

RESEARCH ON THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COMMUNITY SASCA MONTANA, CARAS-SEVERIN COUNTY, THROUGH AGRO-TOURISM

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Abstract: *The most valuable tourist offers of the Banat mountain, in general, of Caras Severin County is nature. The desire to spend as much free time as possible in nature, associated with the promotion of the ethno-folkloric culture of the upland areas, allowed the development of rural tourism in these areas, especially agritourism. Mining town, where, over the years, as in many places in the country, the mining activity was interrupted, Sasca Montana faced, in the last decades, a high degree of migration of the local population to other towns, in search of a job. Those who remained tried to orient themselves towards other sectors, exploiting the natural potential of the area and developing a series of activities in the field of tourism.*

Key words: *agritourism, rural development, rural communities, Sasca Montana*

INTRODUCTION

Agritourism activity can be a way of sustainable, integrated diversification of rural economies and can offer alternative incomes to the population in rural areas, relying on the authenticity of traditional products, which attract consumers, saturated with the homogeneity of the same products. Thus, the practice of agro-tourism activity should start from the premise of the need to identify some possibilities for capitalizing on the potential/own products obtained within the guesthouses/households/farms, through the lens of tourist services. [2,11]

There are a variety of terms that describe tourism activities in rural areas: agritourism, farm tourism, rural tourism, leisure tourism, alternative tourism, etc. Among the forms of rural tourism, agritourism is the one that, in the last period, has experienced a stronger evolution and enjoys greater attention. The reason? The authenticity of rural spaces is a quality that is more and more in demand, in the conditions of today's life. [3,8]

Explaining the concept of agritourism requires treating it as a complex system, the study of which cannot only be done by analyzing its component parts that are concentrated around the activity within the guesthouse or agritourism farm, but also involves the study of the overall behavior, i.e. the relationship between the components of this system and the environment in which it operates. [2,6,13] The environment in which it operates is the rural area, an environment that can satisfy a wide range of motivations: from rest and recreation, to knowledge, culture, sports, treatment, hunting or fishing, etc. By satisfying these needs, agritourism can be considered a way of fully exploiting the rural space in all its complexity. Through agrotourism, the tourist benefits from an unpolluted and picturesque environment, natural tourist attractions and cultural-historical values, traditions and customs present in the rural environment. [1,7,10]

Agrotourism is a relatively recent concept, which refers to the various forms of tourism directly related to agricultural activities and/or constructions having destinations, role, functions in the field of agriculture. [8,12]

Agrotourism is a segment of rural tourism, with the particularity that it is practiced in farms, preferably active ones, offering the tourist the opportunity to participate in various agro-zootechnical activities. As a differentiated tourist offer, agritourism appeared in Europe in the 1960s, Italy being the country with the greatest development. In legal, technical and scientific definitions of agritourism, agricultural and tourist activity are

always related, ultimately it is an activity that supplements the income of farmers. [3,9] So, the concept of agritourism is circumscribed at the level of the household, the farm or the agricultural holding, consisting in the organization of tourist reception activities and all tourist services at the level of the agricultural unit, constituting "a complementary solution, directly supporting the development of agriculture, with positive effects both economic and social". [4,9]

Sasca Montana commune is a picturesque commune located in Caras-Severin County, in the southwestern part of Romania. [2,9,11] Nestled among the Carpathian Mountains, this commune is known for its rich history, cultural diversity and impressive natural landscapes.

Sasca Montana commune is located in the southwest of Caras-Severin County, Banat and Romania, in the mountainous area of the southern Banat at the interference of the Locvei Mountains to the west, the Almajului Mountains to the east and the Anina Mountains to the northeast, being composed of 5 villages: Sasca Montana, Sasca Romana, Slatina Nera, Bogodint and Potoc. [5,11,18]

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was carried out with the aim of identifying the implications of the development of agritourism activities on the rural communities of Sasca Montana commune. The basis of the study was the processing of statistical data obtained from various approved institutions in the field: the Statistical Yearbook, the Local Development Strategy of the Municipality of Sasca Montana, in the period 2021-2027, the Strategy for the integrated development of tourism in the Caras-Severin - Vrsac - Area of South Banat, Strategic Tourism Development Program at the Level of the Area Formed by Timis, Caras-Severin and Mehedinti Counties, Sustainable Development Strategy of Caras-Severin County 2022-2027 and so on.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Set in a picturesque natural setting, in the mountainous area of Banat, in the valley of the Sușara stream, the commune of Sasca Montana has established itself, in recent years, as a real tourist destination. Caras-Severin County is recognized as a county with a high tourist potential, given the harmonious combination of the relief, predominantly mountainous, 65.5%, the rest of the surface being represented by depressions about 17%, hills 11% and hilly plains about 6, 5%.

