

STUDIES REGARDING THE ANALYSIS OF THE AGRO-TOURISM MARKET OF ALBA COUNTY AND ITS DEVELOPMENT POSSIBILITIES

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Abstract: *Having a high tourist potential, the territory of Alba County is suitable for the practice of various forms of tourism: ecotourism, mountain tourism, cultural tourism, adventure tourism, gastronomic tourism, oenological tourism, speotourism, rural tourism, etc. The mountain area, predominantly rural, occupies over 50% of the county's territory, which makes the two forms of tourism - mountain tourism and rural tourism constitute the basic tourist offer at the county level.*

Key words: *agritourism, agri-tourism market, rural development, tourist potential*

INTRODUCTION

The agro-tourism market is a component of the tourism market taking over its content and particularities but related to a narrower segment in terms of the area of manifestation of the tourist act. To illustrate the specificity of the agritourism market and identify its defining elements, the following aspects must be considered: [1,11,12]

❖ *agritourism product* represents the set of material and immaterial elements used to satisfy the needs of rural tourism consumers. In order to satisfy the preferences of rural tourists at the highest possible level, diversification and continuous improvement of its content and specifics is required.

❖ *bearers of the offer*, those who provide services specific to agritourism, represented by the inhabitants of rural areas who come to meet the demand through a series of offers specific to this form of tourism.

❖ *request bearers*, agritourism consumers, respectively tourists who prefer spending their free time and practicing tourist activities in rural areas, and for whom clean, unpolluted air, traditions, customs and the originality of the Romanian village are the main motivations.

❖ *the venue of the act of sale and purchase of agritourism services*, represented by peasant households, farms and agritourism guesthouses, where tourists can come into direct contact with the specifics of rural life.

❖ *the time interval*, represented by the time when the sale-purchase act of tourist services is carried out. In the agritourism market, the transactions concluded between the supply and demand carriers are aimed at shorter time intervals, compared to classic tourism, this form of tourism being very often associated with weekend tourism, but not only. [4,5,9]

In a broad sense, *the agritourism market* it is defined as the set of sale-purchase documents having as their object agritourism products, viewed as a unitary whole with the relationships generated and, in connection and interdependence, with the space for carrying out specific activities. [1,3,6]

The agritourism market can also be defined as the economic sphere of interference of agritourism supply, materialized in agritourism products, with agritourism demand, embodied in consumption.

Agrotourism has constituted its own market in time and space, under the influence of specific factors, of an economic, social, cultural, geographical and especially motivational

nature, which imprint on it the particularities specific to the development of tourist activity in the rural area. [6,10]

The important characteristic of the two defining elements of the agritourism market, demand and supply, is the separation in time and space, which implies that consumption is possible only by shifting demand to supply, i.e. in rural areas of tourist interest.

The evolution of the agritourism market is under the influence of numerous factors: [8,14]

❖ *the agritourism potential of rural areas* represented by the structural dimension and quality of agritourism resources. The existence of a rich agro-tourism potential determines the existence of an agro-tourism market with a high capacity, which can be enhanced through land development works for tourism purposes, and the development of specific infrastructure.

❖ *the degree of arrangement of the area for the purpose of practicing agrotourism*, influences the size of the agritourism market. Thus, an improperly arranged territory will not allow the development of the agritourism market to its potential.

❖ *the degree of infrastructure development* is a factor with major implications, in the valorization of tourist resources, specific to the Romanian village. In this sense, the intervention of the local public administration is required, in the development of the overall infrastructure and the appropriate arrangement, for the purpose of the practice of tourism and the development of the agritourism market.

The study of the agritourism market, in a territorial profile, is required, first through the lens of ensuring the balance between agritourism demand and supply. In this sense, the volume and structure of the offer will have to be permanently adapted to the increasingly varied preferences of rural tourism consumers. [2,7,15]

Secondly, the analysis of the agritourism market, in a territorial profile, appears as a major objective of the market mechanisms, being determined by:

❖ the development and intensification of agritourism activity as well as the complexity of the tourist phenomenon.

