

## ASPECTS THAT CHARACTERIZE RURAL TOURISM ACTIVITY IN SIBIU COUNTY

IANCU TIBERIU<sup>1</sup>, ADAMOV TABITA CORNELIA\*<sup>1</sup>, PETROMAN CORNELIA<sup>1</sup>,  
PETROMAN IOAN<sup>1</sup>, BRAD IOAN<sup>1</sup>, STANCIU SORIN<sup>1</sup>, BĂNEȘ ADRIAN<sup>2</sup>  
<sup>1</sup>*Banat's University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine "King Michael I of  
Romania" from Timisoara, Faculty of Agricultural Management*  
<sup>2</sup>*Romanian Academy-Timișoara Branch, Bv. Mihai Viteazu 24,  
300223, Timiș, Timișoara*

\*Corresponding author's e-mail: tabitaadamov2003@yahoo.com

***Abstract:** Romanian rural area preserves still unaltered the traditional spiritual values, cultural values, of the Romanian people, the social-economic life and the picturesque scenery of these lands. These values give to the rural area favorable conditions for the development of tourist activities, especially agrotourism. Over time, Sibiu County managed to become a top tourist destination in Romania for both Romanian and foreign tourists. This status is conferred, among other things, by the international recognition of the cultural city of Sibiu, the popularity of the main attractions among the public (Sibiu, Marginimea Sibiu, UNESCO sites, Balea, Paltinis, Ocna Sibiului), but also the leading position occupied in the Romanian tourist landscape. The well-defined touristic offer alongside the good services and especially the sustained promotion are the premises on which the current and future success of the county's tourism development plans is based.*

**Key words:** rural tourism, agrotourism, tourist village, traditions and customs

### INTRODUCTION

The valences of the rural environment represent an asset with profound connotations due to the environment in which the current economic and social life runs at national and international level. At present, agrotourism is one of the most dynamic forms of tourism practiced in most European countries, but also in our country, stimulating the economic development by capitalizing the local resources from rural area. [1] This form of tourism offers the opportunity for the residents to supplement their income by capitalizing the traditional household products and compensating the lack of jobs from the rural area, contributing to the development of human resources.

A first aspect is that rural tourism is one of the first forms of tourism manifested in Romania. Thus, an incursion in time, in order to see how the forms of tourism practiced were succeeded, it would highlight the fact that rural tourism has been practiced along with hiking, nautical tourism and hiking tourism since ancient times. [2,5,6,10]

Through the variety of landscapes, the richness of natural heritage, the specificity of different ethnographic regions, the vivacity of traditions, and the hospitality of the inhabitants, the rural area fascinates all those who adore travel, and also has the opportunity to discover the culture of those areas. The return to nature is the result of the need for relaxation, health, physical and spiritual comfort and is a valid motivation for all age groups, sex, and social status. Modern man does not break from the natural way of life, and his contact with the rustic environment has effects in maintaining the balance.

Sibiu County is part of the Center Region alongside the counties of Alba, Brasov, Covasna, Harghita and Mures. Sibiu County, located in the center of Romania, in the south of Transylvania, guarded by the mountains of Fagaras, Cibin and Lotru.

The main characteristics of the tourist resources from Sibiu County are the diversity and the high value compared to the tourist offer of Romania. The natural tourist resources range from the Alpine mountain landscape to special relief forms, while the anthropic tourist resources comprise several main subcategories (ethno-folkloric ones, historical-

architectural, religious one), whose importance is amplified by the multicultural character from the area. [4,13]

Along the County of Sibiu can be identified five ethno-folkloric areas, the main feature being the intersection of the Saxon culture with the Romanian one within the county: Marginimea Sibiului (comprising 18 localities south and southwest of Sibiu, Jina - Talmaciu/Cindrel Mountains - (Turnu Rosu - Arpasu de Jos/Fagaras Mountains), Valea Hartibaciului (Casolt - Agnita) and Secasului Plateau (Apoldu de Jos - Micasasa).

