

AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCES IN RURAL TOURISM: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TOURISM OFFERS IN SPAIN AND ROMANIA

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Abstract: In the context of a reorientation of consumer preferences towards sustainable and personalized tourism, the search for authentic experiences has become a main driver in the development of rural tourism. This paper carries out a comparative analysis of how rural heritage is capitalized in tourism offers in Spain, a mature and diversified market, and Romania, an emerging destination with considerable potential. The methodology included a qualitative analysis of the specialized literature and, in particular, an examination of the specific rural tourism offers promoted by travel agencies in both countries. The results highlight two distinct models: the Spanish model, characterized by professionalism, strong regional branding and niche tourism products (wine tourism, ecotourism), and the Romanian model, which is distinguished by a "raw" authenticity, based on hospitality, living traditions and direct interaction with the community, but which suffers from a lack of strategic coordination and unitary promotion.

Key words: nature, traditions, architecture, rural tourism, Spain, Romania.

INTRODUCTION

The European tourism landscape has undergone a major transformation in recent decades, due to the progressive distancing from the conventional model of mass tourism. Agglomeration, excessive standardization, the negative impact on the environment and local communities were the factors that determined a reorientation of demand towards more responsible and personalized forms of tourism. Therefore, rural tourism has experienced an exponential increase in interest, positioning itself as a viable and desirable alternative [6,7]. Currently, rural tourism is no longer seen as a simple escape from the urban environment, but as an opportunity to discover a different rhythm of life, to reconnect with nature and to explore the cultural and natural heritage in an unaltered setting [6]. This transformation is supported by a change in the motivations of those who travel. Contemporary tourist is no longer just a spectator, but an active participant, in a continuous search for experiences that are authentic, sustainable and deeply connected to the local culture. The contemporary tourist refuses to "consume" generic tourist products, instead seeking a real immersion in the specifics of a destination, being interested in sustainable practices that support the local economy, preserve the environment and respect traditions. In this way, the value of a trip is no longer measured only in comfort or the objectives visited, but by the quality of human interactions, through the stories discovered and through the feeling of belonging, even temporarily, to a community. In this context, the concept of authentic experience goes beyond the simple provision of a tourist service, such as accommodation or food. An authentic experience is defined as a holistic and memorable immersion in the lifestyle of a rural community, giving the tourist the opportunity to understand and actively participate in local realities. This involves many interconnected elements: from staying in a home that respects traditional architecture and tasting culinary dishes made only from local ingredients, to participating in craft workshops, engaging in seasonal agricultural activities, or chatting with hosts about the history and customs of the place. Authenticity is not a static attribute of a place, but a

dynamic construct, obtained from the sincere interaction between the visitor and the host community [1,3,6].

An authentic rural tourism experience is not just about accommodation, but also involves deep cultural immersion. This includes interacting with locals, participating in traditional activities (craft workshops, agricultural activities), exploring local gastronomy, and understanding the specific lifestyle of a community [1,2,5,6].

The choice of Spain and Romania for the comparative analysis is based on the contrast between the two models of rural tourism development.

Spain is a benchmark among mature tourist destinations, where the rural sector has been transformed into a diversified and professional product. From strong regional brands, such as the Pueblos Blancos in Andalusia, to specialized niches such as wine tourism in La Rioja or ecotourism in the Picos de Europa, Spain demonstrates how local heritage can be successfully integrated into a structured and internationally competitive tourist offer. In this sense, the analysis of the Spanish model is essential to understand good practices in terms of branding, infrastructure and the creation of authentic, but standardized experiences [1].

In contrast, Romania is an emerging destination, whose main asset is its rural potential, characterized by picturesque landscapes and well-preserved traditions. Areas such as Maramureș, Bucovina or the Saxon villages of Transylvania offer a “raw authenticity”, based largely on direct interaction with rural communities, and not so much on a strategy. Thus, Romania serves as a case study for an early stage of development, allowing the analysis of challenges related to infrastructure, marketing and standardization, but also of the unique opportunities given by a heritage not yet altered by mass tourism [3,7].

In this way, the juxtaposition of the two contexts, one mature and diversified, the other emerging and with potential, provides an ideal framework to extract valuable conclusions about strategies for valorizing rural tourism in the contemporary European landscape.

The objective of the research is the comparative analysis of how the two countries valorize rural heritage to create and promote tourist offers based on unique experiences.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To achieve the proposed objective, the research conducted was based on desk research. Initially, various sources from the specialized literature were consulted regarding concepts of rural tourism and authentic experiences. The research continued with the analysis of the offers of travel agencies from Spain and Romania in terms of rural tourism, such destinations names and elements based of tourist offers (nature, lanscapes, silence, life style of a community, traditions, crafts, history, architecture, gastronomy).

