

## **HERITAGE AS A STRATEGIC RESOURCE: EXPERIENCE OF ROMANIAN RURAL TOURISTIC FIRMS**

**Botezat Elena-Aurelia**

*Management-Marketing Department, Faculty of Economic Sciences, University of Oradea, Oradea, Romania  
[ebotezat@uoradea.ro](mailto:ebotezat@uoradea.ro)*

**Abstract:** To achieve sustainable performance, touristic rural firms must offer more than food, accommodation and transport services. In this context, heritage plays a key role in rural tourism, directly linked with a competitive offer based on innovation and a responsible and sustainable tourism. The promotion of original elements from the life and culture of an area represents a strong touristic attraction for a significant segment of tourists. These tourists look for authenticity and they want to observe the daily life of people interspersed with local cultural elements. In our paper, firstly, we will present the Romanian rural heritage, with his particular and unique elements. Then, it will be explained how heritage can be valorised like strategic resource in order to attain competitive advantage and economic development. Finally, some examples will be presented based on study-parts of two European project implemented in the Western region of Romania.

**Keywords:** Romania; heritage; strategic resource; touristic competitive offer.

**JEL classification:** M10 – General.

### **1. The Romanian Heritage: General Framework**

Modernity has entered the Romanian society for over 200 years, but it did not profoundly altered the structure of economic and social life, especially in rural areas, as the Romanian village. The continuous transition of Romanian society and especially the ultimate, the one representing the last 20 years, has given birth to a mosaic, to "patch type" modernity without a clear dominant form. It is a tendential modernity, that is a type of modernity that affects only a certain part of society and benefits only certain groups concerned with their economic and social condition (Schifirnet, C., 2009). The Romanian culture and civilization oscillates between the Western and Eastern and clearly stands by a strong vein of national identity. It seems the Romanian has two souls: one of a shepherd and one of a plougher. The ploughmen are "field dependent", conformists, with a contextual-heteronomous moral judgment and specific thinking, while shepherds are comparatively independent, unsuggestible and with a principial-independent moral judgment and abstract thinking.

Romania has a rural tourist potential which so far has not been highlighted. The research conducted in order to create the country brand (Romania - Explore the Carpathian Garden) revealed as competitive advantages for Romanian tourism: spectacular nature and diverse and untouched landscapes such as those offered by the Carpathian Mountains and Danube Delta, cultural heritage which includes sights inscribed in UNESCO, but also historical sights covering all important periods of human history and well preserved traditions and national culture that provides a significant advantage to the Romanian tourism in a market where visitors are looking for new experiences and interaction with special lifestyle, more than luxury destinations and low prices (Romanian Ministry of Tourism, 2010).

The statement above, regarding the attractiveness of tourism potential is reinforced by the findings of the European Commission study on the attitudes of Europeans towards

tourism, held in 2011. It revealed, in order, the following reasons for the decision to purchase a tourist product: the environment (nature) - 32% of respondents, cultural heritage - 27%, entertainment - 14%, gastronomy - 7%, art - 6%, festivals and events - 5%, others - 7%, non-answers - 3%.

The team of THR-TNS specialists (Asesores en Turismo, Hotelera y Recreacion / Taylor Nelson Sofres) employed by the Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism for the country branding conducted an extensive research on eight source-countries for Romanian tourism. Among the results, we bring to the fore the fact that half the people traveling abroad analyzed markets: Germany, UK, Italy, Russia, Austria, USA, France and Hungary would not exclude choosing Romania for vacation and 29% do not have any doubt - it imagines coming for holidays in Romania. This segment represents 46 million passengers. If we take into account the 20% of the 8 countries surveyed who said they "consider the option to travel to Romania", the expanded group potential would reach 97 million.

According to the study mentioned above, Romania's nature and landscapes exceed the expectations of tourists during their visits and general expectations from Romania as a country are satisfied, but not so obsolete after these experiences. However, after visiting Romania only 23 % of tourists (excluding Hungarians, where this percentage is higher) may state the unique features of Romania. The good news for Romania is that half of the country's tourists would recommend to others and would return for the holidays themselves. Those who return home with a positive image are particularly Hungarians, Americans and Italians. Unfortunately, the Russians, the Germans and the British return home rather with a negative impression. The biggest problems that Romania's visitors have to face are mainly related to the overall infrastructure, of the specific tourism, pollution and the quality of accommodation and services.

## **2. Resources: Realities and Goals**

Natural and cultural resources are considered to be the main sources of competitive advantage for Romanian tourism. Official data contradict us. Thus, according to the classification made by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in the calculation Tourism Competitiveness Index (ICT), Romania occupies only a modest place 94 worldwide (World Economic Forum Report, 2011, 2012).

