

POSSIBILITIES FOR RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT AROUND FORTIFIED CHURCHES

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Abstract: *Although the occurrence of tourism vanished in time and, consequently, due to the lack of historical data, we can not establish the precise time of his separation as a distinct activity, it seems, however, that some early forms of tourism have been practiced since ancient times. Transylvania, hilly region, located in the center of Romania, represents a very special cultural landscape. Characterized by century-old cohabitation of Romanian, Hungarian and German communities, the region has a unique feature: nowhere else in the world such a concentration of fortified churches and church-fortress they is not preserved on an area so restricted, seen as a testimony to such a varied work of defense techniques. The origin and development of the churches fortifications are, of course, related to the troubled history of Transylvania based on Tatar invasion since 1241 to 1242, through repeated incursions of the Turks - since 1395 - to the devastating defeat at Mohács in 1526. Transylvanian villages with Saxon fortified churches provide a lively image of the cultural landscape of southern Transylvania. These villages are characterized by a specific system of cultivation land, a settlement and organization model of farms, preserved since the Middle Ages. The localities are dominated by their fortified churches, which illustrate the building periods of the XIIIth until the XVth century. The most famous of these villages is Biertan.*

Key words: *rural tourism; fortified churches, cohabitation; cultural landscape.*

INTRODUCTION

The fortified churches are architectural construction typically for cultural landscape of Transylvania. These churches are strategic constructions that stand as proof of the Saxon community fight in a geographical and historical place, which, over the centuries, it has been the scene of many conflicts between Western and Eastern people.

The fortified churches were built between the XIIth and XVIth century. After the devastating Mongols attack in 1241, but especially with the threat of Turks attacks since the late XIVth century, in the lands of Saxons over 300 strengthened churches were built. Until now, about 140 fortified churches have been preserved.

In six Transylvanian villages the fortified churches were included in UNESCO World Heritage, it's about: Viscri / Deutsch-Weisskirch, Saschiz / Keisd, Călnic / Kelling, Prejmer / Tarlau, Valea Viilor / Wurmloch, Dârjiu / Dersch and Biertan / Birthälm.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

It has been defined the issue and formulation of the main hypotheses in order to constitute an explanatory and convincing model, inducing the importance and activity of the researched subject. Then, it has been drawn up and completed by the collected information. The drafting of this paper was made in laboratory, based on the notes from the ground, the existing material and consulted bibliography.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The most fortified churches are found in Sibiu County and in the villages around Medias. Contrary to the fortresses from Western Europe, the churches - fortresses from South-East of Transylvania were not permanently inhabited.

An important part of the accommodation units in this area have arranged a lot of leisure spaces - gardens, living rooms, terraces - designed to increase the comfort of tourists. In addition, many accommodation units have facilities which would allow the development of agrotourism - orchards, farms, even three structures which enable the horse riding.

By opening these constructions to a wider public and making it accessible to all, it will have an effect for many people. This is an important step for the conservation of the religious heritage.

Several objectives:

- Highlight our religious patrimony and make it accessible to the local population and foreign visitors.
- Create tools for discovery and interpretation of religious heritage.
- Disseminate and promote animation activities of religious heritage, such as tours, concerts, conferences, religious activities.

It is required the establishment of an association of all fortified churches be able to exploit and develop by tracing, for example, the circuits connecting different churches and looking for opportunities to various collaborations.

In order to develop and exploit rationally the tourist area around fortified churches, many criteria should be established to identify rural settlements and determine the potential of their available resources

Although there have a great tourist potential a large part of fortified churches does not capitalize their entire capacity for several reasons:

- economic and comfort conditions do not allow them;
- seasonality of tourist activities;
- lack of training and education of local people to develop a rural tourism around them.

The main objectives of tourism development around the fortified churches are structured on four lines:

- Development of rural infrastructure;
- Organisation of tourist reception structures;
- Creation of an important tourist product;
- Promotion of tourist product.

