

NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR NICHE TOURISM IN ROMANIA: ETHNOGRAPHIC TOURISM

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Abstract:

Compared with other European countries, Romania has a large number of spa resources, and the mineral waters and the various types of bio-climate are prevalent. Thus, there are approximately 2,500 mineral springs and three types of bioclimatic areas with a therapeutic effect, and in addition pits, peat and mud, clay, and saline conditions. These resources have been turned to account for about 200 years, from simple spa cures, gradually reaching a number of modern treatment centers.

Increased attention given to some new forms of spa treatment through allopathic means caused, after 1990, the emergence of new forms of development of this form of tourism, yet in the rest of Europe spa tourism evolves continuously, bringing to the fore a specialization by types condition, including new treatment patterns, increasingly based on natural factors. From this point of view, it is particularly interesting to see what the new European trends in this type of tourism are, and whether our country has been able to join this path of new challenges.

Keywords: European balneology, Romanian spa tourism, strategy, tourist resort

1. Introduction

The identity of a community or society can be defined by all the traditions, customs, traditional practices and conventions, legends, specific symbols, beliefs, norms of behaviour and value systems which, considered together, give a sense of existence to certain people and allow their completion. The identity of a society involves the fusion of language, history, people, nation and territory, legitimized through a certain land area and recognized as such.

The evolution course of rural development was different from one country to another. An essential role was played, among other things, by the presence of an important agricultural potential in terms of both area and production, which involved preserving rural communities. At the level of the rural environment, culture got, over time, the attribute of traditionality. That does not mean that there is no counterpart represented by a certain traditional culture in towns and cities, but this latter culture has very different characteristics. Culture, once it has become traditional, does not exclude innovation,

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which however becomes a cultural value only if a community accepts it, by gradually adhering to its traditional values.¹

2. Characteristic Features of European Traditional Culture

The life of rural communities in Europe (as seen from the angle of its traditions) has unfolded in keeping with a homogeneous, organic and dynamic system, which includes a number of superstitions, beliefs and practices designed to preserve tradition and full harmony within communities.

Generating cultural facts was determined by peculiar, specific milieu and environmental factors, different from one region to another, and from one nation to another. This involved a particular evolution of the culture belonging to a particular geographical, social, economic, etc. environment. So culture assumes, especially today, particular forms, which characterize the nations in today's European society.

In a rapidly changing Europe, traditional culture and folklore have played a key role in preserving cultural identity and diversity of the member states. A nation's folk culture is a complex system, all the more when considered at European level: it fascinates us by its flawless synchronization and harmonization, and also the way certain patterns, themes, common similar subjects are observed and preserved.

This originality – which, under the pressure of today's globalization, is more topical than it has ever been – is manifested in various features such as:

- specific dress, or clothing;
- the architectural style employed to build the houses, and the materials used;
- organization and arrangement of the farms, or rural farm-steads;
- the objects that are part of the inventory or equipment in these houses (typical furniture, implements and utensils for various works, including those used for shepherding, cooking, making clothes, fashioning the objects necessary for living in the household, etc.);
- the specific dishes and the recipes traditionally used in the area in question.

Overall in Europe, over the years and especially in the last century, traditional crafts have undergone a number of changes, and the number of craftsmen has seen an alarming decrease. The situation is the same throughout Europe, the difference lying only in the fact that each country has, based on own resources, materials, human and financial resources, found its own solutions for keeping, preserving and even developing them.

Changes in European rural communities have been much slower, and the specific village structures have demonstrated, throughout history, an extraordinary resistance, where the conservative element was dominant. Thus, the customs and habits specific to each European community as an integral, unradicable part of the people's ways of living, continue to be maintained, largely along with their old functions and forms of manifestation.

The historical, political, social and cultural evolution of tourist areas also impacted the size, structure and functionality of rural settlements in Europe. Each chronological and historical stage experienced by the Old Continent has triggered the emergence of new symbols and cultural objects, which express the architectural and cultural identity of rural

¹ Paul Simionescu, *Etno-istorie, convergență interdisciplinară*, 1983, Editura Academiei, București.

settlements. In the past six decades, tourism has diversified its forms of manifestations, in an attempt to exploit all existing heritage assets of European countries.

All across Europe, by gradually rediscovering the need to spend holidays and vacations in nature, and especially in the countryside, in the patriarchal atmosphere of villages, the IT-addicted urban citizens (who proved to be the main beneficiaries of the said services) have more and more geared up their options towards the rural and ethno-folk tourism product, contributing to the development of this phenomenon.

