

THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE RURAL TOURISM SECTOR. IDEAS AND REFLECTIONS FROM THE PANDEMIC TO THE TOURISM OF TOMORROW

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Abstract

More than two years after the start of the coronavirus pandemic, tourism remains one of the most affected economic sectors. The present work aims to address, on the one hand, the impact of the health crisis on the behavior of consumers in the choice of tourist services, as well as to identify the methods by which these changes in behavior can positively influence the development of the rural tourism sector. Beyond momentary measures, we should look ahead to the future of tourism and identify ways to develop a more resilient and sustainable tourism offer. The experience gained during the health crisis will certainly help us anticipate new trends and consumption patterns. It should be mentioned that in order to benefit from this chance, integrated efforts must be made by all actors involved in the rural tourism sector, so that potential tourists can be guaranteed unforgettable experiences.

Key words: COVID-19, rural tourism, environmental impact, sustainability, development

The COVID-19 pandemic spurred worldwide travel restrictions and inflicted pain on the global tourism industry from 2020 to 2022. In 2020 international tourist arrivals fell by 74%, compared to the same period in 2019. This is the steepest decline in tourist numbers on record and is more than three times the decrease seen during the Global Financial Crisis in 2009.

However, the coronavirus pandemic has some bright spots. It has forced us to do things differently and learn how to adapt. Some of these good parts are that people are becoming more caring and more aware of what is important in life.

The new post-pandemic normal of tourism shows a radical change in travel behavior. On the one hand the plunging numbers in overseas guests and on the other side a simultaneous substantial growth in domestic visitor numbers and overnight stays (Forbes, 2020). Not only domestic travel is recovering faster than its international counterpart (UNWTO, 2020a), but people's preferences for long-haul destinations has also shifted towards smaller, nearby places (Patnait S., 2021; UNWTO, 2020b).

Despite fewer restrictions, paradoxical the phenomenon persists even in 2022. Several recent papers investigated the drivers of this radical change in travel behavior and identify a new type of tourist. In this context, I decided to focus on the concept of tourism novelty, which is often used to

describe new and different experiences (Lee T.-H., Crompton J., 1992), perceived by tourists as unfamiliar and contrasting with previous experiences.

In this context, I decided to focus on an older concept which is "tourism novelty", which is often used in the tourism literature to describe new and different experiences (Mitas O., Bastiaansen M., 2018). Perhaps many people discovered hidden spots in their own areas or maybe the homeland is perceived by many tourists as unfamiliar and now is the best moment to discover it.

Accordingly, the present study embraces a broader perspective, aimed at establishing the priorities of the actors involved in rural tourism activity.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The research methods used in the study were structured according to the completed stages, from the elaboration of the plan for performing the analysis to the formation of conclusions and the elaboration of the proposed solutions.

The theoretical support of the research focused on the study of important scientific papers in the field of tourism and management of tourist destinations, concerning the radical change in tourists' behavior and the perception of the entrepreneurs about the future of development of this sector.

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The research was conducted based on case studies in the representative touristic areas of Romania which can be considered for the moment as a model of good practice in rural development. Also, the research was conducted using the interview method for knowing the attitude and preferences of the interviewees, as well as the method of parallel analysis on the value of the proposed recommendations.

In order to obtain the most accurate picture of the impact of the pandemic on rural tourism, as a research method, we opted for a mix of methods. For the quantitative analysis, the systematization of the statistical data provided by the European Commission department for the indicator of tourist arrivals in tourist reception structures, for the period 2020 - 2022, was followed, to be able to make a relevant comparison. To increase the relevance of the analysis carried out about the specifics of rural tourism, qualitative analysis was used. This was based on the results of field research conducted between June and September 2020, using the direct interview technique. Three people from the public administration, entrepreneurs from the field of tourism and also members of some NGOs were interviewed.

It started from the premise that the tourism phenomenon is at a restart point where it is important to understand the institutional and private mechanisms that must be initiated at the local level for the resilience of an important economic sector.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Tourism has taken on different connotations over time until modern tourism: from the search for basic necessities to commercial reasons, and to the birth of modern tourism in the mid-19th century with the revolution of transport, where travel becomes a moment leisure and the places are starting to become real tourist destinations.

Although this sector has led to improvements in the most varied sectors, it hides negative impacts at a territorial, economic and environmental level. The arrival of Covid-19 has certainly upset the tourism sector, but it can represent a great opportunity to rethink all those problems that have arisen due to the overcrowding of some tourist destinations. Over-tourism, the degradation of the landscape, and the demystification of places are all issues that have been the most common aspects circulated in the circle of experts in recent years. Today we have the chance to rethink the tourist offer in such a way as

to avoid the mistakes of the past and to start thinking about tourism from a new perspective.

