

RĂȘINARI, BIERTAN AND RÂU SADULUI – TOP RURAL TOURIST DESTINATIONS WORLDWIDE

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Abstract:

Tourism is called upon to play the role of facilitator of sustainable development, to lead collaboration with interest groups and local communities to decide jointly on the development of destinations. After the last difficult and challenging years, tourism has shown its resilience and ability to once again represent the percentage of GDP of many of the countries it owned before the pandemic. The WTO launched in 2021 the "Best Tourism Villages" initiative with the aim of transforming tourism into an engine for rural development and well-being and bringing about real change in local communities by creating jobs, supporting local businesses and preserving customs and traditions. The initiative recognizes villages that are an example of a rural tourist destination with cultural and natural assets, that preserve and promote the values, products and lifestyles of communities, and that have a clear commitment to innovation and sustainability. Romania is very well positioned at international level, from the point of view of rural tourism. Six localities have entered the competition "Best Tourism Villages" (2022), dedicated to the recognition of villages that are remarkable examples of rural tourist destinations. These are Biertan, Rășinari and Râu Sadului (Sibiu County), Ciocănești (Suceava), Costești (Vâlcea), Eibenthal (Mehedinți). In the work we analysed the criteria that formed the basis for the selection of the three villages in Sibiu County, namely: the cultural and natural resources in the destination, the promotion and conservation of cultural resources, the economic, social and environmental sustainability, the governance and prioritization of tourism, infrastructure and connectivity, health, safety and security, as well as the photos and presentation videos. Rășinari village is the big winner of Romania's second edition of the world competition Best Tourism Villages, being selected by the specialists of the WTO, from over 130 applications, coming from 57 countries.

Key words: best tourism villages, sustainable development, rural tourism

JEL classification: L83, Q56, Q57, Q01, Q13

1. INTRODUCTION

The rural area of Mărginimea Sibiului has a picturesque and unpolluted geographical setting, with a complex touristic potential as a structure and with a pronounced regional and national specificity, made up of natural resources and attractions (mountains, hills, waters, etc.), a representative ethnographic and folklore dowry, traditional occupations, historical and art monuments, prestigious cultural events.

The tourist village meets a sum of picturesque and unpolluted natural conditions, tourist resources, ethnographic and folkloric traditions, art monuments, historical vestiges, etc., which represent the tourist attraction itself. To these are added the peasant households arranged as tourist and agrotouristic pensions, accessibility, infrastructure and technical-municipal, commercial and social facilities, which form the facilities for tourism.

Romanian rural settlements still preserve, to a large extent, ancient occupations, customs and customs, a rich and varied folklore, authentic folk artefacts and a varied and original gastronomy, elements that acquire a specific connotation of each ethno-folk area or area.

2. THE ROLE OF AGRITOURISM IN DEVELOPING THE RURAL AREA

Agritourism has the greatest implications in capitalizing on local tourism resources and raising the standard of living of the inhabitants (as a complementary activity to the agricultural

holding), in the socio-economic development of the rural settlement and of the community in general (Hornoiu R.L., 2009).

There are situations when investors in rural tourism (in tourist pensions) do not belong to the respective locality and do not use local resources as construction materials, and in the operation of accommodation units they do not use local labor force and food. Local authorities have no control over the quality of services and labor standards and moral and economic conduct or environmental protection. All these aspects bring obvious economic and social damage to the community. Such "implants" related to the "allotment" of land leads to a chaotic development of space, which escapes the coordination of local authorities from an architectural point of view, not respecting the ethnographic traditions of the area and the sanitation of technical-municipal facilities, with a negative impact on the environment (Nicula V., 2014).

As a rule, investors from outside the locality are interested in the "hotel operation" of the pension, rural hotel or tourist villa, being less involved in the ethno-folkloric revival and development, craft traditions, less connected to the socio-economic life of the village.

It is also noted that the lack of involvement of local authorities in the organization and development of rural tourism and agritourism, as well as the lack of initiative groups in supporting the development and promotion of the agritourism offer, generates a chaotic development of socio-economic components, according to the principle "everything for me". Under these circumstances, the local population as an actor of local tourism does not get involved in the socio-economic life of the community. Locally, the community, through its administrative authority, provides the economic facilities of agritourism development, but also the organizers and owners of tourist units must do more for the community (Muhibudin M., 2012).

