

## STUDY REGARDING THE AGROTOURISM POTENTIAL OF ALBA COUNTY

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**Abstract:** *Agritourism represents a strategic field for revitalizing the rural economy, and Alba County stands out through its valuable agritourism potential, supported by diverse natural resources, a rich cultural heritage, living traditions, and distinctive local products. This study analyzes the agritourism potential of Alba County in the context of regional development by comparing it with the other counties within the Central Region, in order to highlight its competitive territorial position. The research examines the evolution of tourist accommodation structures, with an emphasis on agritourism guesthouses, the dynamics of existing and operational accommodation capacity, as well as trends in tourist arrivals and overnight stays, classified by type of tourist (residents and non-residents). The statistical results indicate a moderate growth of agritourism in the county, driven by the increasing interest in authentic rural experiences, but also reveal several limitations related to seasonality and territorial disparities in tourism infrastructure. To provide an integrated assessment, the study includes a SWOT analysis of the agritourism sector in Alba County, outlining the main strengths and weaknesses, as well as the opportunities and threats associated with the current context. The conclusions emphasize the need to intensify rural destination promotion, diversify tourism services, and strengthen cooperation among local stakeholders to ensure a sustainable and competitive valorization of the existing agritourism potential.*

**Key words:** *agrotourism, Alba county, agrotourism accommodation facilities, tourists*

### INTRODUCTION

Agrotourism is one of the most dynamic forms of rural tourism, contributing significantly to the diversification and development of the local economy, to the preservation of traditions and to the sustainable capitalization of the resources specific to the rural environment. [9]

According to the literature, this type of tourism is strongly correlated with the evolution of rural communities and their ability to create authentic experiences, integrated into the daily life of the village. The growing interest of tourists in nature, traditional gastronomy and activities specific to agricultural households has contributed to the consolidation of agrotourism as a viable alternative for rural development. [5]

Alba County has a significant agrotourism potential, determined by the diversity of landscapes, rich cultural heritage, traditional rural architecture and well-defined local identity. According to theories on territorial tourism development, the potential of a region is the result of the interaction between existing resources and their capacity to be harnessed through appropriate services and infrastructure. [2,4] The mountainous relief, with heights of over 2,000 meters, as well as the richness of the cultural heritage old churches, cathedrals, fortified fortresses, castles and mansions give the region a unique identity. [15]

The income obtained from agrotourism can contribute to increasing the standard of living and raising the degree of civilization of the Romanian village. The inhabitants of the county, through their special hospitality, can radically change the image of the area. In this regard, it is necessary to develop a clear and forward-looking policy on the development of Romanian agrotourism, by establishing well-defined and sustainable objectives, capable of generating domestic financial resources. All these directions can transform rural tourism

and agrotourism in Alba County into an essential factor of economic and social development.[12]

Agrotourism is emerging as a complementary activity to agriculture, capitalizing on the existing accommodation spaces in rural households and offering tourists the opportunity to participate in activities specific to village life: outdoor relaxation, knowledge of traditional crafts, local gastronomy or studies and documentary programs.[6]

The traditional occupations of the inhabitants of the rural area, the folkloric traditions, the well-preserved clothing style, are assets for the development of rural tourism and agrotourism in Alba County. The Apuseni Mountains are the most populated mountains in Romania, and accommodation is provided here in traditional village houses, or isolated hamlets, tourist guesthouses, or some traditionally restored village. The areas with the most developed agrotourism in Alba County are: Rimetea and the Upper Arieș Valley.[3,11,14]

All these elements make Alba County a relevant example for the analysis of the potential for sustainable development through agrotourism, in the context of the Romanian rural economy.

### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The research on the agrotourism potential of Alba County was based on the analysis of statistical data provided by the National Institute of Statistics for the period 2015–2024, supplemented with information from local and regional development strategies and direct observations from the territory. Relevant indicators for the characterization of agrotourism were analyzed: the number of agrotourism reception structures; existing and operating accommodation capacity, as well as tourists' arrivals and overnight stays, by residence categories.

The methodology applied included the comparative analysis at the level of the Centre Region, in order to highlight the position of Alba County, as well as the analysis of the dynamics and structure of the main tourism indicators. A SWOT analysis was also carried out, aimed at capturing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats specific to the agrotourism sector in the studied area.

The results obtained provide a complete picture of the recent trends of agrotourism in Alba County and the directions of sustainable capitalization of the existing potential.

