



MARAMURES, AN ICONIC DESTINATION FOR CULTURAL TOURISM IN ROMANIA?

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Abstract *Cultural tourism is one of the most popular types of tourism in Europe. The main reasons are sightseeing, visits to monuments, observing local customs and taking part in festivals. One of the most appreciated areas in terms of cultural tourism in Romania is Maramures, best known for unique tourism objectives such as the wooden churches included in the UNESCO World Heritage Sites or the Merry Cemetery in Sapanta. In this article we aim to make a brief description of cultural tourism in Romania, focusing on Maramureș and to present the main features of the visitor who travels for that purpose.*

Key words:

Cultural tourism, types of cultural tourism, Maramures, cultural tourism in Romania, cultural tourism in Maramures

1. Introduction

Cultural Tourism is one of the most ancient forms of travel and constitute the main motivation for travel in many parts of the world. The concept of cultural tourism started to be used since the 80s, as noted in the 2009 OECD report on the relationship between tourism and culture (academia.edu). Until then culture was seen as a resource for local indigenous population only, while tourism was regarded as an activity of leisure separated from day-to-day life and local culture.

Even if it is difficult to be differentiated from other forms of tourism, due to the mix of travel motivations, the World Tourism Organization estimated the level for cultural journeys to 40% (Țigu et al., 2014; Richards and Munsters, 2010).

This is an important aspect not only for the tourism potential of a certain area, but it is also an important factor for the evaluation of living standards. The cultural factor is often included in studies evaluating the attraction levels of large cities throughout the world made by consulting companies such as PriceWaterHouseCoopers (PWC, 2014) and AT Kearney (AT Kearney, 2014).

At the European level, this form of tourism is getting increased levels of attention. In 1987 the European Council started a program called “Cultural Routes” aimed at promoting the cultural wealth of each country included in the program (29 routes were included). According to data collected each year, the report

published in 2011 showed that Romania is one of the countries who took advantage of its cultural wealth only in a very small percentage - 0.6%, as opposed to countries such as France – 10.4%, with a single route available - Via Pontica (Khovanova-Rubicondo, 2011).

In terms of the level of interest displayed by Romanians in regards to cultural tourism, it turned out to be one of the lowest in Europe. According to Eurobarometer 2014, only 23% of respondents in Romania consider cultural attractions to be important (European Commission, 2014). Low interest for cultural tourism is also the case for those considering tourism destinations in Romania, occupying fifth place in 2013 and sixth place in 2012 (Figure No. 1).

In 2013, the Romanian tourists who contacted travel agencies to buy vacation packages preferred the seaside resorts (14.66 times more tourists), the mountain resorts (7, 24 times more tourists) and spa resorts (4.28 times more tourists) compared to cultural destinations. Romania has a rich cultural and ethnographic dowry which presents an intense interest from tourists. Thus, in our country there are more than 6.600 items of cultural heritage that presents both national and international interest from the total of 44.370 items of cultural heritage, according to the „National Heritage Institute” (clasate.cimec.ro). Among them we note: archeological sites, churches, monuments, urban architectural assemblies.

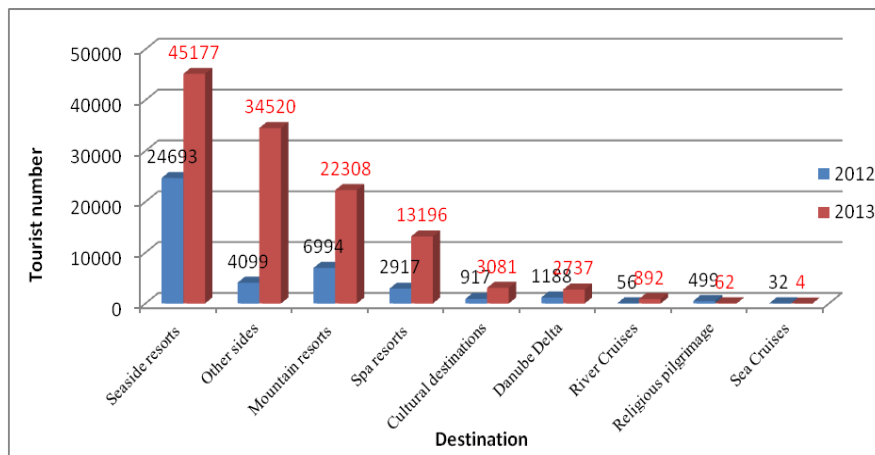


Figure 1. Number of tourists who chose a Romanian destination, according to sales agencies
 Source: Developed by authors based on Romanian Statistical Breviary 2014, p. 57

Ethnographic and folkloric richness of unique originality are represented by wooden churches, village's architecture, various architecture objects resulting from the processing of wood, folk, traditional events, fairs and exhibitions.