Table 1 presents the main existing tourist reception structures at the level of the Western Region and Caras-Severin County, thus indicating the suitability of this area for the development of tourist activities.

Table 1.

Tourist reception structures with accommodation function, Western Region

	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2021	2022	2023
Total accommodation units								
WEST Region	259	365	497	652	888	1012	1059	1073
Arad	63	85	138	145	156	162	172	167
Caras-Severin	78	102	143	231	258	316	334	337
Hunedoara	68	87	94	108	313	371	403	424
Timis	50	91	122	168	161	163	150	145
Agritourism pensions								
WEST Region	7	38	93	148	239	261	285	289
Arad	2	8	24	25	38	41	50	52
Caras-Severin	4	16	36	71	93	97	105	103
Hunedoara	1	11	26	24	81	95	107	112
Timis	:	3	7	28	27	28	23	22

Source: [14,16]

At the level of the Western Region, there is an increase in the number of accommodation units, given the fact of the development of tourist activities, in all counties of the region. The increase in the number of accommodation units at regional level, during the analyzed period, is 314.28%, while at the level of Caras Severin county, the value is higher than the regional average, 332.05%.

Having a high natural tourist potential, Caras-Severin County is in 2nd place, within the Western Region, in terms of the number of accommodation units, after Hunedoara County, concentrating 31.41% of the accommodation units registered at the regional level, figure 1.

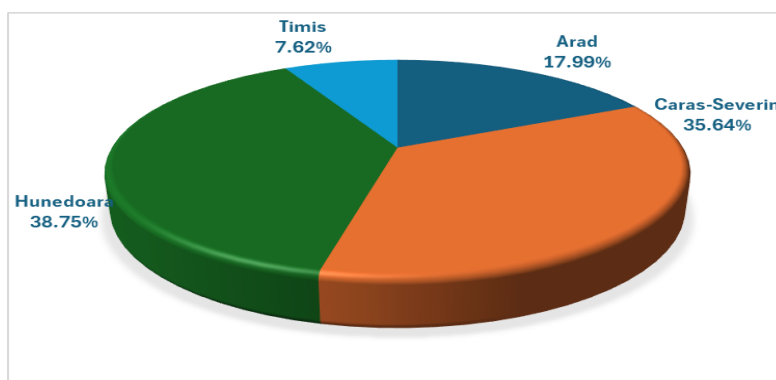


Figure 1. Distribution of accommodation units, by county, Western Region, 2023, [14]

Having a high rural tourism potential, Caras-Severin County stands out for the large number of agritourism guesthouses, existing at the county level, representing in 2023, 30.56% of the total accommodation units.

During the analyzed period, their number increased a lot, from a number of 4 agro-tourist guesthouses registered in 2000, reaching a number of 103 agro-tourist guesthouses, in 2023, the increase being 25.75 times. And in the case of this type of tourist reception structures, at the regional level, Caras-Severin County takes the second place, after Hunedoara County (38.75%), owning 35.64% of the total of agritourism guesthouses in the West Region, in the year 2023.

The agritourism pensions registered at the county level are distributed unevenly, by localities, their number being on a permanent increase. In figure 2., the situation of agritourism guesthouses in the main localities with agritourism potential is presented, in the year 2023.