In most European countries, the concern of central and local authorities to support tourism in its most diverse forms, including tourism directed towards the ethno-folkloric heritage (which has led to the development of handicraft industry, village crafts specific to each single zone), is a top priority, and underpins a prosperous economy and civilized living standards for the citizens, in the manner it occurred in France, Austria, Switzerland, Germany, Poland, and even Bulgaria.

It was thus that the term *ethnographic tourism* has appeared. Although this concept does not have a universally accepted definition, most definitions available are essentially similar. The literature defines this term as a concept that includes the specific problems of a rural area that welcomes tourists and provides services, observing the traditions, specificity and century-old practices regarding food, folk dress and folklore specific to that area.

Ethnographic tourism is an activity whose main principle lies in connecting two different cultures (the visitor's, and the host's), being deeply linked to the traditions, customs and culture of the European peoples. It includes a wide range of events, festivals, celebrations and various other types of entertainment meant for enjoyment and spending spare time, all conducted in an environment that includes elements related to the ethnic and folkloric dimension specific to this form of tourism.

The main characteristics of ethnographic tourism are closeness to nature, tranquillity, the fact that the activities take place in a non-mechanized ambient environment, conveying a vibrant, lively and enduring state of continuity. Therefore, we can say that ethnographic tourism is an adjacent form of cultural tourism, focusing on the values of traditional arts and creation.

The range of the ethnographic aspects that are attractive to the tourists who are not merely content to watch the scenery, is really vast all over Europe: from the old structure of the settlements, the household types, the specific details of architecture, housing, interiors, to the working tools of the characteristic jobs and occupations, from the costumes and food to old customs and traditions.

The existence and the increasingly broader scale of this practice in Europe of this form of tourism was based on four main elements:

- ensuring the protection and conservation of the ethnographic heritage;
- enriching the existing collections with new objects, and supporting the continuation of old crafts;
- providing conditions of high-quality tourist accommodation;
- respecting the way of life of local populations, especially the folk traditions.

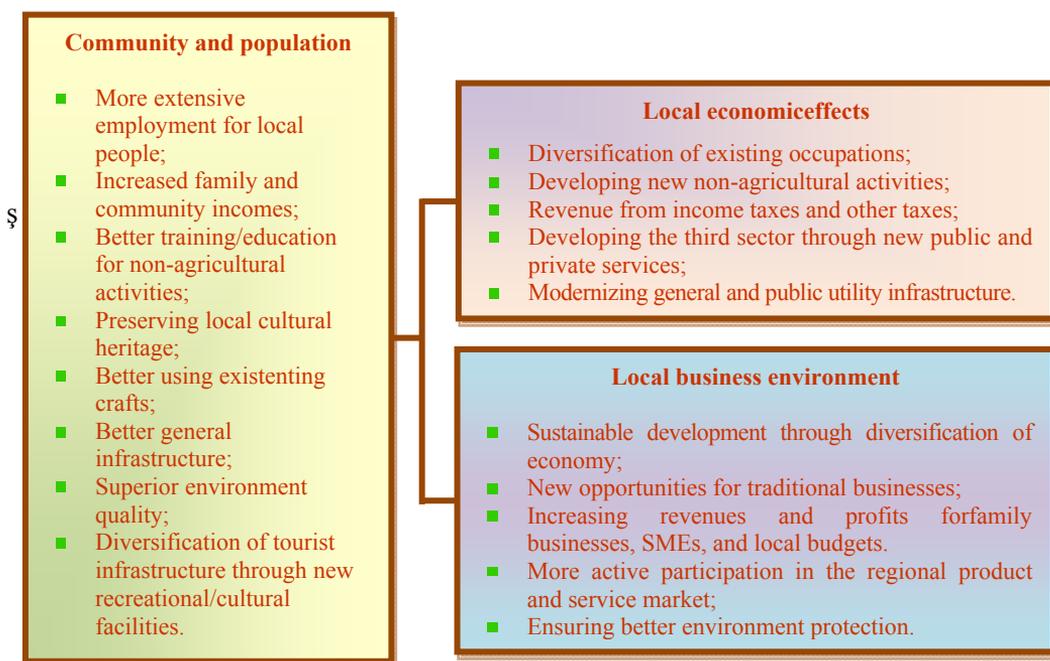
Tourists are increasingly interested in ethnographic tourism, in directly experiencing dialogue with the local people, listening to their stories, getting to know their language, customs and culture.

Making the most of ethnography in Europe, by means of cultural tourism, is supported by:

- the existence of traditional settlements, occupations and crafts;
- the presence of well-defined ethnic groups in the territory;
- the preservation of a set of traditional culture elements of the majority population;
- the existence of ethnography centres and museums.