The Index for Competitiveness in Tourism (ICT) has as an objective evaluating elements to ensure tourism development by three categories of variables, namely: regulatory policies affecting tourism; business environment, infrastructure and natural resources; cultural and human resources involved in tourism.

It is true that, the touristic potential given by nature exists and places us on the 43 rank. What presses us down the rankings is that WEF methodology takes into account only natural sights included in UNESCO, the environment quality, the diversity of wildlife and natural parks. Romania occupies a modest place, mainly determined by the quality of the environment (rank 104), low diversity fauna (rank 83) and protected areas (number 77).

To become more competitive in this chapter, Romania must take measures to implement strategies to improve the environment and protected areas, on the other hand to begin efforts to identify new natural resources that can be included in UNESCO. And regarding cultural resources, Romania is behind direct competitors, despite the cultural heritage value. The cause is the lack of concrete animation action for this heritage, illustrated, for example, by the number of fairs and exhibitions or the performance of creative industries. Regarding the quality of the human factor in tourism, it is generated by the education system, which provides quality training and leads to greater specialization of work force in the tourism, a chapter whereas again, we suffer (Botezat, Benea, 2012; Wei-Chiang Hong, 2008).

The success of a tourist destination lies in the perception of tourists that will be well received, that they will be in a safe environment and if necessary will have access to good quality medical facilities. The role of the touristic product is to meet the needs of those who purchase and physiological needs, safety needs and the need for respect and acceptance are the most important needs according to Maslow's pyramid of needs. We emphasize the role of hospitality in tourism satisfying physiological needs such as hunger or thirst and the need for esteem or acceptance.

A survey conducted in November 2011 on a sample of 1,111 respondent's interview using the face to face method, at the respondents' homes revealed that "the Romanians see themselves as hospitable, resourceful, generous, hardworking and carping". The fact that, in terms of affinity towards tourism, we generically call hospitality, Romania occupies the 95th place, by the Competitiveness Touristic Index value, raises serious questions again. Basically it is about recognized - demonstrated hospitality by the balance of payments of travel and tolerance towards foreign visitors.

The conclusion we reach is that the appreciation of resource's attributes implies a reference to the competitive environment. Discussing the attributes of resource (Dierickx și Cool, 1989; Conner, 1991; Peteraf, 1993; Barney, 1991) involves a reference to external references.

In our opinion, the natural and cultural resources of Romania can evolve to represent sources of competitive advantage for Romanian tourism, only if they get a good score as the attributes mentioned in the literature as the VRIO framework. VRIO is an acronym for the group of concepts: value, rarity, inimitable and organization (exploitability). A resource can be considered valuable if it allows obtaining additional profit compared to if it was missing. The value of resources determines the increase of the held market share. The profile of the targeted tourist presents the following characteristics: it is a discerning traveler, experienced, willing to make extra efforts to live new experiences and emotions, to satisfy particular interest to learn new things. This type of tourist is attracted to nature and landscape, to authentic lifestyle and culture and has values centered around the idea of healthy, active life, based on tolerance. The identification of valuable resources is through an analysis that consists in an activities chain decomposition. The weaknesses of the method is that it can be dropped out of sight the synergies arising from the combined use of resources (nature walks and folk events, for example), or combinations of different entities (hostels, inns, restaurants, museums, craftsmen houses).

A resource is considered to be rare, if the number of competitors holding it is relatively small. Rarity, once recognized as existing, is a sustainable attribute. Of course, the best case is that we are dealing with a single owner of the resource. It is obvious that, in tourism, the site/ environment, by the fact that it is unique, represents a scarce resource. The problem stems from the fact that each community is unique, what makes the difference, in terms of economic performance, is awareness. In other words, a scarce resource in tourism has value insofar as it is known and ranked higher in positive charts like "the most ...".

The problem regarding imitating a resource involves two different relative aspects: proper imitation and substitutability. A resource is considered inimitable if a competitor cannot take possession of it in a short time or if it does not induce the purchase cost disadvantages. Non - substitutability means the inability of a competitor to achieve the same benefit in a new combination of resources. Only if a resource is inimitable, the advantage of value and rarity can be stored. Time "plays" in the favor of natural and cultural resources, in that it creates a barrier against copies. Specifically, the imitation of the economic point of view, involves high costs. After Barney (1991), we are dealing with costs related to historical conditions determined by the position in time and space, the lack of identifiable causality of resources or their way of combination, social com-

plexity which generates an unique psychosocial phenomenon, legal protection, patent types for example.