❖ the simultaneous influence of a set of factors of an economic, social, demographic, political, psychological, conjunctural nature, etc., on the evolution of the tourist market in general and the agro-tourism market, in particular.

❖ the need to develop and put into practice viable strategies for market penetration of agritourism products.

As shown above, the study of the agritourism market, in a territorial profile, represents a major objective of the market economy, at the rural level, manifesting a lot of factors that directly influence the evolution of the agritourism market:

the development and diversification of tourist activity, in the rural area, with the deepening of agro-tourism specifics. [1,2,9]

❖ the elaboration of rural development strategies that are based, to a large extent, on the intensification of agritourism activity in rural areas.

❖ identifying appropriate strategies, to launch the Romanian village as a tourist product on the national and international tourist market.

In conclusion, for the development of the agritourism market, it is necessary to determine and know, with accuracy, the tourist function of rural areas. Determining the tourist function requires performing complex analyses, targeting all the elements generating tourist attractiveness. [11,16]

These elements mainly concern the following aspects:

❖ *the geographical location of the localities*, in relation to tourist resources, access roads, infrastructure etc.

❖ *the level of development of the general infrastructure*, referring, above all, to the state of access and communication routes.

❖ *economic development and the structure of the economy of the rural area*, considering the natural conditions specific to the area, the demographic structure of the area's population, the degree of rural urbanization, the degree of environmental pollution and the agricultural situation.

❖ *the state of the environment and its ecological quality* (identification of sources of environmental pollution and degradation, type and degree of pollution, disruptive elements of the tourism-environment relationship).

❖ *the presence of tourist resources*, which can be both natural (relief, landscapes, hunting and fishing grounds, mineral waters, nature reserves, etc.) and anthropogenic (ethnography and folklore, specific cuisine, historical monuments, churches, monasteries, etc.). [6,10]

Alba County is an extremely attractive county from a tourist point of view due to its natural and cultural heritage, the combination of rustic and modern and the historical load of places in the county. [18,20] Known for its picturesque places, with protected natural areas, with dozens of speleological objectives, with traditions preserved for hundreds of years, Alba County has a continuously developing tourist potential. The wealth of rural tourism through the uniqueness of the landscapes, with an enchanting natural setting and many oases of recreation can represent the main development vector of many areas. [19,21]

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this article, the evolution of the agritourism market in Alba County is analyzed, using a series of tourist indicators. The data used for this study were extracted from the database of the National Institute of Statistics as well as from other studies carried out at the county or Central Region level: Alba County Development Strategy 2021-2027, Alba County Development and Tourism Promotion Strategy, The Center Region Development Strategy 2021-2027, the Center Regional Development Plan 2021-2027 etc.

RESEARCH RESULTS

A form of rural tourism, agritourism, combines very well the original rusticity of the rural area with special natural attractions, being a very well-defined form of tourism around the Apuseni mountains (Albac, Garda de Sus, Arieseni, Avram Iancu, Vidra) and in Rimetea commune from the Trascau Mountains.

Analysis of the agritourism offer

The increase in tourist demand for these forms of tourism had the effect of developing the tourist infrastructure and adapting the offer to the needs of tourists. This has made Alba County an important agro-tourism destination both nationally and regionally.

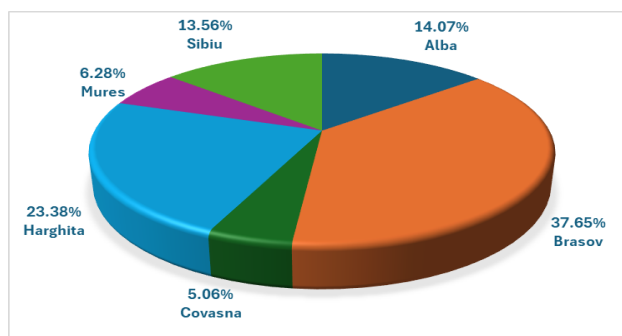


Figure 1. Distribution of agritourism guesthouses by county, Central Region, [17,18]

