

ASPECTS OF TOURIST SERVICES IN PRACTICING WINTER TOURISM AT MUNTELE MIC

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***Abstract.** The paper analyzes the particularities of the tourist services offered in the Muntele Mic resort, with the objective of highlighting how they contribute to the development and attractiveness of winter tourism in the area. The study captures the relationship between the tourist infrastructure, the quality of services and the degree of satisfaction of visitors, emphasizing the importance of adapting the offer to current market requirements. Aspects related to accommodation, public catering, recreational activities and related services are analyzed, as well as the role of investments in the modernization of mountain facilities. The conclusions highlight the potential of winter tourism in Muntele Mic to become a model of sustainable regional development, through the responsible use of natural resources and by diversifying the services offered to tourists.*

Key words: *tourist services; development and attractiveness of winter tourism; accommodation, public catering, recreational activities and related services.*

INTRODUCTION

Winter mountain tourism occupies a special place in the overall tourism forms practiced in Romania, due to the complex interaction between natural resources, technical infrastructure and services offered to tourists. In recent decades, this type of tourism has experienced constant development, driven by the population's growing interest in winter sports, active relaxation and authentic experiences in the mountain environment [4].

In this context, the Muntele Mic area – located in the western part of the Southern Carpathians, in Caraș-Severin County – represents a significant example of a mountain tourist destination under consolidation. The geographical positioning, favorable altitude (1,800 m), favorable climate and spectacular landscape create excellent conditions for practicing winter tourism, especially alpine skiing and related activities [2]. At the same time, the development of this area depends essentially on the quality and diversity of tourist services, which become the central element of the visitor's experience.

Tourism services include all activities through which tourists' needs and expectations are met during their stay - from accommodation, public catering and transport, to leisure services, guidance and assistance [6]. In the case of winter mountain tourism, these take on particular valences: the operation of cable cars, ski equipment rental, ensuring safety conditions on the slopes and offering complementary services (spa, rental centers, medical services, entertainment activities, etc.). As Băltărețu [1] emphasizes, the quality of tourism services is not determined exclusively by the material infrastructure, but also by the skills of the staff, the management of accommodation units and the general perception of tourists. In the case of Muntele Mic, this dimension is all the more important, as the area is in a stage of competitive development, in which differentiation through services becomes essential for attracting visitors.

On the other hand, the development of winter tourism also raises a series of challenges related to sustainability and seasonality. According to Nistoreanu [7], mountain tourism must be viewed through the lens of the balance between resource use and environmental protection, as seasonal pressure on mountain ecosystems can generate

negative effects in the long term. In the case of Muntelui Mic, sustainable service planning – by respecting environmental norms, waste management and responsible use of natural resources – is an essential condition for maintaining the attractiveness of the area [12,13].

At the same time, globalization and digitalization of tourism services have changed the way tourists choose destinations and interact with them. According to the World Tourism Organization [10], modern tourists value personalized experiences, quick access to information, transparency of offers and diversity of complementary activities. Muntele Mic has the potential to adapt to these trends, especially by developing integrated services that combine sports, relaxation and the local cultural component.

This paper aims to analyze the main aspects of the tourist services offered in the practice of winter tourism in Muntele Mic, highlighting both the strengths and current deficiencies. The objectives of the research aim to [12]:

- identify the structure of tourist services offered in the winter season;
- evaluate the level of quality perceived by tourists;
- analyze the degree of diversification and adaptation to market requirements;
- propose directions for sustainable and competitive development.

Therefore, the study is part of an interdisciplinary direction, combining elements of tourist geography, service management and sustainable development [9]. The analysis of Muntele Mic, as a case study, offers the opportunity to better understand the mechanisms through which a mountain resort can capitalize on its natural potential through tourist services, thus contributing to the economic and social development of the area [4,2].

Tourism services are the foundation of the tourist experience and, implicitly, of visitor satisfaction. According to Băltărețu [1], they can be classified into basic services – accommodation, public catering, transport – and complementary services – leisure, guidance, assistance, equipment rental, medical services and cultural activities [9].

