

## THE PANDEMIC, A CHANCE FOR AN AUTHENTIC ROMANIAN RURAL TOURISM

**Carina Andreea DOBRE, Paula STOICEA, Adina Magdalena IORGA**

University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Bucharest, 59 Marasti Blvd, District 1, Bucharest, Romania, E-mails: [dobrecarina@yahoo.com](mailto:dobrecarina@yahoo.com), [dobre.carina@managusamv.ro](mailto:dobre.carina@managusamv.ro), [stoicea.paula@gmail.com](mailto:stoicea.paula@gmail.com), [iorga.adina@managusamv.ro](mailto:iorga.adina@managusamv.ro)

**Corresponding author:** [dobrecarina@yahoo.com](mailto:dobrecarina@yahoo.com), [dobre.carina@managusamv.ro](mailto:dobre.carina@managusamv.ro)

### **Abstract**

*The pandemic has caused a contraction in hospitality business and sifted through Romanian tourism, creating a real chance for authentic rural tourism. The characteristic economic indicators for the period 2020-2021 are presented, highlighting the decreasing trend in the degree of occupancy especially in large hotels, according to INSSE statistics. The organizational specifics of a tourist unit - a guesthouse - in a Muntenia authentic household, were analyzed. This type of authentic peasant household organization, with accommodation units distributed within a large, spaced courtyard, provided the opportunity to carry out a tourism activity in a mandatory by low safe, sanitary conditions. This led to the continuation of this business and the development of the local tourism offer. It can thus be said that authentic Romanian tourism, organized in the typical way of a traditional household, offered a viable alternative for the continuation of hospitality in a critical period of the pandemic, characterized in general by a decrease in this activity.*

**Key words:** *pandemic, rural tourism, authenticity, guesthouse*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The pandemic has caused a contraction in hospitality business. During 2020 - 2021, tourist trips were canceled or rescheduled to reduce the impact of the sanitary crisis on health. A series of specific measures were imposed by the authorities so that the touristic structures that remained open were the ones that could host a limited number of people, respecting social distancing, PCR tested or with a vaccination certificate, measures also applicable to the staff. (Decree no. 195 of March 16, 2020) [3]. Large tourist units, with common access or dining areas that can host a large number of tourists, with air conditioning, spa, swimming pools, could not fulfill these conditions and were forced to temporarily close the activity (Stoicea, P. 2021) [10]. Against this background of massive contraction of the hotel activity, the small tourist units like rural guesthouses, specifically organized with accommodation places dispersed in an authentic household, had the opportunity to continue their activity respecting the imposed sanitary norms. Thus, a real relaunch of the activity was achieved on

this level with the increase in the rate of this type of rural tourism, thus promoting authentic Romanian tourism.

In this context, the purpose of the paper is to analyze the trend of occupancy degree during the Covid-19 pandemic in Romania to highlight what happened in hotel industry and also in guesthouses, especially profiled on agritourism.

An authentic study case of a rural guesthouse from Muntenia region is described in order to prove that small accommodations of this type, based on traditional rural household, became more attractive than hotels for tourists during the pandemic.

### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Some characteristic economic indicators for the 2020-2021 period are presented, highlighting the decreasing trend in the degree of occupancy in large hotels and guesthouses, as well as the increase in the rate of tourism in small agritourism guesthouses, according to INSSE statistics.

The organizational specifics of a tourist unit - the guesthouse - in an authentic Muntenian

household were analyzed. This type of organization of an authentic rural household, with the accommodation units distributed inside a large, spaced courtyard, provided the opportunity to carry out the tourist activity in safe, sanitary conditions.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

There is a marked decrease in the number of overnight stays in tourist units in 2020. In total, this decrease was 51.4%, of which for Romanian tourists with 45.22%, and for foreign tourists with 81.15%. This decrease is reduced in 2021 by only 30.75% in total, respectively for Romanian tourists by 23.36% and by 65.36% for foreign tourists.

In total, the recovery trend of this tourist index (overnight stays) in 2021 was 69.25%, with 76.63%, for Romanian tourists and with 34% for foreign tourists (Figure 1).

