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DOCTORAL THESIS

- Abstract –

TOURISM IN THE MOUNTAIN AND MARGINAL CONTACT SPACE IN MUREȘ COUNTY

Keywords: tourism, mountain, tourism potential, prospecting, exploitation, strategy, tourism product

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Tourism, initially a privilege of the upper classes, has transformed into an organized activity, becoming one of the most important economic sectors globally.

Romania has a great tourism potential, due to the diversity of landscapes, favorable climate, richness of flora and fauna, as well as remarkable cultural and historical heritage. Mureș County falls into this category, having a mountainous and marginal contact area that offers opportunities for tourism development. In the current context, capitalizing on this potential can contribute to economic and social recovery through sustainable development of the area, supported by specialized research and documentation.

The choice of the mountainous and marginal contact area of Mureș County as a subject of study was based both on the personal connection with this space and on the in-depth knowledge of its physical-geographical and socio-economic realities. In addition, the lack of extensive studies on tourism in this area was an additional reason for exploring and promoting its tourism resources. In this regard, the research proposes a detailed analysis of mountain and marginal contact tourism, based on clear hypotheses and well-defined objectives:

HYPOTHESIS 1: The natural and anthropogenic tourist potential of the study area represents the most important component in the development and support of tourist activity in the mountainous and marginal contact area of Mureș County.

OBJECTIVE 1: Prospecting the existing tourism potential in the mountainous and marginal contact area of Mureș County



HYPOTHESIS 2: The capacity of the tourism infrastructure is relatively sufficient for practicing tourism in order to optimally capitalize on the tourism potential in the mountainous and marginal contact area of Mureș County.

OBJECTIVE 2: Analysis of the tourism infrastructure from a triple perspective of existing data resulting in the application of a system for rating and evaluating the tourism potential of the ATUs in the study area



HYPOTHESIS 3: Tourism can ensure socio-economic development in the mountainous and marginal contact area of Mureș County under the conditions of a tourism market and an efficient administration system

OBJECTIVE 3: Establishing the perception of local authorities and locals on the implications that tourism can have within the local community, resulting in the development of an efficient tourism development strategy in the study area

All these hypotheses anticipate and serve the general objective of the research, namely, demonstrating that the mountainous and marginal contact area of Mureș County can transform tourism into a viable socio-economic alternative as long as there is proper exploitation and effective promotion.

Chapter 2. National and international research status

2.1. General scientific context of the proposed topic

The geographical space can become a tourist space by capitalizing on and diversifying specific activities, based on natural or anthropic potential and adequate infrastructure. The organization of this space requires tourist zoning, based on existing resources and includes taxonomic levels such as *the region, the area, the complex, the locality and the tourist objective*. All of this contributes to the development of a tourist offer, which can be primary (natural and anthropogenic resources) or secondary (technical and material base), transforming, through economic exploitation, into a real tourist offer.

The development of tourism depends on the integration of tourist heritage into the profile circuit, which determines the emergence of *tourist flow* - the movement of visitors to receiving areas for recreational, cultural or curative activities. For this, tourism prospecting is essential, ensuring the evaluation and arrangement of tourism resources. Depending on the existing supply and demand, the tourist act can take different forms and types, influenced by factors such as distance, duration and purpose of the trip.

2.2. Brief review of the specialized literature

Previous studies on the research area are mostly general, focused on regional and national levels, and detailed research at the county level is limited and comes from related fields such as history or geography. The bibliography is divided into three categories: general studies, in-depth research and complementary works, highlighting the lack of an integrated tourism analysis. This situation highlights the need for a comprehensive study that includes the mountainous and marginal contact area of Mureș County in the national and international scientific circuit.

Chapter 3. Data and materials used, research methodology

3.1. Data and materials used

The study uses two main categories of information: data on the tourism potential of the mountainous and marginal contact area of Mureș County, obtained from various sources (guides, archives, online databases) and data on tourism infrastructure and tourist circulation, taken from official statistics and own research. The analysis includes aspects such as the number of tourist attractions, accommodation and transport infrastructure, and indicators of tourist circulation (arrivals, overnight stays, seasonality). Data has also been collected through questionnaires administered to local representatives and residents of the study area.

3.2. Research methodology

The research methodology included documentation, collection of field data and their interpretation. Bibliographic sources, interviews and questionnaires have been analyzed, and cartographic materials facilitated the correlation of geographical data. Direct observations and interactions with tourism authorities and service providers have contributed to a complex database, including demographic, economic and tourist information.

Data interpretation and processing have been carried out through quantitative and qualitative methods, using graphic, cartographic representations and comparative analysis of administrative and territorial units (ATUs). The tourism potential has been assessed based on a scoring system given to natural, anthropogenic resources and tourism infrastructure, facilitating the comparison of localities. In addition, methods such as observation, document analysis, surveys and structured interviews have been applied, complemented by advanced graphical representation techniques and the use of specialized software. The case study applied to the 19 ATUs has highlighted the differences and similarities in tourism development, providing a solid foundation for formulating effective strategies to capitalize on tourism potential at regional and national levels.

Chapter 4. Results and discussions

4.1. Geographical location, territorial delimitation and configuration of the study area

The investigated area is located in the central-northern part of Romania, in the northeast of Mureș county, with the neighboring counties of Suceava (north), Harghita (east and northeast) and Bistrița-Năsăud (west and northwest). It occupies approximately 1932 km² of the total 6714 km² of Mureș County and is located in the Upper Mureș basin, at the contact of

the Transylvanian Colline Plateau with the Transylvanian Subcarpathians, the Căliman Mountains (northeast) and the Gurghiu Mountains (east).

The landform is structured in three distinct sectors: the volcanic massif of the Căliman Mountains (north), the volcanic mountains of Gurghiu (east) and the Subcarpathian hills and plateaus (west).

The delimitation of the area was carried out through administrative and physical and geographic criteria, including 17 communes with 77 villages and two urban settlements, thus highlighting the diversity of the landscape and the territorial units analyzed.

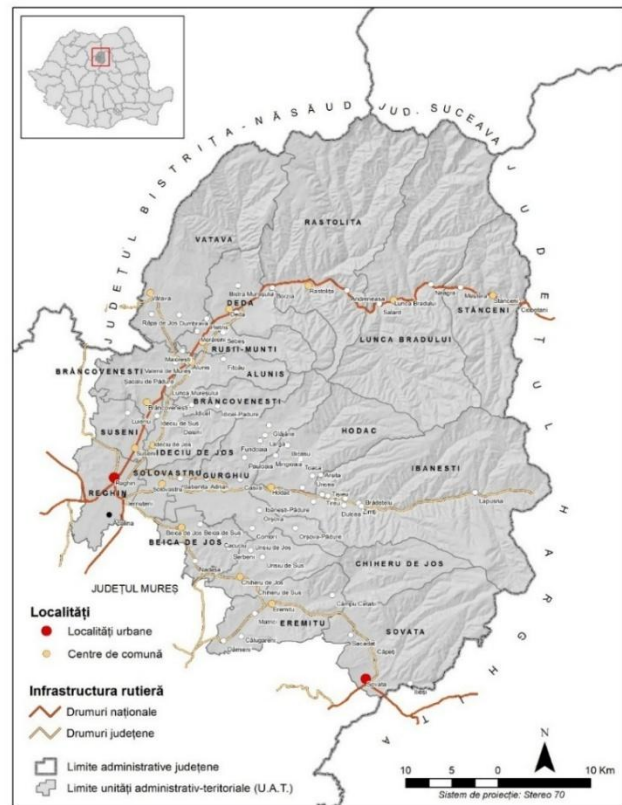


Figure 1. Administrative and territorial delimitation of the study area and positioning of the component localities

4.2. Natural tourism potential

4.2.1. Morphotourism potential

The study area is notable for its diverse mountain landscape, shaped by external agents, which has generated spectacular landforms with tourist value, such as mountain ranges, peaks, plateaus, valleys, gorges, volcanic craters and caves. The morphotourism potential is determined by the presence of the Căliman and Gurghiu Mountains, along with the gorges, plateaus and hilly contact areas. The geological substrate of these volcanic massifs, formed by lava flows, pyroclasts and microdiorite intrusive bodies, influences the landform and landscape. The Căliman massif is dominated by a volcanic caldera approximately 10 km in diameter, while the Gurghiu Mountains are characterized by several volcanic apparatuses and craters eroded by the tributaries of the Mureș and the two Târnave rivers, contributing to the spectacular landform and tourist attractiveness of the region.

The study area overlaps the volcanogenic and sedimentary sector of the Căliman and Gurghiu Mountains, as well as the contact area with the Transylvanian Colline Plateau, between Harghita and Bistrița-Năsăud counties.

The mountains, formed during the Neogene eruptive period, include both volcanic cones, with peaks exceeding 1700 m (e.g. Pietrosu Peak – 2100 m), and extensive volcanic plateaus. Their "horseshoe"-shaped craters influence the climate and biogeographic stratification, favoring tourist activities such as hiking and cycling. The volcanogenic-sedimentary plateau in the west presents resulting from selective modeling, highlighting the geomorphological complexity of the region.

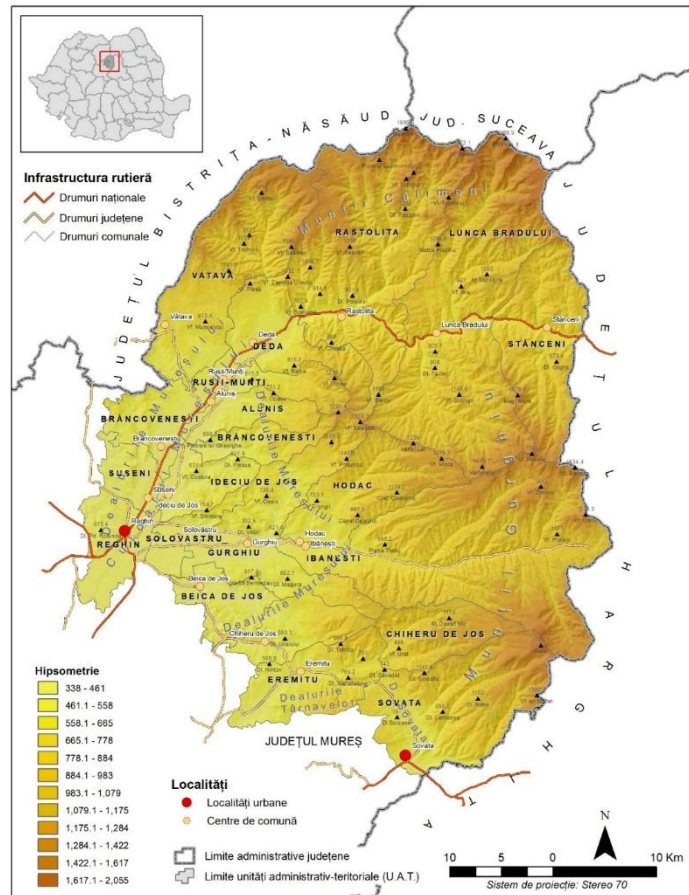


Figure 2. Landform units of the study area

4.2.2. Climate and tourism potential

The study area benefits from a climate favorable to tourism throughout the year, due to the presence of the "indifferent", "sedative-relaxing" and "tonic-stimulant" bioclimates. The indifferent bioclimate offers balanced atmospheric conditions, ideal for relaxation, while the sedative bioclimate has beneficial effects on recovery and stress reduction, being conducive to therapeutic tourism. On the other hand, the tonic and stimulating bioclimate stimulates physical and mental activity, being perfect for hiking, cycling and mountain sports, thus contributing to the diversity and tourist attractiveness of the region.