RESEARCH RESULTS

Theoretical framework: from tourism product to authentic experience

Nowadays, rural tourism has long surpassed the stage of “room to rent in the country”. If in the past rural tourism was seen as a cheaper alternative to mass tourism, an escape from the urban agglomeration, today it is a complex form of experiential tourism. Tourists are no longer looking for just accommodation, but a total immersion in rural life, wanting to understand where food comes from, participate in traditions and reconnect with nature. This evolution is due to a change in tourist behavior, who now value authenticity, sustainability and personalized experiences to the detriment of standardized packages. In

this way, rural tourism has become a symbiosis between agriculture, culture, nature and community, where each element complements the other.

An authentic experience is based on several elements, which together create a complete story for tourists.

Accommodation is no longer just a place to sleep, but the tourist's first interaction with the local specificity. Guesthouses that use traditional building materials and techniques, restored old houses or modern forms, such as glamping that respect the landscape, all contribute to the sentiment of authenticity and are part of the tourist attraction.

When it comes to gastronomy, the "farm to table" concept is essential. Meals prepared with ingredients from own household or from local producers offer tourists a unique culinary experience and support the local economy. Tourists appreciate the authentic taste, fresh products, but also the stories behind them.

Activities and interaction are the essence of the rural experience. Direct involvement of tourists in activities such as pottery, weaving, egg painting, fruit picking, animal care, cheese making, festivals, religious celebrations, tours guided by locals, can transform a simple vacation into an unforgettable memory.

Connecting with the natural environment is also the main motivation for urban tourists. The landscape is not just a backdrop, but an active participant in the experience, whether it is a walk through the forest, a swim in a mountain river or simply contemplating a sunset on the surrounding hills.

When practiced responsibly, rural tourism becomes a powerful engine for the sustainable development of communities, contributing to the local economy, preserving heritage and combating depopulation.

Modern rural tourism is a complex ecosystem in which the tourist is more than a mere spectator, he is an active participant, and the local community is not just a simple service provider, but a partner in creating an authentic and sustainable experience for all involved.

Analysis of rural tourism offers – case study Spain and Romania

- *Spain: a model of maturity and diversification in rural tourism.* Spain is an example of excellence in rural tourism, managing to transform villages and rural areas into complex and attractive tourist destinations. The Spanish model is based on a remarkable diversification of the offer and well-defined marketing strategies, which highlight the authenticity of each region [1,6].

Following the analysis of the rural tourism offers of 23 travel agencies in Spain, the rural destinations and key elements of the offers are highlighted [12-14,17,20,26-28,30,33-35,39-43,46-50]:

- *Nature and landscape* are the most common elements, present in most destinations (e.g. Isla in Cantabria, Ribadesella in Asturias, Val d'Aran in Catalonia). This highlights the importance of the natural setting as a main attraction.

- *Gastronomy and traditions* are components that almost always appear together, indicating a close link between local food and the culture of the area (e.g. Laciana in Castilla y León, Ribeira Sacra in Galicia).

- *Architecture and history* are essential pillars, especially in villages with a rich heritage (e.g. Cádiz in Andalusia, Ciudad Rodrigo in Castilla y León, Mogrovejo in Cantabria).

- *Combined offers*, most successful destinations are not based on a single element, but on a combination of at least 3-4 pillars (nature, gastronomy, culture, history,

adventure), thus creating a complete experience. For example, Matarraña in Aragón combines architecture, gastronomy, nature and adventure.

Based on these observations, a structuring of the offer by regions and specific themes is highlighted:

Tourism in the "Pueblos Blancos" (White Villages) of Andalusia where the emphasis is on a unique visual aesthetic – white houses, narrow streets and flowers in the windows. Destinations such as Cádiz and Casares (mentioned in the image) attract tourists through architecture, history, spectacular landscapes and a relaxed Mediterranean lifestyle.

Tourism in the North (Asturias, Galicia, Cantabria), an area known as "Green Spain", offers experiences based on wild nature (Picos de Europa National Park), adventure (Ribadesella), specific gastronomy (seafood in Galicia) and traditions with Celtic influences.

Agrotourism and wine tourism (La Rioja, Castilla y León), these regions have developed niche offers, built around an emblematic product. La Rioja, for example, is internationally renowned for its wines, and tourism is closely linked to visiting vineyards (bodegas), tastings and local gastronomy. The image confirms that La Rioja's offer includes gastronomy, crafts, traditions and nature.

