

PREMISES OF THE EVOLUTION OF MOUNTAIN TOURISM IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: *The mountain area faces many challenges in terms of socio-economic development, and the development of tourism activities can be a viable solution for the revitalization of these disadvantaged areas. The mountain region of Romania, with its picturesque landscapes, presents a high tourist potential, especially for nature and adventure tourism, but Romania has not exploited this opportunity to its true value. The present study wants to identify some defining elements that are the basis for the development of sustainable strategies regarding the development and promotion of mountain tourist areas. To achieve this objective, we have carried out a SWOT analysis of tourism in mountain areas and an analysis of statistical data, based on tourism indicators.*

Key words: *mountain area, tourism mountain, disadvantages area, statistical and SWOT analysis*

INTRODUCTION

Mountain tourism represents an essential component of the global tourism sector, based on the attraction of spectacular natural landscapes, the diversity of mountain ecosystems, and the recreational opportunities provided by these areas. Mountain tourism in Romania is one of the most important branches of the national tourism sector, rooted in the spectacular landscapes of the Carpathians, the diversity of fauna and flora, as well as the cultural and historical richness of mountain regions. The Romanian mountains, which cover approximately one-third of the country's surface, offer diverse opportunities for recreational activities, from hiking and mountaineering to skiing, mountain biking, or ecotourism.

Mountain tourism is an essential segment of the global tourism sector, standing out for its ability to combine natural, cultural and recreational dimensions. The attraction of mountain landscapes, along with their ecological significance and cultural heritage, positions mountain tourism as a vital contributor to regional development. However, its rapid expansion requires a balanced approach that takes into account both economic opportunities and environmental constraints.

Mountain tourism refers to the travel and recreational activities carried out in mountain areas, including experiences as diverse as hiking, skiing, wildlife watching and cultural tourism. These activities are characterized by their dependence on natural resources and often include elements of adventure tourism and ecotourism.

The economic implications of mountain tourism are profound, especially for rural and underdeveloped regions. It generates significant income through accommodation, transportation, and ancillary services, while providing employment opportunities for local communities. Moreover, mountain tourism can stimulate the growth of associated sectors, such as agriculture, crafts and hospitality.

Mountain tourism facilitates cultural exchange and promotes the preservation of indigenous traditions and practices. It provides a platform for local communities to capitalize on their heritage, while also benefiting economically. However, uncontrolled tourism can lead to the commercialization of culture and disrupt traditional lifestyles.

The environmental impact of mountain tourism is a critical concern, given the fragility of mountain ecosystems. Overtourism can lead to habitat degradation, biodiversity loss, and increased carbon emissions. Sustainable practices, such as promoting ecotourism,

implementing conservation policies and raising awareness of environmental protection, are essential to mitigate these effects.

Recent trends in mountain tourism reflect a growing preference for sustainable and adventure-based experiences. The integration of technology, such as virtual tours and real-time navigation apps, improves the tourist experience and encourages responsible practices. Also, the post-pandemic era has highlighted the importance of wellness tourism, mountain destinations becoming ideal refuges for physical and mental rejuvenation.

Mountain tourism has a huge potential to stimulate economic growth, cultural preservation and environmental protection. However, achieving a harmonious balance between development and conservation requires collaborative efforts between policymakers, local communities, and tourists. Future research and policy frameworks should emphasize sustainable practices to ensure the long-term viability of mountain tourism

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study aims to identify some defining elements that form the basis for developing sustainable strategies for the development and promotion of mountain tourist areas. To achieve this objective, we conducted a SWOT analysis of tourism in mountain areas and an analysis of statistical data based on tourism indicators.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Economically, mountain tourism significantly contributes to the development of local communities, especially through job creation and encouraging entrepreneurship in areas such as hospitality, tourist transportation, and mountain guiding. However, the development of mountain tourism in Romania faces challenges, such as underdeveloped infrastructure, lack of coherent promotion, and environmental pressures from uncontrolled tourist activities. [1,13,14]

In order to assess the premises for the development of mountain tourism in Romania, the study uses two main approaches:

1. **SWOT ANALYSIS** that allowed to outline a clear picture of the internal and external factors influencing this sector. The SWOT analysis provides an overview of the potential and challenges of mountain tourism in Romania. By identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, this method contributes to the development of effective strategies for increasing mountain tourism and integrating it into sustainable regional development plans. [12,15]

Strengths

➤ Diverse natural landscapes. Romania has a varied mountain relief (Eastern, Southern and Western Carpathians), offering spectacular landscapes, from alpine lakes and waterfalls to mountain ridges and virgin forests.