4.2.3. Hydrogeographic potential

Hydrographic resources play an essential role in the development of tourism, providing opportunities for recreation, water sports and fishing. The watercourses in the study area belong to the Mureș basin, which receives numerous tributaries such as the Gurghiu, Nirajul and Târnava Mică. These waters are exploited for tourism through fishing, especially due to the

presence of trout and grayling, but also through activities such as rafting, kayaking and canoeing in the Upper Mureș Gorge. In addition, the reopening of the Morii Canal in Reghin in 2024 has increased the attractiveness of the region for water sports enthusiasts.

The lakes in the study area play an essential role in tourism, providing opportunities for recreational and sporting activities. The most important of these is Lake Ursu in Sovata, unique in Europe due to the heliothermy phenomenon, which allows it to maintain high temperatures in its lower layers. Formed in 1875, this salt lake is internationally recognized for its therapeutic benefits and for the three world records it holds, being a special tourist attraction in Romania.

4.2.4. Biogeographic tourism potential

The research area benefits from a remarkable tourism potential due to the diversity of vegetation and fauna, supporting ecotourism, hunting and fishing tourism. The vegetation is arranged in altitudinal layers, from oak and hornbeam forests in the lowlands, to juniper and holm oak in the subalpine and alpine regions. Rare and endemic species, such as marsh angelica and mountain arnica, complete the natural landscape, providing a special setting for nature loving tourists. A special attraction is the Mociar Forest known for its centuries-old oaks, which constitutes a landscape sanctuary of great value.

The fauna of the region is varied, including both mountain species and species specific to marginal contact zones. Among the most important species of hunting interest are the deer, bear, wolf and lynx, and the Round Forest is home to a colony of bee eaters. These natural resources favor the development of hunting and fishing tourism, supported by hunting funds and fishing habitats in the areas administered by the Lunca Bradului, Gurghiu and Fâncel Forest Districts. Thus, the biodiversity of the region contributes significantly to the tourist attractiveness of the area, providing opportunities for recreational and nature conservation activities.

4.2.5. Protected natural areas

The research area includes nine protected natural areas of national interest, located on the territory of 12 administrative and territorial units. Among the most important are the Căliman National Park, which protects mountain ecosystems and promotes ecotourism, and the Upper Mureș Gorge Natural Park, important for the biodiversity conservation.

Also, the Mociar Forest, one of the oldest oak forests in Romania, represents a valuable scientific and touristic objective. Protected sanctuaries shelter rare species of plants and animals, contributing to the diversity of the natural landscape.

These include the Vălenii de Mureș Sanctuary, where the variegated tulip grows, and the "Lăpușna Resonance Spruce" Sanctuary, a habitat for wolves and brown bears. Ursu Lake, with its heliothermal properties, and the Gurghiu Narcissus Meadow complete the list of natural attractions.

In addition to these areas, Mureș County also includes 20 sites of community importance (SCI) and 6 bird protection areas (SPAs), of which 10 are part of the Natura 2000 network.



Figure 3. Spatial distribution of protected areas within the study area

4.2.6. Estimation the value of the attractive potential of the natural tourist fund

The rating system for natural tourism potential

The analysis of natural tourism resources in the mountainous and marginal contact area of Mureș County has focused on five main categories: morphotourism, climatotourism, hydrogeographic, biogeographic and those belonging to protected areas. These were evaluated and rated on a scale of 1 to 10 points, ensuring a balanced ranking between territorial units. The landform, bioclimate and hydrographic network were scored according to their specific characteristics, with higher values given to mountainous areas, higher order rivers and tonic stimulating climate.

Biogeographic resources have been evaluated according to altitudinal levels, with scores ranging from 8 for the subalpine level to 2 for deciduous forests. Protected areas have received the highest score, depending on their status: national parks have been scored 6, Natura 2000 sites 4, and bird areas 2. This scoring methodology allowed for a detailed analysis of natural

tourism potential, highlighting the importance of each category in the development and promoting of regional tourism.

Table 1. Scores given to natural tourism resources

Tourism resources	Morpho-tourism resources	Climato-tourism resources	Hydro-geographic resources	Bio-geographic resources	Protected natural areas
Score	High mountains (over 1.800 m): 10pts. Medium mountains (1.000 - 1.800 m): 8pts. Low mountains (under 1.000-m): 6pts. Geomorphosites (cliffs, morphostructures, caves, gorges, salt outcrops): 5 pts Hills: 4 pts Depressions/ corridors: 2 pts	Mountain tonic-stimulant bioclimate – M.T.S.: 3 pts Intermediate: 2 pts Sedative-indifferent climate of hills and submontane depressions - S.I.D.: 1 p.	Main rivers and lakes: 3 pts Primary tributaries: 2 pts Secondary tributaries: 1 pt.	Vegetation, fauna Subalpine: 8 pts Coniferous: 6 pts Mixed forests: 4 pts Deciduous: 2 pts	(N) National: 6 pts (C) Community SCI: 4 pts (A) Avifaunistic SPA: 2 pts

Source: adapted from Răcășan, 2018

Estimating natural tourism potential

Once the estimate of the natural tourism potential was made, a ranking of the ATUs subject to research could be carried out based on the score obtained on the five categories of natural tourism resources. Thus, 3 of the 19 ATUs of the study area fall into the category of those with very high tourism potential, obtaining over 60 points (Răstolița, Sovata, Lunca Bradului). In addition, 4 more UATs are classified as high (40 - 59.9p) and one UAT is classified as medium (30 - 39.9p). Otherwise, almost half (8) of the UATs surveyed (19) have an above-average attractive tourist potential, with only 6 UATs classified as low (20 - 29.9p) and five as very low (below 20p).

Table 2. Evaluation of the natural tourism potential of the study area

Natural tourism Potential	Commune/ Town	Morpho-tourism resource	Climato-tourism resource	Hydro-geographic resources	Bio-geographic resources	Protected Natural Areas	TOTAL
Very High (over 60 pts)	Răstolița	6,6 pts	4 pts	20 pts	20 pts	16,2 pts	66,8 pts
	Sovata	4,7 pts	2 pts	31pts	12 pts.	16,4 pts	66,1 pts
	Lunca Bradului	6,6 pts	4 pts	17 pts	20 pts	16 pts	63,6 pts
High (40-59,9 pts)	Deda	5 pts	2 pts	17 pts	12 pts	15 pts	51 pts
	Vătava	5,6 pts	2 pts	14 pts	12 pts	16,6 pts	50,2 pts
	Stânceni	6,5 pts	4 pts	13 pts	10 pts	15,3 pts	48,8 pts
	Ibănești	4,7 pts	4 pts	16 pts	12 pts	11,5 pts	48,2 pts
Medium (30-39,9pts)	Chiheru de Jos	6 pts	4 pts	5 pts	12 pts	5 pts	32 pts
	Gurghiu	5,6 pts	2 pts	6 pts	12 pts	5 pts	30,6 pts

Low (20-29,9 pts)	Hodac	4,7 pts	2 pts	7 pts	12pts	4 pts	29,6 pts
	Brâncovenești	4,6 pts	2 pts	11 pts	2 pts	10 pts	29,6 pts
	Rușii-Munți	4,6 pts	2 pts	7 pts	6pts	8 pts	27,9 pts
	Eremitu	5 pts	2 pts	7 pts	6 pts	5,5 pts	25,3 pts
	Reghin	3 pts	1 pt	10 pts	2 pts	8 pts	24 pts
Very low (under 20 pts)	Ideciu de Jos	3,5 pts	2 pts	5 pts	2 pts	8 pts	19,5 pts
	Solovăstru	3,6 pts	1 pt	7 pts	2 pts	4 pts	17,6 pts
	Aluniș	4 pts	2 pts	5 pts	2 pts	4 pts	17 pts
	Beica de Jos	4 pts	1 pts	4 pts	2 pts	6 pts	17 pts
	Suseni	3 pts	1 pts	5 pts	2 pts	4 pts	15 pts
Average of the study area		4,5 pts	2,3 pts	10,5 pts	7,5 pts	9,1 pts	32,27 pts

4.3. Anthropic tourism potential

4.3.1. Historical buildings and sites

1018 historical monuments have been identified in the study area. Of these, 27 are archaeological vestiges, including sites, forts, fortresses and defensive towers, most of which date back to the Roman era. In the category of residential objectives with architectural value, there are 2 castles, 3 urban ensembles, a confessional school, 16 houses with historical value and a rural ensemble of Romanian houses. Also, the national archaeological repertoire includes 21 vestiges, such as necropolises, coins and medieval fortifications, located within the radius of 9 ATUs.

4.3.2. Religious buildings

In the study area, 138 religious buildings have been identified, of which 15 are included in the LMI, and another 11 wooden churches, discovered through alternative sources, contribute to the tourist attractiveness of the region. These are spread across several localities and are mainly used for visiting, with ceremonies being held only on the patron saint's day. In total, the churches belong to 13 religious denominations, with a majority of Orthodox (55.7%), present in almost all localities, except for a few communes where the Hungarian population predominates.

4.3.3. Cultural buildings

Following the consultation of the Romanian LMI, 11 cultural buildings and sites were identified, including museums, tombs and monuments. The most important is the "Anton Badea" Ethnographic Museum in Reghin, with valuable collections of folk costumes and

exhibitions of traditional dwellings. Monuments and graves are the most numerous, including 8 memorial sites and 46 monuments of heroes, found in most localities, along with 9 graves of local personalities.

