

HERCULANE: ECOTOURISM AND TRADITION – SYNERGY BETWEEN NATURE AND HERITAGE

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Abstract: Sustainable tourism development is not just a concept debated, completed or reformulated during the conferences held on this topic. The need to protect the natural, social and cultural wealth that constitutes the common heritage of humanity and to satisfy the needs of tourists and the local population has generated the emergence in practice of some forms of sustainable tourism. Băile Herculane, one of the oldest and most famous spa resorts in Europe, is located in the Mehedinți Mountains, in the valley of the Cerna River, and represents a fusion between millennial history, ancient legends and spectacular natural landscapes. Founded by the Romans over 2,000 years ago and dedicated to the mythological hero Hercules, the resort is known for its thermal springs with therapeutic properties, used to treat various ailments.

Key words: *Herculaneum Baths, ecotourism, tradition*

INTRODUCTION

Baile Herculane, located in the Southern Carpathians, is one of the oldest spa resorts in Europe, with a history stretching back to the Roman period. The thermal water in this area is recognized for its healing properties, attracting visitors from various corners of the world. This place not only offers therapeutic benefits but also proves to be a promising destination for ecotourism.

Today, Băile Herculane is at a decisive moment, in which the desire for economic development must align with the need to preserve the environment. The area is distinguished by impressive natural landscapes, rich forests and mineral springs, which constitute a habitat for a variety of rare species of plants and animals. These natural elements are vital not only for the ecosystem, but also for attracting responsible tourism that respects local resources.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

This paper aims to analyze the impact of ecotourism on the local community and environment in Baile Herculane. The paper will also discuss the challenges associated with tourism management, such as pressure on natural resources, environmental degradation and the need for effective conservation policies. This paper will highlight both the opportunities and challenges shaping the future of ecotourism in this unique region.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The city of Herculane is in the Banat region, being located in the west of the country, approximately 40 kilometers from the city of Reșița. It is located on the Cerna River valley, in a mountainous area with picturesque landscapes and lush forests.

The city is famous for its mineral-rich thermal waters, which have been used since ancient times for their healing properties. Herculaneum is a popular destination for tourists looking for relaxation and spa treatments, but also for those who want to explore the natural beauty of the area and go hiking in the surroundings.

Access to Herculaneum can be done both by car and by public transport. The main road access is DN6 (E70), which connects the city to other big cities in Romania, such as

Timișoara and Bucharest. The road is well maintained and offers a pleasant ride with beautiful views.

For those who prefer to travel by public transport, there are buses that connect Herculane with other nearby cities, such as Reșița and Oravița. There are also trains that stop in Herculaneum, facilitating access for those who prefer to travel by this means of transport.

For those who want to reach Herculaneum by plane, the closest option is Timișoara Traian Vuia International Airport, located approximately 170 kilometers away. From the airport, one can rent a car or opt for public transport or shuttle services to Herculaneum.



Figure 1. Location of the Herculaneum Baths on the map

Source: <http://www.romanianmonasteries.org/ro/romania/baile-herculane>

The resort was founded during the Roman Empire, being named "Ad Aquas Herculis Sacras" (At the holy waters of Hercules) in honor of the mythological hero Hercules, protector of thermal waters. The Romans built baths and temples here, and the ruins of these constructions are still visible today in certain areas of the resort. The resort saw great development during the Austro-Hungarian period, when it became a popular destination for the aristocracy of Vienna and Budapest.

Baile Herculane is known for its sulphurous, bicarbonate, chlorinated, calcium, magnesium and oligomineral thermal water springs, with temperatures between 38 and 53°C. These waters are used to treat rheumatic, dermatological, respiratory, gynecological and neurological conditions. Among the most famous springs are the Hercules Spring, the Diana Spring and the Hebe Spring.