The resource management must be understood as the ability to exploit the resource, which is supposed to be valuable, rare, inimitable. Basically, we can talk about resource management, i.e. to get the maximum of what we have. In our opinion, possible, to the extent in which we can adequate answer to the questions Why? How? What?. Basically it regards needed capabilities (the theoretic part), skills (the practical part), motivation and opportunities. We believe that a prime element, with an increasing potential is the creativity, the innovative capacity. The one who wants to win this race needs to innovate faster than competitors and can support what he created.

### **3. Research and hypothesis**

The main method proposed for the present research is the case study, considered by the team that implemented the projects to be the most suitable method which can cover all the studied problems. Our research is circumscribed to specific projects such as: The Summer School for *The Management of Touristic Destination*, the First Edition of 2007 and The Second Edition of 2008, the Project of *Developing and Promoting Integrated Common Touristic Packages in the Euro-Region Bihor - Hajdu -Bihar* financed by the Phare Programme CBC 2006/INTERREG IIIA conducted between August 15th 2008 - November 15th 2009, *Entrepreneurship and Equal Opportunities Project. A Inter-Regional Model of Entrepreneurial School for Women*, funded by the European Social Fund (ESF), the Operational Programme Human Resources Development (POS DRU), Priority 3 - Increasing adaptability of work force and enterprises, Key Area of Intervention 3.1 - Promoting entrepreneurial culture, developed between January 3rd 2009 - December 31st 2010 (Botezat, E., 2011).. The case study analysis is a holistic approach that can be applied to complex situations with relevant and valuable results. The main objective of the investigation of the case study is critical analysis and impact assessment. The research of the case study approach is complex and includes a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods. During field research we used the following methods: secondary analysis of statistical data and relevant literature consist of reports, strategies, studies, monographs etc. about Bihor region, semi-structured interviews with key-informants and structured interviews to collect information about successful initiatives for rural cultural heritage.

Bihor County is located in north-western Romania, holds 7,535 km<sup>2</sup> - 2.94% of the country and at the end of 2013 had a population of 634 854 inhabitants, which represents 3.01% of the total population of Romania. Here live Romanians, Hungarians, Hebrews, Germans, Rromany, Slovaks etc. Due to natural and anthropic touristic potential and the valuable material base, the present forms of tourism are: health tourism, cultural tourism, rural tourism and agro-tourism, mountaineering tourism.

*Research objectives* were both theoretical, consisting of bringing into focus the importance of traditions – part of Romanian rural heritage in the current context, and also practical aspects related to identifying if these resources can become an innovative element in order to develop a competitive touristic offer.

*Hypothesis I:* Bihor County has traditions – part of Romanian rural heritage, but they are not enough known and promoted.

*Hypothesis II:* The Bihor County traditions – part of Romanian rural heritage can be an element of innovation for the Romanian tourism.

## **4. Presentation of research outputs**

### **4.1. Outputs regarding the first hypothesis**

The past of Bihor County is alive and lives mainly in rural settlements and in the spirit and art of the people of Bihor.

Embroidery is the occupation of women whose hands refuse to stand for nothing. They plait, twist and sew cotton thread in countless motifs inspired from the immediate reality of the man from the village. We find oak leafs, stars, fir trees, cipcas, screen embroidery. Decorated objects are especially traditional towels, tablecloths, costumes or support pieces.

Pottery itself carries a whole mythology associated with divine creation. Pottery pieces are reflections of the human universe, with its shapes and color, stylized transposed. The two active centers in the county produce red pottery, of Roman specific, in the Crișul Negru region (Leheceni, Criștor și Săliște de Vașcău) and white ceramics, very rare in Romania, in the valley of Crișul Repede.

Crafting wood starts from choosing wood fiber suitable for the type of object that will be produced and goes until its decoration with motifs that highlight the wood and the shape of the object. In Bihor County currently people manufacture chests and ladders and especially among the Rromany population, the manufacturing of spoons, wooden chops and wooden kneading-troughs. Manufacturing wooden furniture is increasing.

The manufacturing of fabrics still persists under pressure from the industrial production of textiles. In Bihor there are some households that are involved in processing of textile fibers (linen, wool, hemp, cotton) and not many women who weave the loom. They can be found mainly in mountain areas. The items they work at are towels, tablecloths, bags, rugs, mats. The colors and the reasons vary depending on the area, leaving the white as the base color.

Braided corn husks, twigs or rushes are different by the materials that are used and that are found in different areas, by way of preparation and processing of the material as well as for the crafted object. Generally, woven rush and husk are more common in lowlands (Abram, Otomani, Borș) and wickerwork exist in other areas (Salonta, around Beiuș).