4.3.4. Economic buildings with tourist function

It represents a category of anthropic tourism potential that is almost non-existent in the study area. This would include the Small Dam / Gat with the entire related hydrotechnical system - the Morii canal and the 1911 Reghin Power Plant, but the Gat is in ruins, and the power plant is no longer of tourist interest. Another objective that falls into this category would be the Răstolița dam, but it is not yet completed, therefore it does not function for economic purposes. Finally, the only economic building with a tourist function is represented by the "Mirona" violin factory in Reghin, which offers tourists the opportunity to visit the wood processing sections and the production of the finished product - the VIOLIN.

4.3.5. Human activities with a tourist function (events)

Following the analysis of this category of anthropic tourism potential, it emerges that in the study area there are a total of 106 human activities with a tourist function, from the category of festivals, fairs, local celebrations and sports competitions. Within these, the largest share is occupied by local holidays (45.87%), followed by festivals (29.35%), sports competitions (12.84%), and the lowest percentage belongs to fairs (7.33%).

Regarding the interest enjoyed by the events identified and mentioned above, we note that most are of local interest (50) and regional interest (25), followed by those of national interest (24 events) and international interest (5 events).

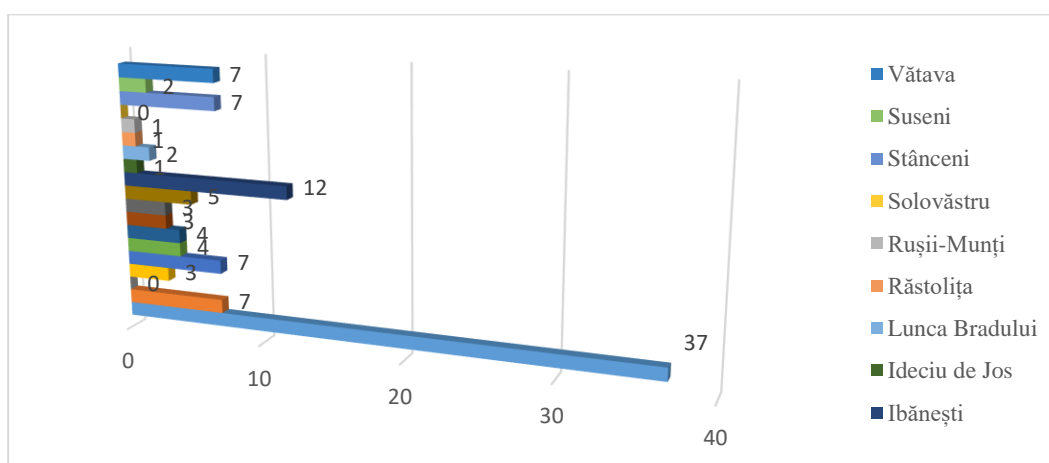


Figure 4. Distribution of the number of events at the UAT level in the study area

The anthropogenic tourist resources in the mountainous and marginal contact area of Mureș County include traditional occupations and crafts, rural architecture, folk customs, folk costumes, songs and games, along with peasant technical installations and Living Human Treasures. These elements reflect the cultural identity of the region and contribute to its tourist attractiveness by preserving traditions passed down from generation to generation.

The area is characterized by ethnic diversity, with Romanians, Hungarians and Sas living together, each group having its own traditions and cultural influences. This diversity is reflected in the four ethnographic subzones: the Upper Mureș Valley, the Gurghiu Valley, the Beicia Valley and the Secuiesc Land.

Although modernization has brought changes, authentic elements such as folk costumes, crafts and traditional customs continue to be preserved and valued, contributing to the diversification of the region's tourist offer.



a) *Rafila Moldovan*



b) *Maria Bucin*



c) *Petruț Chirteș*



d) *Mihai Grama*

Figure 5. Living Human Treasures from the study area (a, b, c, d)
Source: <https://www.cultura.ro/tezaure-umane-vii/>, Pagina facebook emisiune „Asta-i România”

4.3.7. Estimating the value of the attractive potential of anthropogenic tourist heritage

The rating system for anthropic tourism potential

Following the prospection of anthropogenic tourist resources, six types of tourist attractions have been identified that are consistent with the configuration of the tourist heritage related to the mountain and marginal contact space of Mureș County. Thus, the following objectives were analyzed: historical buildings, religious buildings, cultural buildings, economic buildings with a tourist function, human activities with a tourist function, ethnographic tourist resources.

Within the rating system, only five categories of objectives out of the six analyzed were evaluated, with ethnographic tourism resources being (partially) excluded because it would have been quite difficult to quantify in a fair way for all the ATUs of the study area, but they remain an essential component in terms of the tourist attractiveness of the mountainous and marginal contact area of Mureș County. Thus, scores ranging from 0.1 to 5 points have been awarded so that the evaluation was objective and balanced across all analyzed ATUs.

Table 3. Scores awarded to anthropic tourism heritage resources

Tourism resources	Historical Buildings and landmarks	Religious buildings	Cultural buildings and landmarks	Economic buildings with tourism function	Human activities with tourism function
Score	Archaeological remains (H.M./NAR) (ruins: 2pts remains: 1pt) Residential buildings with architectural value (H.M.) (historical monuments: 4pts Castle, fortress, manor, palace: 3pts houses H.M.: 2pts)	Churces M.H., Wooden churches, cemeteries (churces M.H.: 5pts Wooden churches: 4ptd Monasteries/hermitages: 3pts cemeteries M.H.: 2pts Other churces (all denominations 0,1pt)	Museums, collections, parks / living human treasure (museum H.M.: 5pts Park H.M.: 4pts Museum/ living human treasure: 3p Catechetical center: 2pts) Monuments (monument. H.M.: 1p other monuments: 0,1pt)	Dams and other technical buildings (dam: 4pts whirlpool: 3pts mill: 2pts Brandy still: 1pt. Other technical buildings (water wheel, loom, etc: 0,1pt)	Of interest: international: 4pts național: 3pts regional: 2pts local: 1pt)

Source: adapted from Răcășan, 2018

Following the establishment of the rating system for the study area, the anthropogenic tourism potential score has been calculated for each ATU of the mountainous and marginal contact area of Mureş County, taking into account the five categories of anthropogenic tourist attractions subject to evaluation. Thus, at the top of the pyramid are human activities with a tourist function with an average of 10p, followed by religious buildings which have been assigned an average score of 8p. At the opposite pole, the lowest score has been obtained by economic buildings with a tourist function which have obtained an average of 1.55p.

Table 4. Evaluation of the anthropogenic tourism potential of the study area

Anthropic tourism potential	Commune/ town	Historical building and landmarks	Religious buildings	Cultural building and landmarks	Economic buildings with tourism function	Human activities with a tourist function	Total
Very high (over 80 pts)	Reghin	44pts.	21,9pts.	16,6pts.	0,3pts.	60p.	142,8p.
High (50-79,9 pts)	Brâncoveneşti	14pts.	15,6pts.	10,6pts.	-	11pts.	51,2pts.
	Ibăneşti	7pts.	12,8pts.	9,1pts.	6,1pts.	24pts.	59pts.
Medium (20-49,9 pts)	Deda	2pts.	8,6pts.	12,2pts.	3,1pts.	12pts.	37,9pts.
	Vătava	4pts.	13,2pts.	3,3pts.	6pts.	10pts.	36,5pts.
	Beica De Jos	-	19,8pts.	11,4pts.	-	3pts.	33,2pts.
	Gurghiu	10pts.	9pts.	4,6pts.	2pts.	5pts.	30,6pts.
	Eremitu	11pts.	3,4pts.	7,2pts.	-	7pts.	28,6pts.
	Chiheru de Jos	1pts.	18,4pts.	3,3pts.	-	5pts.	27,7pts.
Low (15-19,9 pts)	Sovata	4pts.	8,9pts.	0,9pts.	-	11pts.	25,8pts.
	Hodac	-	0,5pts.	-	6pts.	12pts.	18,5pts.
	Ruşii-Munţi	11pts.	0,4pts.	3,3pts.	-	2pts.	16,7pts.
	Răstoliţa	-	9,3pts.	0,2pts.	4pts.	3pts.	16,5pts.
	Suseni	5pts.	0,3pts.	3,1pts.	-	3pts.	11,4pts.
Very low (under 15 pts)	Lunca Bradului	-	4,2pts.	3pts.	-	4pts.	11,2pts.
	Stânceni	-	4,2pts.	0,2pts.	-	2pts.	6,4pts.
	Solovăstru	-	0,4pts.	3,3pts.	-	2pts.	5,7pts.
	Ideciu De Jos	2pts.	0,6pts.	0,2pts.	-	2pts.	4,8pts.
	Aluniş	2pts.	0,6pts.	0,1 pts.	2pts.	-	4,7pts.
Average of the study area		6,16pts.	8pts.	4,87pts.	1,55pts.	10pts.	29,96pts.

The assessment of the anthropogenic tourism potential in the mountainous and marginal contact area of Mureş County shows that Reghin Municipality has the highest score (142.8p), due to its numerous tourist attractions, while the communes of Ideciu de Jos and Aluniş have a very low potential. Most of the analyzed ATUs fall at an average level and the overall average is 29.6p. These results indicate the possibility of developing tourist offers based on existing anthropic attractions.

4.4. Tourism material base

Any territory that is on the list of those "of tourist interest" must have, in addition to natural or anthropogenic resources, also "*goods and means that facilitate their valorization and tourist exploitation*" (Cocean and Dezsi, 2009, p. 162). These goods and means form the technical and material base, defined as the totality of accommodation, spa and leisure facilities, food, transport and communications capable of satisfying tourist demand (Ciangă, 2007).

4.4.1. Accommodation infrastructure

In the study area, 15 categories of tourist reception structures with accommodation functions have been identified, according to the INS and MEDAT databases, but there are differences between the two sources. The INS includes student camps and bungalows, which are missing from the MEDAT database, while MEDAT mentions apartments and rooms for rent as two distinct categories, these not being present in the INS list. Also, tourist cottages in the INS database are equivalent to camping cottages in the MEDAT database, being considered a single type of structure in the analysis.