As for architecture and cultural heritage, the city preserves impressive historical buildings built in baroque, rococo and eclectic styles, especially from the Habsburg period. The Casino and Imperial Baths are examples of iconic buildings that attract tourists, although some are in need of rehabilitation and renovation. In the 1970s and 1980s, during the communist period, new hotel buildings were built and the architecture began to be diversified, but not always in harmony with the previous styles.

When we talk about touristic and natural activities, due to its mountain position, Băile Herculane is an ideal place for hiking and exploring nature, being close to Domogled National Park - Valea Cernei. You can do hiking and climbing routes on different routes, from Piatra Moale to Vânturătorea Waterfall, one of the most spectacular waterfalls in Romania. Nearby is the Thieves' Cave, an attraction known for its mysterious history and peculiar formations.

The current state of the resort is a dilapidated one, because after the fall of the communist regime, many historical buildings entered a process of decay and the resort lost popularity due to lack of investment. Currently, there are initiatives to restore and promote the resort, and Baile Herculane is starting to attract tourists again who want to discover the

unique combination of cultural heritage, thermal waters and the surrounding nature. Băile Herculane remains a special place due to its historical heritage and natural beauty, and with a proper revitalization, it has the potential to become one of the renowned spa resorts of Romania and Europe.

The numerous vestiges of the past civilization, some of them unique, the wealth of popular traditions, the modern spiritual creation, the contemporary techno-economic achievements - attest to the evolution and continuity of life in these lands, making up an important cultural-historical background, appreciated from a tourist point of view domestically and international. Among the components of the anthropic tourism potential, the archaeological vestiges, historical and art monuments, cultural-artistic institutions and events, popular art and tradition, technical-economic constructions should be highlighted for their value and attractiveness.

Tourists can visit the attractions of the area: The historic center of the resort: the Austrian Imperial Baths, the Decebal Hotel Casino and the Roman Hotel; The statue of Hercules; Thermal springs: Hercules spring, Diana spring and Hebe spring; Cascade the Huntress; Domogled National Park – Valea Cernei; White Cross; Cave of Thieves; The Stone Bridge; Roman Catholic Church; Stone Hut

1. The historical center of the resort

Austrian Imperial Baths: historical building built during the Habsburg period, with an impressive baroque architecture. Here was once one of the most luxurious thermal baths of the Austrian Empire.

Casino: the casino was built between 1862-1864 by the architect Wilhelm von Doderer, at the request of Emperor Franz Joseph I (1848-1916). The building was equipped with a dance hall, a restaurant on the ground floor, and on the first floor, a casino and a performance hall. It has a colonnade and two monumental stone stairs. [17]



Figure 2. Casino

Source: <https://patrimoniubalneare.ro/portfolio/items/cazinoul-the-casino/>

A symbolic neoclassical and baroque building, once frequented by the European aristocracy. Although in a state of disrepair, the casino remains an iconic landmark.

Decebal Hotel and Roman Hotel

The buildings bear the imprint of a Transylvanian baroque style, with many decorative elements and an entrance highlighted by majestic stairs, framed by columns.



Figure 3. Decebal Hotel

Source: <https://expressdebanat.ro/hotel-de-5-stele-la-baile-herculane-milioane-investite-in-ruina-decebal/>



Figure 4. Roman Hotel

These buildings are examples of architecture from the imperial period and have witnessed numerous visits by dignitaries of the time, such as Emperor Franz Joseph. A local legend says that a treasure from the time of the Romans is buried under the Decebal hotel. Treasure hunters arrived from all over the world, who, with the help of metal detectors, were able to prove that there is a large amount of gold under the hotel. When they started digging, however, the figure of a girl dressed in white appeared, chasing them out of the building.

This figure appeared several times, each time in the same form. It is said to be a guardian of the treasure, but others assume that it is a Dacian priest. [18]

2. The statue of Hercules

The statue, cast in bronze in 1847 by the masters Ramelmayer and Glantz from Vienna, represents the god Hercules carrying the skin of the Nemean lion and a club on his left shoulder. [16]



Figure 5. Statue of Hercules

Source: https://www.bing.com/aclick?ld=e8HHP-ddLS_8K0m

It is the symbol of the city, a statue depicting Hercules, the mythological character associated with strength and health. The statue is located in the center of the resort and is an ideal place for photos.

