



Rural Tourism in Vadu Izei, Maramureş County, Romania. Evolution, Social and Territorial Characteristics and Perspectives for Development

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This study intends to analyze the phenomenon of rural tourism from a social and territorial perspective at Vadu Izei, the village where this new form of tourism developed the most within Maramureş Land. For this purpose, we have reviewed the favourable conditions which allowed the settlement to be chosen and included within those villages which benefited from a series of programmes meant to promote and support the development of rural tourism. On the other hand, we have run over the main objectives, strategies and effective actions that blend in to achieve this desideratum. At the same time, we have performed a detailed analysis of the tourism supply and demand in the village, including diverse quantitative and qualitative aspects. For this, we have performed a field inquiry based on the direct questionnaire technique, using operators. Finally, we have analyzed the tendencies of evolution and future bias of rural tourism activities.

Vadu Izei lies at 7 km from the traditional polarizing centre of Maramureş Land. Due to some favourable conditions (see below), it benefited from the special “care” of national and county authorities. NGOs also involved in the promotion and development of one of the forms of tourism that have had a fast dynamics after 1990 – rural tourism.

Both nationally significant tourism organizations whose supply is based exclusively on rural tourism – OVR and ANTREC – are to be found in Maramureş Land. At the same time, in this area one may find B&B organization (with a minor impact), a regional tourism association (MTMM Association) and a series of local associations or small organizations at a community level, most of them affiliated to the above-mentioned networks. However, rural tourism in Vadu Izei develops almost entirely within OVR network, as there is only one pension with 16 places affiliated to B&B.

The tourism project of pilot villages, nationally developed by OVR¹ (Opération Villages Roumains) organization, included Vadu Izei, too. This village became, with the help of “Agro-Tur-Art” OVR Foundation, the main center developed and managed by OVR in Maramureş network. The main favourable factors that led to the selection and the inclusion of Vadu Izei as a pilot village and its launch in tourism are, first, the will of the community to preserve the original material and spiritual culture and, secondly, the favourable geographical position. But there were also other fundamental requests which had to be met for the inclusion in the above-mentioned project and the access to financial and logistic support for the achievement of the proposed objectives: the interest and the will of the community, together with the support and direct involvement of the local public authorities, and the existence of a partnership with a Western community (Braine le Comte in Belgium).

¹ OVR (*Opération Villages Roumains*) organization, was founded even since 1988 in Belgium as an NGO with the declared purpose of opposing the systematization plan of the Romanian villages initiated by the communist regime. In 1990, it changed its policy and helped rural communities by distributing humanitarian aids and setting up projects of cooperation between communities. Since 1992, the organization has involved in the initiation of local sustainable development projects, including the promotion of rural tourism, as it has a special place within the global and integrated development. They laid stress on the direct involvement of the local community in the development of rural tourism, by setting up representative local associations. These should complementarily cooperate with local authorities and actively support the revitalization process of the involved rural settlements. Thus, in October 1991 the idea of launching the *pilot villages* tourism project came out. As a consequence, 14 villages (from 8 counties) were selected and included in an inter-community partnership programme whose declared purpose was the initiation, development and promotion of rural tourism in Romania. In 1994, OVR Romania Association was created as a national association of committees and villages of Romania. Its creation was accompanied by an assistance study for the implementation and development of rural tourism at national scale.

The major purposes which animated the activity of OVR organization and of “Agro-Tur-Art” OVR Foundation Vadu Izei even since the start of this project included the development, the promotion and the coordination of rural tourism activities in each village of the network, with the help of local associations, the guidance of those involved in rural tourism by providing advice concerning the exchange and the diffusion of information, the development of rural tourism networks by stimulating free initiative in order to bring out the tourism area.

At the same time, the foundation has among its objectives: to grant technical and economic assistance to its members, to provide consultancy for the setting up and the development of companies which include rural, cultural or ecological tourism among their activities, to stimulate the owners of the houses included in the programme to modernize them, to conclude contracts with partners from Romania and abroad. Other activities included: the organization of lectures for the formation and improvement of staff specialized in classifying rural tourism households, exchanges with foreign countries, the creation of a database with information concerning rural tourism, the publishing of tourism information and promotion materials. They also won the support of governmental organizations and other organizations and people from Romania or even from abroad. They ensured a beneficial collaboration with the Romanian Federation for Mountain Development, the Romanian Agency for Agrotourism and OVR Belgium and they obtained different facilities for their members and also for the tourists who enjoy low accommodation prices.