At the level of the Central Region, in 2023, Alba County owned 11.26% of the total accommodation units and 14.07% of the accommodation units of the agro-tourist guesthouse type (figure 1.), being in third place, at the regional level, after Brasov County-37.65% and Harghita County-23.38%. During the period of analysis, 2010-2023, at the level of Alba County (figure 2.), there was an upward evolution in the number of accommodation units, both overall and in the case of agro-tourism guesthouses. The average growth rate was 432.83% for the entire tourist activity and 286.11% in the case of agro-tourism guesthouses.

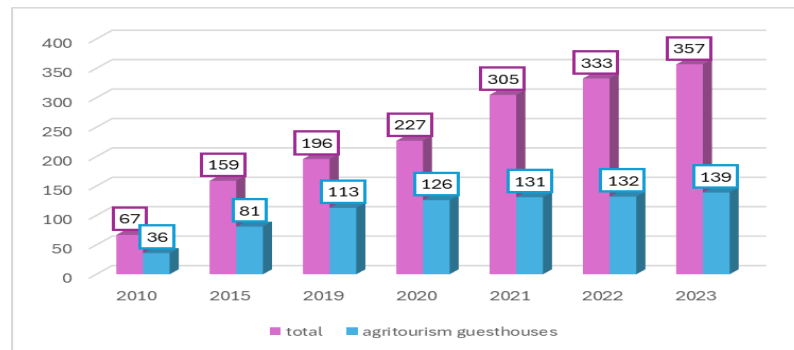


Figure 2. Evolution of the number of accommodation units in Alba County, 2010-2023, [17]

I previously said that the mountain area of Alba County is an area suitable for agro-tourism activity, here several localities (Albac, Garda de Sus, Arieseni, Sugag, Pianu and Rimetea) stand out, recognized both nationally and internationally as emblematic destinations, for this type of tourism.

The 139 registered agro-tourism guesthouses, in 2023, at the level of Alba County, are unevenly distributed in the territory. Most of these, 53.24, are concentrated in the localities: Albac - 17, Rimetea - 15, Arieseni -14, Garda de Sus - 11, Sugag - 10 and Pianu - 7. At the county level, there are also localities with more reduced by agro-tourist guesthouses: 4 localities that registered 3 agro-tourist guesthouses, 7 localities with 2 agro-tourist guesthouses and 13 localities where there is only one agro-tourist guesthouse.

The evolution of the number of agritourism guesthouses in these localities is a gratifying one, their number being on the rise even during the Covid 19 pandemic, when due to the sanitary restrictions imposed, tourists chose less crowded places, with a high natural potential.

Regarding the existing accommodation capacity in the agro-tourism guesthouses, in Alba County, at the regional level, in 2023, it has a share of 14.96% of the total accommodation places in the agro-tourism guesthouses of the Central Region, located on 3rd place, after the counties of Brasov-38.71% and Harghita-21.66%.

The distribution of the accommodation capacity in operation, by county, at the level of the Central Region, in 2023, places Alba County in second place, with a percentage of 17.23%, after Brasov County with a percentage of 42.96% and before the county Harghita owns 16.44%. This is due to a longer period of operation of the agritourism guesthouses during the year.