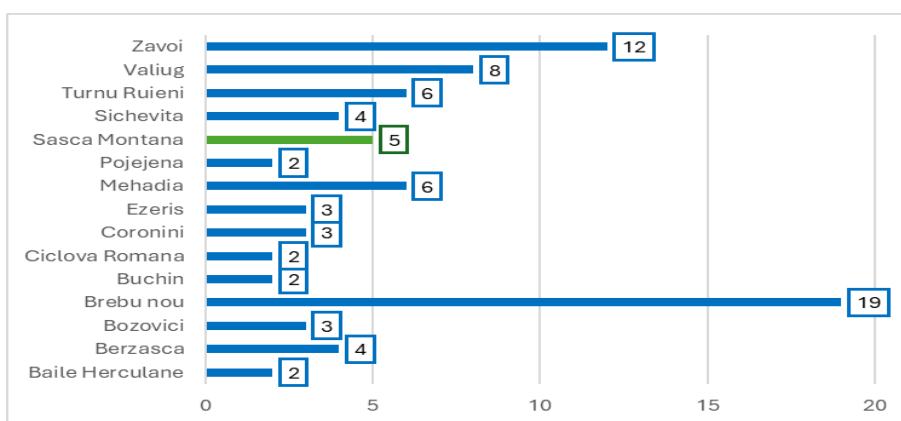


Figure 2. Distribution of agritourism guesthouses, Caras-Severin County, 2023, [14]

With a total number of 5 guesthouses registered, in 2023, the commune of Sasca Montana is in 5th place, at the county level, accounting for 4.85% of the total number of agritourism guesthouses in Caras-Severin County.

Of the 14 accommodation units registered on the territory of the Sasca Montana commune, 5 of them are agro-tourism guesthouses, representing 31.71%

Figure 3 shows the evolution of the number of accommodation structures in the commune of Sasca Montana, in the period 2010-2023.

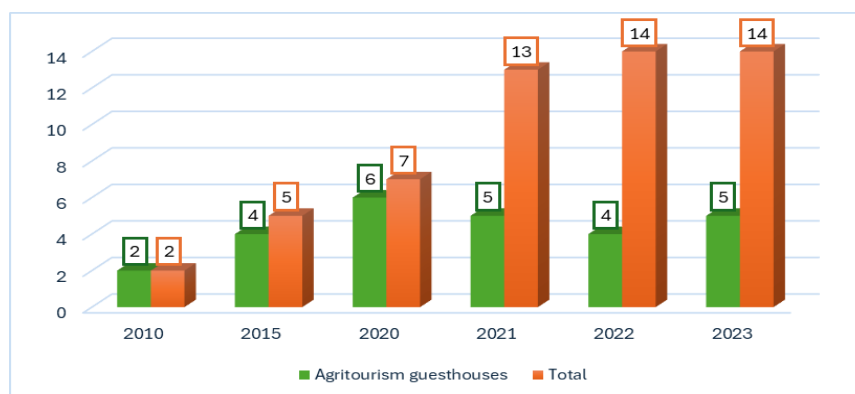


Figure 3. Evolution of the number of accommodation structures, in the commune of Sasca Montana, 2010-2023, [14]

During the analyzed period, tourist reception structures in Sasca Montana registered an upward trend, the average growth rate being 600%. As for agro-tourism guesthouses, their number experienced a fluctuating evolution, marked by a period of growth 2010-2020, when their number increased by 200%, followed by a reduction in the period 2020-2022, 33.33%, currently being registered, again, an increasing trend. The decrease in the number of agritourism guesthouses, in the period 2020-2022, is due to the restrictions imposed by the Covid19 pandemic, which limited HoReCa activity and led to a decrease in revenues in this field.

The existing and operating accommodation capacity in Caras-Severin County also indicates an intense tourist activity in the county, this being supported by the variety of forms of tourism that can be practiced in the county. [16,17]

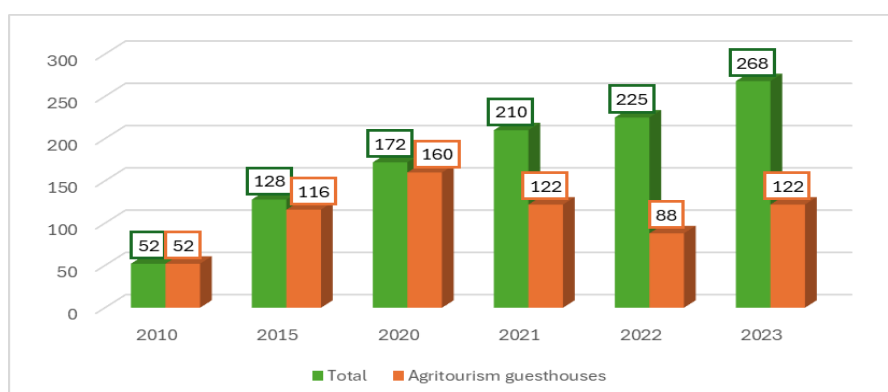


Figure 4. Evolution of the existing accommodation capacity, in the commune of Sasca Montana, 2005-2023, [14]