Sustainable tourism development strategies aim to mobilize and focus society's efforts to achieve sustainable development, providing an opportune framework for a better life. The study of the specialized literature shows how the degree of novelty tourists experience affects their emotions. As emotions are a major selling point of tourism experiences in tourism marketing the most common socio-demographic factors used in outlining the profile of tourists are age, family life cycle, gender, income and level of education (Foot D., 2004; Ma A. *et al*, 2018; Tomić S. *et al*, 2020; Kara N.S., Mkwizu K.H., 2020). These factors offer a true perspective.

In this context, the management of touristic activity is mandatory because it is a conscious process of leading and coordinating individual and group actions and activities, as well as mobilizing and allocating the resources of the entire community in order to achieve its economic objectives by a sustainable concept.

To talk about sustainable tourism, we need to take a step back and think about how this new way of doing tourism.

The current stage of tourism sector

According to the latest World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) Barometer, international tourist arrivals worldwide tripled between January and July 2022 (+172%) compared to the same period of the previous year. In other words, this does not mean anything other than that the sector managed to recover somewhere around 60% of the values recorded during 2019, while the forecasts predict that this trend will continue for the next two years. The steady recovery reflects the growing demand for international travel, as well as the lifting of travel restrictions in more and more countries (86 countries had no COVID-19 restrictions as of November 01, 2022). International tourism is consolidating its strong recovery despite ongoing challenges larger, not being able to overlook the impact of the conflict in Ukraine on this economic sector.

This state of affairs is very well captured in the following graph, which captures the International Tourist Arrivals between January and July 2021 compared to the values recorded throughout the year 2021 (*figure 1*).

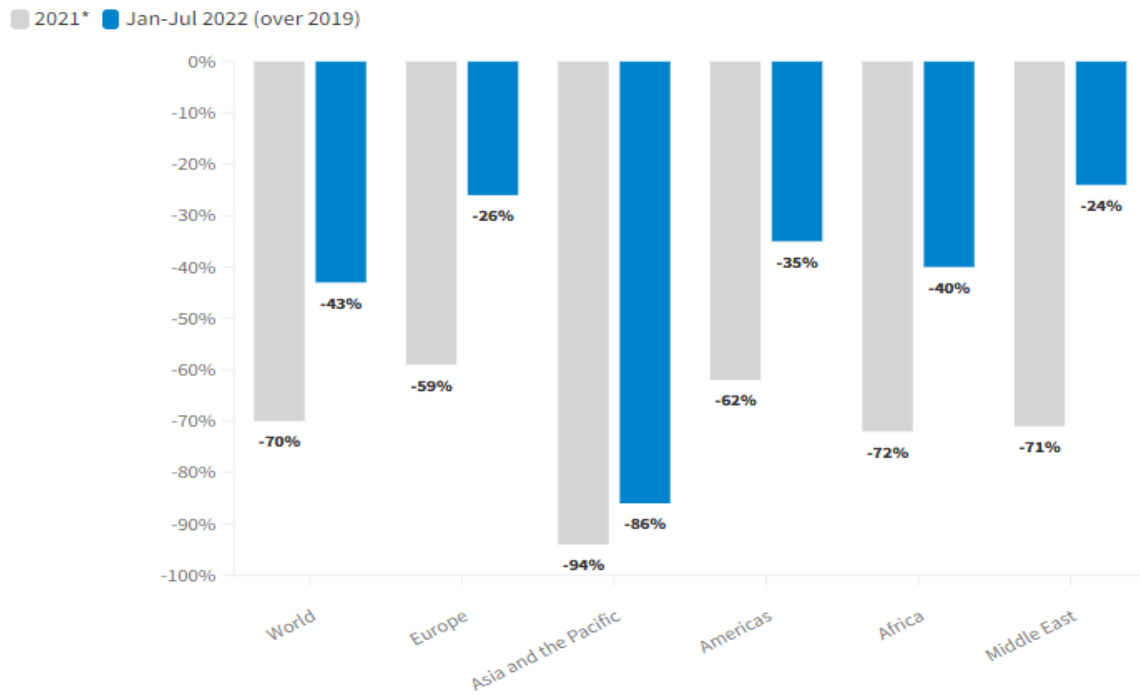


Figure 1 **International Tourist Arrivals**
Source: World Tourism Organization

International tourist arrivals (overnight visitors) tripled (+221%) in January-May 2022 compared to 2021, but remained 54% below the level of 2019. All this while almost 250 million international trips were recorded worldwide by May 2022., compared to only 77 million arrivals recorded during the same period in 2021.