Tourism development in rural areas is accompanied by environmental damage through excessive exploitation of tourism resources, pollution, degradation or destruction of ecosystems natural and, sometimes, ethno-folkloric traditions, through the appearance in rural areas of constructions that disfigure settlements (villas and hotels with architecture not conforming to the area, where traditional materials such as wood and stone are replaced with concrete and glass), systematization is anarchic or puts social and cultural pressure on local communities (Minciu Rodica, 2010).

Tourist arrangements and equipment in rural areas in order to diversify the agrotourism offer, road improvement, are factors that contribute to the attraction of rural settlement. It is in the interest of the resin community and local authorities to harmonize rural tourism policies with those of protecting the natural and built, authentic environment (Nicula V., 2012).

Tourism is called to play the role of facilitator of sustainable development, to lead collaboration with interest groups and local communities to jointly decide on the development of destinations. The biggest challenge is the centralization on platforms promoting all information available from suppliers, and service providers on a uniform basis, or labelling, for example, package holidays with a sustainable offer at the product level. "Tourists are increasingly aware that practicing responsible tourism has repercussions on the health of the planet and their health, as well as for the best experience" (J. Smith). The traveler, in fact, is already looking for application criteria to guarantee this, so it is the task of the tourism sector to provide it with the information so that he can be able to make sustainable travel decisions, assuring them of the positive value of action in a destination and the impact of tourism in improving the lives of local people.

3. THE "BEST TOURISM VILLAGES" "COMPETITION – CRITERIA AND WINNERS

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) launched in 2021 the "Best Tourism Villages" initiative with the aim of turning tourism into an engine for rural development and well-being. UNWTO argues that this work can make a real difference in local communities, as it can create jobs, support local businesses and help preserve customs and traditions. To date, more than 70

villages in nearly 40 countries have received this recognition. In addition, another 40 have been selected to participate in the modernization program, through which they will be provided with expert advice and will be able to benefit from collaboration opportunities. To participate in the next editions, villages in UNWTO member countries can submit an application through their national tourism administrations and winners will be announced by the end of the year in which they apply.

As in previous editions, the initiative recognises villages that are an example of a rural tourist destination with cultural and natural assets, that preserve and promote communities' values, products and lifestyles, and that have a clear commitment to innovation and sustainability. The selection is based on an assessment of resources and initiatives in areas covering the three pillars of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental. Applications are evaluated by an independent international advisory committee, composed of experts in various fields, such as: conservation of cultural and natural resources, sustainability, development of tourism products, marketing, etc. Nine areas will be considered, including sustainability, infrastructure, connectivity and tourism value chain integration.

The criteria underlying the selection of winners are:

- cultural and natural resources in the destination,
- promoting and preserving cultural resources,
- economic, social and environmental sustainability,
- tourism development and value chain integration,
- tourism governance and prioritization, infrastructure and connectivity, health, safety and security, as well as presentation photos and videos.

The network, which provides a space for exchange of experience, good practices and opportunities, consists of representatives of villages that have already obtained this distinction, as well as those participating in the improvement program. It includes experts and public and private entities from the sector dedicated to promoting tourism for rural development. In addition to individual mentoring, villages participating in the improvement program will also join the *Best Tourism Villages network*, which already has more than 100 members in five regions of the world.

Six localities in Romania have entered the "Best Tourism Villages" competition (2022), an UNWTO initiative dedicated to recognizing villages that are outstanding examples of rural tourist destinations. The six rural localities were Biertan (Sibiu County), Ciocănești (Suceava County), Costești (Vâlcea County), Eibenthal (Mehedinți County), Rășinari (Sibiu County) and Râu Sadului (Sibiu County). Romania is very well positioned internationally, in terms of rural tourism, respectively agritourism.