In the period 2005-2023, there are increases in accommodation capacity, both in terms of existing capacity and that in operation. At the regional level, the increases recorded in the case of accommodation capacity in operation are 51.78% for all

accommodation structures and 1.29 times, in the case of agro-tourism guesthouses. At the level of Caras Severin county, the increases recorded for the existing accommodation capacity are 22.99% for all accommodation structures and 32.52 times, in the case of agro-tourism guesthouses.

In the period 2005-2023, the existing accommodation capacity in the accommodation units in Sasca Montana registered an upward trend, the average growth rate being 415.38%. The analysis of the same indicator for accommodation units of the type of agro-tourist guesthouses shows a fluctuating evolution, like the number of registered tourist guesthouses.

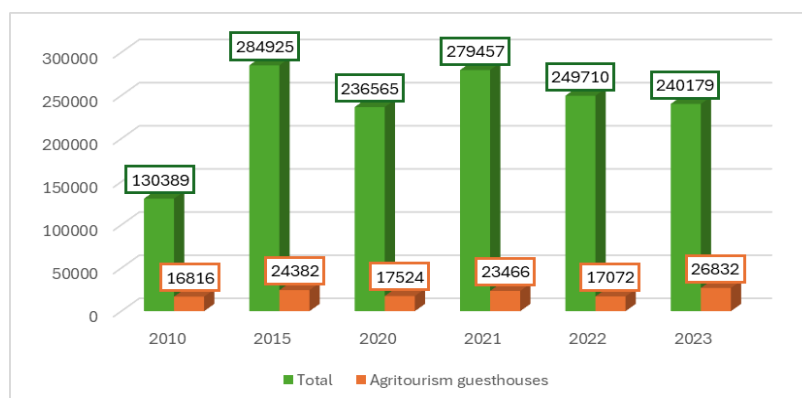


Figure 5. Evolution of the accommodation capacity in operation, in the commune of Sasca Montana, 2005-2023, [14]

The accommodation capacity in operation indicates a fluctuating evolution, marked by an upward trend in the period 2010-2015 (+118.52% for all accommodation units and +44.87% for agritourism guesthouses), followed by a decrease in the period 2015-2020 (-16.97% for all accommodation units and -27.99% for agritourism guesthouses). For the next three years, the situation is marked by both increases and decreases, reaching in 2023, the value of 240,179 place-days for all accommodation units and 26,832 place-days for agro-tourism guesthouses.

From the data presented in figure 6., a concentration of accommodation capacity in operation can be observed in the May-September period, a fact due to higher requests from tourists for the use of accommodation units, during this period. Higher values were also recorded during the November-January winter holidays.

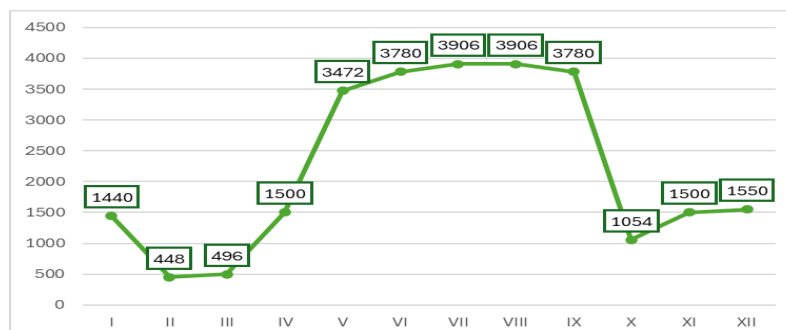


Figure 6. The monthly evolution of the accommodation capacity in operation, in the agro-tourism guesthouses, in the commune of Sasca Montana, 2023, [14]

The net utilization index of the accommodation capacity in operation indicates the degree of concentration of tourist arrivals during a year.