The success of the Spanish model is also due to the way it promotes authenticity:

- *Promoted elements*: The history of the place, unique architecture, regional gastronomy and, very importantly, intangible concepts such as tranquility (explicitly mentioned for the Sierra del Montsant) and escape from everyday life.

- *Marketing strategies*:

- Strong regional branding: Programs such as "Los Pueblos más Bonitos de España" (The Most Beautiful Villages in Spain) or "Magic Villages" create a standard of quality and increased visibility.

- Specialized platforms: There are numerous booking portals dedicated exclusively to rural tourism (casas rurales), which facilitate tourists' access to authentic offers.

- Thematic routes: The creation of cultural or gastronomic routes (e.g.: The Wine Route of La Rioja) encourages tourists to explore an entire region, not just a single town.

Therefore, Spain demonstrates how a coherent national and regional strategy, based on identifying and promoting local strengths – be it nature, architecture, gastronomy or traditions – can transform rural tourism into a mature, diversified and sustainable economic sector.

- *Romania: a model of potential and living tradition*. Romania stands out on the map of European rural tourism through a rare and precious asset: its vibrant authenticity. Unlike other areas where traditions are often recreated for tourists, in many Romanian villages they are still part of the natural rhythm of everyday life. This "living museum" represents both the immense potential and the main challenge of Romanian rural tourism: how to capitalize on this treasure without altering it [2,4,5,8].

Following the analysis of the rural tourism offers of 20 Romanian travel agencies, it was highlighted that the rural tourism offer in Romania is deeply linked to the historical and geographical identity of each region [9-11,15,16,18,19,21-25,29,31,32,36-38,44,45].

Maramures and Bucovina are the quintessence of the traditional Romanian village. Here, tourism is built around an exceptional cultural heritage. The main focus is on traditions and spirituality: wooden churches (UNESCO heritage), carved Maramures gates, painted monasteries in Bucovina. Religious holidays (Easter, Christmas) are celebrated to the fullest, attracting tourists eager to experience centuries-old customs. Crafts are an attraction in themselves: tourists can visit pottery workshops, see how traditional carpets

are woven or participate in egg painting. The cultural landscape, with haylofts and headstones, is unique in Europe and completes the experience.

Transylvania (the area of Saxon villages) is where the rural experience has a strong historical and architectural imprint. The Saxon villages, with their fortified churches (many on the UNESCO heritage list), offer a unique perspective on interethnic coexistence over the centuries. Conservation projects have played a crucial role. Initiatives such as those in Viscri (popularized by King Charles III), Richiș or Mălâncrav have transformed these villages into models of good practice. The old houses have been carefully restored, preserving the original architecture, and transformed into guesthouses that offer modern comfort in a historic setting. Tourism in these areas is slow, contemplative, based on cycling between villages, discovering local history and appreciating a cultural landscape shaped by man for over 800 years.

The Danube Delta and the Apuseni Mountains are areas that offer a form of rural tourism focused on wild nature and isolation. In the Danube Delta, tourism is linked to water: boat trips on the canals, birdwatching, fishing and gastronomy based on fresh fish. Authenticity comes from the unique lifestyle of the locals, perfectly adapted to the conditions of the Delta. In the Apuseni Mountains, especially in the "Țara Moșilor" area, the main attraction is the spectacular karst landscape (caves, gorges) and the archaic lifestyle in the isolated hamlets (groves). Tourists here seek total disconnection, hiking and contact with an almost untouched nature.

If the Spanish model is based on a well-refined tourist product, the Romanian model excels through human and experiential elements, often unpolished, but all the more authentic:

- The hospitality of the hosts is perhaps the greatest asset. In many rural guesthouses, tourists are not treated as simple customers, but as guests of the house. The hosts share stories, sit at the table with tourists and create a personal, memorable connection.

- Participation in the life of the household: many tourists are invited to participate in daily activities: feeding the animals, milking the cow, working in the garden or preparing meals. This direct interaction offers deep satisfaction and a real understanding of life in the countryside.

- Food "like at home": Romanian rural gastronomy is based on simple, hearty recipes, prepared with fresh ingredients, directly from the garden or from their own production. The authentic, unadulterated taste of "zacusca", a soup or a piece of fresh cheese is an experience in itself.

- Unspoiled landscape: Romania still benefits from rural landscapes that in many parts of Europe have disappeared, transformed by intensive agriculture. This "disordered" nature, full of life, is extremely valuable.