Necessary handmade household items used in working the field can be found in every village in Bihor County. However, there are some villages specialized in the realization of certain objects, especially in the Beiuș area: wooden rakes and forks at Criștor, stairs at Cresuia, iron tools at Vărzarii de Jos. Not to be neglected is the cauldron craft, practiced with predilection by the Rromany population.

Making jewelry from beads, addresses more to women, who do wear them mostly at holidays. Traditional in Bihor are necklaces with red, white, black, green beads and geometric motifs (scales, precure).

Decorating Easter eggs is practiced for the Easter holyday. The beautification craft for Easter eggs include the choosing of the egg, dyeing them (often with dyes obtained from plants) and the proper wax-painting, alternately. In Bihor, the craft is practiced in some villages in Beiuș area such as: Drăgoteni, Remetea, Budureasa.

Making gingerbread after a traditional recipe and decorating it with egg white foam is usually present mainly in Hungarian communities. Usually the cake is brown and white patterns are applied over. It can be presented as colored cakes as well as gingerbread items.

Making glass and wooden icons was associated with monastic life, especially with Nicula monastery. Many churches in Bihor have unique icons. Native painting on glass was practiced by many villagers and represent scenes from everyday life. Nowadays, there are organized centers in Oradea and Beiuș centers frequented by young people.

Making musical instruments such as: violins, flutes wooden flutes and pan-pipes is representative for The county. Specific for Bihor is the violin with a trumpet on it.

Traditional beverage includes the famous brandy (palinca), wine and soft drinks. Red plum brandy, bistuca plum brandy, apples, pears or apricots brandy led fame to the region. Known are cherry, blueberry brandy or white wines from the Ierului valley. For lovers of refreshments it can be prepared elder drinks and raspberries, blueberries, strawberries, blackberries, syrups made with cold water spring. In the mountains people prepare pine nuts syrup.

Traditional cuisine is varied and tasty, generated by long coexistence between Romanians, Hungarians, Germans and Slovaks. It is about day to day dishes and special holiday dishes.

#### **4.2. Outputs regarding the second hypothesis**

Research conducted during the development of the strategy for the creation and development of Romania's touristic brand resulted also in the establishment of tourism products that can make Romania a competitive destination. Their analysis directed on identifying interconditionality with the existence of a well-preserved tradition in Bihor encourages us to conclude that the inclusion of proper traditions - part of Romanian rural heritage in the tourist offer is an innovative element that can lead to performance in the Bihor touristic market.

The product "circuits / tours", may be the fastest growing product. This is in order about more circuits.

The circuit of Oradea-Ciucea comprises: Wooden Churches (Peştiş, Subpiatră, Vîrciorog, Gheghie, Auşeu, Luncşoara, Lugaşu de Sus), traditional villages and households Zece Hotare, Damiş, Bulz, Tomnatic), craftsmen (Vadu Crişului, Şuncuiuş, Zece Hotare, Bratca, Damiş, Bulz), peasant installations (Bulz, Valea Brătcuţei, Mişidului).

The circuit Oradea - Beiuş - Vaşcău includes: Wooden Churches (Lazuri de Beiuş, Sebiş, Saca, Brădet, Dumbrăveni, Căpâlna, Luncasprie, Drăgăneşti, Petreasa, Vaşcău), traditional villages and households (Roşia, Meziad, Budureasa, Cresuia, Saca, Gurani, Briheni, Criştiorul de Sus), craftsmen (Drăgoteni, Roşia, Meziad, Budureasa, Căbeşti, Cărpinet, Lunca, Rieni, Cresuia, Finiş, Nucet, Leheceni, Criştiorul de Jos, Totoreni, Tinca, Lazuri de Roşia), peasant installations (Roşia, Lazuri de Roşia, Pietroasa, Budureasa).

The circuit Oradea-Salonta comprises in: Wooden Churches (Ineu, Nojorid), craftsmen (Salonta, Borş, Avram Iancu).

The circuit Oradea-Valea lui Mihai includes: cellars and vineyards (Săcuieni, Diosig, Tarcea, Valea lui Mihai, valea Ierului, Văşad, Sanislău, Pişcolţ), craftsmen (Abram, Tarcea; Sălacea, Otomani, Derna, Sacalasău).

In our view, a problem to be solved is to overcome the phase of fragmented use of the touristic potential of the area. We can successfully combine the incremental innovation with niche innovation. Operating costs could be reduced by setting up structures / associations of producers and tenderers to handle organizing events to attract tourists into several periods of the year, the tourism promotion but also the purchase of products from practicing craftsmen. In this way, each bidder will return a share of lower cost and purchase cost will decrease due to higher orders and regular character.