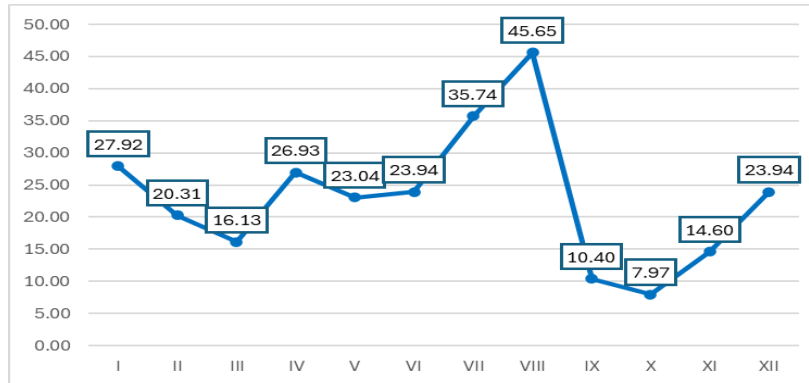


Figure 7. Index of net use of the accommodation capacity in operation, in agro-tourist boarding houses, from the commune of Sasca Montana, on Monday, 2023, [14]

Figure 7 shows the degree of utilization of the accommodation capacity in operation, per month, in 2023. The highest value - 45.65%, is recorded in August, which is the month with the most overnight stays recorded at the level of agro-tourism guesthouses, and the lowest value was recorded in October, 7.97%.

Tourist arrivals represent the basic indicator in the analysis of tourist demand, providing a clear picture of the number of people who have expressed their desire to visit the commune of Sasca Montana.

At the level of the West Region, in the period 2000-2023, an increasing trend of tourist arrivals can be observed, except for 2020, when due to the restrictions imposed by the Covid 19 pandemic, there was a decrease (-45.26%, compared to the year 2015). Tourist arrivals increased by 1.68 times for all tourist units and by 149.76 times, in the case of agritourism guesthouses.

The evolution of tourist arrivals in Caras-Severin County follows the existing trend at the regional level. For the entire tourism activity, tourist arrivals increased by 1.69 times, a value like the regional one, and in the case of tourist arrivals in agro-tourism guesthouses, the value of this indicator increased by 54.72 times, a value lower than the regional average.

In 2023, in terms of the distribution of tourist arrivals, in the agro-tourism guesthouses of Caras-Severin County, two of the localities stand out, Ezeris - 3598 tourists, Sasca Montana - 3230 tourists, which together concentrated 33.45% of the total number of tourists registered in the agritourism guesthouses, from Caras-Severin County.

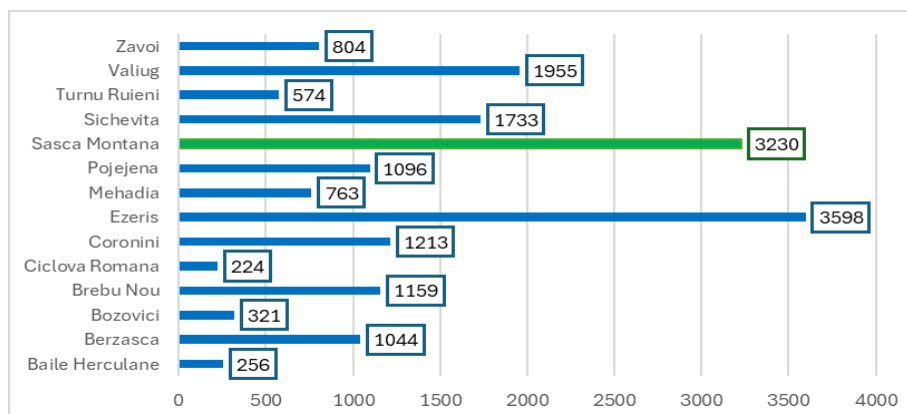


Figure 8. Tourist arrivals, in agro-tourism guesthouses, from Caras-Severin County, 2023, [14]

The evolution of tourist arrivals in agritourism guesthouses in Sasca Montana, figure 9., shows a fluctuating evolution, with a slightly downward trend, in 2022, respecting precisely the evolution situation of the number of agritourism guesthouses. During the analyzed period, the number of tourists increased by 1076.67 times.