➤ High biodiversity. The Carpathians are home to a wide variety of plant and animal species, many of which are protected, such as the brown bear, wolf, and lynx. This biodiversity attracts tourists who are passionate about ecotourism and adventure tourism.

➤ Mountain cultural heritage. Romania's mountainous regions have a rich cultural heritage, with well-preserved traditions and customs, such as the winter customs of Maramureş and Marginimea Sibiului, which annually attract numerous tourists interested in cultural authenticity.

Weaknesses

➤ Deficient tourist infrastructure. In many mountain areas, access is limited and tourism infrastructure, such as roads, parking lots and accommodation facilities, is insufficiently developed.

➤ Reduced accessibility. Public transport to many mountain areas is either non-existent or insufficiently developed, which limits the access of tourists. This is especially noticeable in the mountainous areas of the southern counties of the country, where the lack of trains or efficient bus routes makes access difficult.

➤ Insufficient promotion. Romania invests relatively little in promoting mountain tourism internationally, and the tourism marketing strategy is fragmented, this leads to low visibility compared to other European mountain tourism destinations.

Opportunities

➤ Increasing interest in nature tourism and ecotourism. As more and more tourists seek experiences in nature and opt for sustainable tourism, Romania has the opportunity to position itself as an ecotourism destination.

➤ Access to European funds for regional development. Through EU funds, Romania can invest in infrastructure, human resources training and natural heritage conservation. Funds from the Regional Operational Programme or from the European Fund for Rural Development can finance projects for the rehabilitation of mountain tourist routes or the development of eco-friendly guesthouses.

➤ Extension of the tourist season. By diversifying activities (skiing, hiking, mountain biking, climbing, cultural tourism), the tourist season can be extended, attracting tourists throughout the year.

Threats

➤ Climate. Climate change can negatively affect mountain ecosystems and winter-specific tourism activities. Thus, the ski season in lower mountain areas can be reduced due to high temperatures and lack of snow.

➤ International competition. Other countries in Europe, such as Austria, Switzerland and Italy, have developed a high-performance mountain tourism, supported by infrastructure and international promotion. These destinations remain preferred for tourists looking for high-quality services and modern facilities, being a challenge for Romania to compete directly with them.

➤ Environmental degradation and over-agglomeration. Without conservation measures and proper management of the flow of tourists, mountainous areas can suffer degradation. In recent years, some mountain trails have shown signs of erosion due to the large number of tourists and inadequate waste management, an aspect that can diminish the attractiveness in the long term.

In conclusion, the SWOT analysis highlights the high potential of mountain tourism in Romania, based on unique natural landscapes and authentic cultural traditions, but also the significant challenges related to infrastructure and competitiveness. Capitalizing on opportunities related to ecotourism and European funding, together with proactive measures to protect the environment, could transform mountain tourism into a sustainable and profitable sector. At the same time, investments in infrastructure and promotion are essential to support a competitive and sustainable tourism, which meets the needs of modern tourists.

2. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS of mountain tourism in Romania involves the collection and interpretation of specific indicators that provide an image of the evolution, performance and economic potential of this sector. The main indicators analysed include: *the flow of tourists, accommodation capacities and revenues generated from tourism*, each providing essential information for assessing the attractiveness and economic viability of mountain tourism. [1,7]

The flow of tourists is one of the most important indicators to assess the demand and popularity of mountain destinations. Analysis of this indicator may include:

The total number of tourists, this refers to the total number of visitors from mountainous areas in a certain time frame (month, season, year). Comparing this indicator over several years can reveal upward or downward trends. [1,2,7]

The analysis of this indicator, in the period 2015-2023, both at national level and at the level of the mountain areas, can be summarized as follows:

At national level:

- ❖ a steady upward trend in the total number of tourists, from 9.9 million in 2015 to about 13.4 million in 2019;
- ❖ the pandemic significantly reduced the number of tourists, reaching about 6.4 million, in 2020;
- ❖ after the decrease in 2020, the flow of tourists began to recover, reaching over 13.9 million in 2023;
- ❖ the number of Romanian tourists is steadily increasing, reaching a maximum of 11.7 million in 2023, which indicates strong domestic demand, even during the post-pandemic period;
- ❖ Although the number of foreign tourists also increased between 2015 and 2019, the pandemic had a much more severe impact on them, registering a sharp decrease in 2020 (approx. 454 thousand), with an upward trend in the following years, in 2023, reaching over 2.1 million foreign tourists.