### **RESEARCH RESULTS**

Located in central Romania, with its seat in Alba Iulia, Alba County borders the counties of Cluj, Mureș, Sibiu, Hunedoara, Vâlcea, Arad and Bihor, a position that gives it high accessibility and the potential to attract tourist flows from multiple regions of the country.[13]

The natural tourist resources of the county are remarkable and include picturesque landscapes – caves, gorges, waterfalls, limestone cliffs and mountain massifs – along with numerous nature reserves of national and European interest, such as the Apuseni Mountains Natural Park or the Scărișoara Glacier. To these are added spa resources (e.g. Ocna Mureș), ecosystems rich in flora and fauna specific to the Apuseni Mountains and numerous natural monuments [8]

The anthropic resources are equally valuable and diversified: Dacian and medieval fortresses, Roman castras and mining exploitations, historic castles and palaces, churches and monasteries representing different denominations, historical centers (Alba Iulia, Aiud, Sebeș), traditional Romanian, Hungarian and Saxon villages, museums, ethnographic collections and memorial houses. Events such as the Girls' Fair on Mount Găină, the

Roman Apulum Festival or the Festival of Dacian Fortresses contribute significantly to attracting tourists, along with the Transalpina road, the wine and gastronomic routes, the Mocănița on the Arieș Valley and the golf course at Pianu. [1]

Through the diversity of its resources, Alba County has a high potential for the development of rural tourism and agrotourism, as well as for complementary forms of tourism: sports, leisure, spa, oenological, gastronomic, cultural-historical and religious.[7]

The agrotourism sector of Alba County recorded a significant increase in the number of agrotourism pensions between 2015 and 2024, according to data provided by the National Institute of Statistics. [16, 17] During this period, the county has expanded its agrotourism network by approximately 70 units, reflecting the growing interest in rural investments, the diversification of the tourist offer and the promotion of authentic experiences in rural areas. The constant increase in the number of agrotourism structures confirms the gradual capitalization of the existing potential in the county, especially in areas such as Valea Ampoiului, Apuseni Mountains, Țara Moșilor, the Târnave wine area and localities with strong traditions.

Next, the evolution of the number of tourist reception structures in Alba County in the period 2015–2024 is analyzed, including both agrotourism guesthouses and other types of relevant tourist units.

**Table 1.**  
**Evolution of the number of tourist reception structures in Alba County, 2015-2024**  
**-number of unit-**

Types of tourist accommodation facilities	2015	2017	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
<b>Total</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>191</b>	<b>196</b>	<b>227</b>	<b>305</b>	<b>333</b>	<b>357</b>	<b>399</b>
<b>Hotels</b>	19	19	18	19	18	19	17	18
<b>Hostels</b>	3	4	3	4	4	3	3	4
<b>Motels</b>	7	5	6	6	6	6	4	4
<b>Villas tourism</b>	6	10	10	29	23	22	20	20
<b>Tourist cabanes</b>	8	11	7	6	4	6	5	6
<b>Bungalouri</b>	0	0	1	3	3	0	11	8
<b>Campgrounds</b>	1	1	1	1	3	3	3	4
<b>Tourist stops</b>	1	2	3	2	2	3	3	3
<b>Tourist cottages</b>	0	0	1	1	1	2	4	7
<b>Student and preschool camps</b>	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	2
<b>Tourist guesthouses</b>	30	28	30	27	29	30	28	29
<b>Agrotourism guesthouses</b>	81	108	113	126	131	132	139	151

*Source: Processing after INS-Tempo online, 2025, [16, 17]*

Of all the categories of structures, agrotourism guesthouses have stood out for a significantly upward evolution, representing the most dynamic form of accommodation in rural areas. In 2015, they totaled 81 units, and by 2024, they reached an impressive number of 151, which means an increase of over 86%, in a period of nine years. This constant evolution indicates that Alba County has efficiently capitalized on the number of tourist guesthouses, although they maintain a relatively constant evolution, have registered only minor variations, standing around 28–30 units, which suggests a stabilization of this segment on the local market.

As for the other structures, hotels, motels and tourist villas experienced a moderate dynamic. The hotels remained between 17 and 19 units, without significant changes, which indicates a high degree of maturity of the hotel segment in the county. Tourist villas and chalets show punctual fluctuations, reflecting adaptations to seasonal demand and selective investments in mountain tourism. The emergence of alternative forms of accommodation is

also noteworthy, such as bungalows, tourist cottages or stopovers, which contribute to the diversification of the tourist product and to attracting segments of visitors oriented towards unconventional experiences. Although they represent a small share in the total number of reception structures, these units highlight a trend of innovation and adaptation of the local tourist offer. In addition, campsites and camps for students maintain a constant presence in the county's tourism structure, emphasizing the important role of educational and youth tourism in the dynamics of tourist circulation.