Situated at the foot of the mountains, **Marginimea Sibiu** is the cradle of preserving the ancient Romanian customs and the place where festivals and fairs of folk tradition are held, as well as the practice of the ancestral crafts and occupations. The gastronomy of the area is also recognized thanks to the traditional agricultural products and the novelty of the Saxon influences in the Romanian cuisine. So, the anthropic tourist heritage also has an important intangible component, the potential of which begins to be exploited. The **Tarnavelor Plateau** is an area of concentration of important tourist attractions in the category of fortified churches, resources due to the history pages written by the Saxon population in the area. Tarnavelor Plateau is also a well-known viticulture area, but the exploitation of this resource remains limited in Sibiu County. The **Hartibaciului Plateau** is an area with potential in the tourism exploitation of multiculturalism (from the fortified churches in the Romans professions). The Secas **Plateau** is distinguished as a traditional wine-growing area, but whose potential remains largely unexploited. **The Olt Country** represents, similarly to Marginimea Sibiu, a space of Romanian culture, but with a stronger Saxon influence, with some specific elements (if the Marginimea is recognized for the sheep breeding, the cattle are growing successfully in the Olt Country). [10,17]

The anthropic tourist resources are: Sibiu and Medias municipalities (medieval urban architectural ensembles), Marginimea Sibiu (Saliște - Sibiel - Gura Riului), Cisnădie - Cisnădioara and the Biertan and Valea Viilor communes, UNESCO monuments, ethno-folkloric areas with traditions, gastronomy and specific crafts more important from the point of view of the tourist exploitation is the Marginimea Sibiului, but also the Olt Country, the Hartibaci Valley, the Tarnavelor Valley and the Secas Plateau), the fortified churches (with a concentration in the northern half of the county), the palaces/castles/fortifications spread through the county, the museums (Brukenthal and ASTRA are among the most five important museums of Romania), the events/festivals (theater, music, folklore, crafts, medieval, sports, etc.), skiing

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The theme of this paper is a topical one aimed at identifying viable solutions for revitalizing the rural economy through tourism activities. In order to highlight the role of agrotourism in the development of rural communities, we conducted a diagnostic analysis of the existing situation based on statistical data. The research is oriented towards knowing the role of agrotourism in the economic growth of the Romanian villages. In this respect, we have analyzed some economic indicators that characterize the tourist activity and the accommodation capacity, the arrivals of the tourists, the number of overnight stays, the utilization rate of the accommodation capacity and the average length of the stay.

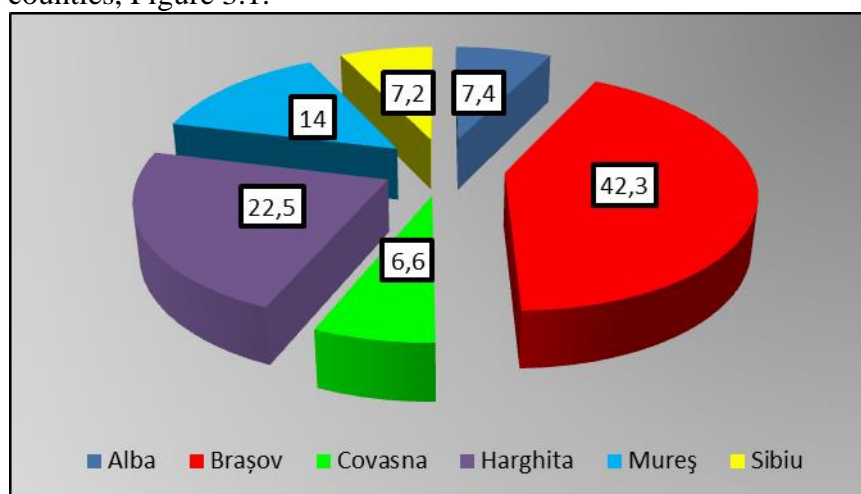
## RESEARCH RESULTS

Its geographical position and historical conditions gave birth to a true cultural diversity in Sibiu County. The great number of colonists who have long gone through this area has had a great influence on local civilization and culture. Today, the ethno-folkloric areas of Sibiu County are individualized so well, each of them is different in its own way, like fragments of a mosaic that put together forms a well-wound whole.