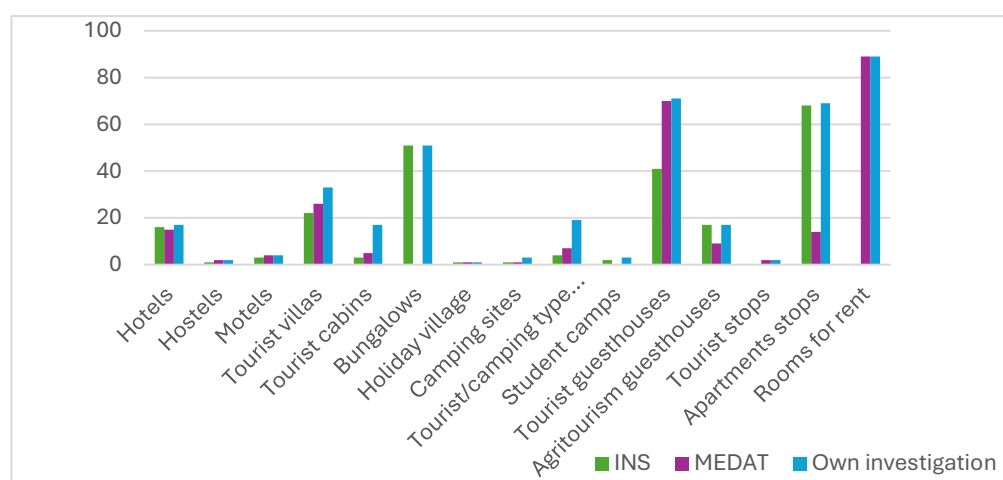


Figure 6. Number of tourist reception structures with accommodation functions in the study area in 2024

Source: author data processing according to INS and MEDAT

The analysis of tourist reception structures in Mureș County for 2024 highlights significant differences between the official sources consulted. INS reports 238 structures and 5401 accommodation places, while MEDAT indicates 257 structures and 6111 places. Following our own investigations, 49 additional structures within 12 ATUs and 794 accommodation places have been identified in addition to the MEDAT data. Also, discrepancies were found in the number of places reported for certain tourist units, such as Cabana Șestina

Sălard (22 places according to MEDAT, 51 according to the investigation) or Valea Regilor Happy Camp (6 places MEDAT, 12 places in reality).

Table 5. Number of tourist reception structures with accommodation functions and their associated accommodation places

Category	Information source	Study area
Tourist reception structures with accommodation functions	MEDAT	257
	INS	238
	Own investigation	306
Accommodation places	MEDAT	6111
	INS	5401
	Own investigation	6898

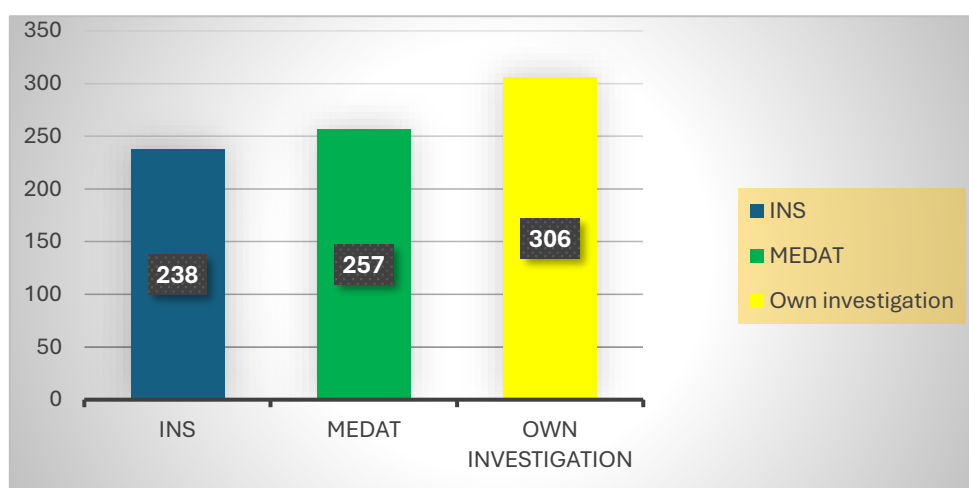


Figure 7. Number of tourist reception structures with accommodation functions in 2024 - triple perspective

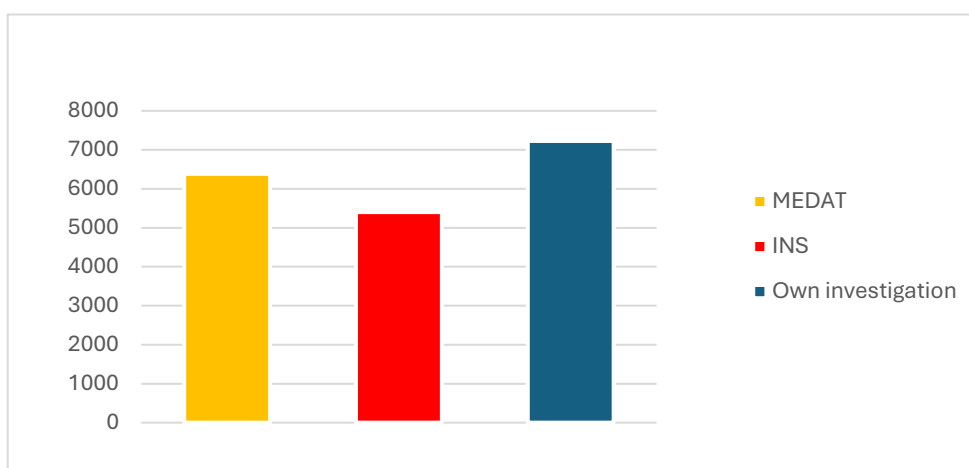


Figure 8. Number of accommodation places in tourist reception structures with accommodation functions in 2024 - triple perspective

The evolution of the accommodation infrastructure in the mountain and contact areas of Mureş County between 1994 and 2024 was marked by fluctuations determined by political, economic and social factors. After a decrease between 2000 and 2002 (from 78 to 57 structures), there was an increase until 2008 (62 structures), followed by a significant decline in 2009 (38 structures), caused by the economic crisis. Between 2009 and 2024, there was an accelerated growth, reaching 230 structures in 2024, which represents 50.54% of the total structures in the county (455). This period marked a significant development of the tourism sector in the region.

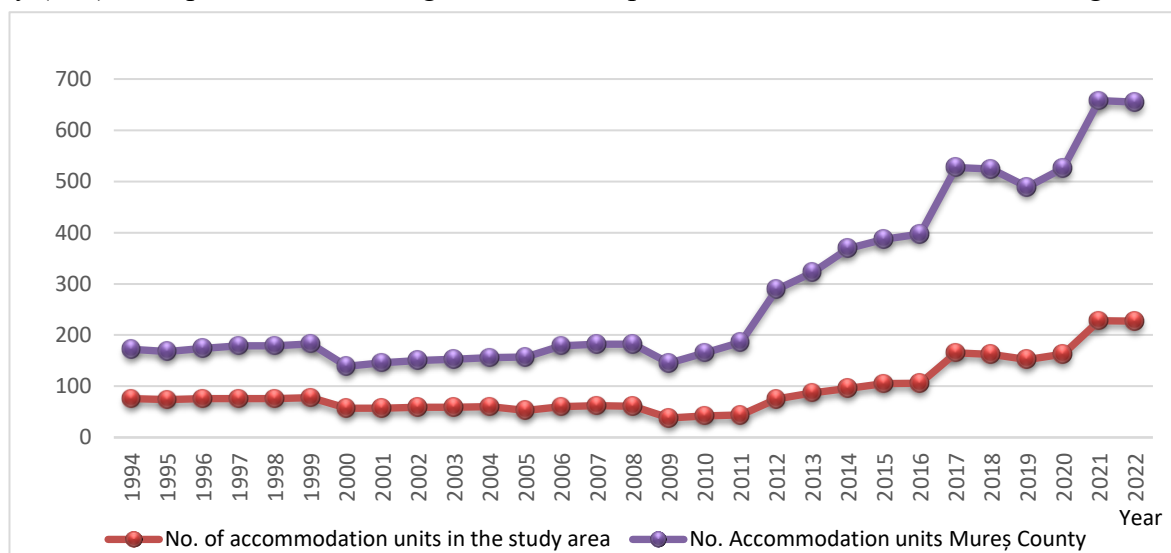


Figure 9. Evolution of the number of tourist reception structures with accommodation functions in the period 1994 – 2024

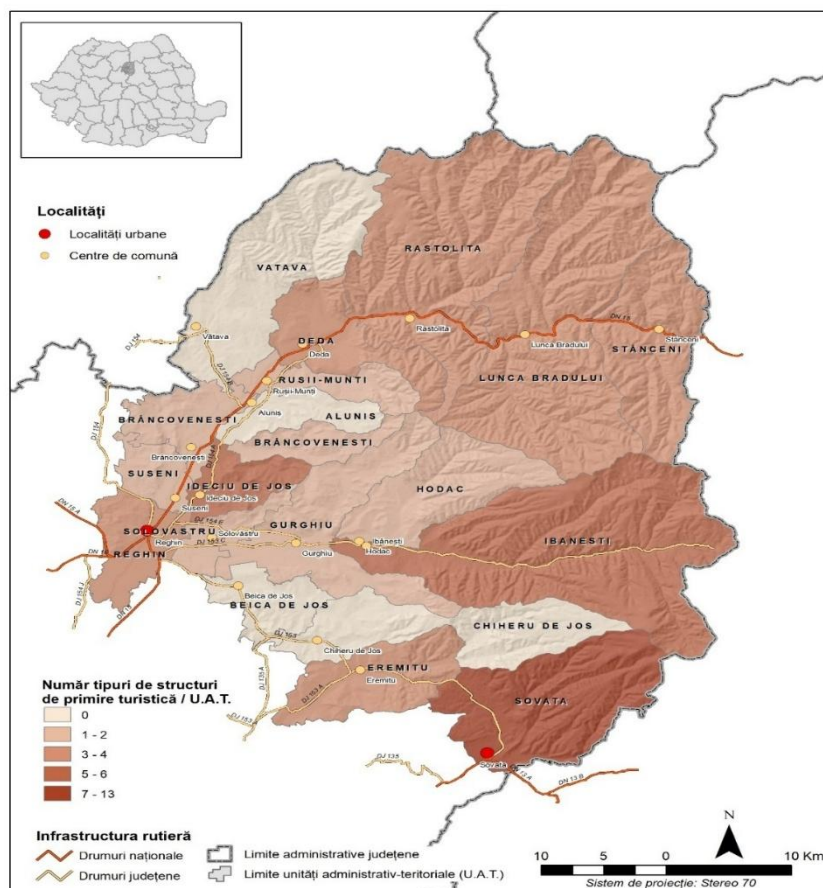


Figure 10. Distribution of the number of tourist reception structures with accommodation functions at the ATU level in 2024

In 2024, the mountain and contact area of Mureș County had approximately 50% of the accommodation structures and 42% of the total capacity of accommodation places at the county level. However, not all ATUs in the area have such structures, with significant differences between localities. The Sovata resort, the main tourist pole of the county, contributes significantly to these high percentages.

