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## **Tourist Resources of Arad City (Romania) and its Surroundings**

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The city of Arad lies in Western Romania, 48 km East of Nădlac, the main entrance gate in Romania by car from the West, and 17 km South of Curtici, the border passage point for train travellers coming from Hungary. It is located in the middle of the Western Romanian Plain, a part of the Pannonic Plain, at only 50 km North of Timișoara, the most important urban centre of the region. It is easily accessible by any means of transportation, given also the existence of international airports in Timișoara and Arad itself. It has about 170.000 inhabitants. Many other tens of thousands pass through it every year. However, its tourist resources are still underused and not known enough by the majority of transit tourists, either Romanians or foreign. This is due to the weak publicity made by the local and national tourist offices, and also because of the mainly commercial interests which made up the main reason of the visitors' presence. It is our opinion that the area of the city and its surroundings has a real potential for the development of tourism.

The most important natural resource is the Mureș river, crossing the centre of the city, and dividing it into two unequal parts. Most of the city lies on the Northern bank of the Mureș. However, the most attractive part of Arad is on the left bank: “Ștrandul Neptun”, a large swimming area. Initially, the swimming pools were located on the right bank, near the city centre. In 1970, the local government decided to move the swimming pools on the other bank, where the river is less dangerous, and there is enough space for sunbathing and the creation of a modern swimming area. Designed initially on a surface of 17 ha, the “Ștrand” developed and slowly changed its function. Until 1995, people paid the entrance tax to tan, bathe and relax during summer, in a quiet environment. As there was no entrance tax after 8 pm, it became fashionable among the young people, walking on the right bank, to cross the bridges to the “Ștrand”. Soon, a number of pubs opened their doors, and the entire nightlife of the city moved from the centre to the “Ștrand” in only a few years.

Today, one has to pay the entrance tax at any time during summer (May to September), but many pubs and discos stay open all year round. Two categories of tourists may be considered: the “classic” ones, who come during the day, including all age categories, and the “night” visitors, who come not much before midnight and are customers for the variety of pubs, night clubs, disco bars, restaurants which have developed. Most of the “night” visitors are young, but the managers succeeded in attracting other age categories by organizing different parties, fairs and especially concerts. Because of the unique nature of this “holiday village” right in the middle of a city, the “Ștrand” became famous in the entire Western Romania and even beyond the borders.

The location of the “Ștrand”, on a peninsula, provides the opportunity for combining leisure with cultural tourism. The peninsula we refer to is the ancient site of Arad fortress, the only Vauban-style fortress in Romania which remained undamaged over the centuries. This is due to its military function, acquired since its erection in 1763-1783. The local authorities are striving to gain a civilian status for it. In the next few years, the visitors of the “Ștrand” will be, hopefully, able to see more of the fortress than its outer walls. The fortress is linked to all the historic events the city has been through in the last two centuries.

On the other bank, the centre of the city has developed especially in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when most of the buildings have been built. Near the river, the height of the dyke is a remainder of the catastrophic floods of 1970 and 1975.

Between the modern “Parc” Hotel, the Casino and the Courts of Justice, two silent parks are the heritage of 19<sup>th</sup> century gardening masters of this region. Parallel to the river, a number of avenues make up the core of the city. The largest one, “Bulevardul Revoluției”, is the main avenue, the “High Street”, including on both sides the main institutions, banks, commercial sites, shopping centres.

At the Southern end, this avenue is closed by the building of the Theatre, erected between 1872 and 1874 in neo-classic style. Near the theatre, on the left, is “Ardealul” Hotel, formerly “Crucea Albă”, a famous inn for the mail coaches of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, before the arrival of the railway. On the same side, the Catholic Cathedral is still the largest religious monument of the city (to be replaced by the Orthodox Cathedral, once it is ready). It has been built between 1902 and 1904 in Renaissance style, and it represents the main symbol of the Hungarian minority. Its courtyard hosted the “Freedom” statue, representing Great Hungary, which has arisen a number of political debates when it was placed in Pompierilor Square.

The next stop of the tram, the only inner city means of transportation, is Revoluției Square. An impressive architectural ensemble is to be admired. On the Eastern side of the avenue, the white Administrative Palace, comprising the City Hall, the County Council and the Local Government Offices. It has been built in 1874-1876 as a Town Hall, replacing the ancient town hall, on the site of today’s “Continental” Hotel, the highest building in the city, with 13 stores. Built in 1969 under the name “Astoria” Hotel, it has been recently restored and renamed.

On the other side of the square, the BCR Bank is located in the former National Bank offices, a monumental neo-classic building dating from 1906-1908. On the same side with the Administrative Palace, the building hosting the “Aurel Vlaicu” University dates from 1896 and it was erected in baroque style. Completing the architectural variety of the square, “Cenad” Palace, dating from the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has been built in a late Renaissance style, while the Alpha Bank building, from the same period, in an eclectic style.