The tourist offer includes in its structure all the tourist elements that can constitute tourist attractions and which can be appreciated by stimulating tourist demand. To all these, there is added the technical-material infrastructure that has the role to put in value the existing tourism resources. [3,9,14]

In the analysis of the tourist offer we use indicators such as: the number of accommodation establishments with accommodation function, the tourist accommodation capacity (existing and in operation), the distribution of accommodation units by categories of comfort and the net use index of the accommodation capacity.

The structure of the technical material base of the accommodation units in the Center Region shows the preponderance of the agrotourist (594) and of the tourist (429) guesthouses. The distribution of tourist accommodation structures is different, by component counties, Figure 3.1.



**Figure 3.1. The structure of the tourist accommodation units, by the counties of the Center Region**

The distribution by county of accommodation facilities with accommodation function is uneven, the highest concentration being achieved in Brasov County - 42.3% from the total number of tourist units in the region. In Sibiu County, 7.2% of the total agrotourism guesthouses are concentrated at the regional level.

**Table 3.1.**

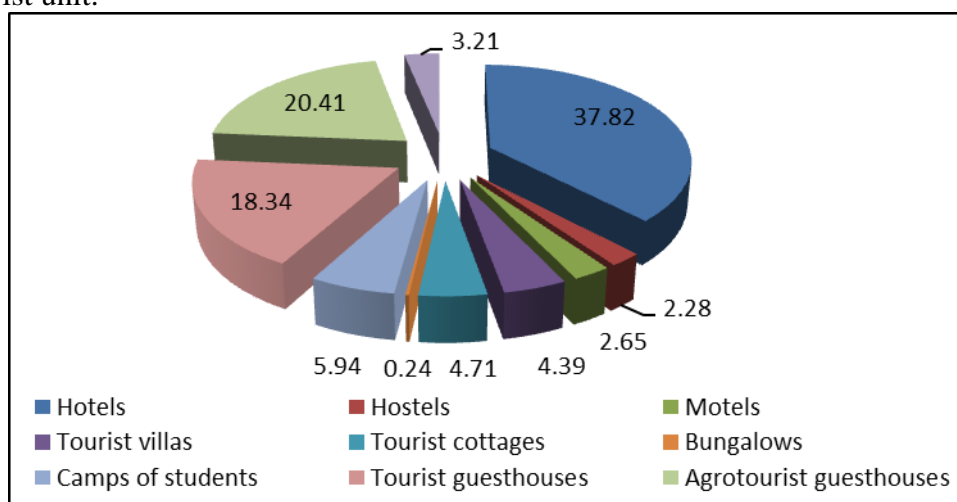
**The evolution of accommodation structures, Sibiu County, 2005-2016**

	2005	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
<b>Total</b>	111	167	109	109	112	119	315	295
<b>Hotels</b>	19	34	36	34	36	39	43	42
<b>Hostels</b>	1	1	3	2	2	6	9	8
<b>Motels</b>	5	7	5	5	5	3	10	8
<b>Tourist villas</b>	7	5	3	2	2	3	17	18
<b>Tourist cottages</b>	7	9	6	6	6	6	14	12
<b>Bungalows</b>	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
<b>Camps of students</b>	8	7	7	8	8	9	8	7
<b>Tourist guesthouses</b>	16	29	27	25	26	23	90	84
<b>Agrotourist guesthouses</b>	41	73	20	25	25	28	118	110