In winter mountain resorts, the quality of these services is influenced by several factors: the level of staff training, the state of the infrastructure, the degree of digitalization of the offers and the capacity to adapt to the demands of tourists [6]. For example, the World Tourism Organization [10] emphasizes that modern tourists are more sensitive to aspects such as comfort, safety, quick access to online information and the diversity of complementary activities [5,8].

In Romania, a recent trend is the integration of tourist services into a unitary system, which combines sports with recreational and cultural activities [11,14]. This holistic approach allows for extending the duration of the stay and reducing the effects of seasonality [4,15]. Resorts such as Poiana Brașov, Straja, Râncea or Muntele Mic have started to develop integrated offers that include both winter activities and relaxation, wellness and local gastronomy services [3].

In this sense, Muntele Mic is part of a national trend of diversifying mountain services. Its location, suitable altitude and proximity to important urban centers such as Caransebeș or Timișoara, transform it into a tourist pole with high potential [12,13]. However, the development of services must be correlated with environmental protection and the training of specialized human resources, in order to ensure a sustainable evolution of mountain tourism [7].

MATERIAL AND METHOD

In Romania, ski resorts seem to be in sharp decline in terms of the number of foreign tourists who come to spend their winter holidays in our country.

The snow cover that continues to diminish is the main factor in this phenomenon. Little natural snow during the winter period requires the use of snow cannons that can ensure the start of the winter season on time. Unfortunately, artificial snow slopes are most

often very hard, the production of this type of snow is very expensive and, most often, can have a negative effect on local resources due to the very high water consumption. Also, ski slopes permanently exposed to temperature changes are vulnerable and exposed to accidents and avalanches.

In order to form a more conclusive image of this type of tourism and the tourist services that accompany it, we set out to identify the expectations and needs of consumers of winter tourist services by applying a questionnaire. The questionnaire was applied in the Muntele Mic resort between November 2024 and March 2025 to a number of 875 respondents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

First of all, we wanted to find out how many trips are made by tourists during this period. The most were those who told us that they make only one trip in winter, respectively a percentage of 37% of the respondents. Those who make two or three such trips are those who love winter sports and represent a percentage of 27% for two trips and 19% for three trips. The fewest, at a rate of 7%, are those who make several trips in winter, over four trips.

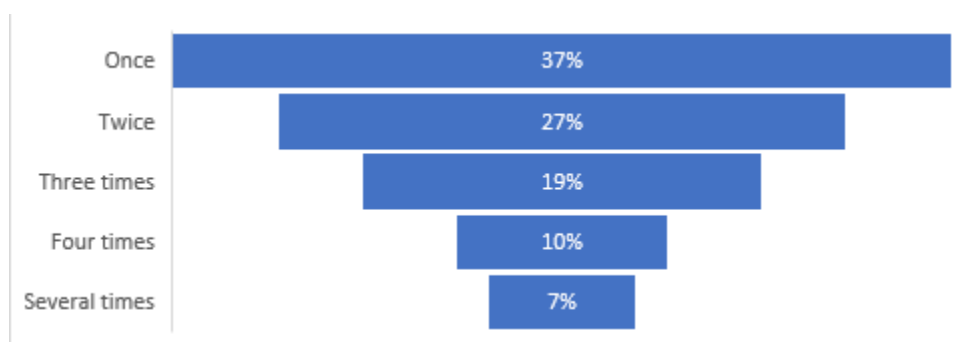


Figure 1. Winter travel

Source: results obtained after processing survey data

Winter trips are especially popular during the New Year period, when people combine holiday fun with sports at home. Then the Christmas period and weekends are preferred.

The favorite destinations of tourists in winter are, first of all, mountain resorts, followed by rural or agro-tourism areas, spa resorts, cities famous for their Christmas traditions and cultural areas.