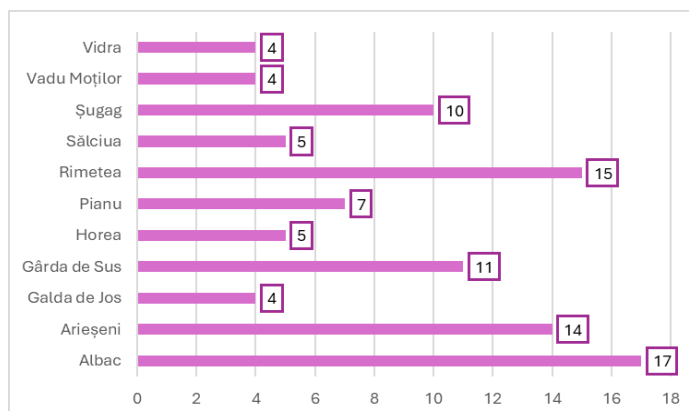


Figure 3. Distribution of agritourism guesthouses in Alba County, on the main localities with agro-tourism potential, 2023, [17, 20]

In the period 2015-2023, the tourist accommodation capacity in operation, from the agro-tourism guesthouses, in Alba County, showed an increasing trend, except for 2020, when due to the restrictions imposed by the Covid 19 pandemic, there were decreases.

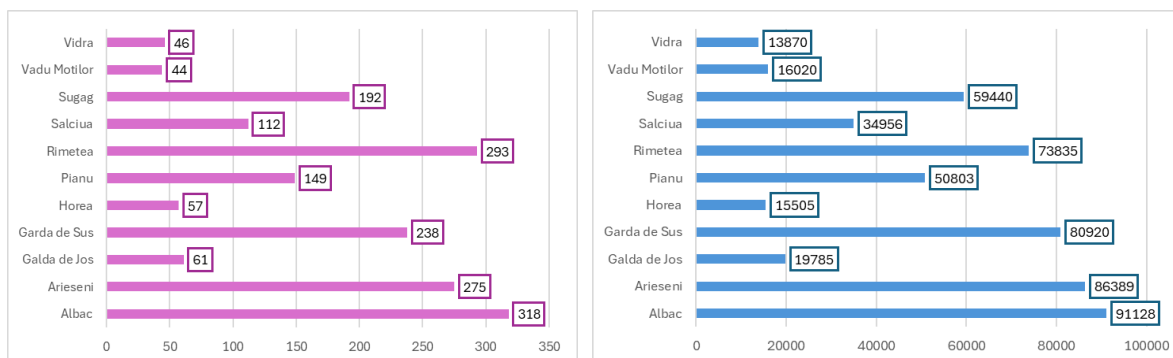


Figure 4. Tourist accommodation capacity in agro-tourism guesthouses distributed by localities at the level of Alba County, 2023, [17]

In 2023, the towns of Albac, Rimetea, Arieșeni, Garda de Sus, Sugag and Pianu concentrated 53.46% of the total existing accommodation capacity and 55.65% of the accommodation capacity in operation, from the values recorded at the county level.

The degree of use of agro-tourist guesthouses in Alba County is presented in figure 5.

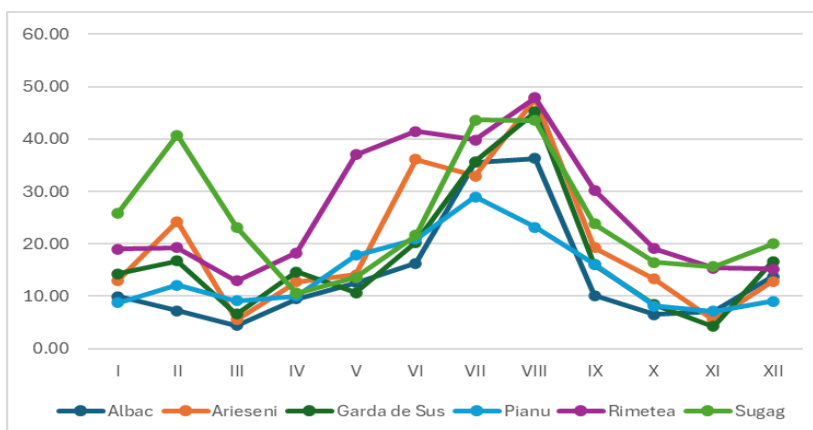


Figure 5. The net utilization index of the accommodation capacity in operation, agro-tourist boarding houses in Alba County, per month, year 2023, [17]

In the June-September period, the agro-tourism guesthouses in the presented localities show the highest degree of use, reaching values of up to over 40% in: Arieseni-47.68%, Garda se Sus-45.22, Rimetea-47.85% and Sugag-43.56%.