3. Thermal springs

Hercules Spring: One of the most famous springs, located right next to the statue of Hercules. The water here is considered beneficial for rheumatic and dermatological conditions.



Figure 6. Thermal springs



Figure 7. Vanturatorea Waterfall

Source: <https://www.bing.com/aclick?ld=e8YA3MSLxY>

Izvorul Diana and Izvorul Hebe: these springs have sulphurous mineral waters, used to treat various ailments and are easily accessible in the resort.

4. Cascade Vanturatorea

One of the most impressive waterfalls in Romania, with a spectacular water fall of over 40 meters. It is located approximately 1 hour's walk from Baile Herculane, and the route offers picturesque views. The water hits the rocks, creating a special visual effect, like a fine rain around the waterfall, hence the name "Vânturătoarea".

5. Domogled National Park - Valea Cernei

It is a protected area with outstanding biodiversity, including rare plant and animal species, as well as spectacular natural landscapes.



Figure 8. Domogled National Park



Figure 9. The White Cross

Source: <https://www.romanianresorts.ro/parcul-national-domogled-valea-cernei>

The trails in the park vary in difficulty and include places like Culmea Domogled, Cheile Feregari and Piatra Banului, all ideal for hiking and exploring.

6. The White Cross

It is one of the most famous, most visited and most picturesque viewpoints of the resort. The cross is on a rocky spur, 529 m above sea level, above the historic center. From here you can admire the panorama of the Herculaneum Baths and the Cerna Mountains. [9]

The route to the Cross is accompanied by several markers and its duration is about an hour and a half. Located on a high plateau, Crucea Albă offers a splendid panorama over the resort and the Cerna river valley. The trail is of medium difficulty and takes about an hour, and is a favorite among tourists for its views.

7. Cave of Thieves

A cave located a few kilometers from the resort, accessible by a hiking trail. The cave has a mysterious history, being linked to stories about thieves who hid here in the past.



Figure 10. Cave of Thieves

Source: <https://viziteaza-romania.com/zona-banatului/judetul-caras-severin/87-pestera-hotilor-grota-haiducilor-jud-caras-severin-2022.html>



Figure 11. The Stone Bridge

Inside, tourists can explore various karst formations and see how nature has left its mark in unique ways.

8. The Stone Bridge

A bridge built in the Roman period, representing a connection between the banks of the river Cerna. Although it is in a state of disrepair, it remains a historical symbol of the resort. The stone bridge was built in 1864, being the first curved bridge in Europe at that time, and the warranty period was 100 years. [10]

9. The Roman Catholic Church

An 18th century building, built in the Baroque style, being a testimony of the Habsburg period in this region. Its interior is simple, but retains original architectural elements.



Figure 12. The Roman Catholic Church



Figure 13. Stone Hut

Source: <https://casavisonesti.ro/biserica-romano-catolic-adormirea-maicii-donnului>

The Roman Catholic Church of Băile Herculane is located in Hercules Square in the center of the resort. It was built in the period 1836-1838, during the reign of Emperor Ferdinand I of Austria, replacing an older Catholic chapel, located on the same site, destroyed by the Turks in 1788. (Wikipedia)

10. Stone Hut

Just an hour and a half from Băile Herculane, is "Piatra Colibată", as it was called by the locals from Bârza, on the integrated cycling route of "Via Banatica".

It was transmitted by word of mouth that this route was dug in stone during the reign of King Decebalus, during the two Daco-Roman wars between the years 101-102 and 105-106, the route from Herculaneum to here also being called "The dug Roman road" in the rock".

11. The Sphinx of Banat

"The Sphinx of Bănățean", also known as the "Sphinx of Topleț", "Sphinx" or under the name of Iovan Iorgovan, about which there are 43 variants of legends passed down by word of mouth.