Source: <http://statistici.insse.ro/shop>

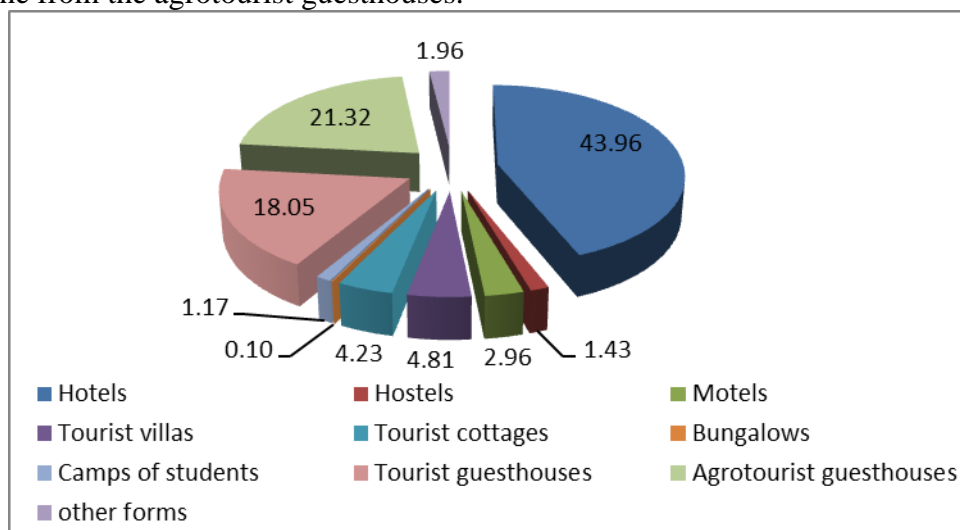
The total number of accommodation units, at the level of Sibiu County, is 165.76%, in the period 2005-2016. In the case of agrotourist pensions the increase is 168.29%. [5,8]

In order to analyze the tourist offer, a particular importance should be given to the *accommodation capacity* (existing and in operation), this indicator expressing the number of existing tourist accommodation places and those actually used during the operation of the tourist unit.



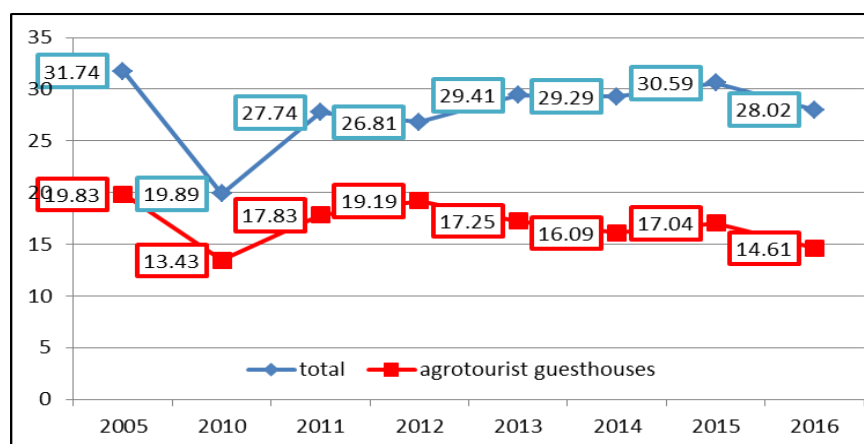
**Figure 3.2. The structure of the existing accommodation capacity in Sibiu County, 2016**

Regarding the *capacity in operation*, existing at the level of Sibiu County, it represents 21.17% from that registered at regional level 11.65%. The distribution of capacity in service by categories of use indicates that, at the level of Sibiu County, 21.32% is the one from the agrotourist guesthouses.



**Figure 3.3. Structure of accommodation capacity in operation, Sibiu County, 2016**

The utilization degree of the accommodation capacity is highlighted by using *the capacity index in operation*. Between 2005 and 2016, there were significant changes in regarding this indicator, both for the whole tourist activity and for agrotourism guesthouses, Figure 3.4.



**Figure 3.4. The evolution of the index of use of accommodation capacity, 2005-2016**

In the period 2005-2016, the index of net use of accommodation capacity decreased, at the county level with 11.72%, for the whole tourist activity and with 26.32%, for the activity performed in the agrotourist guesthouses.

Regarding the degree of utilization of the accommodation capacity in the county of Sibiu, the value of this indicator is 28,02%, on the total of accommodation structures, superior to the regional average, 23,4% and 14,61% in the case of the agrotourist guesthouses. [4,11]

Rural tourism and agrotourism especially attract families with children, seeking relaxation in a peaceful and healthy environment. Besides tourists from Romania, foreign tourists interested in Romanian culture are also attracted by this form of tourism, being a direct means of knowing authentic civilization. Agrotourism has recorded a spectacular dynamics in the last 20 years, the number of touristic and agrotourist guesthouses in Sibiu County being over 10,000.