According to the INS, the ATUs with a high and very high tourist accommodation infrastructure are Deda, Reghin and Sovata, while MEDAT adds Eremitu and Ibănești, and its own investigations also include Răstolița and Stânceni. On the other hand, there are seven ATUs without any accommodation structure, according to the INS (including Aluniș, Beica de Jos and Vătava), and according to MEDAT and our own investigations, only three.

In terms of accommodation capacity, Sovata dominates with over 4000 places, followed by ATUs with a high capacity such as Eremitu, Ibănești, Lunca Bradului and Reghin (INS), to which MEDAT adds Deda. Our own investigations additionally include Rușii-Munți and Stânceni. At the opposite pole, the communes without accommodation places are Beica de Jos,

Chiheru de Jos and Vătava, and according to other sources, also Aluniș, Gurghiu, Hodac and Solovăstru.

Table 6. Size of accommodation infrastructure at the level of the studied ATUs (number of tourist reception structures with accommodation functions)

Size of accommodation infrastructure	National Institute of Statistics	MEDAT	Own investigation
Non-existent (0 units)	Aluniș, Beica de Jos, Chiheru de Jos, Gurghiu, Hodac, Solovăstru, Vătava	Beica de Jos, Chiheru de Jos, Vătava	Beica de Jos, Chiheru de Jos, Vătava
Low (1-3 structures)	Brâncovenești } Rușii Munți } 1 structure Suseni } Ideciu de Jos- 2 structures Răstolița- 3 structures	Aluniș } Gurghiu } 1 structure Hodac } Rușii-Munți } Suseni } Brâncovenești } Solovăstru } 2 structures	Gurghiu – 3 structures Hodac- 1 structure Rușii-Munți -3 structures Suseni- 1 structure Brâncovenești- 2 structures Solovăstru- 2 structures
Medium (4-7 structures)	Eremitu - 7 structures Ibănești - 7 structures Lunca Bradului - 4 structures Stânceni- 5 structures	Ideciu de Jos- 4 structures Lunca Bradului- 5 structures Răstolița - 4 structures Stânceni- 5 structures	Ideciu de Jos- 6 structures Lunca Bradului- 9 structures
High (8-20 structures)	Deda- 9 structures Reghin- 9 structures	Deda- 14 structures Eremitu – 12 structures Ibănești- 11 structures Reghin -14 structures	Deda - 18 structures Eremitu - 18 structures Ibănești- 21 structures Răstolița- 11 structures Reghin- 17 structures Stânceni- 11 structures
Very high (over 20 de structures)	Sovata- 181 structures	Sovata- 174 structures	Sovata- 181 units
TOTAL	238	257	304

Table 7. Accommodation capacity at the level of the studied ATUs (number of places in tourist reception structures with accommodation functions)

Accommodation capacity	National Institute of Statistics	MEDAT	Own investigation
Non-existent (0 places)	Aluniș, Beica de Jos, Chiheru de Jos, Gurghiu, Hodac, Solovăstru, Vătava	Beica de Jos, Chiheru de Jos, Vătava	Beica de Jos, Chiheru de Jos, Vătava
Low (8-40 places)	Brâncovenești- 8 places Ideciu de Jos-34 places Suseni- 20 places	Aluniș- 2 places Brâncovenești - 8 places Gurghiu- 10 places Hodac- 10 places Suseni- 24 places Solovăstru - 28 places	Aluniș- 22 places Brâncovenești- 8 places Hodac- 10 places Suseni- 24 places Solovăstru- 28 places
Medium (41-100 places)	Deda- 98 places Răstolița- 50 places Rușii- Munți- 82 places Stânceni- 60 places	Ideciu de Jos – 66 places Răstolița- 58 places Rușii Munți- 82 places Stânceni- 69 places	Gurghiu- 62 places Răstolița- 93 places

High (101-370 places)	Eremitu- 137 places Ibănești- 111 places Lunca Bradului -175 places Reghin – 243 places	Deda- 122 places Eremitu – 278 places Ibănești- 176 places Lunca Bradului- 161 places Reghin -327 places	Deda- 191 places Ibănești- 348 places Ideciu de Jos-276 places Lunca Bradului-232 places Reghin- 351 places Rușii Munți- 107 places Stânceni- 148 places
Very high (over 370 de places)	Sovata- 4383 places	Sovata- 4851 places	Eremitu- 382 places Sovata- 4945places
TOTAL	5401	6111	7227

4.4.2. Public catering infrastructure

In 2024, according to data provided by MEDAT, within the mountainous and marginal contact area of Mureș County, there are a number of 107 tourist reception structures with public catering functions, representing 40% of the total structures existing on the territory of the entire county at the same year level.

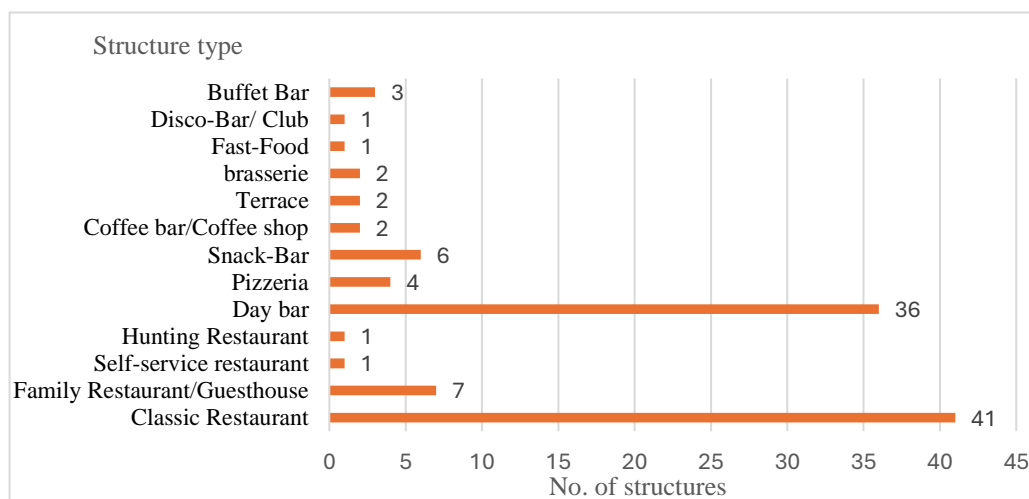


Figure 11. Number of types of tourist reception structures with public catering functions in 2024
Data source: MEDAT

Most tourist reception structures with public catering functions in the study area, approximately 79.4%, are concentrated in the city of Sovata, also representing approximately 38% of the total existing structures in Mureș County (fig. 12). These data highlight the high tourist attractiveness of the city of Sovata in terms of public catering infrastructure, due to the presence of the spa resort. However, from a broader perspective, for the mountainous and marginal contact area of Mureș County, the fact that most tourist reception structures with public catering functions are concentrated in a single locality is not an advantage. This situation indicates an insufficient development of this type of infrastructure in the rest of the localities in the study area.

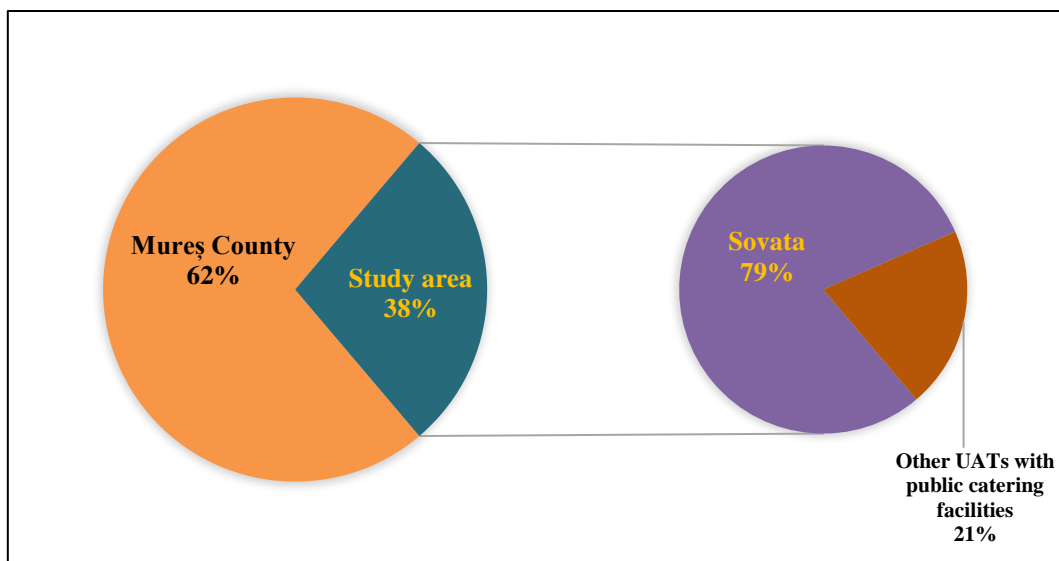


Figure 12. Share of tourist accommodation structures with public catering functions in the study area within the county

Data source: MEDAT

Because a single source of information is not enough, in order to obtain the most realistic picture possible of the number of tourist reception structures with public catering functions, we also resorted to our own investigation. This revealed that the total number of tourist reception structures with public catering functions existing in 2024 in the mountainous and marginal contact area of Mureș county is 161 (fig. 13). Most structures were identified in the municipality of Reghin (42), to which are added the localities: Bistra Mureș (1), Deda (2), Stânceni (2), Ibănești (1), Vălenii de Mureș (1), Câmpu Cetății (1), Ibănești Pădure (1), Morăreni (1), Brâncoveniști (1) and Răstolița (1).