After analyzing the evolution of tourist accommodation structures in Alba County, it is necessary to situate these developments in the broader context of the Centre Region, by examining the dynamics of agrotourism guesthouses at regional level, in the period 2015–2024.

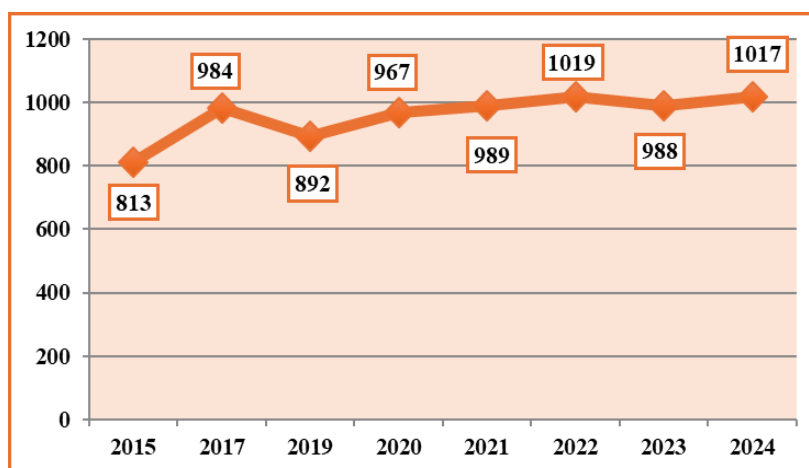
**Table 2.**

**Evolution of the number of agrotourism guesthouses in the Centre Region, in the period 2015-2024**

**- number of unit -**

Year	2015	2017	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
<b>Total</b>	<b>813</b>	<b>984</b>	<b>892</b>	<b>967</b>	<b>989</b>	<b>1019</b>	<b>988</b>	<b>1017</b>
Alba	81	108	113	126	131	132	139	151
Braşov	347	411	383	379	387	380	372	377
Covasna	47	44	36	56	45	45	50	52
Harghita	178	225	215	229	229	265	231	236
Mureş	42	58	49	51	51	56	62	64
Sibiu	118	138	96	126	146	141	134	137

Source: <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table>, [16]



**Figure 1. The evolution of agrotourism guesthouses in the Centre Region, in the period 2015-2024**

Source: Processing after INS-Tempo online, 2025, [16, 17]

The data in the table and figure above show a general trend of increasing the number of agrotourism guesthouses in the Centre Region, from 813 units in 2015 to 1,017 in 2024. Alba County stands out for a constantly upward evolution, doubling its number of guesthouses from 81 to 151, which places it among the most dynamic counties in the region.

Brasov remains the county with the most agrotourism guesthouses, although with visible fluctuations, while Harghita maintains a stable growth until 2022, followed by a

slight decrease. Mureș and Covasna counties register low values and moderate variations, and Sibiu presents an oscillating evolution, with periods of decrease and recovery.

Overall, Alba County ranks third in the region, after Brașov and Harghita, but stands out for the fastest percentage growth rate in the analyzed period.

After highlighting the dynamics of agrotourism guesthouses at regional level, the next natural step is to analyze the existing and operating accommodation capacity, in order to observe to what extent the numerical development of the structures is also reflected in the increase in the potential for tourist reception.

**Table 3.**

**Existing and operating tourist accommodation capacity of Alba County**

Years	Existing accommodation capacity (places)	Operating accommodation capacity (place-days)
2015	4585	1304120
2016	4748	1409380
2017	5176	1502775
2018	5278	1575437
2019	5218	1566155
2020	5688	1064249
2021	7273	1711700
2022	7798	2182758
2023	7864	2503909
2024	8581	2762490

Source: Processing after INS-Tempo online, 2025 [16, 17]

The data on the accommodation capacity in Alba County show a constant increase in both the existing capacity and the one in operation. The existing accommodation capacity increases from 4,585 places in 2015 to 8,581 places in 2024, which reflects the expansion of tourism infrastructure and investments made in rural areas.

The operating accommodation capacity follows a similar evolution, registering a significant advance, from 1,304,120 place-days in 2015 to 2,762,490 place-days in 2024. A sharp decrease is observed in 2020, driven by the restrictions imposed by the pandemic context, but the values quickly return to an upward trajectory from 2021 onwards, exceeding previous levels.

The dynamics presented indicate a consolidation of the tourist reception capacity of Alba County, which, in recent years, reflects both the increase in the number of agrotourism structures and the intensification of tourist activity in rural areas.