Mountain area:

- ❖ The number of tourists in mountain resorts increased from 1.52 million in 2015 to almost 2.69 million in 2023.
- ❖ Romanian tourists represent the majority in mountain resorts, with a steady increase until 2023, when about 2.53 million are reached.
- ❖ The number of foreign tourists in mountain resorts remains relatively modest compared to Romanian tourists. After a decrease in 2020, it increased to about 155 thousand in 2023.

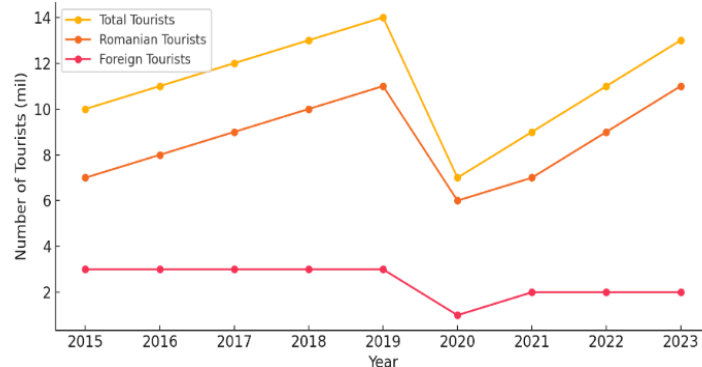


Figure 1. Evolution of tourism flux in Romania, 2015-2023, [10,11]

This analysis of the flow of tourists provides valuable insights into the dynamics of mountain tourism in Romania, highlighting not only the strong domestic demand, but also the growth potential of the foreign tourist segment. Trends in tourism activity, both at national level and in the case of mountain resorts, are useful to identify the optimal period of resource allocation in mountain resorts and to understand the resilience of domestic demand compared to international interest in mountain tourism in Romania. [9,11]

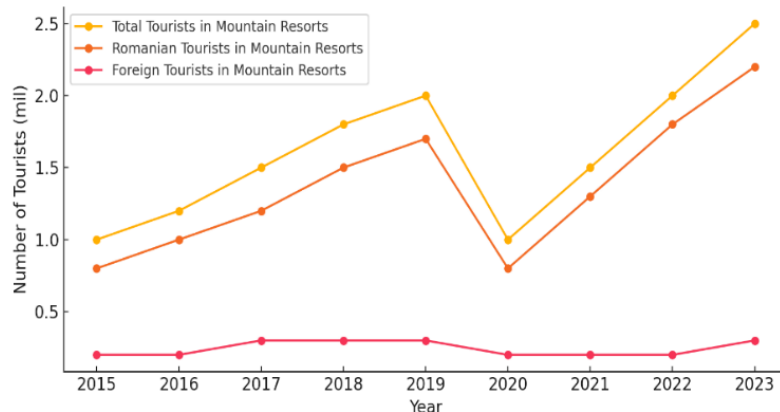


Figure 2. Evolution of tourism flux in mountain resorts, in Romania, 2015-2023, [8,10]

The seasonal distribution of tourists allows the identification of the flow of tourists, at different times of the year. In general, in the mountainous areas of Romania, the seasonal peaks are recorded in the winter season (for winter sports) and in summer (for hiking and ecotourism). This data helps to plan activities and optimize resources. These data underline the importance of supporting tourism infrastructure to cope with the increased demand during peak season periods. Continuous development of accommodation and international promotion can help sustain and expand these figures. These trends are useful for efficiently planning tourism resources and activities, in order to meet the seasonal preferences of tourists. [12,16]

Accommodation capacity is another key indicator, reflecting the infrastructure and level of readiness of the mountain region to accommodate a large number of visitors. Specific indicators include [1,6]:

Number of accommodation places. The total of accommodation units, such as hotels, hostels, mountain chalets and campsites, gives an idea of the capacity to receive tourists.

