

## CHANGES IN TOURISM BEHAVIOR DUE TO COVID-19 AND THE NEED TO DEVELOP SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

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**Abstract.** *Tourism has been the industry hardest affected by the Coronavirus pandemic. After a year in which travel has taken place, mainly, in the country and to a lesser extent and across borders, tourism is beginning to develop in new directions and coordinates and with the appearance of the vaccine and its spread around the world, tourism has resumed to relaunch. Tourism will gradually resume its course, in close connection with the evolution of the pandemic and as new destinations open their doors. Among the trends in the behavior of tourists that have emerged during the pandemic and will continue to influence the tourism market and further, we mention:*

- preference for secluded locations, as close to nature as possible
- holidays in smaller groups
- hygiene measures and social distancing
- preference for accommodation in smaller spaces
- last minute holidays
- vaccination to weigh more and more in the purchase of holidays
- preference for specialized tourism advice, from experienced agents or agents.

**Key words:** *tourism, consumer behavior, sustainability, Covid-19*

### INTRODUCTION

The tourism sustainable development meets the current needs of tourists and host regions, protecting and expanding the possibilities for the future. It is designed as to lead the management of all resources, so that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be met while maintaining their biological diversity and life support systems, according to the WTO.[7,16]

If we refer to responsible tourism, we can say that this notion refers to a new culture of travel, in the center of which will be the well-informed, independent tourist with high expectations and who easily expresses his own needs. Thus, a new tourist market is born, the one of the buyer, in which the sovereign consumer has the last word.[3,5,9,15]

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

According to the Cape Town Conference, from August 2002, the characteristics for responsible tourism must refer to:

- minimizing negative environmental, economic and social impacts;
- conservation of cultural heritage in order to maintain global diversity
- developing a climate of respect between the tourist and the local community, which will increase the feeling of belonging and trust within the local community;
- offering unforgettable experiences to tourists, by involving the local community
- improving working conditions and access to some industry sectors
- good integration into local ecosystems
- involvement and interest of the local community in decisions regarding living conditions. [7,9,14]

## RESEARCH RESULTS

It is known that tourism is a cross-cutting economic activity that has a major impact on the environment and the climate and the EU economy, in particular on economic growth, employment and the social and sustainable development of the regions. Tourism contributes to the promotion of a balanced regional structure, has a positive impact on regional development as well as the conservation of biodiversity, social welfare and economic security of local communities. The tourism and transport sector was among the most affected by COVID-19; because at least 6 million jobs, and those for seasonal workers and people in vulnerable situations, are at risk in the EU; travel restrictions introduced in response to the pandemic continue to severely affect global and European tourism, with the latest data from the World Tourism Organization (WTO) indicating a 70% decrease in the number of international tourist arrivals in 2020.[3,4,6,8,11]

In this context, there have been major changes in the behavior of tourists and we appreciate that restoring consumer confidence is essential for the future of the tourism sector.

Tourism has been one of the most affected sectors from the world due to the pandemic, the professionals from the field looking for the levers necessary to get out of this tourism crisis. Thus, we can say that the tourism industry has undergone through many changes since 2020, when the pandemic broke out.

According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), COVID-19 had a devastating impact on the global tourism sector last year, with losses of nearly 4.5 trillion\$.

From the data of the WTTC report, which represents the global private sector of tourism and travel, it is observed that the decrease of the industry is an obvious one, the contribution of the tourism sector to the GDP registering a decrease of 49.1%, compared to the global economy, which decreased by only 3.7% in 2020.[15]

Hotel occupancy degrees in Europe were 26.5% in July 2020, which represent a decrease of 66.4% compared to the same month from 2019.

The big tour operator TUI - reported a 98% decrease in revenue in the second quarter of 2020, and Booking.com reported an 87% decrease in the number of nights booked in the second quarter of 2020.

The main driver of tourism in 2020 was domestic demand, travel within its own borders.

A consequence of this crisis will be the consolidation of local tourism, meaning visiting places near the house. Post-crisis tourists will probably choose to travel to destinations closer to their place of residence, considered less risky or in wild, less explored places such as very distant destinations: in Africa, countries such as Zanzibar, Uganda, Kenya, Namibia, Ethiopia, Tanzania.

Regarding tourism in Romania, according to the National Institute of Statistics, the arrivals of tourists in Romania in 2020 were 6.3 million, down with 52.3% compared to 2019, these being 73% tourists from EU.[1,2,10,11]

According to Euromonitor International [12], an effect of the emergence of COVID-19 is the behavior forced towards the environment: walking and cycling, recycling plastics to protect the planet, and the tendency to have a healthy lifestyle that was accentuated during the pandemic. Consumers now prioritize physical and mental well-being, are more aware of consuming vegetarian diets, and use preventive health applications more frequently.