Near the river, a few meters from the Revoluției Square, one may find the finest architectural monument of the city: the Culture Palace. Built in 1911-1913 by Ludovic Szantay, it is a masterpiece of its times, including all the architectural styles developed until then. It hosts the Philharmonic Orchestra and the County Museums of History-Archaeology and Sciences. The tourist may be surprised to discover two modern museums. The Science Museum has been designed during the 80s and includes a number of scientific fields. Children will be more than happy to explore a cave, for example. The Arts Museum is located somewhere else and it hosts valuable collections of paintings.

More to the North, the “Red Church” provides a change in colours to the curious tourist. Although it seems ancient, probably because of the neo-gothic style and its red walls, it dates from 1906. The Lutheran community of Arad is so small that the church has lost most of its religious function. It is now famous mostly for the symphonic concerts that take place there once in while.

The new Orthodox Cathedral lies at the other end of Revoluției Avenue. Its construction started in 1993, and the place of the building determined important debates. Finally, it was decided to place the Cathedral in Podgoria Square, at the Northern end of Revoluției Avenue, on the site of a small park. The bells of the Cathedral have been brought from Austria in December 2003 and the building is supposed to be over soon. It adds a new style to the mixture of Arad architecture: Romanian traditional style. Podgoria Square is also known for „Podgoria” train, where the name comes from. The train linked Arad to its vineyard („Podgorie”) settlements. It was the first electric train to run in South-Eastern Europe (1910); the route is now used by trams, which get as far as 18 km out of the city, at Ghioroc, in the vineyard region.

On the Western side of Podgoria Square, a small lake, surrounded by a „forest” (8 ha), is a nice place for a walk. The lake is sometimes used as a skating rink in winter (now replaced by a modern skating rink, near the Fortress). It represents a small part of a former bed of Mureș river, also known as Mureșu Mort, nowadays running mostly beneath the city as sewage waters.

The Railway Station (1914) was once at the Northern edge of the city. It is a monumental building, surrounded by enterprises. It impresses the visitor especially because of its size. The square in front of it underwent massive changes at the beginning of the 90s.

The thermal waters are a very important natural tourist resource for Arad and its surroundings. Discovered along a fault-line in the Western Romanian Plain, they are brought up to the surface by drillings. Such drillings were made at Arad and several other settlements

nearby, and the waters have been discovered at about 1200-1300 m deep. They have a temperature of about 40-56°C and their use is indicated for a number of diseases. Swimming pools using thermal waters have been created at Arad since the 70s. Although the quality and temperature of the water is not suitable, the thermal waters have been introduced at "Neptun Strand" in 2003. However, the thermal swimming pools of Arad are located at the outskirts of the city, at the exit towards Nădlac. These pools benefit from the good quality of thermal waters, but unfortunately one may accuse the poor location and management.

This is the reason why local people and foreign tourists prefer the thermal swimming pools at Dorobanți, Curtici or Șofronea. The swimming pools at Curtici are open since 1984 and they have been modernized since 1999. They have the advantage of accessibility: 5 minutes walk from the Curtici railway station, and 15 minutes drive from Arad. The swimming pools at Dorobanți are accessible only by car, but still have the highest number of visitors (an average of about 5,000 per week in summer). The area has 2 ha, and there is a large parking. A number of visitors are Hungarians, crossing the border nearby. As in Curtici, the visitors have access to pubs, restaurants, a beach, and pools with hot, moderate or cold water. If Dorobanți swimming pools date from 1986, those at Șofronea are the most recent. Created initially in 1989, then abandoned, they have been rebuilt since 1999. Today, they benefit from the shortest distance from Arad (10 km) and the location near Purgly Park and Manor, a former noble estate which may be designed as a tourist attraction, too.

However, the most attractive location is Macea. Although the swimming pools are the poorest of the region, tourists come for the Botanical Garden, belonging to "Vasile Goldiș" University of Arad. The initial forest was transformed into a park by the members of the Cernovici family, beginning with the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The castle was built between 1820 and 1845, a period when many exotic species were introduced in the park. The Karoly family, which inherited the estate at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, extended the garden from 10 to 58 ha. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the entire estate underwent progressive degradation. In 1968, a surface of 20.5 ha was declared reservation (dendrology park). After 1990, the above named University took charge of the park and transformed it into a Botanical garden. Together with the exotic plants, one may admire the small Zoo, the sculptures mostly dedicated to Eminescu, the national Romanian poet, and the permanent art exhibition at the castle. Artistic events take place every year in summer. Small groups may be accommodated in the castle itself.