The occupancy rate of accommodation units indicates which periods are overcrowded and where there is untapped potential. A low occupancy rate means that accommodation units are underused, while a very high degree may signal the need to expand accommodation capacity.

Average length of stay. A longer stay may indicate a greater attraction of the area and suggest additional services that would encourage tourists to stay longer.

Accommodation capacities are often varied, including hotels, guesthouses, chalets, and campsites. Analyzing the distribution by comfort categories (1-5 stars) can highlight diversification opportunities to attract different segments of tourists, including international ones seeking higher standards. [1,4,5]

The analysis of accommodation capacities in mountain resorts in Romania is essential to understand whether the current infrastructure can support seasonal tourist flows, especially during peak periods. The study of these capacities helps in strategic planning, highlighting the needs for expansion or modernization of accommodation facilities.

Figure 3 illustrates the evolution of accommodation capacities in mountain resorts in Romania for the period 2015-2023. Thus, it can be observed:

- ❖ constant increase in the number of accommodation places in mountain resorts, indicating investments and an expansion of accommodation infrastructure.
- ❖ in 2020, the number of seats was maintained, but in practice capacities were not fully utilized due to the travel restrictions imposed by the pandemic.
- ❖ Starting with 2021, capacities continue to increase, suggesting an adaptation of operators to the increased demand for mountain tourism.

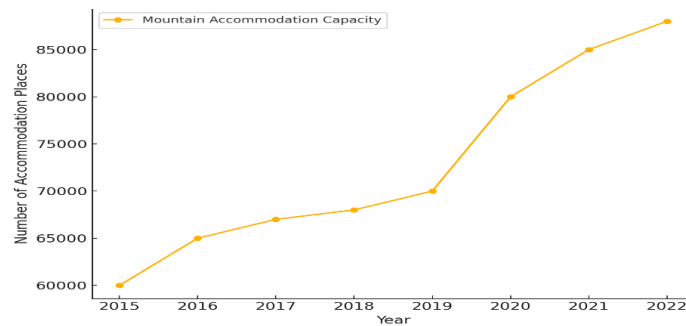


Figure 3. Evolution of accomadion capacity in Roumanian mountain resorts, 2015-2023 [10,11]

This growth indicates a response to increased demand, suggesting continued investment and a strategic focus on the development of mountain tourism

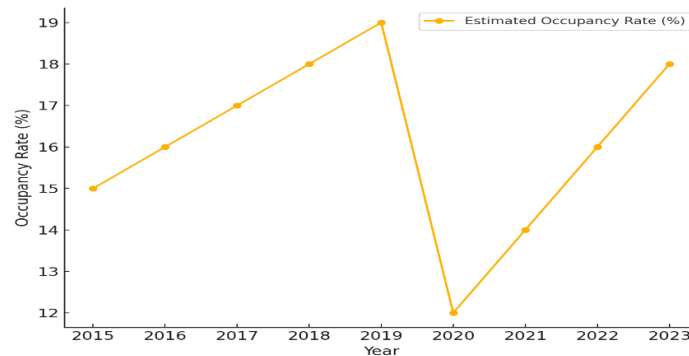


Figure 4. Evolution of estimated occupancy rate in Roumanian mountain resorts, 2015-2023 [10,11]

Figure 4 shows the evolution of the estimated occupancy rate in mountain resorts in Romania for the period 2015-2023, based on the annual number of tourists and accommodation capacity:

- ❖ the occupancy rate increased from about 15% in 2015 to 19.5% in 2019, suggesting a growing demand for accommodation in mountain resorts;
- ❖ in 2020, the occupancy rate decreased to 11.1% due to the travel restrictions imposed by the pandemic;
- ❖ Starting with 2021, there is a steady increase in the occupancy rate, which reaches 17.8% in 2023.

Although the occupancy rate does not reach 100%, this result reflects a capacity used throughout the year. During peak periods (summer and winter months), a much higher occupancy rate can be estimated. The trend of increasing occupancy rates through 2019 and the post-pandemic recovery suggest a demand that could support the expansion of accommodation capacities in traditional mountain resorts to avoid overcrowding in peak seasons.