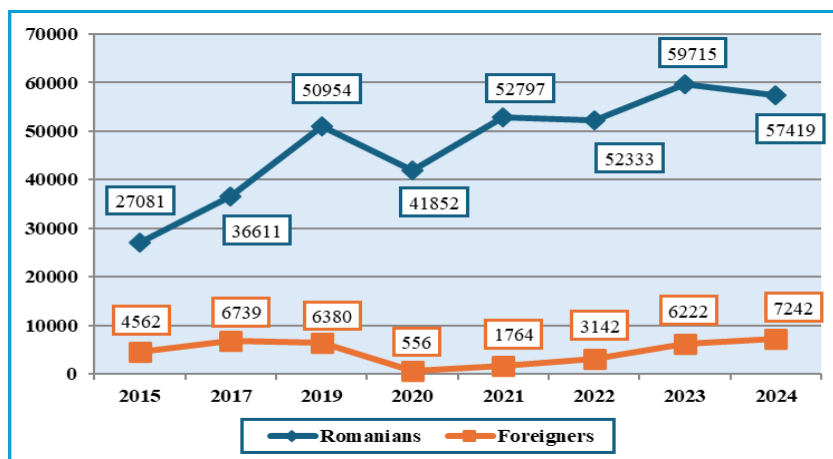
In continuing the analysis of the accommodation capacity, it is relevant to examine the evolution of tourist flows, in order to observe to what extent the increase in the reception infrastructure was reflected in the intensity of tourist traffic in Alba County.

**Table 4.**

**Evolution of arrivals of Romanian and foreign tourists in agrotourism guesthouses in Alba County, between 2015-2024**

Types of tourists	2015	2017	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
<b>Total</b>	<b>31643</b>	<b>43350</b>	<b>57334</b>	<b>42408</b>	<b>54561</b>	<b>55475</b>	<b>65937</b>	<b>64661</b>
<b>Romanians</b>	27081	36611	50954	41852	52797	52333	59715	57419
<b>Foreigners</b>	4562	6739	6380	556	1764	3142	6222	7242

Source: Processing after INS-Tempo online, 2025, [16, 17]



**Figure 2. The evolution of the arrivals of Romanian and foreign tourists in the agrotourism guesthouses in Alba County**

Source: Processing after INS-Tempo online, 2025, [16, 17]

The data presented in the table and graph above highlight a constant increase in tourist arrivals in agrotourism guesthouses in Alba County, with an evolution from 31,643 arrivals in 2015 to 64,661 arrivals in 2024, which indicates the doubling of the tourist flow in the analyzed period.

Romanian tourists constitute the majority category, increasing from 27,081 arrivals in 2015 to 57,419 arrivals in 2024. This confirms the growing interest of domestic visitors for rural tourism, gastronomic tourism and for the landscapes specific to the Țara Moților, the Apuseni Mountains area and the wine-growing areas.

On the other hand, foreign tourists have much lower values, ranging from 4,562 arrivals in 2015 to 7,242 arrivals in 2024. The drastic decrease in 2020 (556 arrivals) is noteworthy, explained by pandemic restrictions, followed by a gradual recovery in the following years.

Overall, the data indicate a sustained increase in the attractiveness of agrotourism guesthouses in Alba County, with a dominant share of Romanian tourists and a visible recovery of the foreign tourist segment after 2021.

Next, we will analyze the evolution of overnight stays in agrotourism guesthouses in Alba County, in order to observe to what extent the dynamics of arrivals are reflected in the duration of the stay and in the degree of utilization of the accommodation capacity.

**Table 5. The evolution of overnight stays by categories of tourists, in agrotourism guesthouses in Alba County, between 2015-2024**

-number-

Years	Agrotourism guesthouses	
	Romanian	Foreign
2015	67027	9090
2017	82893	13575
2019	114348	12561
2020	91865	1126
2021	109014	4072
2022	117194	6889
2023	131660	12349
2024	121742	13776

Source: Processing after INS-Tempo online, 2025, [16, 17]

The data presented highlight a generally upward evolution of the number of overnight stays in agrotourism guesthouses in Alba County, with variations determined by economic and health factors. In the case of Romanian tourists, overnight stays increase from 67,027 in 2015 to a peak of 131,660 in 2023, followed by a slight decrease in 2024 (121,742), but remaining at a significantly higher level compared to the beginning of the analyzed period.

Among foreign tourists, a general growth trend is observed, from 9,090 overnight stays in 2015 to 13,776 in 2024, with a sharp decrease in 2020 (1,126 overnight stays), caused by pandemic restrictions. The resumption of growth after 2021 indicates the gradual return of international visitors' interest in the rural area of Alba County.