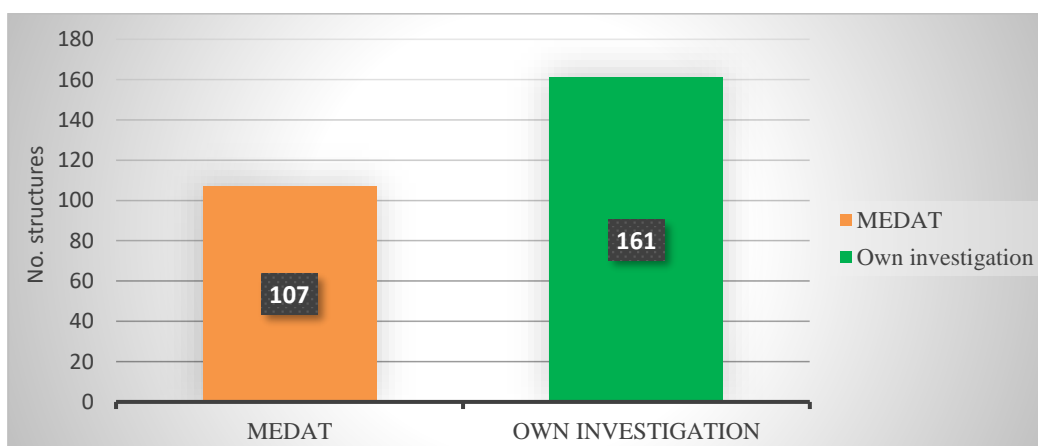


Figure 13. Number of tourist reception structures with public catering functions in 2024 - double perspective

Data source: MEDAT

The mountainous and contact area of Mureș County has a low level of public catering infrastructure, with 52% of ATUs lacking such structures according to MEDAT data. Six ATUs

have 1-2 structures, a single ATU has 6 structures (medium level), and Reghin (10 structures) and Sovata (85 structures) fall into the high and very high level.

Compared to the official data, field investigations identified an additional 51 public catering establishments, including classic and traditional restaurants (20), pizzerias (8), bistros (6), cafés (4), fast-food restaurants (5), bars (4), pubs (1) and patisseries/confectioneries (3). Most additional establishments were identified in Reghin, Deda and Brâncovenești, thus completing the list of ATUs in the MEDAT database. In conclusion, although the area has a low spread of public catering structures, their capacity is at an average level.

Table 8. Size of public catering infrastructure at the level of the studied communes

The size of the public catering infrastructure	Ministry of Economy, Digitalization, Entrepreneurship and Tourism	Own investigation
Non-existent (0 structures)	Aluniș, Beica de Jos, Brâncovenești, Chiheru de Jos, Deda, Gurghiu, Hodac, Stânceni, Suseni, Vătava	Aluniș, Beica de Jos, Chiheru de Jos, Gurghiu,
Low (1-2 structures)	Ibănești - <i>2 structures</i> Ideciu de Jos - <i>1 structure</i> Lunca Bradului - <i>1 structure</i> Răstolița - <i>1 structure</i> Rușii-Munți - <i>1 structure</i> Solovăstru - <i>1 structure</i>	Brâncovenești - <i>2 structures</i> Ideciu de Jos - <i>2 structures</i> Lunca Bradului - <i>2 structures</i> Răstolița - <i>2 structures</i> Solovăstru - <i>2 structures</i> Stânceni - <i>2 structures</i>
Medium (3-7 structures)	Eremitu - <i>6 structures</i>	Deda - <i>3 structures</i> Eremitu - <i>7 structures</i> Ibănești - <i>4 structures</i> Rușii-Munți - <i>3 structures</i>
High (8-15 structures)	Reghin - <i>10 structures</i>	
Very High (over 15 structures)	Sovata - <i>84 structures</i>	Reghin - <i>42 structures</i> Sovata - <i>84 structures</i>
TOTAL	107 tourist reception structures with public catering functions	155 tourist reception structures with public catering functions

4.4.3. Transport infrastructure

The mountainous and marginal contact area of Mureș County has a well-developed road network, dominated by national roads (DN15, DN15A, DN16, DN13A, DN13D) that provide the connection with neighboring counties, such as Cluj, Bistrița-Năsăud, Harghita and Covasna. The main European road, E578, crosses the area, and county roads (8 in number) and communal roads (18 in number) connect the towns and villages, facilitating access to tourist attractions. The modernized infrastructure, with 95% of roads paved, supports the development of tourism and the increase in the flow of visitors.

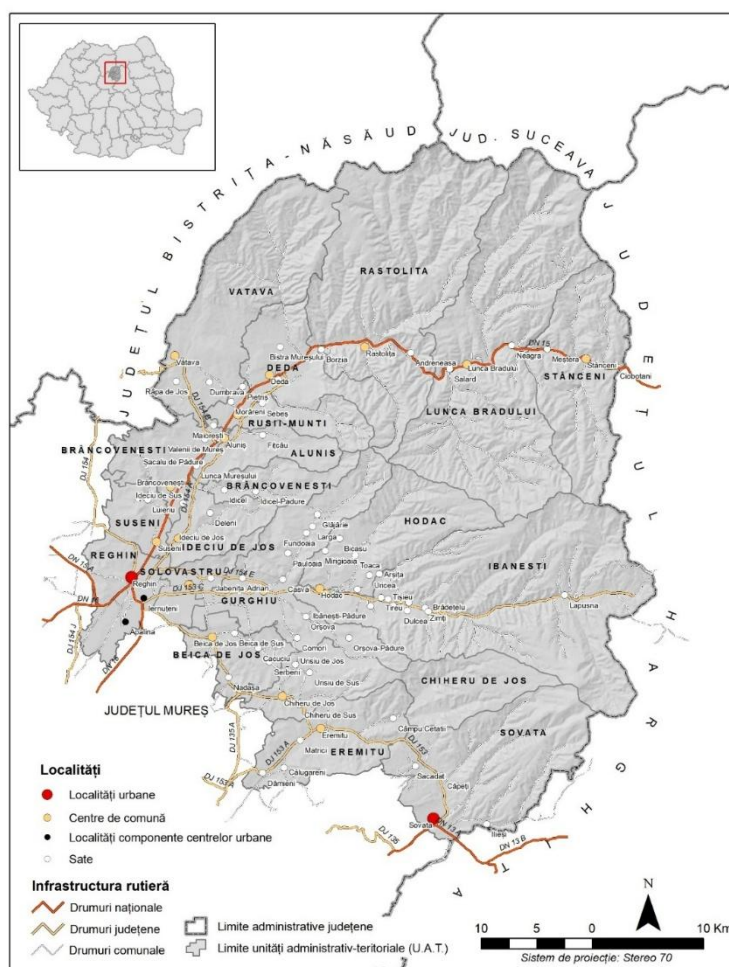


Figure 14. Road infrastructure of the study area

Rail transport contributes significantly to the accessibility of the region, supported by the CFR 400 Main Line, which connects Brașov to Satu Mare through localities such as Toplița, Stânceni, Lunca Bradului, Deda and Reghin. Also, the 405 Main Line connects Deda, Reghin and Târgu Mureș, providing transport for people and goods. A special attraction is the narrow railway between Câmpul Cetății and Sovata, where Mocănița, reintroduced in 2011, attracts approximately 20,000 tourists annually on a 14 km route, offering a picturesque experience.

4.4.5. Sports and leisure infrastructure

This component of the tourist infrastructure also has the role of increasing the attractiveness of a tourist area and at the same time contributing to the diversity of tourist activities in a certain area/zone/tourist resort.

In the study area, there is only one spa resort of national interest (Sovata), two ski slopes (Sovata) and two recreational parks (Adrenalin Plus Adventure Park Sovata and Fun Arm Orșova).

4.5. Elements of information and tourism promotion

The tourist act itself is not complete and carried out "by the book" if it does not have elements specific to tourist information and promotion. No matter how authentic, original, varied, etc. the tourist offer may be, it cannot reach a high level and a long time of "survival" if it does not also have appropriate promotion. In this regard, tourism service providers have increasingly begun to emphasize these aspects related to tourism information and promotion services, in some cases allocating a considerable budget to benefit from quality services in this regard.

Tourism service providers as well as institutions responsible for tourism activity in the mountainous and marginal contact areas of Mureș County are trying to keep up with these elements of the tourist act.

4.5.1. Estimation of the potential of the tourist material base

The rating system for the tourist material base

The accommodation infrastructure in the study area was assessed based on a scoring system, with urban structures (hotels, hostels, motels) receiving the most points (5), followed by tourist and agrotourism guesthouses (4 points).

Accommodation in tourist villas and holiday villages received 3 points, while cabins and rooms for rent received only 2 points, due to their frequency in the area. Campsites and camps have been rated 1 point, having lower comfort.

The evaluation of public catering structures was carried out according to authenticity, with national or hunting restaurants being the most appreciated (5 points), followed by classic restaurants and guesthouses (4 points). The transport infrastructure was evaluated with 5 points for European roads and 1 point for railways, and in the sports and leisure field, resorts received 10 points, followed by ski slopes (5 points) and theme parks (3 points).

Table 9. Scores given to the structures of the tourist material base

Score awarded	Accommodation infrastructure	Public catering infrastructure	Transport infrastructure	Sports and leisure infrastructure
	hotel, hostel, motel: 5pts agrotourism guesthouse, tourist guesthouse: 4pts tourist villa, holiday village: 3pts cottage, apartments for rent, rooms for rent: 2pts camping, camping cottages, camp, tourist stop: 1pt	national restaurant, hunting restaurant: 5pts guesthouse restaurant, self-service restaurant, classic restaurant: 4pts bistro/brasserie, terrace, pizzeria: 3pts day bar, buffet bar, cafe- bar/cafeteria: 2pts fast - food, snack - bar, disco - bar: 1pt	European road: 5pts national road: 4pts county road: 3pts municipal road: 2pts railway: 1pt	Resort: 10pts Ski slope: 5pts Theme park: 3pts

Source: adapted from Răcășan, 2018

The assessment of the tourist material base in the mountainous and marginal contact area of Mureș County has shown an average score of 67.57 points, indicating a relatively high level, largely due to the city of Sovata and its spa resort (779 points). The highest score has been obtained by the accommodation infrastructure (57.86%), followed by public catering (25.54%), transport (16.63%) and sports and leisure infrastructure (1.93%).

In terms of tourism potential, Sovata has stood out with a very high grade, followed by Reghin and Eremitu, which have obtained over 50 points, and six other localities (Deda, Lunca Bradului, Ideciu de Jos, Ibănești, Răstolița, Stânceni) ranked at an average level (over 25 points). Five communes (Brâncovenești, Gurghiu, Solovăstru, Suseni, Rușii-Munți) have recorded low scores (15-24 points), and another five (Vătava, Beica de Jos, Chiher, Hodac and Aluniș) have obtained the lowest scores, below 10 points.

