

STUDIES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURISM IN DENSUȘ COMMUNE, HUNEDOARA COUNTY

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***Abstract:** The present paper aims to present the main aspects related to the tourist potential of Densuș commune in Hunedoara county as a possibility for sustainable development. The actual research carried out by the authors is directed at the following aspects: the analysis of natural resources and the presentation of the tourist potential of the Densuș commune, where the main objectives and tourist attractions will be presented. The research ends with the SWOT analysis, with the identification of possible proposals for superior exploitation of the tourist potential in the study area and with the main conclusions drawn from the research.*

***Key words:** rural tourism, tourist attractions, potential, Densus commune*

INTRODUCTION

Based on the fact that "tourist attraction is the main reason for the public's reception of a particular destination for entertainment, curiosity or education", an area or territory is of interest to the extent that it has elements of attraction whose development can lead to tourist activity. [8,9]

According to this approach, the **tourist potential** of an area can be defined, in general terms, *as all the elements that constitute tourist attractions and that are suitable for development to attract and receive travellers* [1].

Other specialists give the same meaning to the concept of tourist potential, specifying the nature of the elements; thus, it is considered "the totality of the elements of the natural and socio-historical environment that can be exploited at a certain stage" for any form of tourist activity. [4]

The terms "**tourist background**" and "**tourist heritage**" are also used to express the totality of attractions. In this case, too, some clarifications are necessary; while the concept of "tourist resources", defined by the totality of natural and cultural resources with a tourist destination, can be equivalent to that of potential, heritage has a much broader scope of reference, including, besides attractions, the specific technical and material base and even infrastructure, components that ensure the exploitation and valorisation of tourist wealth [3].

The diversity of the components of tourism potential and their different roles in the tourism phenomenon has made it necessary to structure and prioritise them; thus, in tourism theory and practice, there are several criteria and ways of grouping tourist attractions. The most important and widely used classification in the field divides tourist attractions (potential) into two main categories according to their content: **natural attractions** and **man-made attractions**; each of the two categories is in turn divided into homogeneous groups. [2]

Many specialists in rural tourism have identified Romania as the country with the greatest potential in Europe for the development of rural tourism as an important source of income, both for investors and for the state budget.

Rural tourism can also be an employment sector, creating jobs for local people. In many cases, employment in this sector can be complementary to another sector of the economy, such

as agriculture, which will ultimately lead to an increase in family income. Investment in rural tourism will lead to an increase in local incomes.[7]

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The research is carried out in Hunedoara County, in the Densuș commune, and aims to propose solutions for the promotion of rural tourism, solutions that can be implemented in a short time and that can generate real economic effects.

The Densuș commune is located in the central-western part of Hunedoara County, at the foot of the Poiana-Rusca Mountains, with the relief shape of the extensions of the radial mountain ridges, which unfold in a fan shape and get lost in the depression of the Hateg Land, resembling a real plain, which, according to some geographers, was once a sea bay. [11]

The main methods used in this research are analysis and synthesis, observation, literature review and SWOT analysis.

REASERCH RESULTS

- **Presentation of the main tourist attractions of Densuș commune**

The main type of tourism practised in the area of Densuș is cultural, represented by the existence of the historical monument "**St. Nicholas Church**" in Densuș, defined by the locals as "a Romanian medieval architectural jewel", being one of the oldest churches in Romania, listed by UNESCO as a universal cultural heritage site. It can be said that the building was built in the 13th century in the Romanesque style. Today, the church is an architectural monument visited by dozens of tourists every year.[10, 15]



Figure 1. St. Nicholas Church in Densuș

The church of Densuș was built on the ruins of an ancient building (4th century). It has a square floor plan (approx. 6 x 6 m), and the nave is pierced by a tower, around which there is a narrow room with a vaulted ceiling. To the east, there is a deep semicircular apse, both inside and out, with a large diaconate on the south side.[17]

Another representative tourist attraction of Densuș is the **Peșteana Swamp**, called "**Bottomless Pit**" by the locals, a botanical reserve. It is one of the most southerly oligotrophic swamps in the country, with a specific flora consisting of mosses, carnivorous plants and rock roses, one of the most representative species of which is *Drosera rotundifolia*, an important glacial relic. The name "Bottomless Pit" comes from the popular legend that it is a bottomless lake from which, in the past, animals fed and were swallowed. The access to the "Bottomless Pit" is on foot from the village of Peșteana and takes about 30 minutes. [5]



Figure 2. The Bottomless Pit at Peșteana



Figure 3. The Wheel of the Sky at Peșteana Botanical Reserve

Source: <https://turismretezat.ro/patrimoniul-natural/taul-fara-fund/> [13]

The House of Volcanoes is a space for use and visits, built and coordinated in 2014 by the Association Drag de Hațeg, together with the volunteers of the UNESCO Geopark Tara Hațegului and the Commune of Densus. It is an ecological construction made of earth, straw and water, adapted to the geological history of the Hațegului depression, where traces of the volcanoes that dominated the island of Hațeg can still be found today. Visitors to the House of Volcanoes can discover dinosaur fossils, animal tracks and mechanical traces.