Overall, the dynamics of overnight stays confirm the consolidation of agrotourism guesthouses as the main form of accommodation in rural areas, and the positive developments reflect both the expansion of the offer and the increased attractiveness of the agrotourism experiences offered in the county.

The agrotourism guesthouse segment has contributed significantly to this evolution, as it offers personalized experiences and accommodation conditions integrated into the natural environment. This form of tourism supports the sustainable development of the rural area, by stimulating the local economy and preserving traditions.

In order to integrate all the elements analyzed, the study is completed with a SWOT analysis, meant to highlight the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the agrotourism sector in Alba County.

#### SWOT ANALYSIS

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- High diversity of natural resources: mountain landscapes, gorges, caves, waterfalls, forested areas and unique natural sites.</li> <li>- Valuable cultural and historical heritage, with numerous tourist attractions of national and international interest.</li> <li>- The presence of well-preserved traditional villages with a strong local identity and authentic potential.</li> <li>- Recognized local gastronomy and specific traditional products.</li> <li>- Constant increase in the number of agrotourism guesthouses in the period 2015–2024.</li> <li>- Major cultural events that attract important flows of tourists (Apulum, Girls' Fair, Dacian Fortresses Festival).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Poor road infrastructure in some rural areas, which limits the access of tourists.</li> <li>- Low level of promotion and international visibility of agrotourism destinations.</li> <li>- High seasonality and lower occupancy in the off-season.</li> <li>- Lack of qualified personnel in some agrotourism structures and high fluctuation among the workforce.</li> <li>- Insufficient investments in the modernization of some existing accommodation units.</li> <li>- Uneven distribution of agrotourism guesthouses in the territory (high concentration in Țara Moilor and mountainous areas).</li> </ul>
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Increasing interest in rural tourism, eco-tourism and authentic experiences, both from Romanian and foreign tourists.</li> <li>- European funding available for the development of agrotourism and related activities (PNDR, PNRR, LEADER programs).</li> <li>- The possibility of developing integrated tourism products: gastronomic routes, wine tourism, craft tourism, agricultural experiences.</li> <li>- Collaborations with travel agencies, local associations and tourism promotion organizations.</li> <li>- Diversification of outdoor activities: hiking, cycling, off-road, adventure tourism, winter sports.</li> <li>- Increasing the visibility of the region online and on tourism booking platforms.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- High competition from other counties with a strong tourist tradition (Brașov, Sibiu, Harghita).</li> <li>- Climate change that can affect natural resources and outdoor activities.</li> <li>- Increased operating and maintenance costs for small pension owners.</li> <li>- High dependence on Romanian tourists, which can create instability in difficult economic times.</li> <li>- Overcrowding phenomena in certain tourist areas during peak periods, affecting the quality of the experience.</li> <li>- Possible legislative changes regarding the authorization and operation of accommodation structures.</li> </ul>

The analysis of the evolution of tourist reception structures, accommodation capacity and tourist flows, completed by the regional comparative assessment and the SWOT analysis, highlights the fact that Alba County has a solid, diversified and continuously developing agrotourism potential.

## CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the agrotourism potential of Alba County highlights a positive and constant evolution of the sector in the last decade, supported by the capitalization of natural resources, cultural heritage and local traditions. The significant increase in the number of agrotourism guesthouses and accommodation capacity confirms the increased interest in rural tourism and authentic experiences in the Transylvanian countryside.

The development of agrotourism in Alba County directly contributes to the diversification of the rural economy, to the creation of jobs and to the maintenance of the young population in the villages. At the same time, the positive dynamics of tourist arrivals and overnight stays, especially Romanian ones, underline the consolidation of the domestic market and the potential for expansion towards international tourism.

However, challenges remain related to seasonality, uneven distribution of infrastructure and the low level of promotion of high-potential areas. For a sustainable capitalization, closer cooperation between local actors is needed, diversification of the tourism offer, digitization of services and creation of integrated products based on the local rural identity.

The SWOT analysis highlighted both the competitive advantages of the county—the diversity of its landscapes, rich heritage, local identity, gastronomy, and cultural events—and the vulnerabilities that need to be managed through appropriate policies and strategies. The opportunities offered by European funding programs, the growing interest in rural tourism and authentic experiences, and the possibility of developing integrated tourism products can contribute significantly to strengthening the sector.

Overall, Alba County is emerging as an emerging pole of Romanian agrotourism, with solid prospects for competitive development in a regional and national context, through a coherent strategy oriented towards sustainability, quality and authenticity.

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