Tourism revenues. The total economic impact of mountain tourism is an essential measure to understand the overall contribution of this sector to the local and regional economy. It includes both direct revenues and indirect economic effects, which extend to the community through jobs, side businesses, and infrastructure improvements: [2,3,7]

- ❖ Mountain tourism generates jobs both directly (in hotels, restaurants, tourist agencies) and indirectly (suppliers of local products, transport). The jobs created and

maintained by tourism contribute to local economic stability and to the improvement of living standards. [13,14]

- ❖ Transportation businesses, mountain equipment stores, local food producers, and other ancillary services benefit from the flow of tourists, extending the economic impact of tourism beyond the hospitality industry.
- ❖ Each unit of direct income spent on tourism has a multiplier effect on the local economy. For example, revenue generated in restaurants and hotels is still spent on purchases from local suppliers, which amplifies the overall economic impact.

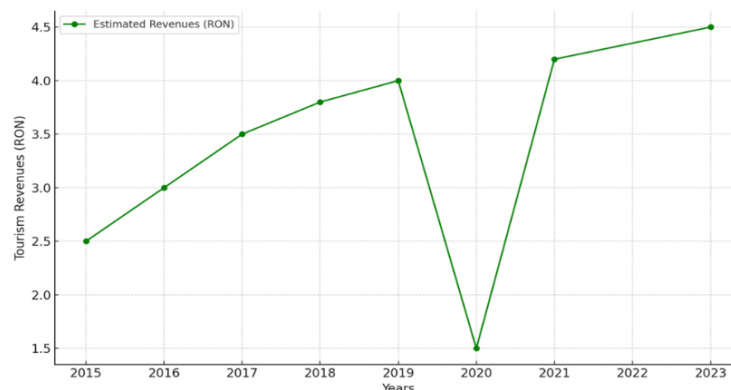


Figure 5. Estimated revenues from mountain tourism in Romania, 2015-2023, [10,15]

Estimates of revenues generated from mountain tourism in Romania for the period 2015-2023, based on data on overnight stays and average expenditure per night, show an interesting evolution. Mountain tourism revenues consistently increased, reaching approximately 388.7 million RON in 2019, suggesting growing demand and a positive economic contribution to mountain regions. In 2020, revenues dropped significantly to 218 million RON due to restrictions and reduced tourist flows, highlighting the sector's vulnerability to major external events. [11,14] In 2023, estimated revenues reached approximately 454.6 million RON, exceeding pre-pandemic levels, due to an increase in overnight stays and tourist expenditures. Direct revenue growth suggests a positive economic impact and justifies further investments in infrastructure and diversification of tourist services. If the development strategy includes luxury services or personalized experiences, revenue per tourist could increase, enhancing economic benefits for mountain regions.

If the total economic impact is increasing, this justifies further investment in tourism infrastructure, promotion and regional development, as the benefits are not limited to the tourism sector alone but extend to the entire local economy. Local authorities could invest in transport facilities, tourist information centers and upgraded infrastructure to attract more tourists and maximize the economic multiplier effect.

CONCLUSIONS

Romania's mountain region faces multiple socio-economic challenges. Developing tourism activities is seen as a potential solution for revitalizing these disadvantaged areas, particularly by creating economic opportunities and stimulating demographic growth. However, Romania has not fully capitalized on the potential of mountain tourism, especially compared to other European countries with similar mountain relief.

Proposed measures include:

- ❑ *Developing infrastructure and creating leisure facilities* adapted to mountain tourism, including winter sports and ecotourism.

- ❑ *Conserving the mountain environment* by integrating ecotourism practices.
- ❑ *Promoting natural and cultural specificities* through campaigns that highlight the uniqueness of mountain landscapes and local cultural traditions to attract both domestic and foreign tourists interested in authentic experiences.
- ❑ *Stimulating local economic growth and employment through mountain tourism*, providing jobs for the rural population and revitalizing mountain communities.
- ❑ *Positioning mountain tourism* as a pillar of Romania's economy through strategic and coordinated approaches to boost GDP and support the revitalization of disadvantaged areas, offering a sustainable economic alternative.

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