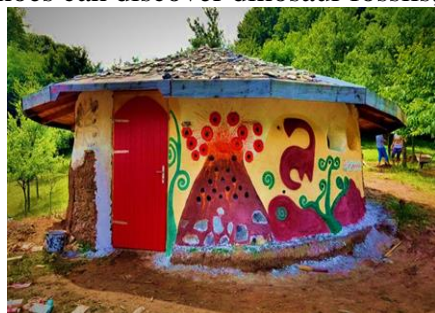


Figure 4. House of Volcanoes in Densus



Figure 5. Fossil traces

The Hațegan Village Museum in Peșteana, housed in a traditional wooden house, was founded ten years ago by Anton Socaciu with the aim of welcoming tourists interested in learning about the history and ancient customs of a rural area in the Hațeg region. The objects exhibited in the museum were bought from the inhabitants of Peșteana village or were given to the museum by various people over the years. Inside the museum, there are folk costumes, books and documents from the Hațeg region, coins and banknotes, objects rarely found today from the peasant's kitchen, sewing machines and other iron materials that remind of the exploitations that took place in this area. [5,6]



Figure 6. Ethnographic Museum from Peșteana

Sursa: <https://turismistoric.ro/> [14]

• **Tourist accommodation in Densuș commune**

In terms of accommodation capacity, Densuș has affordable accommodation for all categories of tourists.

At the level of 2022, Densuș Municipality has more than 15 accommodation units, classified according to the rules of the Ministry of Tourism, in several structures of 2 stars and 1 star. The tourist accommodation structures are equipped with modern bathrooms and can provide tourists with catering services (half board, guest house or B&B) as well as recreational facilities.

- | | |
|--|-----------------|
| 1. Casa de Sub Deal | - 10 places |
| 2. Pension La Doinel | - 14 places |
| 3. Criss Densuș House | - 11 places |
| 4. Country House Hățăgel | - 8 places |
| 5. Valea Mare Hut | - 15 places |
| 6. Pension Dor de Casă | - 10 places |
| 7. Pension Casa Criss | - 14 places |
| 8. Diana Hut | - 12 places |
| 9. Pension Transylvania Log Cabin din Peșteana | - 10 l places |
| 10. By The Forest Valea Verde Huts | - 8 places [12] |



Figure 7. Guest house Transylvania Log Cabin, Peșteana

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/transylvanialogcabins/> [19]



Figura 7. By The Forest Valea Verde Hut



Figura 8. Criss din Densuș House

Source: <http://www.casacriss.ro/index.php/turism> [18]

At present, the accommodation units are not sufficient for tourists, they can opt for accommodation services in other units near the village. [16]

Table 1

SWOT analysis of the current exploitation of tourist resources in Densuș commune

S.W.O.T ANALYSIS OF DENSUȘ COMMUNE	
STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Spectacular landscapes - Important historical monuments - Existence of religious monuments - The attraction of investors through tourism - The landscape that can contribute to the development and practice of different forms of tourism in the area 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Poorly developed road infrastructure - The place is not promoted at the national and European level. - Local traditions and customs are not promoted - Lack of jobs - Weak development of classified tourist accommodation, which would create favourable conditions for rural tourism - Insufficient tourist accommodation capacity - Insufficient promotion of the cultural heritage, the landscape and the various tourist routes.
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Exchange of experience for those working in tourism - The attraction of tourism investors due to Geopark's location - The existence of historical monuments attracts dozens of tourists every year. - Development of modern agriculture from the perspective of rural development funds. - The existence of organic farming and traditional products can be exploited through rural tourism activities. - An area with a high potential for the exploitation of tourist resources, which allows the practice of several types of tourism: religious, agrotourism, cultural and rural, the most representative of which are: the churches listed in the World Cultural Heritage, the botanical reserve Mlaștina de la Peșteana, the House of Volcanoes and the Museum of the village Hătegan. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Flooding - Pollution that reduces the attractiveness of the area - Redevelopment - Loss of young and skilled population to other areas - Decreasing number of tourists