Traditions, folk crafts, as well as different gastronomic and living customs are defining elements for a truly authentic holiday experience. Moreover, Sibiu County was well represented by the three localities that submitted their candidacy. In the first stage of the competition, the applications were evaluated by specialists from the Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Tourism (MAT), based on the information submitted by the applicants. Punctually, the eligibility and selection criteria were taken into account, according to the guide provided by UNWTO, as well as the photos and videos presenting the destinations, attached to the registrations. Subsequently, on-site checks were initiated in order to establish the conformity of the transmitted data. According to the regulation, the first three villages that accumulated the highest scores were Romania's proposals for the UNWTO contest, thus qualifying for the stage held worldwide. Further, those designated Best Tourism Villages will become members of a network that facilitates the exchange of information, experiences and good practices. The network also includes experts, public and private partners in the field of tourism promotion for rural development. Rural destinations included in the network can be considered case studies in UNWTO policy documents and mentioned/promoted in recommendations and at events for rural development and tourism.

According to the regulation, the first three villages that accumulated the highest scores, namely *Rășinari* (Sibiu County), *Biertan* (Sibiu County) and *Ciocănești* (Suceava County) were Romania's proposals for the UNWTO contest, thus qualifying for the stage held worldwide.

The village of Rășinari was selected along with 31 other villages from 57 countries: Zell am See and Wagrain (Austria), Puqueldon (Chile), Dazhai and Jingzhu (China), Choachí (Colombia), Aguarico and Angochagua (Ecuador), Ecovillage in Choke Mountains (Ethiopia), Mestia (Georgia), Kfar Kama (Israel), Sauris-Zahre and Isola del Giglio (Italy), um Qais (Jordan), Creel and Din Fuente (Mexico), Ksar Elkhobbat and Moulay Bouzerktoune (Morocco), Lamas and Raqchi (Peru), Castelo Novo (Portugal), Pyeongsa-ri (South Korea), Al Ula Old Town (Saudi Arabia), Bohinj (Slovenia), Rupit, Alquézar and Guadalupe (Spain), Murten and Andermatt (Switzerland), Birgi (Turkey), Thái Hải (Vietnam).

The village of Rășinari from Sibiu County is Romania's big winner of the second edition of the Best *Tourism Villages* world competition, being selected by UNWTO Consultative Council specialists from over 130 applications from 57 countries.

4. RĂȘINARI TOURIST DESTINATION, "BEST TOURISM VILLAGE 2022"

Rășinari is an attraction point on the tourist map of Sibiu County, even on the national and European one. The activity of hostel managers who offer hosting and products from local gastronomy, festivals and traditions, make Rășinari a tourist village and rural and agrotourism a catalyst for local economic development (Nicula V., 2011).

Analyzing the statistical data on the number of accommodation structures in Rășinari, it is found that between 2020 and 2022 their number increased from 15 in 2020 to 17 in 2022. In 2022, a hotel was inaugurated in Rășinari by modernizing the existing hostel, alongside which 12 farm stays, 2 tourist pensions and 2 apartments with rooms for rent functioned. The existing tourist accommodation capacity increased in the agritourist pensions of Rășinari from 189 places in 2020 to 209 places in 2022, to which are added 7 places in hotels, 77 places in tourist pensions and 22 places in apartments and rooms for rent.

An important tourist indicator is that of the accommodation capacity in operation, which basically indicates what number of days has been used, during one year, the accommodation unit analyzed. In Rășinari, the accommodation capacity in operation increased significantly, from 53250 beds-days in 2020 to 89664 beds-days in 2022. In agritourism pensions, the increase was from 41044 places-days in 2020 to 59595 places-days in 2020, while tourist hostels registered a spectacular increase, from 12206 places-days in 2020 to 22039 places-days in 2022.

As for the number of tourist arrivals and overnight stays, they have considerably increased in 2022, by approx. 50% compared to the value recorded in 2020. Certainly, however, as the effects of the designation of the village of Rășinari "*Best Tourism Village 2022*" will make themselves felt, the desire to travel in the rural area will boost tourism in Rășinari even more.

Due to the way local traditions are sacredly preserved, but also to its beauty, the village of Rășinari from Mărginimea Sibiului officially received the title of "Best Tourism Village" at a ceremony held in Saudi Arabia. The event, with the theme "*Tourism that changes lives*", brought together representatives of tourism authorities and ambassadors from around the world. One of the strengths for which Rășinari won this award is its mixed economy based on agriculture, animal husbandry and traditional crafts, with a particular focus on sheep breeding. According to official sources, Rășinari is one of the oldest villages in Transylvania, mentioned in documents since 1383, and its name comes from the fact that the locals were busy collecting resin and selling it.