The analysis of tourism demand is realized based on some indicators referring to the number of tourists accommodated, the number of overnight stays and the average duration of the stay.

In the period 2005-2016, at the level of Sibiu County, oscillations can be observed regarding *the number of tourists' arrivals*. The trend, manifested in the county, is an increase in the number of tourists. For the analyzed period, at the county level there was an increase in of tourists' arrivals with 120.28%.

**Table 3.2.**

**The evolution of the number of tourists' arrivals, 2005-2016, number of tourists**

	2005	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
<b>Total</b>	228627	228195	263684	285136	329986	355698	438611	503620
<b>Hotels</b>	150426	185676	227838	235652	254146	269367	295138	310756
<b>Hostels</b>	43	1711	3393	1807	377	4023	4658	5678
<b>Motels</b>	13471	7524	7489	5096	7148	5772	8456	13722
<b>Tourist villas</b>	7458	9094	4615	6337	5372	8211	17715	18478
<b>Tourist cottages</b>	6691	4644	5170	7605	18053	19202	15410	15474
<b>Bungalows</b>	1725	430	286	637	1007	1985	252	139
<b>Camps of students</b>	4669	3884	2931	5420	5356	5645	5237	4091
<b>Tourist guesthouses</b>	23862	5347	4046	7415	13714	15433	50577	75277
<b>Agrotourist guesthouses</b>	12660	9885	7916	15167	24813	25975	36506	54448

Source: <http://statistici.insse.ro/shop>

Regarding the tourists arriving in the agrotourist guesthouses, during the analyzed period, their number increased 2.2 times on the total tourist activity and 4.3 times, in the case of the agrotourist guesthouses. [12,17]

In 2016, the number of tourists accommodated in Sibiu County was around 503,620 persons, representing 19.47% from the total number of tourists staying in the Center region. The tourists accommodated in the agrotouristic guesthouses from Sibiu represent 17.90% from the total number of tourists accommodated at the region's level.

Another important indicator of tourism demand is *the number of overnight stays*. In 2016, the value of this indicator was 830.295 tourist days, representing 15.41% from the total number of overnight stays registered at regional level.

**Table 3.3.**

**The evolution of the number of overnights stays, 2005-2016**

	2005	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
<b>Total</b>	369029	401578	461636	490260	540507	581505	740946	830295
<b>Hotels</b>	236340	300689	387928	390203	417901	438272	485275	505516
<b>Hostels</b>	81	5604	8294	3980	805	6023	9225	10268
<b>Motels</b>	14360	10517	10115	6791	9320	8353	13414	16707
<b>Tourist villas</b>	29871	24399	9000	9635	8098	16283	37023	37984
<b>Tourist cottages</b>	9904	9282	8213	14506	22036	22465	23735	25542
<b>Bungalows</b>	1725	576	626	875	1018	2143	273	189
<b>Camps of students</b>	14826	14024	10176	18632	22166	26003	17599	13630
<b>Tourist guesthouses</b>	32053	11078	9167	15139	19714	19798	77986	119778
<b>Agrotourist guesthouses</b>	20464	25409	18117	30499	39449	42050	69335	92258