In an analysis by region, we see that Europe and America lead by far in the recovery of the tourism sector. Europe saw more than four times as many international arrivals as in the first five months of 2021 (+350%), while in the Americas (+112%) arrivals were just over double. However, despite the accelerated recovery, arrivals remained 36% and 40% below 2019 levels in Europe and the Americas, respectively.

As for the Middle East (+157%) and Africa (+156%), these regions recorded increases in January-May 2022 compared to 2021, but remained below half of the levels recorded in 2019. For Asia and the Pacific, the values of international arrivals have almost doubled (+94%), although the figures are still half of those recorded in 2019. It should be noted that here in the Asia-Pacific region, many countries have imposed restrictions on non-essential travel.

According to the scenarios created by the UNWTO, the number of international arrivals will reach somewhere between 55% and 70% of the pre-pandemic levels in 2022. In the analysis of the advanced scenarios, Europe still ranks (65% to 80% of the 2019 levels) and The Americas (63% to 76%) top the tourism results for 2022. As for

Africa and the Middle East, arrivals could reach somewhere between 50% and 70% of pre-pandemic levels, while that in Asia and the Pacific could at best reach 30% of the levels of 2019, a state of fact mainly due to the policies and restrictions still in place today.

This state of affairs indicates the optimal moment for rethinking tourism policies, to limit the negative effects identified in the pre-pandemic period.

Romanian tourism Evolution

The HoReCa sector in Romania, although strongly affected during the pandemic, still manages to maintain an upward trend in investments in new construction projects. At the beginning of the pandemic, we were talking about the fact that many investors decided it was an opportune time to rehabilitate and modernize. Well, last year, 26,269 projects were underway in Romania, some of them large-scale, according to the analysis carried out by IBC Focus.

The tourist sector was supported mainly by Romanians who chose to spend their holidays in destinations in the country. According to a survey carried out by Travelminit.ro, the boost in domestic tourism was due to the holiday vouchers offered by the state, with 21% of respondents indicating holiday vouchers as the reason they traveled to Romania. The mountain resorts followed by those on the coast were the main choices where Romanian tourists chose to use their holiday vouchers most often.

Survey results

The interview objective of the proposed investigation is to understand how tour operators see the development of the rural tourism sector. Data collection began in June 2022 and ended in September of the same year. Several 21 people involved in tourism activity were interviewed.

A questionnaire was developed which is divided into four sections: the first part follows the outline of the respondent's profile, the second aims at the socio-demographic characteristics, in the third part information was requested regarding the degree of satisfaction related to the theme of Romanian rural tourism, from in the fourth part, we will follow the recommendations made for the sustainable development of this sector.

70% of the interviewees carry out entrepreneurial activities in the rural tourism sector, while the remaining 30% are representative of local public administrations or NGOs. All those interviewed own companies that are included in the SME group, and 20% have no employees. Describing the socio-demographic characteristics of the people interviewed, it appears that 60% of the respondents are women between 30 and 40 years old, while the remaining 40% are men but their age group tends to increase and is between 40 and 60 years old. years.

Investigating the reasons that carrying out activities in the tourism sector, it turned out that the interviewees are very passionate about the activity in which they are involved, whether we are talking about the economic, salaried or voluntary activity. For this reason, we identified a general state of dissatisfaction, but this is related only to the bad management of the community's resources and not to the activity in which the respondents are involved. On the other hand, all respondents consider the current moment as an opportunity for a restart of tourist activity.

Respondents were asked what are the ways in which the rural tourism sector can become more attractive, to which they unanimously indicate the immediate need to develop some leisure activities.

CONCLUSIONS

The rural tourism market encompasses many different customers, with groups of rural tourists varying by geographic area. The profile of urban rural tourists is well educated and organizes their own trips. They are middle-aged or older, have above-average incomes, and travel mostly in small groups, usually with family and friends. To get them to choose a rural tourism destination, we

need to provide authentic outreach activities and most importantly, find ways to engage them in the community.

Finally, rural tourism must be integrated into well-thought-out local economic development plans, starting with an inventory of local assets such as: area biodiversity, natural attractions, cultural attractions, historical attractions, recreational activities and tourism infrastructure/facilities.

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