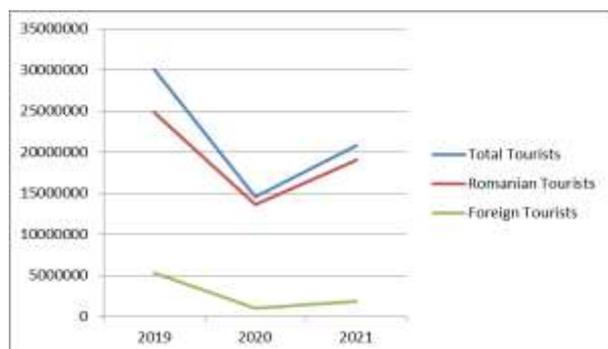


Fig. 1. The decrease in total number of total tourists, Romanian tourists vs foreign tourists during the period 2019 – 2021

Source: Own design based on the data from NIS-INSSE, 2023 [7].

Although sudden, the contraction of the activity in the tourism field mainly interested large and medium-sized hotel units. This can be seen from the comparative aspect of the decrease in activity from 2020 by 51.54% for all accommodation units compared to only 39.8% for agro-tourism guesthouses.

In 2021, the decrease in the number of tourists was more accentuated in large hotel units, by 30.75%, compared to agritourism guesthouses, where the decrease was only 17.03% (Figures 2 and 3).

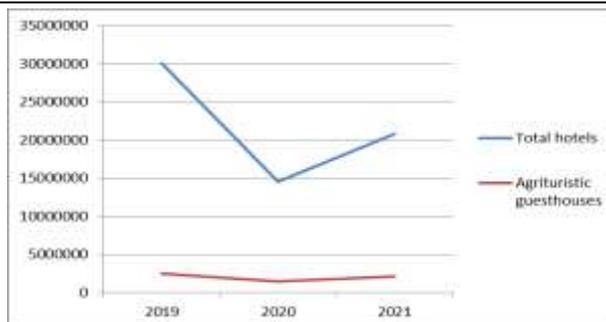


Fig. 2. Decrease in tourist activity in terms of overnight stays per total number of hotels vs agro-tourism guesthouses

Source: Own design based on the data from NIS-INSSE during the period 2019-2021 [7].

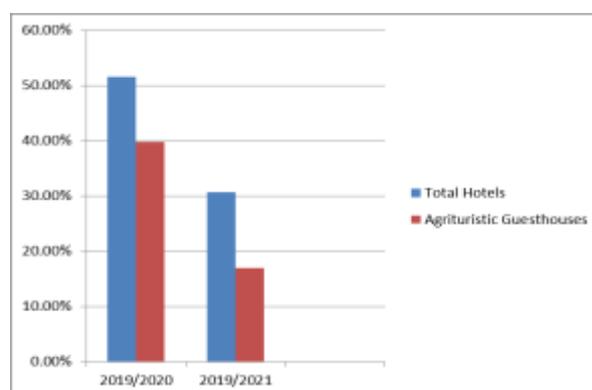


Fig. 3. Percentage decrease in tourist activity in terms of overnight stays per total number of hotels vs agro-tourism guesthouses

Source: Own design based on the data from NIS-INSSE during the period 2019-2021 [7].

With a much lower percentage of tourists compared to the total number of accommodation units in 2019 -8.37%, the agro-tourism guesthouses had in the most critical year, 2020, an increasing share in terms of tourist accommodation, 10.39% of the number total and maintained at 10.02% in 2021 (Figures 4 and 5).

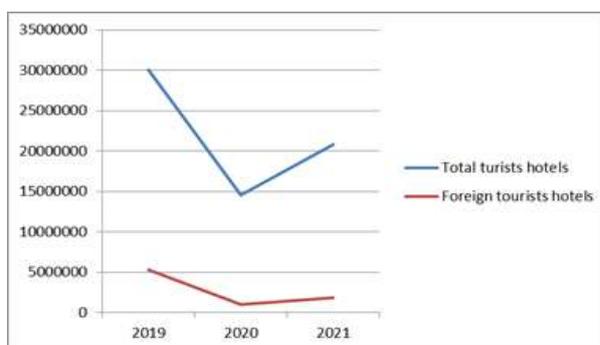


Fig. 4. Decrease tourist activity - total tourists vs foreign tourists in hotels

Source: Own design based on the data from NIS-INSSE during the period 2019-2021 [7].