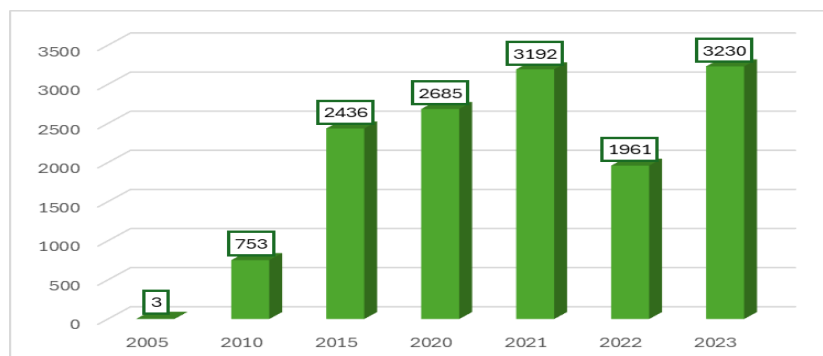


Figure 9. Evolution of tourist arrivals, in agro-tourist guesthouses, from Sasca Montana, 2005-2023, [14]

In close correlation with tourist arrivals are their overnight stays, providing a clear picture of the number of nights spent by each tourist in the respective accommodation unit.

We previously knew that tourist arrivals decreased in 2020, because of the restrictions imposed during the pandemic and the limitation of activity in the HoReCa system, the reductions are much more pronounced than in the case of tourist arrivals.

Thus, at the regional level, the decrease in overnight stays on all tourist accommodation units was in 2020, compared to 2015, by 50.76%, and in the case of agro-tourism guesthouses by 26.42%. At the level of Caras-Severin County, the reductions were 38.13%, for the entire tourist activity and 20.06% in the case of agro-tourism guesthouses, these values being lower than those recorded at the level of the West Region.

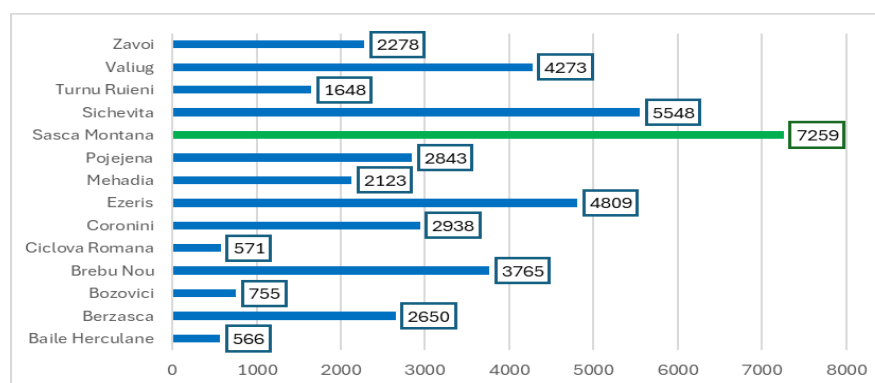


Figure 10. Evolution of overnight stays by tourists, in agro-tourism guesthouses, in Caras-Severin County, 2023, [14]

Regarding overnight stays registered at the level of localities in Caras-Severin County that have this type of accommodation units, figure 10., the commune of Sasca Montana ranks first, with a total number of 7259 tourist days, at the level of 2023, concentrating 15.13% of the total number of nights registered in agro-tourist guesthouses, at the county level. [14,15]

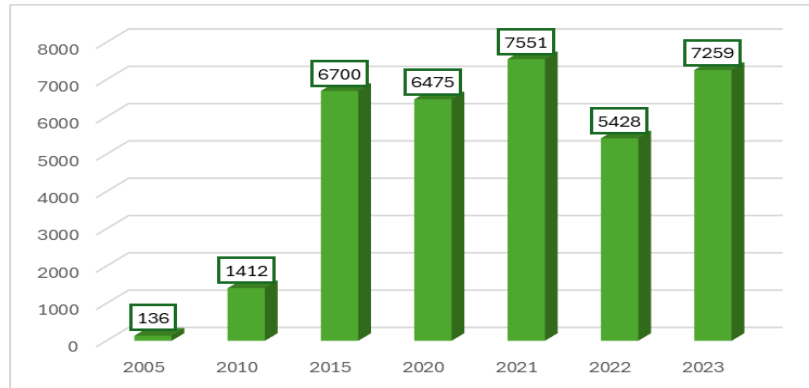


Figure 11. Evolution of overnight stays by tourists, in agro-tourist guesthouses, in Sasca Montana, 2005-2023, [14]

In the period 2005-2023, the number of overnight stays increased 53.37 times, because of the development of tourist accommodation infrastructure in the area and obviously, the intensification of tourist traffic. The highest value was recorded in 2021, and the lowest in 2022, both situations being due, in principle, to the increase or decrease in the number of agro-tourism guesthouses.