This phenomenon of better use and valorisation is carried out in close correlated with local communities, which are mostly rural. Figure no. 1 briefly presents these connections.

Fig. 1 – Correlation between ethnographic tourism and the local community
(the authors' own viewpoint, 2016)



In economic terms, combining traditional craftsmanship and tourism is an activity with great potential, which has the advantage of acting so as to open up new opportunities of investment. Given the historical and ethnic peculiarities of the receiving regions, tourism facilitates contacting people from different countries, milieus and backgrounds, who foster ideas and actions directed towards better use of the various local resources.

Increasingly often, tourists pay special attention to a nation's history, culture, traditions, religious and spiritual values, a trend that has been manifesting itself quite strongly on the European continent, too. Thanks to ethnographic tourism, nowadays tourists have the opportunity to see for themselves the production of specific local pottery, to sample traditional cuisine, to see the national costumes of the locals, and to know their customs, habits and ways.¹

¹The EUROTEx Project – *Developing and marketing crafts tourism*.

Under the current circumstances, when there are attempts at establishing a type of European globalisation, culture and folklore are the elements that help to preserve local identities. The tourism resources in an area, belonging to the category of traditions and folklore, can be the starting points for the development of niche tourism.

Overall, ethnographic tourism represents a way to develop rural Europe, which can contribute to raising the level of local standards of living, mainly because it sets in motion a broad range of resources. From this point of view, the richness of the local traditional heritage is an invitation to longer stays in those region, and to make full and constant use of accommodation structures.

However, in addition to awakening and stimulating the economy of the European area in question, ethnographic tourism contributes to making a new, superior use of the history, culture, nature, way of life and customs of rural areas.

Further benefits of developing ethnographic tourism in Europe lie in the very fact that it can conduce to avoiding or reducing rural exodus, it can diversify the local economy, increase consumption of local products, does not require abandoning traditional activity, improves life quality, protects the natural environment, maintains cultural traditions.

As far as the cultural component of ethnographic tourism is concerned, one should note that in the last 4-5 decades a distinct market has been created, which belongs to a true industry of culture. Tourism is involved in this dynamics in that it contributes to the economic harnessing and superior exploitation of cultural resources. Compared with other markets of goods and services, the cultural market has its own peculiarities.

Ethnographic tourism mainly targets those areas where the local traditions and customs have been preserved very well over time. Ethnographic and folklore reality actually differs from one country to the next, and they constitute valuable elements of national cultural identity.

3. The Current Context and the Ethnographic Potentiality in Romania

In the general picture of the European continent, Romania is among the nations where the testimonies of civilization and culture continue to be very rich to this day. The folklore and ethnic diversity of this country, in all their constitutive elements (folk architecture and technology, creative arts, traditional events, traditional gastronomy), continue to develop in terms of new and original forms.

Romanian popular culture exhibits such fundamental traits as authenticity, originality, unity and continuity, which closely intertwine with ingenuity and inventiveness, reflected in the art of singing and musical playing, folk dancing, art creations, customs and traditional habits.

The ethnographic vestiges of material and spiritual culture which, by their perennial features, have endured until today, in numerous and quite various forms, are telling with respect to the millennium-old Romanian folk culture; some of the representative phenomena are rooted in the Thracian-Dacian-Gaetic era.

The richness and diversity of Romanian folk architecture, the craftsmanship and artistic talent in the art and craft of wood processing can be seen and known from close range, especially in open-air ethnographic museums, or in the outdoor sections of certain complex county museums.

Peasant architecture – an ancient element of Romanian folk culture, assumes particular interest for knowing the development of material culture in this country. Romanian traditional houses had, and still have, the role of providing permanent and durable housing, which is a characteristic feature of the Romanian people. The specifics of traditional architecture are due to the the material structure of the buildings, their proportions, their decoration and their ornamentation.

The traditional technical installations are intrinsically connected with the occupations related to agriculture, forestry and transport. They developed from manual household tools, and diversified, adapting various mechanical systems, depending on the raw materials or the products that were to be processed. The mills, the laundering whirlpools, the thrashing devices operated by water, the wood-cutting mills, the oil presses, they all prove the peasants' technical skill, resourcefulness and ingenuity. Since the Middle Ages, the inhabitants had to procure the necessary resources of daily living within the borders of the village, using local sources, in this case timber and hydropower. The peasant technical installations, as traditional rural assemblies, can be also found "in situ", i.e. the mills and laundering whirlpools at Prigor, the water mills on the river Rudăria (in Caraș Severin), the windmills, the fulling mills at Rucăr and Moeciu de Sus, etc.