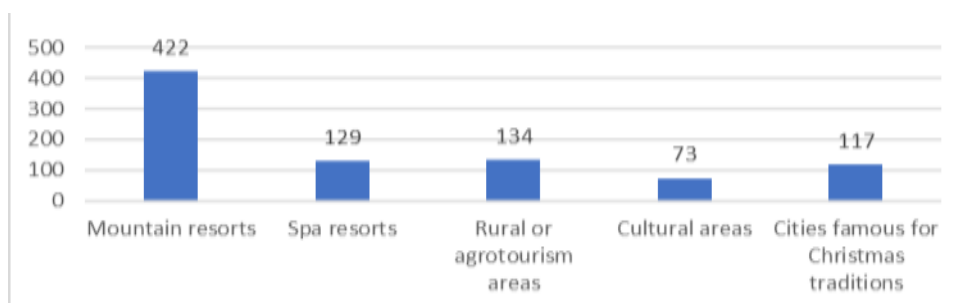


Figure 2. Favorite winter destinations

Source: results obtained after processing survey data

The number of trips involving at least one overnight stay during the winter period is graphically presented in Figure 3. Most trips are 1-3 trips per year, 39%.



Figure 3. Number of trips involving at least one overnight stay

Source: results obtained after processing survey data

During the winter, about one trip is made per week, in proportion to 41% of the respondents. Those who make one or two trips per month are in the percentage of 35% (15% two trips and 20% one trip). There are quite a few who said that they do not make trips in the winter. Also, in the winter, trips abroad are preferred to those in the country, a proportion of 61% to 39%. The preferred means of travel regardless of the more difficult travel conditions is the personal car, followed by bus, train and plane.

Among the accommodation preferences, hotels predominate – 29%, tourist chalets – 18%, villas – 15%, private hosts 14% followed by tourist guesthouses – 12% and bungalows 1%.



Figure 5. Accommodation preferences

Source: results obtained after processing survey data

The preferred types of accommodation are dominated by full board accommodation, followed by half board, all-inclusive accommodation and, lastly, accommodation with breakfast included.

The sources of information regarding winter travel are dominated by information on the Internet. In the next places are social networks, travel agency websites or agency points of sale, followed by recommendations from friends or family and leaflets, brochures and catalogues.

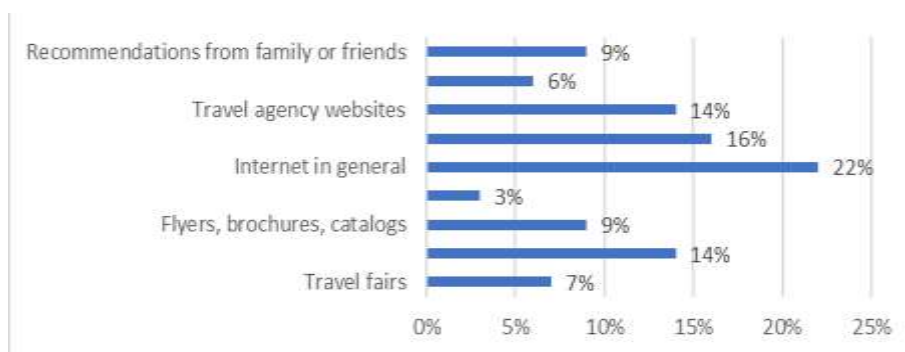


Figure 6. Information sources

Source: results obtained after processing survey data

The main source they would turn to when planning a winter trip is recommendations from family or friends, followed by travel agency websites, and 73% of those who responded to our request to answer the questionnaire stated that they would turn to a travel agency to plan their winter trip.

