

## ALBERGO DIFFUSO CONCEPT-AN ALTERNATIVE FOR THE REVITALIZATION OF ROMANIAN VILLAGES AND DEVELOPMENT OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

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***Abstract:** Global travel trends highlight the fact that tourists are looking for new experiences, being interested in authenticity and specificity. In this sense, a concept initiated in Italy in the 80s offers an authentic experience sought by many tourists today. The Albergo Diffuso concept offers tourists the opportunity to live like a local, the fundamental principle of this concept being the restoration of abandoned buildings in villages and their transformation into accommodation spaces. In recent years, interest in the Albergo Diffuso model has grown, as it is a real development engine for countries where villages are experiencing a demographic and economic decline. Therefore, the use of abandoned houses for tourist purposes, the generation of new opportunities for young people and implicitly a framework for sustainable tourism, can be a model worthy of consideration by Romanian villages in difficulty.*

**Key words:** Albergo Diffuso, revitalization, rural, community

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the growth of the tourism sector has exceeded and according to estimates, it will continue to exceed the growth recorded by the global economy. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, international arrivals, which reached 1.5 billion in 2019, are expected to reach 1.8 billion by 2030. [26]

The development of tourism worldwide is mainly due to the economic, social, demographic and political factors that have registered significant increases. The significant evolution of tourism is closely related to people's interest in visiting new places, to get to know other civilizations, but also to the technical progress registered in the field of transport that ensures faster and more comfortable trips to increasingly distant destinations for tourists. [10,18,24]

In terms of figures, according to World Travel & Tourism Council, in 2022 the total contribution of Travel & Tourism sector to GDP was 7.6%, registering an increase of 22% compared to 2021, but 23% below 2019. As for the new jobs, in 2022 total contribution of Travel & Tourism to Employment was 22 million new jobs, registering a 7.9 increase compared to 2021 and 11.4% below 2019. Regarding the visitor spending, in 2022 domestic visitor spending increased by 20.4%, but still 14.1% behind 2019 and international visitor spending rose by 81.9%, 40.4% below 2019. [27] The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the role of the tourism industry in global development, as a result, all tourism stakeholders must think and implement strategies towards a more inclusive, sustainable and resilient sector. [19]

However, it is essential to ensure sustainable and inclusive growth that contributes positive to the development of communities, the preservation of natural ecosystems and cultural heritage.

The purpose of the article is to present the Albergo Diffuso concept as an alternative for the revitalization of Romanian villages in terms of sustainable tourism.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

In order to highlight how suitable is the Albergo Diffuso concept for the development of Romanian rural villages in terms of sustainable tourism, the methodological steps presented in figure 1 were carried out.

<b>Literature review</b>	<b>Characterization of Romanian villages</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Data collection</i>: document analysis</li> <li>• <i>Sources</i>: articles, reports, published works</li> <li>• <i>Analyzed aspects</i>: Albergo Diffuso concept, sustainable tourism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Data collection</i>: document analysis</li> <li>• <i>Sources</i>: statistics, articles, published works, reports</li> <li>• <i>Analyzed aspects</i>: statistical indicators related to Romanian villages, types of tourism practiced in the Romanian countryside</li> </ul>

**Figure 1. Methodological steps**

*Source: authors' own processing*

**RESEARCH RESULTS**

Declared a priority for the tourism sector, sustainability has received increased attention due to the pandemic. In the last period of time, consumers are paying more attention to the impact of people on the environment and looking for sustainable living and travel options. At the same time, the private sector welcomes consumers with sustainable alternatives, and the public sector is interested in financing sustainable tourism and development. [20] Therefore, more and more people intend to become responsible travelers, they are interested in sustainable tourism and want to choose a less crowded destination over an overcrowded one. The practice of sustainable tourism implies the adoption of sustainable practices in the tourism industry and with the aim of minimizing the negative impact (economic losses, damage to the natural environment, overcrowding of cities) and maximizing the positive impact on tourist destinations (conservation of natural and cultural heritage, generation of new jobs). [12,22]


Currently on the rise, the Albergo Difusso (AD) phenomenon is the kind of authentic experience that tourists are increasingly looking for lately. Recognized as a sustainable and innovative form of hospitality, AD has its origins in valuing historical and cultural heritage, and is represented by original structures, places and people involved in the production and delivery of authentic experiences. [14,15,25]