The expression of the permanent creative spirit of the Romanian people is represented by the impressive treasure of folk artistic creation, shown in the permanent exhibitions of museums or ethnographic departments.

Pottery has been practiced since ancient times, and the beautiful pottery of the Neolithic Age (6,000 BC) stand witness to it; at that time a remarkable civilization developed on the territory of today's Romania. The ceramic articles stand out through the elegance of their forms as well as their ornamentation. Folk ceramics brings together a whole set of traditional elements marked by the living conditions, and also by the evolution of aesthetic taste. Bringing together three major groups, black pottery, red glazed ceramic, and red plain ceramic, folk pottery exhibits a vast repertoire of forms and ornaments, determined by the working techniques, and also the use of component parts adapted to various household needs.

Folk stone sculpture was developed especially for its ornamental nature, being found in intra-Carpathian and extra-Carpathian villages, near the extraction areas.

The folk artistic craft of leather processing is present in almost all the ethnographic areas, where there are craftsmen who deal in tannery, leather-waistcoat making, shoemaking, etc.

The art of wickerwork proves an old tradition, with the craftsmen using several types of materials: twigs, straw, maize cob husks, rush.

The art of folk fabrics and embroidery has the widest distribution area, representing the full range of dress components made of textile fibers, meant to be decorative, defining the regional ornamental style of the interior of a house, or of the folk costume. The folk areas renowned for the pieces of applied embroidery and woven fabrics are Maramureș, Vrancea County, Argeș, Muscel, and Vâlcea.

The art of glass painting has developed as a popular craft in Transylvania and northern Moldavia, in a number of urban centers and rural areas, since the eighteenth century.

Other traditional crafts are practiced only in certain ethnographic regions, and they managed to keep their deepest meanings of art and ritual. Thus, the craft of decorative egg painting can be noted, which is practiced in most villages of Bukovina, or the village

of Oboga de Sus in the Olt County. Other specific craft is that of making masks, which are used in ritual dances and certain related secular holidays related to Christmas, New Year, and Pentecost.

In rural communities, social life is conducted in accordance with a certain instrument of measuring time, which harmonizes the variety of human concerns and pursuits with the constant phenomena of the terrestrial and cosmic worlds. These connections are embodied by means of numerous celebrations and rituals specific to the Romanian people.

The originality and richness of Romania's ethnographic heritage and folklore, regardless of their specifics and the location of their manifestation, substantially contribute to the knowledge of the multi-millennia roots of Romanian folk civilization and culture, the origin and continuity of the Romanian people, its spirit of ingenuity and inventiveness, its consciousness as a creator of own history, its contribution to European and world culture. That is why visiting Romania and knowing this huge original cultural heritage simply means direct, in-depth knowledge of the very essence of the Romanian people's spirituality.

For Romania, a predominantly agricultural country, which however has a diversified natural and cultural heritage, which is mostly well preserved, ethnographic tourism represents a viable alternative, unfortunately still underexploited for business diversification in order to obtain additional income for the population in rural areas. The Romanian traditional village can represent – by its ethno-cultural and ethnographic specificity, the originality and richness of the resources corresponding to its own geographical space – a uniquely novel tourism product that could meet a wide range of motivations in organized tourism as well as individual tourism, for both domestic and international guests.

Our country's rural areas of have a substantial growth potential, and a vital social role. In recent decades, the Romanian village has undergone a continuous process of transformation, which has resulted in changes to both the specific outlook of villages and the demographic, occupational and value coordinates of the population. The socio-economic transformations of the past decade have caused the Romanian rural areas to be characterized by significant heterogeneity, triggered by the uneven development of the villages.

Through its cultural and historical, ethnographic, natural and socio-economic values, the Romanian traditional village is a basic component of rural areas, and its tourist value can turn it into a highly original product, a genuine brand of Romanian tourism.

The development of ethnographic tourism in the framework of villages provides new sources of income for the population, especially when the area has great potential, high quality human resources, as well as appropriate infrastructure.

Ethnographic tourism can produce revenue during the tourist season; in the off-season periods, a type of tourism could be the agricultural one, where tourists can experience the traditional modalities of harvesting agricultural produce, and various ways of processing it. This element can bring additional incomes, and it can also make better use of a household's agricultural products, highlighting the resources of the region, and driving away boredom and monotony, while using tourist voluntary labour.

