

RESEARCH ON AGRITOURISM ACTIVITY IN BIHOR COUNTY

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***Abstract:** Situated in the north-west of Romania, Bihor County is characterized by a varied relief, harmoniously combining the Apuseni Mountains, hills, plains and meadow areas, offering an ideal setting for both recreational activities in nature and authentic experiences of rural life. These spectacular landscapes not only attract hiking, caving and adventure tourists, but also foster the development of rural and agro-tourism. Agro-tourism in Bihor County is constantly expanding, having a significant impact on the local economy thanks to its natural beauty, rich cultural heritage and well-preserved traditions. The authors of this scientific work note a steady growth in this sector, with more and more rural households being transformed into agrotourism guesthouses, offering visitors traditional-style accommodation, local cuisine and activities inspired by village life. At the same time, a detailed analysis of the methods used and the results obtained contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of rural tourism and agritourism in this region. For the realization of this study, quantitative and qualitative methods were used, which allowed a detailed analysis of the agritourism sector in Bihor County. Therefore the scientific research methodology included clear principles and rules for conducting the investigations, using appropriate tools for data collection and interpretation. In the process of processing and interpreting the information, we used in particular the method of comparison, analyzing the data in time and space in order to obtain a deep and detailed understanding of the analyzed activity.*

Key words: *agritouristic activity, agrotourism, Bihor County, tourists, tourist accommodation structures*

INTRODUCTION

In the context of the transition towards a sustainable economy, agritourism is becoming an increasingly important pillar of rural development, especially in Eastern Europe and, implicitly, in Romania. As a form of tourism that is deeply integrated into village life, agrotourism involves hosting tourists in traditional homesteads and offering them authentic experiences related to agricultural activities, local gastronomy, crafts and customs specific to the rural environment. [4]

This form of tourism contributes significantly to the economic revitalization of rural areas, complementing farmers' incomes and creating alternative employment opportunities for the local population. [1] Studies show that agrotourism not only reduces the economic dependence on agriculture, but also plays an essential role in preserving local identity and limiting the process of depopulation. [6, 8] However, the development of agritourism is not without its difficulties: high seasonality, shortage of qualified staff, insufficient promotion and poorly developed infrastructure, especially in remote areas, remain major challenges. [2] However, the benefits are clear - agritourism stimulates the local economy, supports the preservation of traditions, and contributes to the modernization of infrastructure. [10] In Bihor County, these positive effects are reflected in increasing investments in the modernization of guesthouses, the promotion of traditional products, and higher occupancy rates during off-peak seasons. [7]

Beyond the economic dimension, agrotourism also has a strong educational and ecological component. It fosters awareness of the value of natural and cultural heritage, turning tourists into partners in the conservation of the rural environment, and hosts into

promoters of environmental and cultural education. [10] In Bihor County, these interactions are particularly visible in the villages of the Apuseni Mountains area, where responsible tourism projects, carried out in collaboration with NGOs and local authorities, have generated positive impacts on the communities.

Starting from these premises, the present research aims to provide a detailed analysis of agro-tourism activity in Bihor County, emphasizing the relationship between local resources, tourism dynamics and the impact on communities. The ultimate goal is to identify strategic development directions that will sustainably capitalize on the region's potential.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present research was carried out between 2013 and 2023, with the aim of analyzing the evolution and current status of agritourism activity in Bihor County. The approach was both descriptive and analytical, based on secondary sources and qualitative analysis methods. The analysis documentation was structured in a logical manner to emphasize the essential aspects. The facts were presented in a clearly defined sequence, progressing from specific details to broader considerations and from simple information to more complex insights. Each stage of the analysis adhered to general principles, ensuring both the coherence and the relevance of the results obtained.

The scientific research methodology included clear principles and rules for conducting investigations, using appropriate tools for data collection and interpretation. The research was limited Bihor county.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The county of Bihor is one of the most attractive counties in Romania for rural tourism and agrotourism due to its varied landscapes, well-preserved traditions and the hospitality of its inhabitants. Situated in the north-west of the country, Bihor is among the largest counties in Romania and benefits from a diversified relief, including the Apuseni Mountains, hills, plains and meadow areas, offering an ideal setting for recreational activities in nature and authentic experiences of rural life. [15, 17] The most important tourist attractions of the county are concentrated in its mountain area. The area supports a wide range of tourist activities, including hiking, speleotourism, adventure tourism, as well ecotourism and cultural tourism, all based on the value of its natural, historical (archaeological) and cultural resource. [11, 14] At the regional level, Bihor County ranks 3rd place, with 23% in the total, equivalent to 495 accommodation units out of a total of 2119, according to the data presented in the table and figure below.

