism has only developed strongly in recent years in the context of economic restructuring and land restitution. The potential lies not only in fine scenery, made accessible by an excellent transport system which has been necessary to link the lowlands of Moldavia and Wallachia with Transylvania, but also attractive cultural landscapes with both historical monuments and a live display of rural activity which is remarkable by general European standards. There is also potential for winter sports and for medical treatment linked with mineral waters and climatic stations. While some villages are outstanding for folklore or handicrafts, others may be attractive for their scenic pastoral landscapes, hunting/sporting facilities and choice of fruits and wines (Istrate & Bran 1995). The potential has been acknowledged by foreign consultants '*family orientated tourists, nature lovers, excitement- and adventure-seekers, outdoor enthusiasts and those interested in farming- or forestry-based holidays* days can all gain from visiting Romania' Walker et al 1995 p52) Thus, the underlying rationale is that in contrast to holiday activities specific to 'classical' tourism like sunbathing and swimming; winter sports; urban tours and conferences, rural holidays can best cater

for a different range of activities: walking and mountain climbing; the study of nature; culture and ancestral values; hunting and fishing; and sports such as canoeing and horse-riding.

The approach is seen as a progressive one, offering income and employment while remaining firmly rooted in the Rio de Janeiro declaration on sustainability. Romanian academics contemplating the rural future see agrotourism as a possible trigger for development which could extend from farming and food processing to handicrafts and infrastructure. Such a view is vindicated by experience in the Bran-Rucar corridor, close to the tourist centre of Brasov, where out-migration is relatively low because there is considerable opportunity for young people (Pascaru 1996). According to the Director of the Tourism Research Institute, V Glavan (1995), rural tourism is of great potential importance within the plan to increase the number of foreign tourists from 5.9 million in 1994 to 7.2 in 2000. It is intended that there will be facilities in 8,500 rural households by 2000, which could provide Romania with a niche in the market and spread the benefits of tourism more widely throughout the country.

### **Satisfying the Preconditions**

However, while the opportunity exists, it cannot be exploited immediately by people who have little capital and virtually no experience of private enterprise after half a century of central planning. Individual households will need some aptitude for running a business, which could depend on current non-agricultural activities or family experiences going back to the pre-communist period. The stimulus of finding extra work to keep younger members of the family at home may be a critical spur for action, and awareness of the potential may be strengthened by proximity to a main highway and a situation in a relatively developed region. There is also a need for both community and individual effort to identify resources and evolve diversification plans. Visitors will be attracted by the notion of an 'escape' to rural civilisation and therefore a total ethnological / folklore approach is needed as well as individual family effort. It is important to balance economic, social, cultural and religious values so that sustainable development is achieved. Publicity may be handled by local organisations with which individual households can register. Co-ordination is also needed to ensure the availability of good-quality souvenirs. Older people should be motivated to pass on their skills so as to safeguard the quality of production and diversity into new craft products.

Considerations fundamental to the successful development of rural tourism extend to nature conservation to ensure the retention of scenic resources. It is clear that rapid and uncoordinated development of tourism has created problems in mountain areas like the Bucegi where more effective controls are needed (Velcea et al 1993). Without more careful regulation, a growth in rural tourism could undermine the resources on which it depends. The largest protected area at present is the Retezat National Park created in 1935. It now covers 54,400 ha including a nature reserve of 18,400 ha where no economic activity is permitted. Similar regimes should be provided for the Bucegi and other sensitive areas like the Apuseni Mountains and the Cozia and Parang Mountains in Valcea County. As well as environmental protection to ensure an unpolluted environment, ecofarming has a significant bearing on rural tourism through assurances to tourists about the quality of food produced. Sustainable agriculture has very good prospects in the hills and mountains, whereas only gradual change towards this idea can be expected in the plains

Fundamental to any initiatives in tourism is an appropriate legislative framework. If Romanian tourism is to be profitable, a modern legal framework should be put in place, preferably in harmony with European Union (EU) legislation, so that the Ministry of Tourism can regulate industry and exercise control through subordinate organisations. There should be more attention to protecting the tourist as the consumer, and guarantees may have to be deposited by authorised operators. Finance is also a crucial issue given the present climate of high inflation, high interest and liquidity

difficulties, which makes banks cautious in advancing loans. There are not sufficient parameters for evaluating financial risk. Individual developments in rural tourism of course tend to be small and partnerships with foreign enterprises may not be appropriate, but it would be useful for a Romanian tourist bank to support investment activity with inexpensive credits.

### **Action Taken Since the Revolution**

Immediately after the revolution the government set up a Commission (later renamed Agency) for the Mountain Zones within the Ministry of Agriculture to disseminate the principles of ecology through education and publicity (Figure 1). This organisation has tried to promote good practice, especially with regard to the concept of pluriactivity. It has worked in tandem with non-governmental organisations like the Romanian Working Group on Sustainable Agriculture and Biodiversity and the Federation for Mountain Development which has taken much effective action in the field of rural tourism. Designs for farmhouses which could include rooms for tourists have been circulated. These drawings include three-story houses similar to those commonly found in the Polish Carpathians. At the same time the Agency has developed international links. It became a member of the 'Euromontana' organisation in 1991 and, since 1994, has participated in drafting the European Charter of Mountain Regions through the Council of Europe. Expertise is being obtained from *Gites de France* (France's National Federation of Rural Tourism) which has 40 years experience. In addition, Eurogites (European Federation of Rural Economic & Cultural Tourism) has 22 national and regional member associations including Romania. The Romanian entries in the Eurogites catalogue are increasing although the total number remains small.