Harnessing ethnographic tourism will be conducive to turning to account the periods in which other types of tourism do not have such a great demand; various categories of guests (pupils, students) would be able to experience and learn new things, while creating a fresh breath of novel ideas and innovation. Overall, amplifying ethnographic tourism will lead to the development of rural communities, by reviving and

supporting folk art, rehabilitation of the housing assets, and decongesting overcrowded tourist areas.

For Romania, ethnographic tourism represents a field that can have a really major role in the revival of economic life, especially when we consider the fact that rural tourism in this country has grown from one year to the next.

At the same time, stimulating leisure and recreational activities in a rural ambience, combined with the promotion of a number of traditional cultural activities, will benefit both tourists and the rural population involved in these types of activities. Increasing tourism in villages also has influenced in demography, being likely to lead to a certain stability of the rural population, mainly by reducing city-bound exodus.

We must point out that the tourist potential of the ethnographic areas in Romania is far from effective valorization: poor use of existing resources is obvious, as well as a low level of use of the local facilities. There are ethnographic areas that are still undeveloped economically, which however concentrate numerous tourist sites and attractions, where promotion can have a revitalizing role by harnessing the local potentialities.

Conservation and preservation of the national heritage specific to the rural areas are actions relevant not only in order to protect the elements of a unique nature of each country on the European continent, but also to promote rural and cultural tourism, thus helping to increase tourism in that area

Protecting the rural heritage is extremely important as far as the development of ethnographic tourism is concerned, as a way to promote villages, with a positive effect on attracting tourists, and plenty of economic benefits for the local population.

4. Conclusions

In all European countries special attention is given to the conservation of the ethnographic heritage and organizing specific activities in the field. Various methods and techniques of management and organization are applied.

Rural tourism, whose motivations abundantly tap into the ethnographic heritage of rural areas, represented an ideal opportunity for Europe with a view to revitalizing traditions and customs, a number of artisanal occupations folklore. All of the above have become primordial elements of an original, novel tourist offer, which was able to attract and retain tourism demand on the continent.

Among the countries of the old continent, Romania has great opportunities for tourism development in rural areas. The geographical configuration of the country constitutes a genuine natural potential, and the vast variety of cultural-historical values (folk art, folklore, traditions, historical relics) supplement the anthropogenic potential, making it complete and outlining the features of a rich heritage, which is still insufficiently exploited.

Folk tradition is still kept alive to this day, although the present time is about to alter it. Moreover, in the future, especially in that of the future generations, customs or traditions will be a way of understanding the past, the testimonies of the ancestors' way of life, values and beliefs. For contemporary humans, understanding tradition offers new, sometimes unexpected, ways to discover and understand themselves.

In conclusion, we can say that, although urban life has somewhat diminished, in some places in Europe (including of course Romania), the old traditions and customs, as

well as the constituent elements of ethno-folklore (traditions, dress, dancing, folk songs), they are still maintained. Fortunately, today, one can still analyze and observe, in real-life situations, the traditional objects of the European peoples' culture, which reflect the century-old experience of popular lore over time.

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If you thought that Niche Tourism covers just a hand-full of interest groups, think again. In the 5th edition of his book 'Marketing Tourism in South Africa', Richard George identified 20 distinct Special Interest or 'Niche' tourism groups, and we've added 11 more to this growing list. Special interest tourism (SIT) to South Africa has

Special interest tourists are motivated by the desire to go on holiday and take part in a current interest or develop a new interest in a new or familiar location. Special interest tourism is a niche market, similar to adventure tourism, but it differs in that it involves little or no physical exertion. Niche tourism: benefits and risks. A national tourism strategy is a government policy that encourages tourism that brings benefits to the country.

Suggest other examples of niche tourism in addition to those listed on this page. [3]. Identify possible problems with niche tourism in a specific location. [4]. Suggest why many niche tourist activities have a global sphere of influence.

What are the niche tourist opportunities in your area? Create a proposal for your local government authority to encourage the development of niche tourism. Consider how niche tourism would benefit the area compared to other forms of tourism such as mass tourism. Share this

Therefore, niche tourism is seen to be a response to a growing number of more sophisticated tourists demanding specialist tourism products.

diverse set of recreational activities, demand for alternative locations, entertainment and attractions, thus new tourism segments are rousing. Niche tourism can be defined in relation to this myriad of factors interrelating and reacting to ever-changing tourism requests and market trends as can be seen in figure 2.

Figure 2 "Niche tourism segments."

4. Niche tourism in EU's Eastern periphery. Tangible-intangible, movable-immovable or spiritual heritage assets create competitive advantages and innovation and become promoters for regeneration and growth of a destination (Bailey et al., 2010).