This form of tourism developed in the years to come, greatly due to the financial and logistic support of European programmes (financed by the E.U.) which were initiated and managed smartly. The most important of these programmes were, in chronological order, the following:

- 1994-1995: the initiation of PHARE-INTERREG programme and the inauguration of the first tourism season;
- 1996: “Agro-Tur-Art” OVR Tourism Foundation became a corporate body; the Tourism Office opened in Vadu Izei and the folder named “Vadu Izei - from tradition to tourism supply” promoted the tourism supply; the system of tourism signs was realized, by installing indicator panels at the three points of entrance in the village, plates for tourist houses, different advertising spots etc.; the initiation of PHARE-DEZVOLTARE programme in collaboration with OVR Braine le Comte – Belgium and OVR International (aiming at the improvement of confort conditions for 20 tourist houses in Vadu Izei commune, action which had a budget of 23.000 ECU); the setting up of 20 family associations which became part of the network and had tourism services as the main object of activity; the development of French classes for the suppliers of tourism services within the foundation; the preparations for the PHARE-LIEN project and the intention to access financing from the European Community;
- 1997: the arrangements of files for getting the Classification Certificate for the 20 tourist households (in September); the multiplication and distribution of tourism supply; the publication of a promotion folder (“Discover Vadu Izei”) in Romanian and French; the development of an intercultural programme together with Chantiers Jeunes Association and Louis Marie Institute from Thy-le-Chateau (Belgium); the continuation of the PHARE-DEZVOLTARE programme by accessing the second financing instalment and the execution of confort improvement works in tourist houses; the publication of the information bulletin entitled “SAT TURISM”, the setting up of indicator panels, of postcards, of the monography of Vadu Izei village, at the same time with an advertising campaign in the written and audio press; the continuation of PHARE-INTERREG and PHARE-LIEN (“Professional reconversion of the unemployed by rural tourism and traditional handicrafts”) programmes, as well as the initiation of PHARE-TURISM 2 programme; the organization of lectures for hosts; the inclusion of Vadu Izei among the four pilot zones, as the settlement was named the regional centre of rural tourism along Iza Valley;
- 1998: the implementation of PHARE-TURISM 2 programme; the setting up of traditional handicrafts workshops – sculpture, weaving, wattles, rug weaving, painting; the arrangements for an exhibition hall, a museum of musical instruments and a restaurant with traditional food; the arrangements for the Violin and Village

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Music International Festival from Maramuzical Hall in collaboration with Maramureş Land Association and OVR (the preparation of tourism supply, shows within the festival, a fair for gluttons, the meeting of the violin makers etc.); the setting up of a tourism information office; the improvement of tourist signs; the development of a co-financing project aiming at the donation of 30 cows to several families;

- 1998-2000: the initiation and development of the megaproject “Formation, professional reconversion and integrated rural development” within the programme PHARE-LIEN 1998 (in partnership with OVR Committee Braine le Comte, “AGRO-TUR O.S.R.” Tourism Foundation, Opération Villages Roumains International and the Rural Foundation of Romania). This project aimed at the formation in the field of the management of small rural companies, the transfer of knowledge in the field of production and trading of handicraft products, the transfer of knowledge in the field of production and trading of quality agricultural products, the instruction of guides etc, the publication of the folder named “The tour of handicraftsmen at Vadu Izei”;
- 2001: the classification of the 20 rural tourism pensions by ANT; the organization and the development of a symposium on rural tourism with the participation of a group of people from Vatra Dornei, partners of HPI Romania programme;
- 2002: the drawing up of the tourist guide entitled “Vadu Izei and Maramureş” in Romanian, French and German; the setting up of the Internet site www.vaduizei.ovr.ro and the folder named “Scouts from Vadu Izei”; the inauguration of the foundation club and the pub named “Zori de Ziuă”, which would host symposia, festivals, reunions, the rehearsals of “Zori de Ziuă” folk group; the initiation of “Microcredite” programme (in collaboration with Heifer Project International, a Christian organization from the U.S.A.) which allow the foundation members and Vadu Izei community to access low interest credits, exclusively given for rural tourism and agricultural activities, managed exclusively by Tisa Credit Cooperation.

At present, the tourism network of Vadu Izei includes 22 homologated agrotourism pensions with a total number of 128 accommodation places, classified as two-star (or daisy) comfort category. The price for a double room varies between 16 and 22 EURO per night, while a single room costs between 8 and 15 EURO, most of them settling for 10 EURO. The prices for half-pension (accommodation and breakfast) are around 12 to 15 EURO per person, to which another 7 to 10 EURO are added in the case the person chooses also for dinner. The price for a festive meal is 25 EURO per person, for New Year’s Eve, Easter, Christmas, or occasionally.

In order to diversify the alternatives for rest and entertainment, the tourism network of Vadu Izei provides a series of supplementary services for the tourists: folk music band, dancers and animators for groups, classes of folk dance, walks in horse-driven coaches or sledges. The tourists may also take part at different agricultural works, and specific arrangements for Easter and Christmas holidays. The hosts provide guiding services and organize together festive dinners for groups of tourists accommodated at different households etc.