The 16-meter-high stone sculpted over time by wind and rain, taking the shape of an imposing human face, is also identified with Hercules, the mythical character from the ancient legends very widespread in the Herculaneum Baths area and also the protector of the resort.

The Bănățean Sphinx is located in the southeast of Caraș-Severin county, on the administrative territory of Topleț commune, in the northern part of Bârza village, in the 0.50 ha nature reserve. This tourist attraction is located halfway along the route to Piatra Colibată.

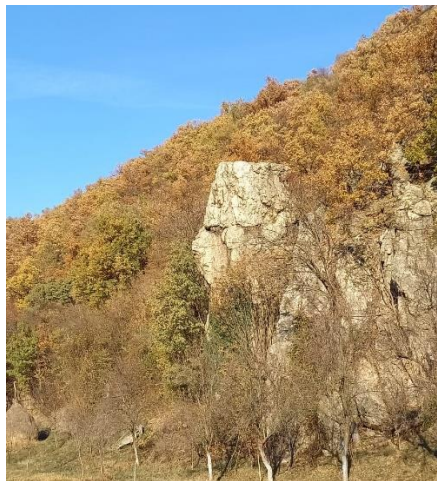


Figure 14. The Sphinx of Banat

Source: own pictures

Apart from the must-see tourist attractions, visitors can make excursions and hikes in the Valea Cernei National Park. The area is dominated by beautiful landscapes, a rich flora and fauna, typical of sub-Mediterranean influences. Among the representative species, we cannot omit the horned viper, whose presence in the Banat area is well known, but also a number of rare species of snakes. Tourists eager for adventure and fun can opt for rafting, mountaineering, caving activities, cruises on the Danube, practicing sports such as cycling, paragliding, motorcycling, tennis, football.

Analyzing these attractions both from a tourist and ecotourism point of view, we can discover both strong and weak points as well as opportunities and risks of the studied area. They are presented in tabular form, to be better highlighted.

Table 1.

Swot analysis

Strong points	Weak points
Special natural resources Historical and cultural heritage Possibilities for the development of sustainable tourism Existing tourist infrastructure	Damaged infrastructure Lack of investment Reduced accessibility Limited tourist services Poor marketing Degradation of the natural environment
Opportunities	Risks
Funding for ecotourism and sustainable development projects Increasing demand for sustainable tourism Revitalization and promotion of local traditions	Overexploitation of natural resources Climate change Excessive commercialization of tourism Competition from other ecotourism destinations

The fundamental premise of tourism development is the protection and preservation of the tourist potential and the prevention of its degradation, these constituting a problem of maximum importance and actuality, which must be an integrated and inseparable part of the general tourism development policy. It is becoming increasingly obvious that the development of tourism in sensitive natural areas, in the absence of proper management, can present a threat to the integrity of ecosystems and local communities. Increasing numbers of visitors to ecologically fragile areas can lead to severe environmental degradation. Also, local communities and indigenous culture may be negatively influenced by the increased flow of foreign visitors with a modern lifestyle.

CONCLUSIONS

The Herculaneum Baths have the potential to become an example of sustainable ecotourism, contributing not only to the economic development of the community, but also to the preservation of a valuable natural heritage.

The Băile Herculane tourist area, being a mono-industrial area, with the exception of other activities auxiliary to tourism, as a basic activity in the area can bring well-being to the native population, as well as to the resort's visitors.

Individual tourism allows the full satisfaction of the needs and wishes expressed by the individual in his capacity as a tourist, because he puts the man and his maximum satisfaction at the center of his attention, creating in this sense all the conditions necessary to obtain the maximum tourist satisfaction

Birdwatching tourism consists in watching birds, their behavior in a word, their way of life. Correlatively, it is possible to view the landscape in general and the flora in particular. For Romania, the ideal place for practicing this form of tourism is the Danube Delta. But it can already be successfully practiced in the analyzed area of Băile Herculane.

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