Unlike Spain, Romania does not yet have a coherent and strong national branding strategy for rural tourism. Marketing is largely supported by the individual efforts of guesthouse owners and associations such as ANTREC (National Association of Rural, Ecological and Cultural Tourism), which played a pioneering role in the field. They organize events and promote the concept, but their reach is limited. In recent years, travel bloggers and social media influencers have become an important vector of promotion, discovering and popularizing lesser-known destinations. Most bookings are made through international platforms such as Booking.com or Airbnb. Although effective, these platforms are not specialized in rural tourism and often cannot capture and convey the complexity and authenticity of a rural experience, reducing it to a simple accommodation transaction. The lack of specialized and strong national platforms is a major disadvantage.

Thus, rural tourism in Romania is an unpolished diamond, rich in authentic resources, living traditions and hospitality, but which needs a strategic vision, coherent branding and adapted marketing tools to reach its true potential.

A relevant analysis of how Spain and Romania capitalize on rural heritage in tourism offers is presented in table 1, which highlights two distinct development models. The analysis structured on five essential criteria – level of development, authenticity driver, infrastructure, promotion strategy and challenges – allows a clear understanding of the strategic differences between the two countries.

Spain stands out for its professionalism and maturity, with a well-structured rural sector, supported by strong regional brands and an accessible infrastructure. Spain's authenticity is built around tangible elements such as history, architecture and regional gastronomy, being packaged in an internationally competitive offer. The main challenge identified is overtourism in certain areas and maintaining authenticity in the face of standardization.

In contrast, Romania is in an emerging stage, characterized by fragmented initiatives and less coordinated promotion. Romania's competitive advantage lies in its "raw" authenticity, based on living traditions, hospitality and direct interaction with the local community. The major challenges are related to the lack of standardization, poor infrastructure and insufficient marketing.

Table 1.

Comparative analysis of rural tourism offers

Criterion	Spain	Romania
Level of development	mature, diversified, professional.	emerging, fragmented, based on individual initiatives.
Engine of authenticity	history, landscape, architecture, regional gastronomy.	living traditions, hospitality, direct human interaction.
Infrastructure	well developed, easy access.	developing, difficult access in some areas.
Promotion strategy	coordinated at regional/national level, strong brands.	dependent on private efforts, less coordinated.
Challenges	overtourism in certain areas, maintaining authenticity.	lack of standardization, infrastructure, poor marketing.

Source: authors' own processing

The table highlights that although both countries have valuable rural potential, they exploit it through different strategies, reflecting different stages of tourism maturity. The comparison provides a solid basis for identifying good practices and future development directions for Romania.

CONCLUSIONS

Both countries analyzed have a valuable fund for authentic rural tourism, but they capitalize on it differently, through models at different stages of development. While Spain excels at packaging and promoting experiences in a professional way, Romania offers a “rawer authenticity”, based mainly on human interaction.

Rural tourism in Romania represents an essential component of the national tourism offer, with considerable growth potential, given the increasing preference for authentic experiences and less crowded destinations. In order to capitalize on this potential, it is necessary to implement coherent and well-defined strategies aimed at strengthening regional identity, improving the quality of services and exploring new research directions. In this sense, a first step is the creation of strong regional brands, and a strategic approach

for the development of rural tourism in Romania involves moving from the individual promotion of guesthouses or small businesses to that of micro-destinations with strong regional brands. The creation and promotion of thematic tourist products represent another fundamental strategic direction, allowing the connection of different tourist offers in a logical and attractive circuit, offering tourists complex experiences. Thematic routes can be developed around specific cultural, historical, gastronomic or natural elements. Thematic routes not only diversify the offer, but also contribute to the distribution of tourist flow over a wider area, reducing the pressure on congested destinations and stimulating economic development in lesser-known areas. Another strategic direction is the professionalization of services. In Romanian rural tourism, the professionalization of services is crucial, this involves organizing training and professional development programs for guesthouse owners, local guides and other tourism service providers in digital marketing, customer experience management, sustainability and ecological practices. By implementing these recommendations, Romanian rural tourism can reach a higher level of development, contributing significantly to the local economy, heritage conservation and offering unique tourist experiences.

In order to support continuous development and adapt to new trends, research can be continued through an analysis of the impact of technology on the promotion of authentic experiences, studying how digital tools can be used to amplify and make accessible authentic experiences in rural tourism, without transforming them into mass products. Another future research direction may be to study foreign tourists' perception of authenticity in Romanian rural tourism in order to identify the specific elements that foreign tourists consider authentic in Romania, compared to other rural tourism destinations. The study could provide valuable information for adapting promotion strategies and for developing tourism products that meet the expectations of this market segment.

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