Table 10. Assessment of the potential of the tourist material base of the study area

The degree of potential of the tourist material base	Administrative-territorial unit	Accommodation infrastructure	Public catering infrastructure	Transport infrastructure	Sports and leisure infrastructure	Total
Very high (over 200 pts.)	Sovata	514pts	236pts	13pts	16pts	779pts
High (between 51-112 pts)	Reghin	46pts	36pts	30pts	-	112pts
	Eremitu	41pts	29pts	8pts	-	78pts
Medium (between 25-50 pts)	Deda	28pts	-	12pts	-	40pts
	Lunca Bradului	14pts	4pts	10pts	3pts	31pts
	Idecu de Jos	13pts	4pts	8pts	-	25pts
	Ibănești	28pts	7pts	3pts	-	38pts
	Răstolița	12pts	4pts	12pts	-	28pts
	Stânceni	16pts	-	12pts	-	28pts
	Brâncovenești	6pts	-	17pts	-	23pts

Low (between 15- 24 pts)	Ruşii-Munţi	5pts	4pts	8pts	-	17pts
	Gurghiu	4pts	-	9pts	6pts	19pts
	Solovăstru	8pts	4pts	8pts	-	20pts
	Suseni	4pts	-	11pts	-	15pts
Very low (below 15pts)	Aluniş	2pts	-	6pts	-	8pts
	Vătava	-	-	6pts	-	6pts
	Beica de Jos	-	-	7pts	-	7pts
	Chiheru de Jos	-	-	5pts	-	5pts
	Hodac	2pts	-	3pts	-	5pts
Study area average		39,1 pts	17,26 pts	9,89pts	1,31 pts	67,57 pts

4.6. Tourist circulation in the mountainous and marginal contact area of Mureş County

Main indicators of tourist circulation: arrivals and overnight stays

The tourist circulation of the study area has been analyzed using statistical and mathematical methods, applied to the database held by the INS. Thus, a first indicator analyzed was that of the number of tourist arrivals, resulting in a number of 146,029 tourist arrivals in 2023, 103,137 more than in 2021, which shows us a positive evolution of this indicator. The second indicator analyzed was the number of tourist overnight stays, resulting in a value of 431,731 in 2023, with 158,159 more overnight stays than in 2001, most of which were recorded in hotels related to the Sovata resort. In this case too, a positive evolution of this tourist indicator can be observed.

4.6.1. Precise utilization index of operating tourist accommodation capacity

Regarding the precise utilization index of the existing accommodation capacity in operation at the level of each ATU of the mountainous and marginal contact area of Mureş County (fig. 182), it can be observed that at the level of 2023, the highest values are recorded in the city of Sovata, due to the existence of the spa resort. At the opposite pole, with low values are municipalities such as Aluniş, Beica De Jos, Chiheru de Jos, Vătava where the value of the precise utilization index is 0.

4.6.2. Average length of stay

Following the analysis performed, Mureş County has an average length of stay of 2.3 days, while the mountainous and marginal contact area of Mureş County has obtained an average length of stay of 3.9 days. Within the study area, the largest contribution to this value of the average length of stay during the analyzed period was made by the Sovata resort due to

its spa function, which determines a high number of arrivals and overnight stays in hotels that benefit from treatment courses and more.

Both at the level of Mureș County and the study area, the average length of stay reveals a downward evolution over the 23 years analyzed (fig. 15), the largest decrease being recorded at the level of the study area (from 6.3 days in 2001 to 2.9 days in 2023).

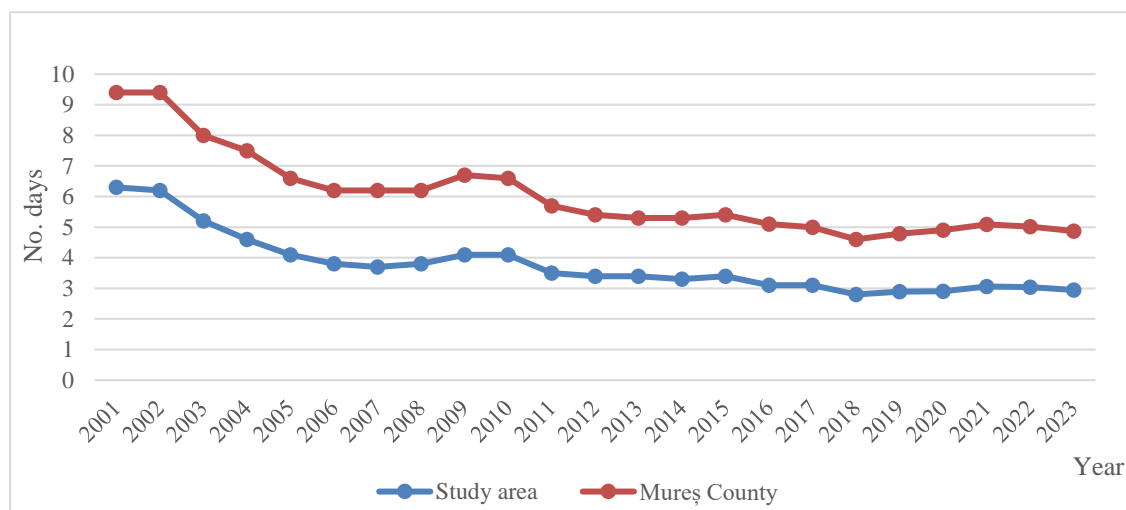


Figure 15. Evolution of the average length of stay in the period 2001 – 2023
Data source: INS

4.6.3. Tourism seasonality

The analysis of the evolution of tourist seasonality in the mountainous and marginal contact area of Mureș County, based on INS data from January 2015 to November 2024, revealed that the peak period for arrivals and overnight stays is recorded between May and August, with a maximum peak in August.

The evolution of arrivals was generally upward between 2015 and 2024, except for 2020, when the number of arrivals decreased significantly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The maximum was reached in August 2024, with 24,484 arrivals, of which 90.7% were registered in the town of Sovata, which underlines the importance of this town for tourism in the region. In 2024, the most overnight stays were registered in July (51,030).

4.7. Evaluation and valorization of the tourist offer of the study area

Estimating the value of the attractive potential of the general tourist offer

The evaluation of the tourist attraction potential of the mountainous and marginal contact area of Mureș County has analyzed three main indicators: natural heritage, anthropogenic heritage and the tourist material base. The scores obtained have been used to establish five levels of tourism potential: very high for Sovata (over 300 points), high for

Reghin, Ibănești and Eremitu (130-300 points), medium for most ATUs, low for Chiheru de Jos, Rușii-Munți, Beica de Jos and Hodac (50-79.9 points), and very low for the last four communes (below 50 points). The average score was 133.31 points, highlighting a high overall level, with a significant contribution of the tourism material base (50.69%).

Table 11. Evaluation of the general tourism potential of the study area

Degree of general tourism potential	Territorial administrative unit	Natural tourist heritage	Anthropogenic tourist heritage	Tourist material base	General tourist offer
Very high (over 300 pts)	<i>Sovata</i>	66,1pts	25,8pts	779pts	870,9 pts
High (between 130-300 pts)	<i>Reghin</i>	24pts	142,8pts	112pts	278,8 pts
	<i>Ibănești</i>	48,2pts	59pts	38pts	145,2 pts
	<i>Eremitu</i>	25,3pts	28,6pts	78pts	131,9 pts
	<i>Deda</i>	51pts	37,9pts	40pts	128,9 pts
Medium (between 80-129.9 pts)	<i>Răstolița</i>	66,8pts	16,5pts	28pts	111,3 pts
	<i>Lunca Bradului</i>	63,6pts	11,2pts	31pts	105,8 pts
	<i>Brâncovenești</i>	29,6pts	51,2pts	23pts	103,8 pts
	<i>Vătava</i>	50,2pts	36,5pts	6pts	92,7 pts
	<i>Stânceni</i>	48,8pts	6,4pts	28pts	83,2 pts
	<i>Gurghiu</i>	30,6pts	30,6pts	19pts	80,2 pts
Low (between 50-79.9 pts)	<i>Chiheru de Jos</i>	32pts	27,7pts	5pts	64,7 pts
	<i>Rușii-Munți</i>	27,9pts	16,7pts	17pts	61,6 pts
	<i>Beica de Jos</i>	17pts	33,2pts	7pts	57,2 pts
	<i>Hodac</i>	29,6pts	18,5pts	5pts	53,1 pts
	<i>Ideciu de Jos</i>	19,5pts	4,8pts	25pts	49,3 pts
	<i>Solovăstru</i>	17,6pts	5,7pts	20pts	43,3 pts
Very low (below 50 pts)	<i>Suseni</i>	15pts	11,4pts	15pts	41,4 pts
	<i>Aluniș</i>	17pts	4,7pts	8pts	29,7 pts
TOTAL		613,1 pts	569,2 pts	1284 pts	2533 pts
Study area average		32,27pts	29,96p.	67,58p.	133,31p.

4.8. Types and forms of tourism

The study area offers a wide range of tourism forms, including curative/spa tourism, with resorts such as Sovata, Ideciu de Jos and Jăbenița, which benefit from mineral waters and mofetta. Hiking tourism is supported by mountain landscapes and famous routes such as VIA TRANSILVANICA. Other types include cultural and religious tourism, with important

historical monuments and churches in towns such as Reghin and Brâncovenești and event tourism which attracts tourists through festivals such as the Mureș Valley Festival. The area is also conducive to adventure tourism (mountain biking, rafting), ecotourism and hunting tourism, especially in Valea Gurghiului, and also the gastronomic tourism has considerable potential.

4.9. Perception of tourism in the mountainous and marginal contact areas of Mureș County

The paper analyzes the tourism phenomenon in the mountainous and marginal areas of Mureș County, through field investigations aimed at identifying and evaluating the tourism potential of the region. In addition to these studies, a survey has been conducted on the perceptions of local authorities and locals about tourism, using two types of questionnaires: one for authorities and one for locals. The questionnaires included short answer, multiple choice and dual response questions, to allow for a full expression of perceptions and to compare the opinions of the two groups.

4.9.1. Perception of local authorities on the tourism offer

The analysis of the responses of local authorities highlighted that many town halls do not have a development strategy or, if one exists, it does not include projects for the development of tourism in the mountainous and marginal areas of Mureș County. Also, some mayors do not sufficiently know the tourism potential of the localities they administer, underestimating or overestimating it, and the lack of specialized tourism departments in city halls prevents its knowledge and effective promotion.

4.9.2. Local people's perception of tourism activity

The analysis of the responses to the questionnaire addressed to locals in the mountainous and marginal areas of Mureș County revealed both negative and positive aspects. On the one hand, there is insufficient knowledge of the local tourism potential, a small number of people specialized in tourism and a limited involvement of residents in tourism activities, which affects economic development. On the other hand, locals are very open to the possibilities of working in tourism and recognize the need for greater involvement in promoting the area, both on their part and on the part of local authorities. These findings will be reflected in the development strategies proposed below.