In accordance with Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania site, our country is present on UNESCO World Heritage List with a number of seven sites (<http://www.mae.ro/node/1614>). As regards sites number, on a European country ranking Romania is almost on middle (Figure No. 2).

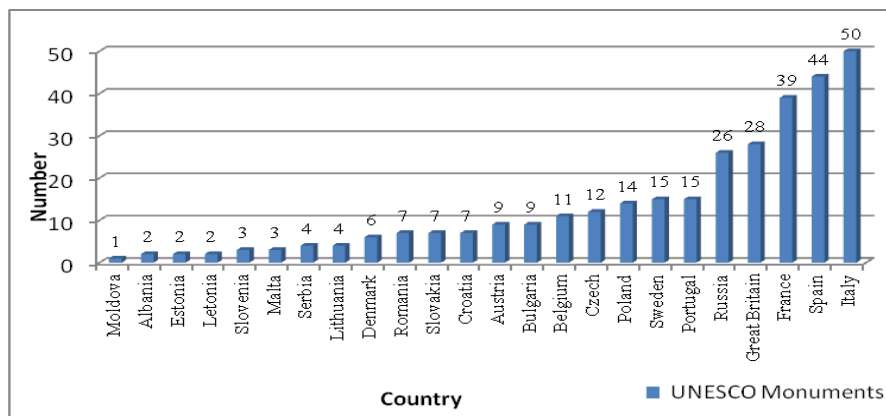


Figure 2. Number of UNESCO monuments in European countries
 Source: Developed by the authors, based on:

<http://whc.unesco.org/pg.cfm?cid=31&l=en&action=stat&&mode=table#s1>

Although tourists benefit from a multitude of cultural attractions, they are encountering numerous difficulties in terms of access to the areas of interest, lack of information, lack of accommodation facilities, etc.

Cultural tourism takes various forms. Among commonly encountered are: religious tourism, visiting of archaeological sites, visiting parks and gardens, attending festivals and cultural events, gastronomic tourism.

Culture passionate tourists have certain characteristics that distinguish them from other types of tourists. According to the sitesincont.ro,

incomemagazine.ro, ZF.ro American tourists who visit Romania are: people born between 1946 and 1964 (baby boomers), have higher education, with annual income over \$ 95,000, have no children or children who became, are interested in culture, traditions, arts, events (34% of all American tourists), prefer 4 and 5 stars accommodation facilities.

According to a research carried out among spectators from cultural institutions of Sibiu, the following profile of culture consumer arise: has an average age of 34 years, are from urban areas, has higher education, has income of 125 - 220 € (35%) and

pursue their activities in education (<http://www.sibiu.ro/ro2/pdf2013/hot129.pdf>).

Romania is faced with the inability of public institutions to stop the destruction of heritage assets, consistent with the lack of education for people in regard to the protection and enhancement of heritage assets in their communities.

2. Maramures County – is it a brand of Romanian cultural tourism?

Maramures County represents one of the most important touristic destinations from Romania. The Maramures County belongs to Romania Nord-West Region and has many and various natural and manmade touristic objectives. In some authors' opinion, Maramures County is considered a Romanian cultural brand. The wooden churches - part of them included in the UNESCO World Heritage, the traditional homestead, riverside technical installations (grain mills, the whirlpools and sawmills), the wooden gates, the wayside cross, the rattle spindle, the seal engraver as well as the traditional peasant costume, Sacel pottery and the traditional cuisine are just some of the attractions which define this area and offer it a particular distinction (Stef, 2007). The Maramures County is recognized for the spectacular landscapes, traditions and habits and also, for the vernacular of Maramures that exists since ancient times. The Merry Cemetery from Sapanta is one of the most important touristic attractions, being famous for the brightly colored paintings of funeral crosses and for epitaphs of