Analysis of agritourism demand

The tourists registered in the agro-tourism guesthouses in the region represented in 2023, 12.52% of the total number of tourist arrivals in the Central Region.

During the analyzed period, the number of tourist arrivals, in the agro-tourism guesthouses in the Central Region, indicates an increasing trend (377.66%), except for 2020, when reductions were recorded, because of the restrictions imposed by the Covid 19 pandemic. In this year, the decrease was 42.35% compared to 2019. Starting from 2021, growth is recorded again, the average growth rate being 64.37%. [17,21]

In the year 2023, the number of tourists arriving in agro-tourism guesthouses in Alba County represented 26.09% of the total number of tourists registered at the county level, the value being higher than the one registered at the regional level.

At the level of Alba County, in the period 2010-2023, the same upward trajectory of tourist arrivals is observed, as well as that recorded at the regional level, except for the year 2023, when decreases are recorded. The average growth rate of tourist arrivals, during the analyzed period, was 691.65% higher than the regional average. In 2020, compared to the previous year 2019, the arrivals of tourists, in the agro-tourism guesthouses in Alba County, decreased by 26.03%, the value being lower than the regional average. In the following years, the growth trend resumes, the average growth rate being 55.48%.

The analysis by category of tourists of the arrivals registered in the agro-tourism guesthouses in Alba County, shows that, in the year 2023, 90.56% of the total tourist arrivals are Romanian tourists, the remaining 9.44%, being foreign tourists. Making a comparison with the share of foreign tourist arrivals in agritourism guesthouses, at the regional level - 8.49%, we can say that the agritourism localities in Alba County managed to attract more foreign tourists.

The towns of Albac, Arieseni, Garda se Sus, Pianu, Rimetea and Sugag, recognized as agritourism destinations at the Alba County level, hosted in 2023, more than half, 60.15%, of the total number of tourists arriving in the agritourism guesthouses, from the county White.

Table 1.

Tourist arrivals in agro-tourism guesthouses in the localities of Alba County, 2015-2023

	2015	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Albac	2130	4038	2384	3098	3574	4996
Arieseni	6959	10520	7416	7770	5938	6568
Galda de Jos	:	687	898	1013	910	805
Garda de Sus	2611	5351	4833	5842	4986	5093
Horea	95	72	751	615	500	558
Pianu	1883	3486	2911	3388	3433	4001
Rimetea	4825	8728	4418	7787	7605	12079
Salciua	1894	2805	1626	1117	1701	1765
Sugag	1101	4683	5935	7173	6520	6926
Vadu Motilor	108	410	249	369	1197	890
Vidra	858	600	803	482	674	1057

Source: <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table>, [17]

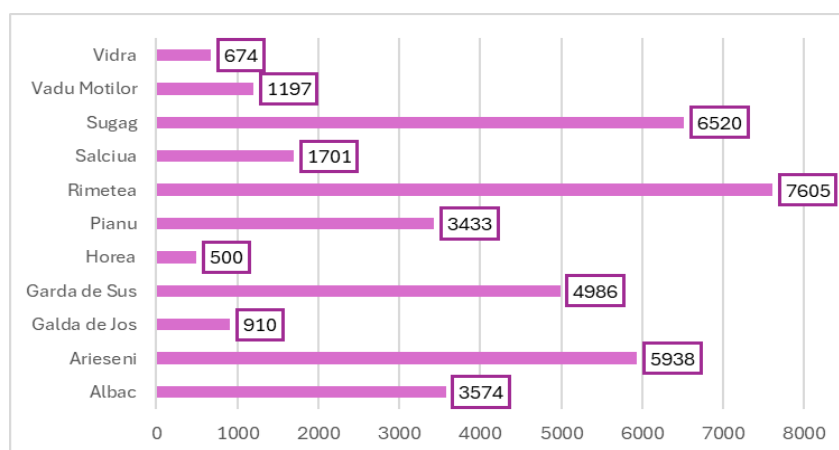


Figure 6. Tourist arrivals, in agro-tourist guesthouses in the localities of Alba County, 2023, [17]

Overnight stays by tourists in agro-tourist guesthouses in the Central Region amount to 13.10% of the total number of overnight stays registered at the level of the region, in 2023.