The average duration of the stay spent in the agro-tourism guesthouses in Sasca Montana, per month, in the year 2023, is presented in figure 12.

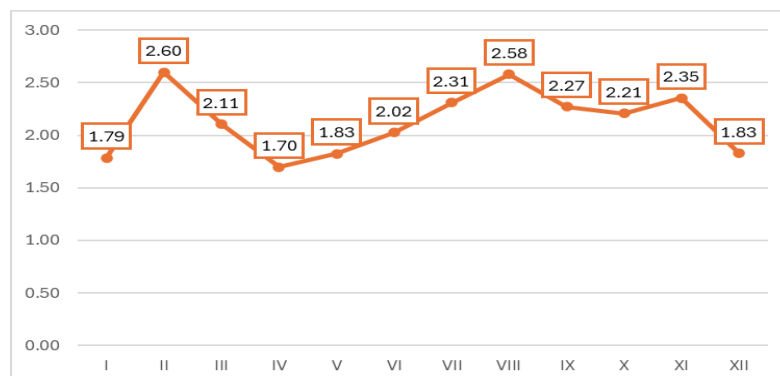


Figure 12. Average length of stay, in agro-tourist guesthouses, in Sasca Montana, per month, 2023, [14]

From the analysis of the data presented, it can be observed that an uneven distribution in terms of the length of stay, in the agro-tourism guesthouses in Sasca Montana. Thus, it indicates a longer duration of spending free time in these accommodation structures, in the summer, in the months of June-September in the month of August, with the highest value being recorded at 2.58 days/tourist, a value approximately equal to that recorded in the month of February 2.60 days/tourist.

The future of Sasca Montana Municipality is promising, with several development plans aimed at improving the quality of life for residents and promoting sustainable growth. Key areas of focus include improving infrastructure, expanding education and health services, and diversifying the local economy.

The commune of Sasca Montana is a unique and vibrant community with a rich history and a diverse cultural heritage. Despite the challenges it faces, the commune has a significant potential for growth and development.

CONCLUSIONS

In most of the Romanian mountain areas, regardless of the region, therefore also in the Banat mountain area, rural tourism and agrotourism are rather, a potentiality rather than a reality. The beauty and tranquility of villages, of rural households, the variety of agricultural activities, the attractiveness of natural landscapes, the traditions and ethno-folkloric culture of each rural mountain locality, ensure the agro-tourism potential of mountain areas. However, the development of agritourism in these areas requires major investments in the development of the mountain rural infrastructure, in general, but especially the tourist one.

Also, in addition to the development of the rural and tourist technical infrastructure, for the development of tourist activities in the rural area, an intense promotional activity is required and the establishment of tourism information networks that allow assiduously informing the population about the existence of these forms of tourism.

The commune of Sasca Montana has a major tourist potential, not yet exploited to its true value, a fact that requires the adoption of strategies aimed at preserving the traditional character of the community and the conservation of the ethno-folkloric heritage of the area, these being in fact elements of major importance in the development of rural tourism and agritourism.

Sasca Montana, a mountain village from Banat, with a tourist vocation, can be constituted as a unique tourist product equally for the national and the European market. The promotion of this area, as a rural tourist destination, at an international level, will make Romania known, will increase interest in this area and, why not, will even generate business opportunities.

The impact of tourism on the local economy is significant, providing employment opportunities and generating income for local businesses. However, it is important to manage the development of tourism in a sustainable way to conserve the natural environment and the cultural heritage of the commune.

There is also significant growth potential in the tourism sector, with opportunities to develop eco-friendly accommodation, guided tours and cultural experiences. By capitalizing on its natural and cultural assets, the Commune of Sasca Montana can build a sustainable future that benefits both residents and visitors.

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