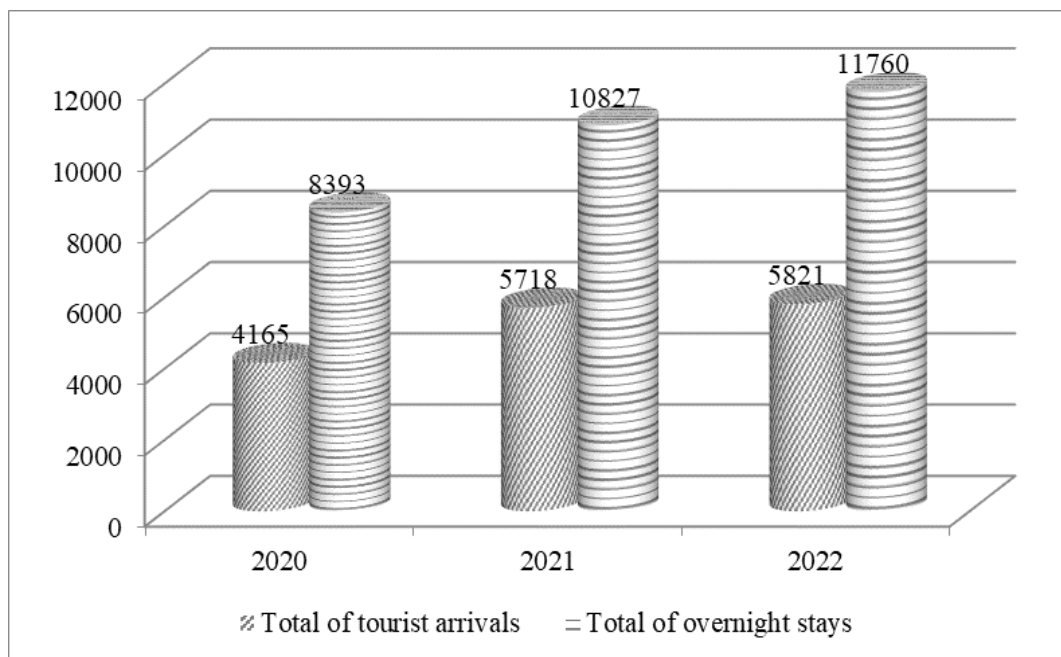


Figure 1. Evolution of the number of tourist arrivals and overnight stays in Rășinari (2020-2022)

Source: insse.ro, processed data Tempo online, 2023

"Most of the villages in the area have preserved strong spiritual and ethno-folk traditions. Although progressively the modern buildings replaced the old traditional ones, the atmosphere in Mărginimea Sibiului remained largely unchanged. Holiday costumes of rare elegance, embroidered in black and white, are proudly worn on holidays and crafts inherited from ancestors are successfully practiced today," said local authorities.

The destination must represent a very clear value proposition or brand promise. In other words, when consumers think about it, they need to be able to visualize the desired experience.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The tourist village of Rășinari is a typical settlement of sheep villages in Mărginimea Sibiului, where the relief and climatic conditions imposed a certain configuration of localities, a specific architecture and resources used as building materials.

For a destination to stay trendy in the eyes of consumers, there are three key elements to keep in mind. First of all, the brand concept must aim to promote messages, values and image from local businesses and citizens in a particular locality, so that they function as ambassadors of their own brand, something similar to promoting motivation and a sense of belonging among employees of a company. Secondly, the tourist destination must remain faithful to the concept that tourists already have about the place and thus be closer to their expectations. Finally, using the power of collective imagination and innovation, while preserving the natural environment and culture of the place, the tourist destination *has the obligation to "take care of the name, identity and characteristics that differentiate the place from any other, but, above all, not to stray from the promise, expectation and experience it promises to the tourist ... Because in the end, we always travel in search of emotions, anecdotes and memories"* (Jesús Hernández., *evisionturism.ro*). It is much easier to become fashionable than to maintain yourself as a tourist destination, and as a tourist, he must want to come back or recommend it to friends. The brand promise of a destination must be real, in this sense collaboration between the public and private sectors is essential, because both have the same objectives.

The "*Best Tourism Villages*" initiative is a conclusive example of collaboration in this regard.

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