From the data presented, it can be observed that a considerable increase in overnight stays by tourists in agritourism guesthouses during the analyzed period, with the exception of 2020. The average growth rate recorded is +31.50% at the regional level and +567.51%, at the county level.

At the level of Alba County, the overnight stays registered in agro-tourism guesthouses represent almost a third of the total number of overnight stays - 30.98%, from this point of view, in 2023, they are in second place with a percentage of 17.05%, after Brasov County-45.70%.

The structure of overnight stays, by category of tourists, shows that 91.42% of them belong to Romanian tourists and 8.58% to foreigners.

The evolution of overnight stays in agro-tourism guesthouses in Alba County, in the main localities with agro-tourism potential, is presented in table 6. and figure 7., from the data presented, the same upward trend of overnight stays can be observed, in the period 2015-2023, with the exception of 2020, a fact due pandemic restriction.

Table 6. The overnight stays of tourists, in agro-tourism guesthouses in the localities of Alba County, 2015-2023

	2015	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Albac	6175	12557	6788	7451	9667	13948
Arieseni	21186	27852	19916	21069	15936	17388
Galda de Jos	:	1747	2838	2417	2155	1749
Garda de Sus	6331	14895	11975	14386	15011	14446
Horea	396	180	1810	1422	1218	1293
Pianu	3072	6895	5276	6463	7129	7470
Rimetea	8784	15263	7591	13968	14884	21355
Salciua	4130	5793	3651	2370	3511	4273
Sugag	2451	8244	12511	13869	14261	15394
Vadu Motilor	735	1279	892	958	2525	2625
Vidra	1926	1544	1846	1426	1565	2551

Source: <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table>, [17]

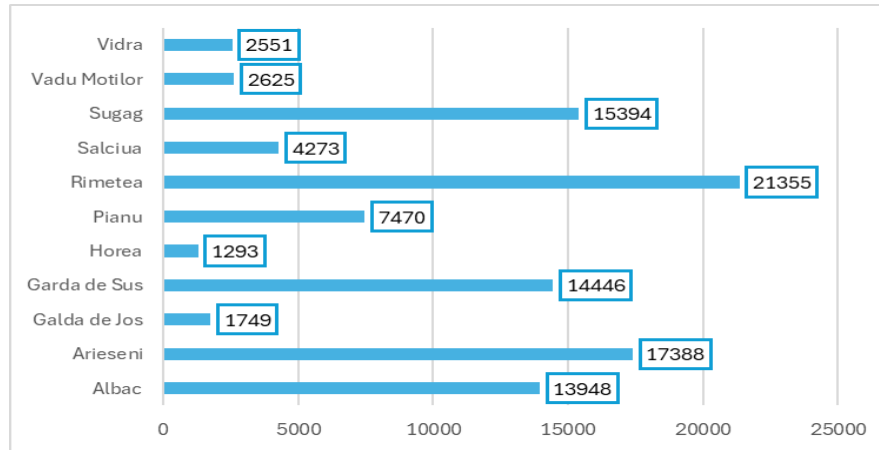


Figure 7. Overnight stays by tourists, in agro-tourism guesthouses in the localities of Alba County, 2023, [17]

The main localities in Alba County, with agro-tourism potential, which recorded the highest values of this indicator, in 2023, are: Rimetea-21355, Arieseni-17388, Sugag-15394, Garda de Sus-14446, Albac-13948 and Pianu-7470, together making 62.51% of the total overnight stays at the county level.