The increase of tourism based on nature, due to COVID-19, through greater exposure to nature can generate certain pro-environmental behaviors: for example, planting trees or managing hedges for birds. It has also been found that there is a causal link between time spent in nature and more sustainable behavior.

It is known that if we refer to the hospitality capacity of a community, we are talking about the quality of life of its inhabitants. Will be encouraged tourism policies and business practices, which benefit from natural and cultural assets, but also protect, preserve and enhance the identity and distinctive character of the destination, the diversity of the place being the reason for the trip. Thus, a community-destination must be oriented towards the outside, towards “tourists”, but it must not neglect its own residents. Such a destination will be able to capitalize on natural resources and create a creative, structured, competitive and innovative tourism and cultural industry. The socio-economic and natural environment transformed into a tourist space becomes a fundamental support of attractiveness, and through acquired institutional support it will become sustainable.

In the case of Romania, it has huge resources to put tourism in an important position for a development not only economic.

Studies recently commissioned by the European Parliament's Committee on Transport and Tourism (TRAN) look at trends in transport and tourism, highlighting the need for sustainability, so transforming the industry into greener, smarter and more inclusive tourism is a long-term scenario. [13]

In the tourism industry, the main players in the market: tourists and travel agencies have realized the importance of hygiene, health and the fact that we need to give each other space to do different things and that they will prevail in the future. Tourists will look for vacation places where they feel safe, will check the hygiene and distance conditions, and tour operators will ensure their compliance.[6,8,9,11]

It is necessary to increase the number of specialized travel agents because the tendency of tourists is to turn to a specialized agent, to ensure the feeling of trust when buying certain tourist products or services. Tourists have started to be more and more informed about the entry/exit conditions in different countries, but the information provided by a tourism consultant will increase his safety and help him make the right purchase decision.

Given the existing health situation, there are certain trends that will be outlined in the next period:

- travel in the vicinity of homes
- will increase the number of day trips in nature, with own transport and a minimum interaction with other tourists, agencies or accommodation and food establishments
- more importance will be given to family holidays or small groups of friends
- preferred accommodation will include: villas, apartments, caravans or those accommodation units that offer them more generous personal space and in which they interact with the staff little by little
- tourists will opt for contactless experiences: online check-in and check-out, ordering food and drinks using mobile applications.
- crowded places will be avoided: very large accommodation or transport units, such as cruises, large public catering establishments, certain tourist attractions
- the number of last minute bookings will increase due to the uncertainty of the pandemic situation and its future effects
- the number and type of medical and cancellation insurance will increase
- holiday budgets will be reduced due to the uncertainty of the economic situation in the future.

Also, tour operators, accommodation and food establishments, and certain transporters will undergo changes:

- will have to ensure distance, hygiene conditions and travel safety for tourists
- to ensure transparency in the communication of offers

- the transport will be done with smaller means of transport, such as coaches or cruise ships
- to provide a more generous space for tourists
- provide as flexible booking and cancellation conditions as possible
- to ensure strong internet connections
- to provide contactless experiences for tourists
- carriers must provide safe travel conditions
- in the case of cruises, it will be necessary to have a doctor on board and to ensure spacing and hygiene protocols
- an increasingly important role will be played by tour guides, who will have to respond to the new wishes of tourists

The emergence and wider spread of the vaccine has increased the sense of security and creates optimism in a better horizon, by reopening many tourist destinations and reopening travel.

Regarding the sustainable tourist destinations, several pillars are taken into account: environmental sustainability, social sustainability, economic stability, risk factors, and demand for sustainable products, sustainable transport and sustainable accommodation facilities.

Based on these sustainability pillars, Euromonitor International created a report on global destinations for sustainable tourism, which analyzed 99 countries around the world, a process that generated 57 indicators weighted according to their relevance, which led to the calculation of a sustainable tourism index for each state.[12]

The report shows that 66.4% of consumers globally want to have a positive impact on the environment through their daily activities, including travel.

In the top of sustainable tourist destinations, the first 21 countries in the ranking are from Europe, on the first places being Scandinavian countries, Romania being on the 28th place, our country proving great improvements in terms of environmental sustainability.

The European eco-label awarded to economic operators will increase the trust of tourists and their loyalty, strengthen the company's position in front of customers, in terms of commitment to the fight for environmental protection and improve the brand image.

We can say that despite the Covid-19 that has completely changed the whole world, the desire to travel has remained unchanged, many of those who failed to travel at all in 2020, will feel the need to recover.

## CONCLUSIONS

We can conclude that there are some clear trends for the future of tourism:

- attention to hygiene and health
- respect for the space and distance required between persons or in relation to certain objectives
- the Romanian consumer becomes more and more attentive to quality, budget reduction, preference for local products and online migration, with the need to provide specialized advice
- transparency, credibility and trust are much more important in the current context
- the most dynamic segment is Millennials, who are digital and want new experiences, trusting their own opinions.
- resilience and adaptability are two key features for a revival of the hospitality and tourism sector.

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