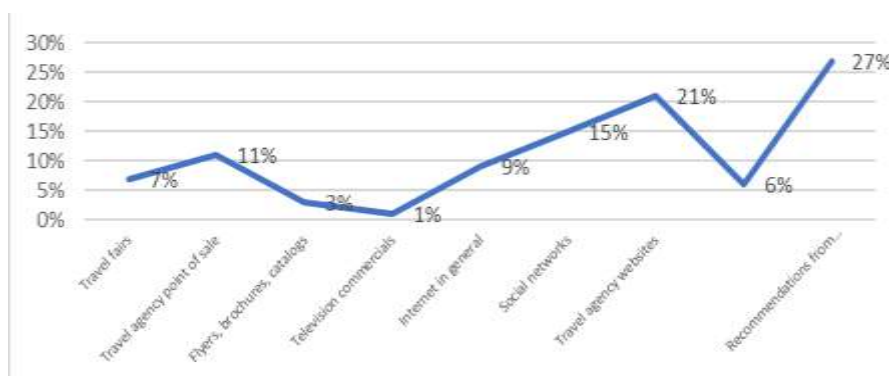


Figure 7. Sources to use when planning your trip

Source: results obtained after processing survey data

The main factor that determines winter travel is the practice of winter sports, followed by the quality of services offered and, closely, the opportunity to spend free time.

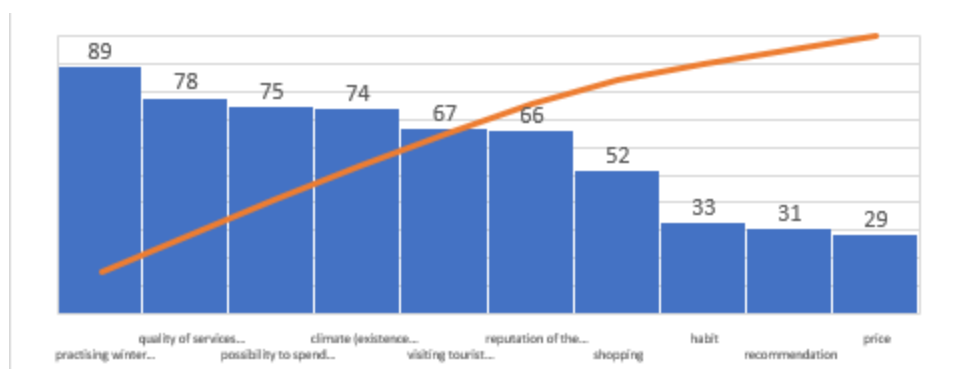


Figure 8. The determining factors of winter travel

Source: results obtained after processing survey data

The offer for winter tourism in Romania compared to other countries is considered, almost unanimously, to be less diversified.

Regarding the prices/tariffs practiced in winter tourism, in Romania compared to other countries, these are definitely higher, according to the respondents' opinion. And the offer of services for winter tourism is considered much worse in Romania compared to other countries.

Accommodation services are also considered to be much worse than those offered abroad. Neither the possibility of entertainment for winter tourism in Romania represents a factor that could attract tourists for this type of tourism.

Regarding the possibility of practicing winter sports in Romania, most consider it to be about the same as that abroad, a percentage of 49% of respondents, 33% believe it is lower, 9% consider it much lower, 7% slightly higher and only 2% much higher.

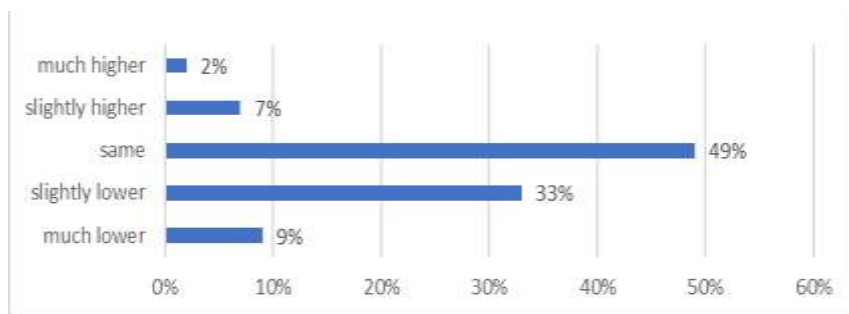


Figure 9. The possibility of practicing winter sports in Romania compared to abroad

Source: results obtained after processing survey data

Asked whether they believe that a reduced or lower price of services in winter tourism could be an important factor in promoting this type of tourism, most respondents expressed total agreement from this point of view.