Fiscal concessions are being negotiated, for in a country where rural houses often lack bathrooms and interior toilets it is a daunting prospect for small farmers contemplating the major works of modernisation needed for entry into the tourism business. It used to be necessary for farmers with only two or three rooms to obtain permits from the water, electrical and sanitation authorities before going into the tourist business. Since legislation enacted in 1994 for the mountain zone, the Danube Delta and the Black Sea coast, these approvals are now no longer necessary.

Moreover, approved farms and guest-houses (the latter having 3-20 rooms) providing quality services can gain exemption of taxes for 10 years. A grading system is also provided and costs fluctuate according to standards within the range of 15,000-25,000 lei per night (three to five UK pounds) for a twin-bedded room, plus a further 20,000 lei (about four UK pounds) if meals are required (Mitrache et al 1996). So far, just over a thousand households have been invited to apply for classification as units of agro-tourism. These are spread somewhat unevenly over 20 of the counties with mountain territory within their borders. Just over 60 percent of households accepted but 'with a substantial difference between the Carpathian Curve and Eastern Carpathians (above the average) and Banat-Oltenia and Western Carpathians where the response was much poorer Table 1 and Figure 2). There is a strong tourist tradition in some of the high-scoring regions which may result in a particularly positive attitude. The work of the local authority may be very important, for a major growth of interest was reported in Vama (Suceava) in response to encouragement by local officials.

### **New Organisations and the Phare Programs**

Other specialist organisations have come to the fore to stimulate agro-tourism. A National Association of Rural Ecological & Cultural Tourism (ANTREC) has branches in 23 counties. The aim is to organise all those willing to practice or support rural tourism householders, tour organisers and environmental organisations. ANTREC is also encouraging progress on the gastronomic side of

the business. It organised two events in 1996 and attracted an international entry thanks to its protocol of co-operation with Hungary's National Association for Rural Tourism. In several areas there are commercial organisations within which groups of private householders operate, like Branimpex near Brasov and 'Montana Borsa' which is active in the area round the Maramures town of that name. Local tourist associations are growing up, such as 'Agromontana', 'Agro-Tur' and 'Botiza' in Maramures. Meanwhile, there is an important external stimulus through 'Operation Villages Roumains (OVR), set up by a group based in Belgium and supported by the EU under its 'ECOS' program. OVR has developed a strategy for tourism based on eight pilot zones covering 40 selected villages in the north of the country. Each village has produced an information pack to describe the local facilities and opportunities (including visits to monasteries, folk festivals and craft workshops). In each case there is a link with a village in Belgium (or another West European country) to help with external marketing. About a thousand bed-nights were secured during the first year of operations (1994) and the scheme may be extended to other parts of the country.

ANTREC and OVR together provide a viable base for co-operation with the EU's aid program for Eastern Europe (Plop 1996). This is known as PHARE although its scope now goes way beyond the countries of Hungary and Poland for which the name of the organisation was first devised. PHARE works with OVR in respect of infrastructure and training and with ANTREC for promotion and implementation. Under the Village Tourism Pilot Project (VTPP) undertaken in collaboration with OVR, the four villages of Arieseni (Alba), Bran (Brasov), Vadu Izei (Maramures) and Vama (Suceava) should finish up with a model standard of rural tourism co-ordination (covering information, product development and infrastructure / customer service, provided through a Local Tourism Infrastructure Fund) for the local development of tourism.

This project will also demonstrate the complementarity of local activity and Ministry of Tourism plans. Meanwhile, PHARE also works with ANTREC on the Promotion of Rural Tourism Program. While having strong links with the VTPP, this is primarily intended to promote Romanian rural tourism at exhibitions and fairs of both local and international importance. It will also establish an effective rural tourism reservation network sustainable in the medium term, design brochures and signposts, print materials, and organise symposia and workshops. PHARE is also supporting integrated development in the Apuseni Mountains, where the state has recently restored privileges to the local population that were annulled in the communist period

## **Conclusion**

Since the revolution, Romania has started to rebuild its tourist industry. In keeping with the principle of sustainability, there will be a stronger rural component to take advantage of the opportunities and also to meet an important social need for pluriactivity on the small family farm which has arisen through land restitution. Romania's 'Strategy for Development of the Mountain Zone' seeks agricultural modernisation combined with support for a range of ancillary activity including agro-tourism. However, there are important preconditions that must be satisfied, not only to assure the necessary standards of transport, communications and information, but to stimulate enterprise in the villages at both the community and individual household levels. All this in turn depends on substantial support from government and international agencies. A draft Mountain Law offers some compensation for natural handicaps in order to stabilise the population (especially young families), improve infrastructure and make better use of agricultural, touristic and other resources within ecological limits. But even so, progress will be gradual, dependent on the success of pilot projects in the more promising regions. An important factor will be the success of the current intensification of relations between Danubian states since the bulk of the visitors to Carpathian villages are likely to originate within Romania and neighbouring states. Trends similar to those in Romania are evident in Slovakia and the countries of Former Yugoslavia, contributing to

the development of functions on the Pannonian rim complementing those of the plain. More open frontiers will help this process of rural diversification and specialisation. The strength of handicraft production is already demonstrated in Budapest and other major Pannonian markets. Rural tourism could be another indicator of regional cohesion among the Danubian countries

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