a subtle humor, representing aspects from the life of buried persons. The ethnographical museums in open air (built in Baia Mare and Sighetu Marmatiei) represent truly reservations of peasant architecture, through reconstructions of villages specific in area, being presented also the major habits and occupations of the rural population. The festivals "Marmatia" Winter Festival of Folk Customs and Traditions from Sighetu Marmatiei, „Tanjaua de pe Mara" from Hoteni, Midsummer Night's Festival from Borşa, Hora de la Prislop) are just some cultural manifestations which attract a large numbers of tourists.

Maramures monasteries capture the interest of tourists and the most representatives are: St. Ana Monastery from Rohia (Lapus), Bîrsana Monastery, Moisei Monastery and Sapanta-Peri Monastery. A significant place is occupied by the festival – unique in world – The long road to Merry Cemetery, organized since 2010 (Consiliul Judetean Maramures, 2014). The cultural value of the land is completed by castles, these buildings being attractive for the tourists through their encompassed stories and through their architectural design, although some of them pass into ruins (such as Teleki Castle from Pribilesti), losing thus their charm and their touristic value. (Mojolic, 2013)

According to statistical data, in Maramures in 2013 were functional 19 museums. Compared to previous years, in 2013 it can be noticed a decrease in the number of museums, that drives to a decreasing with 15.78% of the visitors number in 2013 faced to 2012 (see Table 1).

Table 1 . The evolutions of museums in Romania and the number of visitors

| Year | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 |
|--------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Number of museums | 25 | 25 | 25 | 25 | 19 |
| Number of visitors | 218890 | 200724 | 228187 | 275772 | 232333 |

Source: Authors, according to statistical data 2014

Maramures cultural tourism blends, most of the time, with the rural tourism from this area. Maramures rural tourism includes mainly accommodation and food services and, only in a reduced proportion, other types of services, like carriage and sleigh ride, horseback riding, participation to traditional crafts exhibition. However, tourists that chose to spend their vacations in rural Maramures have the opportunity to take contact with habits and traditions developed with the occasions of some important events and moments from the life of Maramures peasants, without them being organized for such touristic purposes (Simion, 2011).

Analyzing the period between 2009–2013 and reporting the number of overnight stays to the number of arrivals results an average length of stay with values between 1.75 – 2.22 days (INS, 2014). Regarding the seasonality of the touristic activities in Maramures County, it results that July, August and September are the most crowded months, at the opposite side being March and November (Figure 3). The winter months, December, January and February, have a slightly higher number of tourists, that thing being due to the winter sports facilities (in Borşa, Cavnic, Şuior) and to the various festivals of customs and traditions taking place in the area.

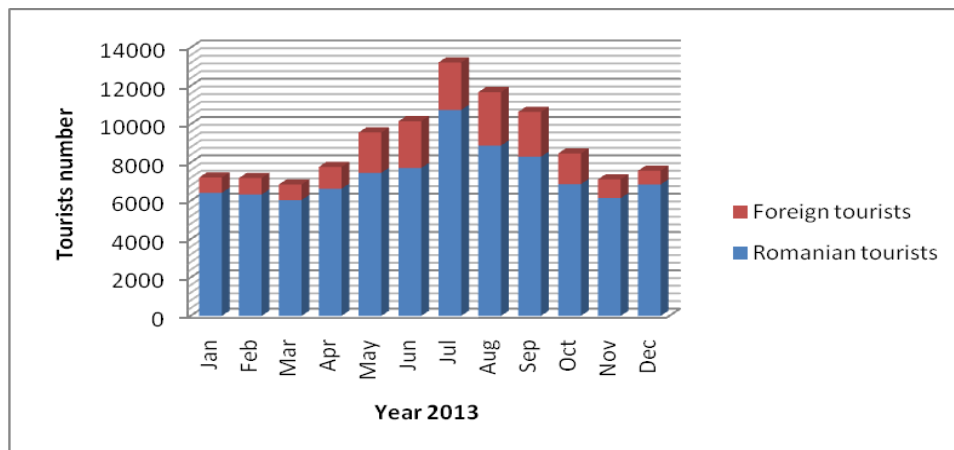


Figure 3. Arrivals of Romanian and foreign tourists in Maramures County in 2013

Source: Authors, according to statistical data retrieved from INS, 2014

Analyzing the average length of stay during 2013, it can be remarked that the interval 1.60-2 days gets the highest values in January, and the smallest ones in March. Going further, the analysis highlights that the