A special situation is represented by the fact that, in some localities such as Rimetea, Galda de Jos, Horea, Sugag and Vidra, in 2020, the number of overnight stays did not decrease, but, on the contrary, increased, a fact due to the rapid adaptation of the units of accommodation, to the requirements imposed by the Covid19 pandemic, and the provision of favorable conditions, which allowed the intensification of tourist traffic in these areas.

The average length of stay is an important indicator for analyzing tourist demand, providing information on the average number of days spent by a tourist in the accommodation units and the unit's ability to retain, for as long as possible, the demand touristic.

Figure 3.8 shows the average length of stay in the main agro-tourism villages in Alba County, per month, in 2023.

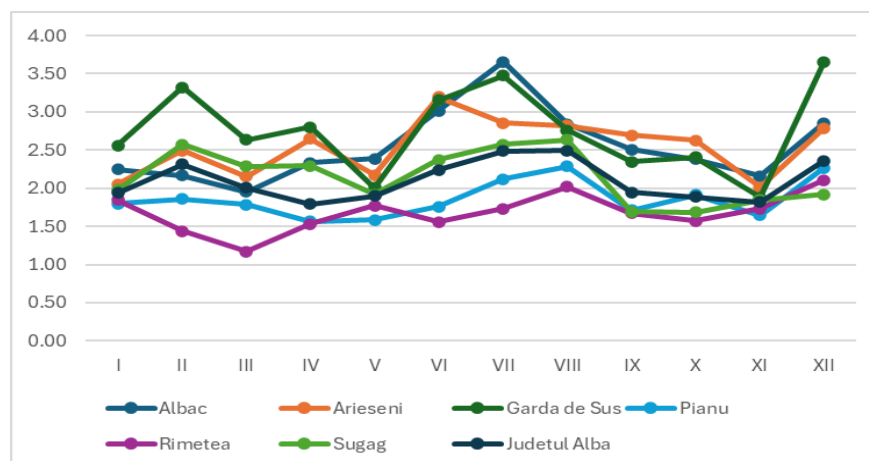


Figure 8. Average length of stay, in agro-tourism guesthouses in the localities of Alba County, 2023, [17]

The average length of stay in agro-tourism guesthouses in the localities under study indicates an average value of 1-3 days/tourist (2.25 days/tourist), reflecting precisely the

fact that tourism practiced in these accommodation units is usually a weekend trip. The highest values were recorded in the towns of Albac and Arieseni with 2.54 days/tourist and Garda de Sus with 2.75 days/tourist, the values being higher than the county average-2.10 days/tourist.

CONCLUSIONS

Having numerous natural and anthropogenic resources, Alba County presents a high potential for the development of rural and agritourism, oenological and gastronomic, sports, spa, leisure, religious and cultural-historical tourism.

Alba County is a very attractive county from a tourist point of view, having a rich natural, cultural and historical potential, harmoniously combining the rustic with the modern and keeping the authentic rural environment unaltered. The picturesque lands, the numerous speleological objectives and protected natural areas, the traditions and customs preserved over the years, make Alba County a county with continuously developing tourist potential.

Rural tourism and agritourism, as tourist activities practiced in the countryside, oriented towards the use of local tourist resources and the promotion of ethno-folkloric traditions and customs, of local communities and the valorization of traditional products specific to the area, constitute as true vectors of the development of rural areas in the county White.

At the level of Alba County, there are numerous localities with remarkable agrotourism potential, established as tourist attractions both nationally and internationally, which allow the development of tourist activity in rural areas.

However, the tourist potential of these areas is not exploited to its true value. The main aspect that determines the existence of a reduced degree of exploitation of the tourist potential and the low degree of occupancy of agritourism guesthouses, at the county level, is due to the short duration of the stay, the lack of facilities adjacent to the accommodation service, the lack of tourist programs and obviously, a promotion reduction of agritourism at national and international level.

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