Table 1.
The distribution of accommodation units in North-West Region
-number of unit-

Specification	2013	2015	2017	2019	2021	2022	2023
North-West Region	709	771	1019	1124	1732	1952	2119
Bihor	139	179	216	256	336	472	495
Bistrița-Năsăud	49	44	87	95	143	184	191
Cluj	206	186	283	334	507	547	596
Maramureș	180	197	277	262	508	537	618
Satu Mare	77	62	36	62	106	77	73
Sălaj	58	103	120	115	132	135	146

Source: Processing after INS-Tempo online, 2024, [12]

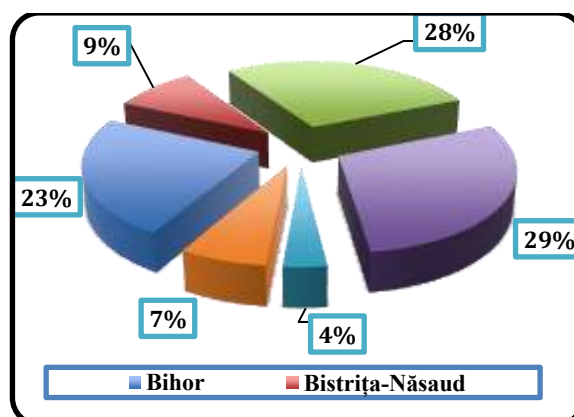


Figure 1. Distribution of accommodation establishments in the North-West Region, 2023

The tourist infrastructure of Bihor County is well developed. In 2023, the county registers 495 tourist accommodation establishments, including 57 hotels, 17 hostels, 136 apartments and rooms for rent, 7 motels, 39 tourist villas, 5 chalets, 29 tourist guesthouses and 195 agro-touristic guesthouses.

Table 2 illustrates the dynamics of tourist accommodation establishments in Bihor County between 2013 and 2023. [12]

Table 2.
Existing accommodation structures in Bihor County, 2013-2023

- number of unit -

Tourist accommodation structures	2013	2015	2017	2019	2021	2022	2023
Total	139	179	216	256	336	472	495
Hotels	42	48	52	51	51	54	57
Hostels	3	5	7	12	15	17	17
Apartments and rooms for rent	:	:	:	:	58	121	136
Apartment hotels	2	2	2	1	1	2	2
Motels	3	5	5	5	6	7	7
Tourist villas	10	20	21	26	29	41	39
Tourist huts	4	4	6	5	6	5	5
Campsites	4	4	4	1	2	3	3
Tourist cottages	:	:	:	:	:	2	4
Tourist pensions	6	11	26	25	29	29	29
Agritouristic guesthouses	53	77	90	127	139	190	195

Source: <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table>, [16]

The statistical data on the evolution of tourist accommodation facilities in Bihor County between 2013 and 2023 show a positive trend and a significant diversification of the accommodation offer. The total number of establishments increased from 139 in 2013 to 495 in 2023, representing an increase of over 256%.

The most spectacular developments have been recorded among the agro-tourist guesthouses, which grew from 53 in 2013 to 195 in 2023, representing an increase of more than 267% with a decade. Between 2021 and 2023 alone, the increase was over 40%, confirming the revival of agritourism in the post-pandemic period and the growing interest in rural tourism (figure 2).

This expansion is largely due both to tourists' preference for authentic experiences in natural settings and financial support programs funded through European resource, which have supported the development of rural tourism infrastructure.

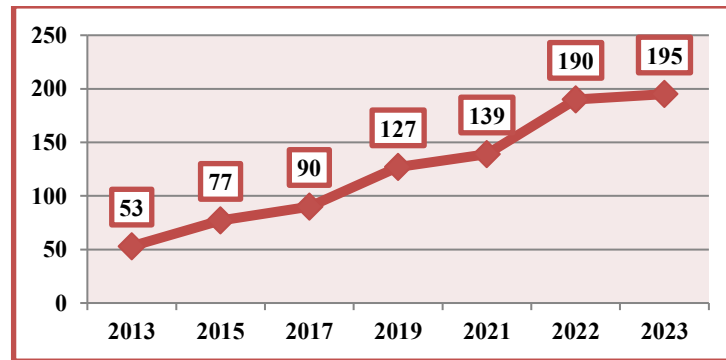


Figure 2. Evolution of agrotouristic guesthouses in Bihor County, 2013-2023

Significant developments can also be observed among other types of accommodation: apartments and rooms for rent (from 58 in 2021 to 136 in 2023), hostels (from 3 in 2013 to 17 in 2023), and tourist villas (from 10 to 39 in the same period). These data show that Bihor County has successfully adapted to the modern demands of the tourism market, while promoting local values and resources through the sustainable development of agritourism.

This evolution has been influenced by several factors:

- ✚ Access to European funds: many households in the mountainous areas of the county (e.g. Padiș, Roșia, Budureasa area) have been modernized with the support of PNDR (National Rural Development Program) funding measures, according to MADR (2023). [13]

- ✚ Increasing demand for sustainable tourism: tourists, especially urban tourists, are increasingly looking for authentic experiences - tastings of local products, participation in agricultural activities, hiking or craft workshops. [3]

- ✚ Online promotion and digitization: more and more hostels in Bihor have created websites, profiles on booking platforms and social media accounts, which has increased their visibility. [9]

In order to assess the impact of tourism infrastructure development on demand, it is essential to analyze tourist arrivals in agritourism guesthouses in Bihor County, broken down by categories of tourists - Romanian and foreign - in the period 2013-2023 (Table 3).