average length of stay of foreign tourists visiting Maramures is slightly higher than that of Romanian tourists, the range being between 1.60–2.09 days against 1.59 – 1.99 days (see Table 2)

| Month | Jan. | Feb. | Mar. | Apr. | May | Jun. | Jul. | Aug. | Sep. | Oct. | Nov. | Dec. | Average |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|---------|
| Length of stay (days) Tourists | 2,01 | 1,63 | 1,60 | 1,92 | 1,78 | 1,83 | 1,78 | 1,64 | 1,68 | 1,65 | 1,75 | 1,98 | 1,77 |
| Length of stay (days) Romanian tourists | 2,00 | 1,62 | 1,59 | 1,93 | 1,79 | 1,87 | 1,82 | 1,65 | 1,67 | 1,65 | 1,75 | 1,98 | 1,77 |
| Length of stay (days) Foreign tourists | 2,09 | 1,68 | 1,67 | 1,88 | 1,75 | 1,72 | 1,61 | 1,61 | 1,73 | 1,68 | 1,69 | 1,94 | 1,75 |

Table no. 2 Average length of stay in 2013

Source: Authors, according to statistical data INS 2014

At the level of Maramures county, according to the last statistical data providing from the Statistical national Institute (INS, 2014) there are 168 units of accommodation providing, overall, 4.636 accommodation places. It result an average of 27.59 accommodation places for one accommodation unit. These accommodation places represent 1.40% from the entire capacity of accommodation in Romania and almost 16 % from the Nord-West Region (second place after Cluj County).

The largest share is held by agro touristic boarding houses – 42%, followed by touristic boarding houses – 35% and the hotels – 12%. The smallest share (approximately 1%) is held by the touristic chalets and by the schools and pre-schools camp.

Despite the fact that Maramures county is recognized like a touristic destinations, there are a lot of aspects which influence the tourists decision to visit the area: poor infrastructure, improper facilities found in

some agro touristic boarding houses from the rural area, the quality of touristic services lower than occidental services, the unaesthetic appearance of some building that spoil the traditional architecture effect, the long distance to the bigger towns and the limited offer of services. The promoting activity is under dimensioned, the situation being determined by the lack of a national network and policy for promoting, by the small number of touristic information points, the lack of some specific brands well managed, the lack of initiatives of the local stakeholders (the city halls, organizations, etc), especially by the indifference of accommodations owners (Simion, 2011)

3. Conclusions

Cultural tourism is a form of tourism that gets increasing attention from the European authorities with the European Council getting directly involved in creating cultural routes and highlighting the important

cultural objectives in every country. From our analysis on cultural tourism in Romania's Maramures area, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- Romania is one of the countries who doesn't take full advantage of its cultural tourism potential although it is included in the cultural routes, with 7 UNESCO World Heritage sites, unique customs and unique festivals;
- Romanian tourists do not show an high level of interest in cultural attractions, being among the last in Europe;
- There is a lack of education in terms of cultural heritage conservation;
- Although Maramures has one of the richest offers in terms of natural and cultural touristic attractions from Romania, it still fails to attract enough tourists. Those tourists who visit Maramures stay for a short period, and as such, it is difficult for them to reach all cultural heritage Maramures County provides;
- The cultural heritage of Maramures is strongly affected by irrational and excessive modernization, resulting in the destruction of this region's identity and identification marks (traditional clothing and architecture), bringing a decrease in tourism.

Maramures is one of Romania's key areas in terms of cultural tourism and abundance in terms of monuments, traditions and festivals here, with the potential of turning those into emblems for this area. Thus, the sustainable cultural exploitation can be a real chance for the national economy development by generating jobs and involving various businesses in the tourism activity.

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