The AD hospitality model was born in 1982, in the Friuli Region, with the aim of stopping and preventing the depopulation of rural areas, saving the landscape and restoring small houses and villages. The concept assumes the existence of accommodation spaces located in different buildings in a locality, these being managed from a central point. The concept of AD is associated with a concept of territorial development as it aims at the reuse of small towns and historic villages, eliminating the risk of loss of identity and cultural and historical heritage by valuing natural and human resources, the community being the main provider of tourist services. [3,4,16]

The first definition attributed to the AD concept can be found in the Regional Law of Sardinia L.R.S. no. 22/1984, where AD was defined by the facilities characterized "by the concentration in a single reception building, common spaces and possibly a restaurant and kitchen, as well as by the distribution of residential units in one or more separate buildings, provided that they to be located in the old city center of the municipality and not more than 200 meters from the building where the main services are located". Also, in

1998, by Sardinian Law no. 27/12.08.1998, article 25, AD is defined as an independent form of accommodation. [11]

In figure 2 are synthetically presented the main features of AD concept.



<b>Location</b>	- historic towns - historic residences - old farmhouses
<b>Size</b> (average number)	- 18 rooms, 30 beds (located within the pre-existing units)
<b>Services provided and related activities</b>	- accommodation - breakfast - housekeeping - shuttle busses to main tourist attractions - access to special events and local initiatives
<b>Accommodation</b>	- horizontal organization - bedrooms are located in single houses, restructured and restored in traditional architectural style
<b>Management</b>	- main building (central hub) located in a central position at most 200-300 meters from bedrooms - central hub serve as reception desk and information centre

**Figure 2. Main features of Albergo Diffuso concept**

Source: authors' own processing after [11,22,23]

The AD concept is in line with the requirements of sustainable tourism which is increasingly responsive to protecting the environment and local communities. [11,13]

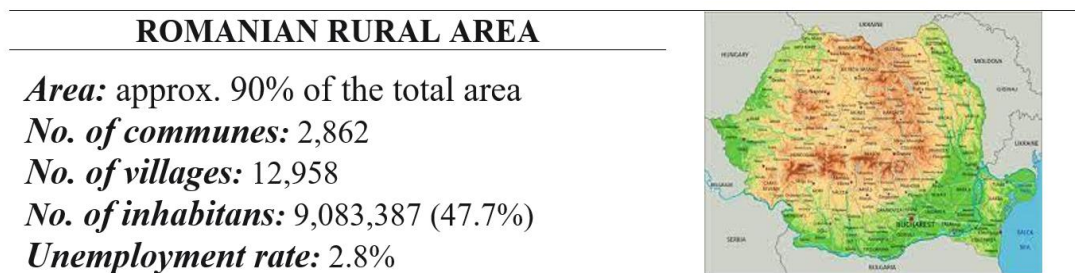
Another important aspect "touched" by this concept is represented by the promotion of the economic development of the area, in this way those rural communities in drift, whose only resources are the landscape and cultural traditions, can be helped. So, this hospitality model can be seen as a solution that respects the environment, the values and the cultural identity of an area. [3,4,8]

The (AD) phenomenon represents an important step in the development of the competitiveness of tourist destinations, emphasizing the valorization of the historical and cultural heritage. The AD concept is an innovative approach to tourism by promoting sustainable tourism, by involving communities and tourism resources in order to obtain alternative incomes for the locals and stimulate the entrepreneurial spirit. The AD "recipe" includes tourist attractions that transform old towns and villages into "hotel-inclusive destinations". In this sense, AD has gained notoriety because it takes shape in the form of opportunities for the revitalization of communities in demographic and economic decline.[7,11]

In recent years, the AD model has crossed the borders of its country of origin, such hotels being accessible to tourists in states such as San Marino, Germany, Switzerland, Japan. Currently the concept is on the threshold of implementation in Albania and Kosovo. Interest in the implementation of this model has increased recently due to the fact that it represents an engine for the development of declining communities through the use of households and the generation of new opportunities for young people, and implicitly the promotion of sustainable tourism. [2,5,6,9,12]