Not all the tourists are satisfied with artificial pools or hot water. For those who feel the need of a cold bath during summer, there are a number of solutions. Not far away from the city, just passing the Airport towards West, there lies Ceala forest, a reminder of the ancient forests covering the Mureș flood plain in the past. A beautiful road enters the forest: it is the locals' favourite location for a day out. Parking places are numerous on both sides of the road, which has very low traffic except for the National Holidays. A small lake is located inside the forest, and a chalet, with a bar and restaurant, lies on its shore. For those who want a serious bath, the river is not far away! The road reaches the river at the point called "Trei Insule" (Three Islands). A pontoon bridge, similar to those of the "Ștrand", links the river bank with the Third Island, the only one inhabited. Due to the beauty of the landscape and the short distance from the city, many dwellers of Arad have built secondary homes on the island, a "small paradise" on Mureș. On the main bank, "Zori de Zi" restaurant is a habitual eating place for locals at special occasions.

A few kilometers more towards West, the tourist may discover one of the oldest settlements of Western Romania. Hodoș-Bodrog Monastery has been first mentioned in 1177. Though small, it is an important religious site for Romanian Orthodox, and it has a beautiful location, near the river Mureș. Initially, the monastery was on an island of the river, which provided the necessary protection, along with the forest. When floods affected the monastery and the small village, the river course has been changed. Bezdin monastery was erected on the Southern bank, a few kilometers away to the West. This Serbian Orthodox religious monument is kept alive with great efforts by the Serbian community. The entire area from Arad to Nădlac, along the Mureș, is covered by the ancient forest, of about 5.000 ha. The natural park „Lunca Mureșului” (Mureș Flood Plain) functions for a number of years, protecting a forest and water environment which is quite unique in this part of Romania. It also includes the archaeologic site of Ziridava, an ancient Dacian settlement, before the arrival of the Romans. Unfortunately, the site is not designed as a tourist attraction.

A small forest also exists along the Mureş in the other direction, East of Arad, near Vladimirescu. It covers about 1.000 ha and it also comprises a small lake, whose shores are beginning to be used for chalets and secondary homes.

The main destination for many tourists during week-ends in summer is the Vineyard Region, „Podgoria”. By tram, car or train, one can easily get to Ghioroc, in the centre of this region. Two artificial, cold-water lakes are used for bathing, one of them having a very nice beach and water sports equipments (yachting, for instance). On the shores of the same lake, a private beach has been created near “Las Vegas” Restaurant. The restaurant has also a disco-bar and a nightclub, and important concerts take place during summer. For those who prefer something else than bathing and tanning, two Museums have their gates open inside the village: the Museum of Vineyards and the museum hosting “The Green Arrow”, the famous electric train which connected the vineyard villages with Arad until the 80s. From Ghioroc, one can also do some mountaineering in the neighbouring Zarand Mountains, although the altitudes are quite low, not more than 500 m.

For cultural tourists, an interesting visit would be in the villages Sâmbăteni and Covăsânţ, both at about 5 km from Ghioroc, in opposite directions. There, one may see the Gipsy “Palaces”, large villa-type houses, built after 1990 by Gypsies (Roma population) who encountered their fortune in Western European countries. Their architecture tries to imitate several Western modern styles, but they are mainly just kitsch. Many of these “palaces” are not finished. In the Northern part of the vineyard region, Şiria village is known for its fortress and the memorial house of the classical Romanian writer, Ioan Slavici. To get to the ruins of the ancient fortress (11<sup>th</sup> century), the tourist should climb the hill for about 45 minutes. Although the fortress lies at only 477 m high, it is not an easy climb, but it certainly worth the effort. The ruins may provide the opportunity for a one-day exploration, yet the panorama is fantastic. The eye may catch the entire Arad region and plain from there. This is also the place for the lovers of skydiving and other extreme sports. Back in the village, the Memorial Museum offers a perspective on the lives and creation of Ioan Slavici and Emil Montia. Bohus Manor and Well are surrounded by a beautiful park. To the other end of the vineyard region, in South, Lipova is a small town comprising also the former villages Radna and Şoimoş. Its strategic location, at the exit of Mureş River from the mountains, gave it a special importance during medieval times. Şoimoş fortress, on a hill watching the narrowest point of the river bed, was built in the 14<sup>th</sup> century to secure the passing of merchandise along the river. The access to the fortress is somehow easier than in the case of Şiria, and it takes only 15 minutes once you are at the foot of the hill. The same amazing panorama is to be seen from among the ruins, but this time comprising an important part of Mureş Valley and Lipova town. The town itself has an Art Museum and the oldest Orthodox Church of the region (1338, transformed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century). The most interesting monument is the Turkish bazaar, dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the area was under Turkish occupation. On the right bank, the Franciscan Monastery of St. Mary – Radna is an impressive two-towered monument, lying on a small hill and dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The first documents concerning another monastery on the same site are much older. The park of the monastery includes a number of beautiful sculptures. The church of the monastery is a place of pilgrimage for Roman Catholics on St. Mary's Day.

All these tourist sites, having the city of Arad in the centre, deserve to be included in a local strategy based on the development of tourism. There is a high potential for such a development, which may also be supported by European funds, if the right projects are to be created.

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