The development of rural infrastructure is the necessary key for the development of tourism in rural areas, implicitly around the fortified churches. If we talk about this goal, then it is not enough the development of transport and communication routes, but it should be taken into account the service development in rural areas. Romanian rural area is deficient in terms of service, which is detrimental to rural tourism by failing to ensure decent living conditions, then by the lack of facilities for leisure, but also by the lack of specialized persons.

The organization of reception structures is another essential condition for the development of rural tourism forms. The reception structures (accommodation in churches buildings) must be organized and equipped, in order to be presented to the tourist and to achieve the minimum conditions of comfort. Tourism planning in rural areas around the fortified churches should be made so the rural areas become more attractive, but at the same time, the traditions, customs, particularity should be preserved.

The creation of an important tourist product is the third objective of development. It is not enough to ensure good conditions of accommodation in order to provide a tourist product. If we talk about tourism, tourist product is more valuable as the percentage of obtained products is higher. Leisure possibilities are another component of tourist product. In this regard, Romanian rural area is deficient. And the originality is highly priced meaning that more leisure ways are diverse and unique, more they will attract tourists. The possibilities for leisure or entertainment are related to religious activities, environmental, rural community, crafts, traditions, and activities in rural areas. The tourist product offer is special: the advantages and mysteries of life at fortified churches; crafts and food specific; tourists can discover a various architectural heritage, laic and religious buildings and the rich folklore. As an overview of the main cultural and tourist attractions, tourist area of all fortified churches can persuade to the exploration of an area not so known but very interesting, due to the natural landscapes, the rich folklore and traditions heritage of those who live on these lands.

In order to sell the tourist product, *the promotion* is essential or, currently, in our country, it is deficient. The methods of promotion must be achieved according to the requirements of foreign tourists which straighten increasingly towards the nature, rural and ecological tourism. Currently, there is a growing demand for active holidays and unique tourist products that attract tourists. Such tourist packages should be promoted, primarily, on internal market, because the concept that, in agrotourism, the quality is lower than in classic tourism must be removed. On the external market, the promotion of Romanian agrotourist product must be intensive to face the competitive offers received from countries like Austria, France and Italy.

The implementation of a system to develop and promote the tourism around fortified churches should include several measures:

- Encouraging the creation of network and local structures, development and promotion of tourism in the area;
- Elaborating regional tourist development strategies and implementing them;
- Supporting the tools and promotional activities: brochures, web sites, tourist maps, tourist guides;
- Participating in tourism fairs and organizing an annual salon to encourage the tourism agencies to offer tourist products in this area;
- Promoting the tourist products at national and international level;
- Creating a website for all fortified churches to promote tourism.

The launch of tourism offer on international market must be carried out through:

- Organizing events and achieving promotional materials by the associations and national organizations with support of individual providers, specialized companies, travel agencies and tour operators from Romanian tourism;
- Organizing promotional and marketing activities within the promotional program of the Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism;
- Collaborating with specialized foreign companies interested to establish rural circuits in Central and Eastern Europe and introducing religious tourism offer in their tourist brochure ;
- Publishing a brochure with the offers of certified farms.

CONCLUSIONS

The main directions for development aims to:

- Boost tourism by the superior capitalization of local ethnocultural values and organization of conferences and workshops;
- Preserve traditional aspect of settlements by laws concerning new construction and architectural modifications that could be done to the buildings;
- Relaunch of wine growing by supporting the small entrepreneurs;
- Support investment in creating accommodation units and planning activities spaces specific to agrotourism;
- Restore gradually the fortified evangelical churches
- Include the fortified churches in tourist tours;
- Rehabilitate road connections between the villages with fortified churches (Hoghilag-Valchid - Biertan);
- Preserve traditional crafts and support artisans (including revitalization of old guilds)
- Develop and promote tourist products: cultural routes (churches painted by brothers Grecu, circuits of traditional crafts: glass, painting glass icons, weaving), horseback riding, fishing.

To an overview on these churches, it appears that most of them would require at least minor work of restoration in order to enable a better tourist exploitation, while in some identified cases, major projects of rehabilitation are needed (e.g. fortified churches in Veseud, Iacobeni Buzd, fortress of Salgo, fortress of Slimnic).

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