4.10. Opportunities and Development Strategies. SWOT Analysis

4.10.1. Economic Development Opportunities

In the last two decades, the importance of tourism in the economic development of communities has increased at the global and European level, which has led to the development of strategies and projects aimed at supporting this sector. Various initiatives, such as the CARPATHIAN CONVENTION, EDEN and the European sustainable tourism development programmes, have been implemented to support local communities. In Romania, similar projects and strategies are underway, including strategies for spa tourism and ecotourism. Other documents of importance for the development of tourism in the mountainous and marginal areas of Mureş County include the National Strategy for Sustainable Development of Romania and various European programs, such as the PNDR and the PNS. These strategies are essential for the management and financing of tourism activities.

4.10.2. SWOT Analysis

The SWOT analysis of tourism in the mountainous and marginal contact area of Mureş County allows the identification of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, contributing to the development of effective strategies. This is a nuanced one, given that factors considered advantages can become vulnerabilities and vice versa. The analysis was based on direct observations and opinions of the authorities and the local community, providing an objective approach to the tourism offer.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Important and diversified tourist potential, supported by natural and anthropogenic resources attractive for multiple forms of tourism.• High tourist potential throughout the year due to the natural mountain and cultural heritage.• High hunting and fishing resources, favoring hunting tourism and sport fishing.• Development of ecotourism due to protected natural areas and environmental conservation activities.• Multicultural tourist heritage that supports cultural tourism in various forms.• Spa resort of international interest (Sovata Resort).• Tourist signaling and promotion elements (signs, information centers, promotional materials).• High potential for spa tourism throughout the year in Sovata Resort.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• insufficient exploitation of natural and anthropogenic tourist resources;• • insufficient promotion of protected natural areas with high tourist potential• • degraded cultural tourist heritage• • insufficient and poorly developed tourist infrastructure within some ATUs• • lack of training of human resources in tourism• • lack of local tourism development strategies• • lack of promotion of the tourist identity of the study area at national and international level• • reduced access to European funds intended for tourism development• • existence of a large number of tourist reception structures with accommodation and public catering functions that are not officially registered

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversity of accommodation structures (cottages, villas, hotels, camps). • High potential for hiking, rural, cycling, camping, recreation and ecotourism in most localities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • impossibility of retaining tourists in tourist reception structures for more than 2-3 days; • lack of a brand image both at the level of each ATU and at the level of the entire researched area • poor tourist infrastructure in the mountain area (lack of marked mountain trails);
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting tourism at national and international level. • Accessing European funds for infrastructure and tourism activities. • Capitalizing on traditional products in fairs and events. • Implementing the concept of "recreational tourist villages". • Organizing sports activities (horseback riding, skiing, swimming, cycling). • Diversifying leisure and entertainment services. • Creating domestic and international partnerships in tourism. • Attracting investors in the tourism sector. • Collaborating with neighboring UATs to promote tourism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Isolation of some ATUs from the national tourist circuit. • Orientation of tourists towards better promoted areas. • Limited financial resources for infrastructure. • Destruction of protected areas. • Lack of a vision of sustainable development. • Poor receptivity to tourism financing. • Unecological tourism and indifference towards natural heritage. • Shortage of qualified personnel in tourism

4.10.3. Development strategy. Objectives and directions of action

The tourism development plans in the mountainous and marginal contact areas of Mureș County do not include sufficient measures to promote tourism, educate the community and capitalize on the ethnographic potential. These aspects are essential for local economic growth, which is why it is necessary to establish clear development directions, based on SWOT analysis and the opinions of authorities and locals.

The proposed strategy aims to strengthen the tourist image of the area through specific measures, supported by efficient collaboration between authorities and specialists. The main objectives are to improve infrastructure, diversify tourist attractions and involve the local community. A key element is the creation of a functional tourism model, based on cooperation between the private sector and local administration.

The implementation of the strategy is done in three stages: in the short term, by promoting tourism and organizing events; in the medium term, by capitalizing on cultural and natural resources; and in the long term, by developing rural tourism and increasing the attractiveness of cities in the area. These measures contribute to economic development and the strengthening of sustainable tourism in the region.

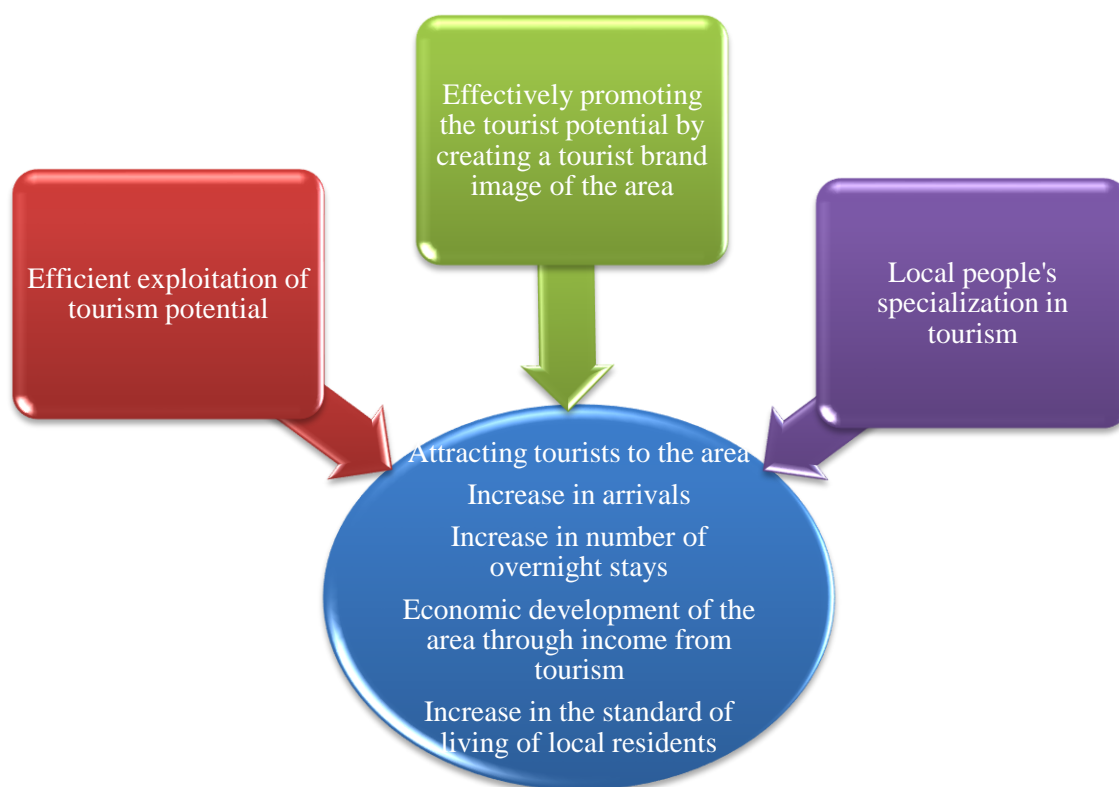


Figure 16. Forecast effects of tourism development in the study area

4.11. Aspects of tourist personalization

A brand image was created for the 19 ATUs in the mountainous and marginal contact area of Mureș County, with the aim of promoting the region and highlighting the tourism potential of each locality. Each brand reflects the defining features of the ATUs and can contribute to the development of various forms of tourism. The process of creating them was based on personal photographs from field research, but also on images from external sources. These materials become an effective promotional tool, strengthening the visual identity of the region and supporting the development of local tourism.



Model de logo și/sau imagine turistică propuse	Elemente definitorii
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - poartă tradițională maghiară - port popular maghiar / săsesc - casă tradițională săsească - porți împodobite Rusalii
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - produs local „Dulceața lu Răzvan” - Idicel - Castelul Kemény (Brincovenești) - sec. XIII - Tezaurul Uman Viu - Rafila Moldovan - lăleaua pestriță - specie protejată - Vălenii de Mureș

Figure 17. Brand image examples for two ATUs in the study area

4.11.1. Categories of personalized tourism products

In addition to the brand images created for each ATU, 6 personalized tourist products have been developed, adapted to 5 types of tourism: rural, winter, ecotourism, hunting and heritage. These products are designed in the form of circuits or mini-stays, with Târgu Mureș as the starting and finishing point for easy access to the study areas (Valea Nirajului, Valea Beicii, Valea Gurghiului, Valea Mureșului Superior).

Each tourist product includes the following common elements: name, slogan, type of product, proposer ("Marisia Travel" Travel Agency), number of days (3-5), period of operation, target group, promotion, proposed itinerary, operator by days and price calculation. Each circuit is detailed with real information, including tourist attractions, activities, accommodation and public catering facilities. Tourism products are designed so that they can be implemented in the presented form, being completely viable from an organizational and execution point of view.

CONCLUSIONS

This research on tourism in the mountainous and marginal contact area of Mureș County aimed to highlight the potential of the region for a sustainable and dynamic development of tourism, offering a viable economic alternative. The efficient use of tourism resources and adequate promotion will contribute to improving the living conditions of local communities.

Thanks to the arguments presented, the methodology adopted and the detailed analyses from various fields: tourism, physical and geographic, cultural, economic, political and administrative and geodemographic, the essential factors influencing the development of tourism have been identified. These include the primary, decisive, permissive and strategic tourist offer, which result from the observations, prospections, analyses and surveys carried out.

The natural and anthropogenic tourist potential of the study area represents an essential factor in the development of tourism, due to the diversity and complexity of its resources. Their detailed analysis highlights the city of Reghin as a major point of interest, due to the numerous historical monuments, religious buildings and varied tourist activities. However, the exact quantification of this potential remains difficult, being influenced by subjective factors, allowing each administrative and territorial unit to outline its own contribution to the regional tourist heritage.

The tourism infrastructure of the analyzed area is relatively sufficient for the optimal exploitation of the tourism potential, having well developed components in the accommodation, food, transport and leisure sectors. The detailed analysis highlighted that the localities of

Sovata, Reghin and Eremitu are distinguished by high scores in all infrastructure categories, confirming their role as poles of tourism development in the region.

Tourism can contribute significantly to the social and economic development of the study area, under the conditions of a dynamic tourism market and an efficient management system. The analysis of tourism demand and supply, correlated with the examination of tourist flows based on INS data and statistical methods, highlighted the impact of this sector on the region. Also, the survey conducted among local authorities and locals confirmed the role of tourism in the economic and social growth of Mureș County.

The established objectives have been successfully met, and the formulated hypotheses have been confirmed, thus achieving the general purpose of the research.

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