#### **5. Conclusions and discussions**

Subscribing G. Stiegler's theory (1962) on the determinants of life and economic dynamics of a country, we emphasize along with the ability of organization and resource allocation, the importance of an unique, specific spiritual model, built over time which causes the motivation of using these resources. It is the result of a more pragmatic and liberal approach that can be distinguished from the classic, mercantilist one (Barbie, 1998; Hammer, 2008).

The object to competitive travel packages is customized, increasingly more through differentiation and the main source for this is the vast majority of situations, *creativity, innovation*. As a result, those who perform will be those that will learn faster how to offer better benefits and / or differentiated from the competition on the market. Consumers claim solutions to their problems rather than the goods and services themselves. As a result, the goals of a touristic business no longer expressed as lower cost, highly skilled labor and better management but through customer satisfaction! In the current crisis, tourism entrepreneurs strive to design added value, through small sieve any variable, any weak signal, any strategy, budget and control plan to be able to notice changes in consumer needs for travel, choose the most appropriate market segment to develop.

Innovation niche may be considered, in our opinion, combining elements of interest in the area at events (peasant fairs, tasting contest, festivals - the Locust trees in bloom, the Slovak hutens, Autumn on the Ier Valley and so on). Expected benefits would be: increased tourist traffic and the number of nights, industrial development side, higher revenues for local budgets, the increasing popularity of the area.

The sustainability of competitive advantage is possible when tourism company has developed skills based on resources and capabilities, hard to find or imitated. Knowing that the consumer travel decision to visit a destination is to meet a need, innovation must respond to this need and be presented in a way that tourists become aware that that need will be met by the tour package proposed, the package that includes products resulted from tradition - part of Romanian rural heritage, in our case.

## References

- Schifirnet, C. (1999) *Rădulescu-Motru C. Psihologia poporului român*, Editura Albatros, Bucureşti.
- Romanian Ministry of Tourism, THR&TNS. (2010). *Development of new tourism brand for Romania*.
- European Travel Commission and UNWTO. (2010). *Handbook on Tourist Destination Marketing*.
- European Travel Commission. (2011). *European Tourism: Trends&Prospects Q4*.
- World Economic Forum. (2011, 2012) *The Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report*.
- Botezat, E. A., Benea C. B. (2012). *Stimulating the Potential of Local Resources in order to achieve Competitiveness in Romanian Tourism*, in the Proceedings of The International Conference: „Emerging Markets Queries in Finance and Business” – EMQFB, Tîrgu-Mureş, 24-27 October 2012, Procedia - Economics and Finance, Elsevier journal, Imprint: ELSEVIER, ISSN: 2212-5671, hosted by Science Direct.
- Wei-Chiang, Hong, (2008). *Competitiveness in the tourism sector*, Physica-Verlag, p. 6. [http://www.realitatea.net/romani-se-declara-ospitalieri-si-carcotasi\\_893219](http://www.realitatea.net/romani-se-declara-ospitalieri-si-carcotasi_893219), [on line] available: [4.03.2014]
- Dierickx, I., Cool, K. (1987). *Asset Stock Accumulation and Sustainability of Competitive Advantage*, *Management Science*, vol. 35., nr. 12, pp. 1504-1511.
- Conner, K. R. (1991), *A Historical Comparison of Resource-Based Theory and Five Schools of Thought within Industrial Organization Economic: Do We Have a New Theory of the Firm?*, *Journal of Management*, vol. 17., nr. 1, pp. 121-154.
- Peteraf, M. A. (1993). *The Cornerstones of Competitive Advantage: A Resource-Based View*, *Strategic Management Journal*, vol. 14, nr. 3, pp. 179-191.
- Barney, J. B., (1991), *Firm Resources and Sustained Competitive Advantage*, *Journal of Management*, vol. 17., nr. 1, pp. 99-120.
- Botezat, E. A. (2011). *Learning Women from Western Part of Romania Business. An Empirical Approach*, *International Journal of Education and Information*, Issue 2, Volume

- 5, (2011), 258-261, <http://www.naun.org/journals/educationinformation/19-782.pdf>.  
\*\*\* site-uri: cultural institutions from Bihor, University of Oradea, Bihor County Council  
Barbie, A. (1998). *Cultural identity of the Slovenian countryside: Territorial integrity and cultural diversity from the perspective of rural communities*, *Agricultural and Human Values*, Vol. 15, pp. 253-265.  
Hammer, J.R. (2008). *Recreation and rural development in Norway: Nature versus culture*, *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, Vol.8, No.2, pp. 176-186.