The structure of the promotion activity of the settlement tourism supply and the consolidation of its image as tourist destination, informing and attracting the domestic and foreign customers, is based on a diverse set of advertising means, partially or wholly integrated into an active advertising strategy. This includes: the internet, the distribution of different graphical advertising materials in tourist information centres, domestic travel agencies (whose offer also contain tourism programmes which include partially or exclusively specific rural tourism offers), international guides (Routard), the participation at tourism fairs, symposia on rural tourism, and not the least, the advertisement made by former visitors (foreign or Romanian) which were satisfied with the services provided and sent this feeling to the people they have contact with etc. The major shortcoming of the rural tourism at Vadu Izei is given by the short period of stay. Most tourists spend in average one or two nights in the village. During spring and autumn, the tourism demand is at its lowest (1 or 2 nights per week) and there are periods when some of the pensions register no tourism flows. However, during summer and the winter holidays, the duration of stay increases up to 3 to 4 nights accommodation/household (sometimes even more). In these terms, the accommodation capacity of use reaches an average of 30%/year, a value which would correspond to an annual average tourism flow of 12.000-14.000 accomodation nights.

Several years ago, the main area of external demand was represented by France and Belgium. Nevertheless, the improvement of the social and economic conditions, in general, and that of tourism, in particular, during recent times, led to a significant enlargement of the number of countries where the tourists come from. So, to the two already mentioned countries, one should add Hungary, Italy and Germany, and in lower numbers, the Netherlands, Austria, Spain, Israel, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Poland, Denmark, Great Britain. Seldom, in very small numbers, there were even Canadian, American, Japanese and Australian tourists.

A part of the organized groups made by foreign tourists get to rural tourism locations in Vadu Izei as a part of longer tours which include Bucovina, along with Maramureș Land. In this case, Vadu Izei is just an intermediary point of their route. Most of the times, these tourists arrive by air at Budapest, and then they are transferred to a bus, along a route Budapest – Petea customs – Valea Izei – Bucovina. This route is also followed by many unorganized groups of tourists. Some years ago, the main area of the domestic demand was represented by Southern Romania, and especially Bucharest City, to which one may add a series of important urban centres (Craiova, Pitești etc.). Recently, however, one may notice an important extension of the area of “recruitment” of domestic clientele, which now covers practically all the major urban centres of Romania (with higher weights in the case of cities like Constanța, Timișoara, Cluj-Napoca, Arad, Sibiu, Oradea, Iași, Suceava, Bacău, Botoșani, Râmnicu Vâlcea or Ploiești). Nevertheless, the people from Bucharest still have the supremacy, “providing” the highest number of practicans for this type of tourism. In the first years of its existence, rural tourism represented a secondary activity practiced mainly by females (housewives, most of them), with high school or university studies, and by the retired persons, with the aim of supplementing family incomes. Gradually, for most of the households included in the tourism circuit, rural tourism became the most important source of income for the family, even if the professional structure of the people involved is generally the same.

The professional structure of people actively involved in rural tourism covers a larger set than the average of the settlements included in the same field. Among the professions of people actively involved in rural tourism, one may find tailors, janitors, drivers, carpenters, vendors, waiters, foresters etc. Nevertheless, there is a high degree of people actively involved in rural tourism that may be included among the intellectuals – such as physicians, teachers, nurses, accountants etc. This position ensures a certain level of education and a cultural capital above the average of the Romanian rural space, including the knowledge of one or more important foreign language(s). This aspect proved to be an important advantage as concerns the capacity of reception, the fair perception of economic mechanisms of the rural tourism activities, the faster assimilation of managerial knowledge necessary for the organization and the management of the development of specific activities of this field. The latter are also more adaptable as they may communicate easier with foreign tourists, establishing contacts and collaboration relations with settlements of Western Europe (an advantage which was capitalized even by the creation of a partnership with Braine le Comte, a village from Belgium). All these are reflected in the attraction of a higher number of (especially foreign) tourists and the earning of higher incomes from tourism activities. In spite of all this, the incomes get exclusively from rural tourism are not high and constant but in the case of a few households, seldom becoming the main source of income for the family. The incomes obtained from rural tourism by most of the households are between 25 and 50%. This cannot allow important accumulations of capital, although the constantly increasing trend of the tourism flows in recent years may change the situation. There are several households where the tourism incomes reaches almost 75%, and the incomes of one household are exclusively ensured by rural tourism activities. It is hoped that the rural tourism developed at Vadu Izei and in the entire Maramureș Land will have a positive evolution and impicitly the desired results and effects.

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