Romania is a tourist destination, recognized for its many natural tourist attractions (Bigar Waterfall, Muddy Volcanoes, Danube Delta, Red Lake, Balea Lake, Retezat

National Park, Apuseni Natural Park, Cheile Turzii, Cheile Bicazului, Horses Waterfall, etc.) and anthropogenic (Palace of Parliament, Bran Castle, Peles Castle, Alba Carolina Fortress, Voronet Monastery, Curtea de Arges Monastery, Transfagarasan, Sighisoara, Sibiu, Merry Cemetery Sapanta, Turda Salt Mine, Rasnov Fortress, Castelul Corvinilor, Praid Salt Mine, etc.). Closely related to the natural environment, history, culture and tradition, the tourist attractions found on the territory of Romania allow the practice of various forms of tourism, such as: coastal tourism, mountain tourism, rural tourism, urban tourism, ecotourism, cycle tourism, speleological tourism, cultural tourism, religious tourism, medical tourism, thematic tourism, dark tourism, spa tourism, gastronomic tourism, event tourism, itinerant tourism, hiking, scientific tourism, adventure tourism. [24] The Romanian rural area occupies an overwhelming share of the total area of the country and represents the living space for 47.7% of the country's population. (Figure 3) [1,17]



**Figure 3. Romanian rural area**

Source: authors' own processing after [1,17]

Rich in various resources, the Romanian rural area is a space where mainly activities related to agriculture take place, facing major problems (depopulation, aging population, lack of jobs, poor health, educational and road infrastructure, etc.).

Also, in the Romanian rural area, next to agriculture, there are activities specific to small industries and crafts. Against the background of the folkloric and ethnographic traditions characteristic of the Romanian countryside, the crafts acquired a cultural charge, turning into a small craft industry (pottery, weaving, wood and metal processing, etc.).

Another activity that has expanded in the Romanian rural area is tourism. The varied and complex natural tourist potential is given by the diversity of the components of the physical-geographical environment, on the basis of which numerous tourist activities can be carried out. The tourist potential of the Romanian rural area is located especially in the mountainous area, on the Black Sea coast and in the Danube Delta, due to its diverse landscape, floristic and faunal value, but also in the areas of hills, plateaus and plains. Along with the natural tourism potential, the anthropogenic tourism potential is identified, given by historical, religious, cultural, economic objectives, monuments, ethnographic heritage. Therefore, the entire Romanian rural area can be considered a real treasure for the revitalization of the rural economy, both in terms of the physical-geographical environment and in terms of the spiritual, folkloric and ethnographic heritage, each area having its own specificity. Given that Romania has a valuable, diversified and high-quality touristic and cultural-spiritual potential, some areas can be identified where progress is being made in terms of attracting villages to the domestic and international tourism circuit, for example villages from counties such as: Alba, Argeş, Braşov, Caraş-Severin, Cluj, Constanţa, Gorj, Harghita, Mureş, Neamţ, Sibiu, Maramureş, Suceava, Tulcea, etc. Which are particularly rich in terms of agriculture, traditions, crafts, culinary specialties, folk port. In 2021, of the total number of trips made in Romania, 26% were made in rural areas, with the majority of stays (71.63%) having between 1-3 nights. [21]

In the context of massive depopulation, the aging of the population and the existence of a rich cultural heritage, the AD model can be a viable direction for the revitalization of Romanian villages. In this sense, special attention must be paid to infrastructure and promotion, these two aspects should be found in the rural tourism development strategy.

## CONCLUSIONS

The practice of sustainable tourism involves the promotion of local culture and the stimulation of the local economy, taking into account the sustainability of the environment. By implementing the *Albergo Diffuso* concept, the identity of the villages is maintained by protecting and preserving heritage, promoting culture and stimulating the local economy.

The revitalization of abandoned Romanian villages through the implementation of the *Albergo Diffuso* concept can be a beneficial measure for them. The success of the transformation of abandoned villages into heritage villages is closely related to the inclusion of the environment as part of the revitalization of the villages, the protection and preservation of the existing heritage, the easy access of tourists to the cultural heritage, the promotion of traditional characteristics, practices and lifestyles, the involvement of all parties interested and local residents in decision-making and management of village revitalization.

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