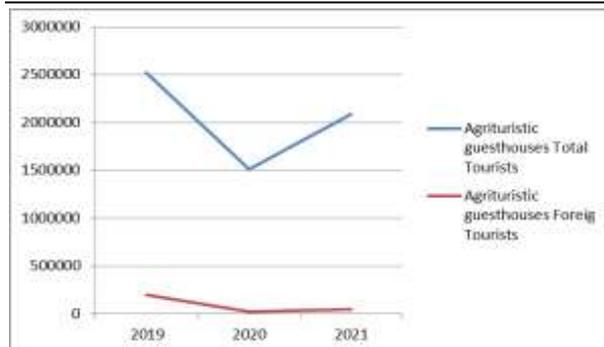


Fig. 5. Decrease tourist activity - total tourists vs foreign tourist in agrituristic guesthouses

Source: Own design based on the data from NIS-INSSE during the period 2019-2021 [7].

For the time being, there is no clear data in the specialized literature or in the statistical databases regarding the evolution of turnover during this period for authentic, traditional rural tourism. But we can state the trend of increasing the number of foreign tourists interested in this part of Romanian tourism. The statistical data are eloquent regarding the demand and attendance by foreign tourists of the units with traditional or regional specifics - a significantly smaller decrease of foreign tourists compared to the total number of tourists. This can be explained by the search for new destinations, distinguished by the local specificity of the accommodations, in authentic houses, local gastronomy and historical circuits, especially under the conditions of the pandemic restrictions.

Thus, foreign tourists were able to get to know a new, specific and characteristic aspect of traditional Romanian hospitality, a distinctive factor, encountered more and more often in the tourism offer in our country. The advertising impact achieved through the purchase of properties by the British royal family in Romania, the production in recent years of some documentary films about the simplicity and authenticity of rural life as well as the wealth of pre-Christian and Christian customs well preserved in our villages, have opened the appetite of tourists for frequenting some areas and fields less sought after in the pre-pandemic years.

In this sense, the tourist offer of the rural guesthouses fit like a glove in the conditions where the large network of hotels and guesthouses have drastically reduced their

activity. The elements that led tourists to choose rural and agrituristic guesthouses as vacation destinations during the pandemic period are, on the one hand, the specific sanitary conditions and, on the other hand, a particular way of organizing a country household. The imposed sanitary conditions have drastically reduced the offer of large hotels, while at the same time the way country households are organized have offered safe and comfortable accommodation opportunities.

The organization of a specific Muntenian household follows the traditional principles of rural construction as it appears from the architectural plans presented in the specialized literature (Order of Architects of Romania, 2017) [8].

The villages of Prahova Valley, in the submontane area, were located at the intersections of important commercial roads. The peculiarity of this individual households is the withdrawal of the house from the main road, in the center of the property (Photo 1). The suite of main annexes were structured around the big house: the cellar, the summer kitchen, the stable and hay deposit, the corn warehouse (the barn), the craftsman's workshop. All these buildings and outbuildings can exist together, but more often they are independent, located at a distance in the large courtyard, specific to traditional practices (Hoinarescu C., 2013) [4].



Photo 1. Big house in the center of the property

Source: Original.

Thus, in Satul Banului Village, in the commune of Magureni, Prahova, the guesthouse is organized according to the

typical local smallholder property – named "gospodărie moșnenească", offering tourists accommodation, local gastronomy based meals and cultural tourism (Dinica Ciobotea, 2010) [2].

Unlike the rural modern houses and at the same time specific to this area, the main house, also called the big house, is set back from the street inside the courtyard, necessarily surrounded by vegetation (Photo 2).