Source: <http://statistici.insse.ro/shop>

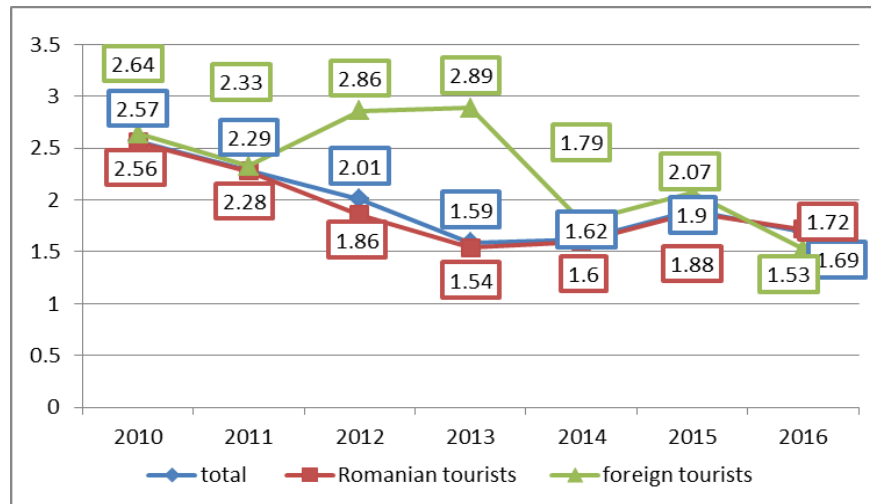
The analyze of the overnight stays in the agrotourist guesthouses, Table 3.4 shows that in the Sibiu County has increased by 4.5 times, representing 11.11% from the total number of overnight stays in the county.

Regarding the structure of the tourists who visit the Sibiu County, according to the place of origin, most of them are Romanians, foreigners accounting for only 22.54%. Foreign tourists visiting Sibiu come mostly from European countries (Hungary, Austria, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, but also from Western Europe), but also states like America, Canada and Israel.

The variety of natural and anthropic tourism resources of Sibiu County offers the possibility to increase the number of foreign tourists who visit these places. The preferences of foreign tourists are oriented towards cultural, health and wellness tourism, and currently these forms are being exploited in a limited extent. [8,13]

At the level of the county, the share of foreign tourists' overnight stays in the total number of overnight stays was 30.11% in 2016, 16.7% above the regional average.

*The average length of stay* indicates the average time (days) of the tourists' stay in the accommodation units and reflects the possibility of the offer to retain the tourist in a particular area, region, etc.



**Figure 3.5. Average length of stay, Sibiu County, 2005-2016**

Regarding the evolution of this indicator, during the period 2010-2016, there is a decrease in the duration of the stay. At the regional level, the decrease is 31.25%, while in the county it is higher, 5.71%.

In 2016, the average duration of stay in Sibiu County is 1.65 days/tourist, lower value to the regional average, 2.5 days/tourist. The average length of stay in agrotourists guesthouses is 1.69 days per tourist.

Regarding the foreign tourists, the average duration of the stay is 1.53 days/tourist, less than in case of the national tourists, 1.72 days/tourist.

**The seasonality** of tourism demand and consumption is the dominant feature of tourism activity with special implications in the activity of service providers from this field. One of the peculiarities of the tourist market is the time concentration of the demand and tourism consumption. [1,10]

The analysis of the tourism activity, at the level of Sibiu County, indicates a concentration of tourist arrivals and overnight stays in the summer (August and July) and the lowest level in March.

If in the past was achieved the unaltered preservation of the many traditions of the inhabitants of rural areas, nowadays, under the pressure of inherent changes and influences of modern society, the existence of some traditions from centuries is jeopardized. That is why, together with the preservation and restoration of the material heritage, it is necessary **to support the preservation and promotion of the immaterial cultural heritage in the rural area of Sibiu County.**

## CONCLUSION

Tourism is one of the economic branches that have experienced the fastest expansion in the last decades. The economic benefits of the tourism industry are multiple. The tourism industry generates a significant number of jobs, and investments in this area have a relatively short amortization period. The local economy as a whole benefits from the development of tourism. Tourists create additional demand for consumer services and goods, thus stimulating the tertiary sector of the economy (services, trade, craft industries, etc.). At the same time, tourist localities tend to have a more developed public service and infrastructure. The transport sector and the real estate sector are two other important branches that can benefit from tourism development. Must be taken in consideration the indirect benefits gained by increasing the visibility and interest for those regions which are experiencing a large influx of tourists.

For the development of tourism activity at the level of Sibiu County, a number of directions of action have been developed.

1. Putting in value the natural and anthropic tourism resources
2. Development and modernization of the reception and leisure infrastructure in order to improve and diversify the offered tourist services
3. Promotion of tourist destinations from Sibiu County
4. Developing cultural, recreational infrastructure and support cultural activities
5. Support the development and promotion of rural tourism and agrotourism at the level of Sibiu County

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