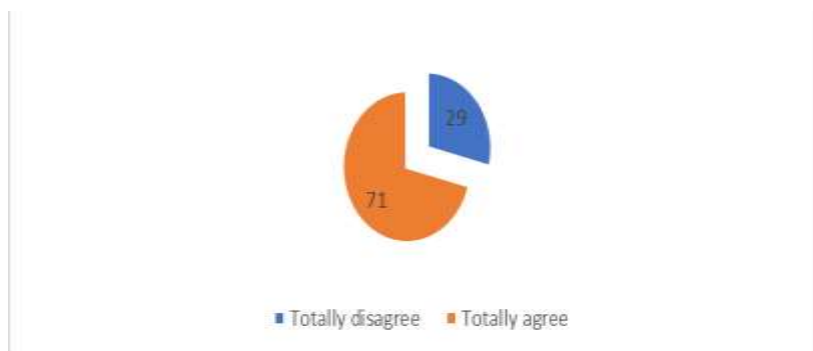


Figure 10. Low price of services - factor in promoting winter tourism in Romania

Source: results obtained after processing survey data

The last questions of the questionnaire were those that sought to obtain minimal information about those who answered our questions. Thus, we wanted to find out information about the gender of the respondents - 64% were male, about the age of the respondents - those between 23 and 26 years old predominated, and about the level of education, with those with higher education predominating.

CONCLUSIONS

Winter is the season with a special charm in Romania, this season bringing with it a magical atmosphere, offering a wide variety of unique experiences in tourism, from snow-covered landscapes to various authentic traditions, a time when tourists can discover the charm and beauty of this season in various areas of the country.

An extremely beloved winter experience in Romania is the one related to the mountainous landscape, a very impressive landscape, the Carpathian Mountains offering excellent opportunities for winter sports lovers. The mountainous area of the country thus becomes a true fairytale destination, transforming into a paradise for those who ski or snowboard.

For lovers of local culture and traditions, the winter season becomes the ideal time to explore authentic Romanian villages when tourists can experience the authenticity of the culture or participate in traditional celebrations.

Those who prefer relaxation and reconnecting with nature, in a wonderful and peaceful setting, can find these things in the mountain villages that are true oases of beauty and calm.

Winter is also the season of traditional local gastronomy and the dishes specific to the period can bring true additional delights during the tourist trip, moments when tourists can enjoy authentic aromas and rich tastes that reflect the Romanian gastronomic culture.

Therefore, winter in Romania offers diverse, unique experiences, from adventures on the slopes of achi, to walks through authentic villages, with traditional dishes, the entire country offering a varied tourist landscape, full of charm for all those who want to explore the beauty and magic of this season.

Unfortunately, to paraphrase the French poet François Villon, today we also ask ourselves the question "Where are the old snows?", given that Romanian winters have changed dramatically in recent years. Most often, we hear the voices of farmers lamenting the lack of snow cover so necessary for crops, it snows less often in cities, in mountain resorts. Both the agricultural sector and winter tourism are affected by climate change. Normally, Romania should have 90 continuous days of snow, unfortunately currently, there is no continuity of snowy days, but a segmentation of them has appeared. Of the 90 days, half are without snow, producing a real imbalance that affects the Romanian economy.

The mechanisms in agriculture and those in tourism follow the same logic, which is why the future does not look favorable for improving the situation in any of the mentioned sectors. The winter season will certainly be shorter, involving more complex and expensive tourist services. There will be an overcrowding of some resorts to the detriment of others.

Romania's problem is that all resorts are located below 2,500 meters altitude, meaning all in the most vulnerable area. Between 1,800 and 2,400 meters altitude there will probably be a short but decent winter tourist season for practicing winter sports, while below 1,800 meters we can rule out the existence of ski resorts for the future.

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