Photo 2 . Big house surrounded by vegetation  
Source: Original.

The house is built on two levels, in the lower part is the storage area - the cellar, the larder. On the upper floor are the living rooms.

The porch and the pavilion are characteristic elements of the Muntenia area (Photo 3). Extended on one, two or three sides of the house, the porch has both an aesthetic but also a practical role (Stoica G., 1989) [9].



Photo 3. The big house, the stable and the summer kitchen  
Source: Original.

Thus, in the big house, tourists are offered three accommodation rooms with all the utilities and a space for serving meals inside or outside on the porch (Order of Architects of Romania, 2017) [8].

The stable is structured on two levels. On the lower level, where the animal shelter used to be, there is a social space and the dining room, and on the upper level - the old hay deposit is organized into 3 rooms with private bathrooms (Photo 4).

The main kitchen of the pension found its natural place on a lower level of the ground floor, built of river boulders - a characteristic element for the houses in this area (Ionescu G., 1957) [6].



Photo 4. The stable  
Source: Original.

On the other side of the yard is the corn warehouse, the structure suspended on pillars, used for grain storage. It is equipped with 2 fully equipped rooms. Under the barn is the socializing and dining area, open, in direct contact with nature (Photo 5).



Photo 5. The cornwarehouse  
Source: Original.

The carpentry workshop, a craft of the owner's grandfather, is set up as a separate accommodation unit, on two levels, with all utilities. The dining area is set up in front of the workshop (Photos 6 and 7).



Photo 6. The carpentry workshop  
Source: Original.



Photo 7. The carpentry workshop – interior view  
Source: Original.

The summer kitchen has a socializing and dining area on the lower level and a living room with full utilities on the upper level (Photos 8 and 9).



Photo 8. The summer kitchen  
Source: Original.

Tourists staying at the property can benefit from such independent accommodation spaces

in the main house or annexes arranged for tourist purposes.



Photo 9. The summer kitchen upper level  
Source: Original.

The dining area is also separate for each accommodation unit. In this way, 4 places to serve meals could be used, corresponding to the accommodation spaces, spaced apart. The shift in the meal service schedule was also introduced so that the staff would specifically serve each group of tourists, separately.

Although the sanitary conditions imposed rules and procedures specific to the pandemic, it was possible to create a safe, pleasant, discreet but at the same time hospitable environment in the true sense of the word, specific to local Muntenian traditions.

This was emphasized by the continuously promoted local gastronomy, from which no discount was made. The complete, healthy diet used by our great-grandparents has been brought back to the tourists' tables, reinvented here and there but keeping all the original organoleptic properties as well as the vitamin nutritional value so desirable in this critical period all made from fresh or preserved products collected from the garden.

## CONCLUSIONS

The traditional constructive elements: the location of the buildings in the household, the presence of specific architectural elements: the independent porches, the pavilion, have created an authentic Romanian hospitality structure that has found its perfect functionality especially in pandemic conditions, tourists being protected and respecting the imposed sanitary conditions

(maximum number of tourists, social distance).

This type of rural tourism guesthouse was able to operate continuously during the pandemic, during which large hotels were forced to reduce their activity precisely due to the impossibility of respecting the conditions imposed by social distancing.

It can thus be said that authentic Romanian tourism, organized in the typical way of a traditional household, offered a viable alternative for the continuation of a hospitality activity in a critical period of the pandemic, characterized by a decrease in activity in general.

Although it decreased during the pandemic, the tourist flow in the rural guesthouses represented a relative constant in terms of the continuation of the activity. Thus the pandemic sifted through Romanian tourism, creating a real chance for relaunching authentic rural tourism.

The positive signal given by rural guesthouses can be continued through an intense promotion through the specific ANTREC and HoReCa networks [1, 5] but also through governmental support of small tourist units through public-private partnerships. This represents an intrinsic value, promoting Romania through what it has most valuable, authenticity. Thus, rural tourism can become a way to revitalize the life of villages, having many positive effects, increasing productivity and incomes at the local level based on the principles of a sustainable economy.

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