- **Proposals for better use of the tourist potential of the commune Densuș**

Based on the SWOT analysis, the authors propose some measures to improve the situation in Densuș, which could lead to a visible regeneration of the whole commune and the quality of life of its inhabitants:

1. *Organise a hike in Poiana Rusca Mountains*

This is one of the easiest activities to do in a mountain area. In general, hiking is practised by mountain lovers at altitudes above 1200m. Most of the time, tourists climb the mountain alone, but some need a guide to avoid getting lost, especially when the routes are of a higher level of difficulty. Most of the time foreign tourists ask for a guide and often there is none.

2. *Bicycle and ATV hire*

We all know that renting bicycles and ATVs in the summer and autumn is no longer a novelty. In most cases, bicycles are the most desirable to rent, as the cost is much lower and the ride in a scenic area fascinates tourists who want to relax and explore. Tourists are often keen to hire ATVs, especially where the road infrastructure poses minor problems for travel.

3. *Provide space for food caravans*

One of the most important services in a tourist area is food, and very often tourists are not looking for a restaurant in particular, but rather a place where they can buy something good and fast so that they can continue to use the area and enjoy all that the commune of Densuș has to offer. Apart from the fact that this business would be profitable, it would certainly contribute to the development of tourism in the Densuș area.

4. Establishment of a gastronomic point with local products

To develop the tourist area of Densuș, it is necessary to establish a gastronomic point that will delight tourists with traditional local dishes. This place should offer tourists the opportunity to enjoy a variety of traditional local products with rural specificity while respecting the rules of hygiene so that the health of those who cross the threshold is not affected.

5. Mine rehabilitation

The rehabilitation of the mines represents an opportunity for future development, as they could be used to create an underground museum, which would be the only one of its kind in our country. This museum would include all the tools and objects used for iron mining, with a history of around 100 years. Another way of attracting more tourists would be to introduce carriage transport.

6. Creation of a museum

Another direction of development envisages the creation of a museum on the site of the former school of Peștenița, demolished in 2016, with a gallery of exhibits of the carnivorous plant, the Dew of the Sky, illustrating an important glacial relic, located in the Botanical Reserve Mlaștina de Peșteana.

7. Promotion of rural and agri-tourism

All the other proposals are aimed at developing an important factor in the development of Densuș, namely **rural tourism** or agrotourism. This type of tourism can be developed thanks to the exchange of experiences with the French. Rural tourism and agrotourism can be developed by reviving old customs such as the "howling with the ox", the shooting of the rooster on the second day of Easter, the measuring and climbing of the sheep on the mountain, "Dodoloiul", "Clăcile" and the village feast "Nedeia". On the other hand, these forms of tourism could develop, as the French have shown an interest in exchanging experiences in agriculture and other fields.[6]

CONCLUSIONS

According to the study carried out on the Densuș commune, the tourist potential of this locality is not sufficiently exploited, as several obstacles make it impossible to revitalise the area to increase its attractiveness. The poor infrastructure is the main factor, starting with the way it is presented and continuing with the lack of a drinking water and sewage treatment plant, and the absence of sewage and gas. The lack of facilities for recreation and tourism and the indifference of the authorities to take measures to bring about changes for the better are all losses for the future development of the municipality.

Another existing problem is that **the tourist attractions that are representative of the municipality are not being promoted to their full potential**. Promoting these tourist attractions would attract both domestic and foreign tourists. As far as the main tourist attractions are concerned, among those presented above, **the focus should be on the Church of St. Nicholas**, which is one of the oldest churches in Romania, **the Bottomless Pit and the Village Museum**, as these are the most representative attractions for Densuș, according to the local community, and also the ones that attract the most tourists.

Densuș Church is one of the most important tourist attractions in Romania. It is unique in Europe, as it is the only stone church hundreds of years old that still holds services. Its unmistakable appearance and the fact that it still serves as the village church make this place a must for tourists.

Another solution that would speed up the regeneration process of this community is to access European funds for the restructuring of old churches and the rehabilitation of road infrastructure. With access to European funds, it would also be beneficial to build more accommodation facilities with different themes, which would make it possible for tourists to enter.

The Densuș commune has the chance to be reborn, thanks to its resources, its favourable geographical position, to its rich history, starting from the 13th century (with the Church of Saint Nicholas, which for the locals is a "medieval Romanian architectural jewel"), and to other tourist attractions "waiting" to be exploited.

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