Table 3.
Arrivals of tourists staying in agritourism accommodations in Bihor County,
by type of tourists

-number-

Types of tourists	2013	2015	2017	2019	2021	2023
Total	24375	36866	64466	77130	60070	81248
Romanians	22277	34974	62968	75223	59571	79529
Foreigners	2098	1892	1498	1907	499	1719

Source: Processing after INS-Tempo online, 2024, [12]

The statistics show a positive trend in the total number of arrivals, which increased from 24,375 tourists in 2013 to 81,248 in 2023, representing an increase of more than 233% in the space of a decade. This trend confirms the consolidation of agritourism as a preferred form of leisure, especially in the context of the search for authentic and natural experiences.

Romanian tourists are the dominant segment with a steady share of over 95% of total arrivals. Their number has increased from 22,277 in 2013 to 79,529 in 2023, which

underlines a growing interest of the local population in rural tourism. Particularly in the post-pandemic period, in 2021 and 2023, there is a return to and even an exceeding of pre-pandemic levels (over 75,000 in 2019), suggesting a rediscovery of destinations in Romania.

In contrast, foreign tourists represented a much smaller segment, with significant variations: from 2,098 in 2013, their numbers fell to 499 in 2021, most likely as an effect of the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by a slight recovery to 1,719 in 2023. Although their contribution is modest, it is important to emphasize the potential for growth, especially in border areas and communities with internationally promoted responsible tourism projects.

This development should be correlated with the increase in the number of agritourism hostels: between 2013 and 2023, their number increased from 53 to 195, thus offering more accommodation capacity but also diversity in services. Moreover, part of the increase in the number of arrivals is directly influenced by this development of rural tourism infrastructure.

In terms of overnight stay records, i.e. the total number of nights spent by tourists in Bihor County, they amounted to 379,022 in the period analyzed, indicating a relatively short average length of stay. According to data provided by INS for the 2015-2023 period, December was the most active month in terms of tourism, with a peak of 30,141 overnight stays, reflecting the attractiveness of the winter holiday season.

The average length of stay is between 2 and 4 nights, which suggests a pattern of short-term tourism, characterized in particular by Romanian tourists, who represent the majority of visitors. At the same time, there is a gradual increase in the number of foreign tourists, especially from countries such as Hungary, Germany and Austria - a trend supported mainly by the geographical proximity of Bihor County to the western border and the promotion of destinations in the Apuseni Mountains area.

An essential element in the dynamics of rural tourism in Bihor is seasonality. The busiest months are July and August, which correspond to the summer season, and December, when the guesthouses are at high occupancy. In contrast, the months of March-April and November are considered to be periods of decreasing tourist activity, which highlights the need to diversify the agritourism offer and to organize themed events to attract visitors also in the off-season.

The analysis highlights a significant progress of the agritourism activity in Bihor County in the period 2013-2023, both from the perspective of the expansion of the accommodation infrastructure and of the tourist demand. The steady growth in the number of agrotourism hostels and tourist arrivals, especially Romanians, underlines the increasingly important role of this sector in the local rural economy. Although the number of foreign tourists remains low, the recent upward trend indicates a potential that can be tapped through international promotion and cross-border partnerships.

The relatively short length of stay and the seasonality of agritourism activity suggest the need for strategic interventions to stimulate tourism even in the off-peak periods of the year. Diversification of services, the organization of themed events, investments in digitalization and infrastructure, as well as the preservation of authentic local traditions can all contribute to the sustainable strengthening of this sector.

It can be stated with certainty that agritourism in Bihor County is on an upward trend, demonstrating a strong capacity to support rural development and promote the area's authentic values. With a coherent strategy adapted to the current context, this potential can be harnessed at both national and international levels,

CONCLUSIONS

Bihor County has a considerable agrotourism potential, supported by diverse natural resources, valuable cultural heritage and infrastructure undergoing modernization.

Agrotourism has a positive impact on the local economy, contributing to job creation in rural areas and encouraging the active involvement of communities in the provision of tourism services.

The steady growth in the number of agritourism guesthouses reflects the increased interest in this form of tourism, both from local entrepreneurs and tourists.

The main difficulties identified include poor infrastructure in certain areas, a shortage of specialized staff, uncoordinated tourism promotion and limited cooperation between local stakeholders.

Agrotourism has contributed to the diversification of the rural economy, the preservation of local traditions and fostering social cohesion within rural communities.

To support the sustainable development of this sector, there is a need for: investment in infrastructure, training programs for hosts, digitalization of promotional activities and public policies to encourage the expansion of tourism activities during the off-season.

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