

THE CITY OF ORADEA – A SUCCESSFUL TOURIST DESTINATION

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Abstract: *In recent years, the city of Oradea, located in northwestern Romania, has stood out as a model of good practice in tourism development. The Oradea case study highlights the joint efforts of the public and private sectors, along with strategic planning and the implementation of innovative actions, which have significantly contributed to Oradea's transformation into a point of attraction both nationally and internationally. Among the most notable initiatives are the restoration and valorization of the Art Nouveau heritage, the creation and promotion of the city's tourism brand, and the organization of numerous cultural events (such as open-air concerts, Christmas and Easter fairs, the Transylvania International Film Festival – TIFF, the City Days festival, and the Gaudeamus Book Fair), all aimed at attracting tourists throughout the year. The projects carried out in the field of tourism focused on developing a welcoming urban environment that highlights the history, architectural wealth of the city while creating a perfect balance between urban hustle and outdoor relaxation. The Oradea and Region Tourism Promotion Association (APTOR) plays an essential role in increasing the visibility of the destination and revitalizing areas with significant tourism potential. The association has launched several innovative initiatives (the "Oradea with Love" campaign, free guided tours, the Oradea City Hunt project and the creation of a customer relationship management (CRM) system) with the aim of increasing awareness and accessibility to the city's main tourist attractions. Also, the awards obtained by Oradea in the last two years, (Oradea – winner of the title "Art Nouveau Destination in Europe" and the title "Destination of the Year" 2025) shape the image of the city as a successful tourist destination.*

Keywords: *urban tourism, Art-Nouveau, APTOR, city brand, Oradea.*

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1. Introduction

Tourism plays a significant role in the European Union's economy, substantially contributing to economic growth, employment generator, and social progress (Trip *et al.*, 2021). According to Eurostat, in 2024, over 3 billion nights were spent in tourist accommodations across the EU (a 2.2% increase from 2023). Countries like Spain (500 million), Italy (458 million), France (451 million) and Germany (441 million) registered the highest number of nights spent at tourist accommodation establishments, representing 61.6% of the total nights spent in the EU, confirming their position as Europe's top destinations (Eurostat, 2025). A significant milestone in 2024 was the

complete integration of Bulgaria and Romania into the Schengen Area. The removal of land border controls has facilitated the free movement of people across 29 European countries. This expansion reinforces mobility within the European Union and will boost travel, trade and tourism in Southeast Europe (European Commission, 2025). Many Romanian towns, with histories stretching back thousands of years, have chosen to build an authentic future rooted in their ancestral heritage, rather than rushing toward rapid development. Located approximately 8 miles east of Romania's border with Hungary and extending along both banks of the Crișul Repede River, the refined city of Oradea serves as a distinguished entry point into Romania for travelers arriving by car or train from Central Europe. Compared to other important tourist destinations in Romania, it has consolidated its position in the top tourist destinations in the country, occupying 8th place, the same position as in 2024, being one of the most attractive locations for tourists.

Table no.1 Top tourist destinations in Romania (2024)

Important tourist destinations Romania	Tourist arrivals (number of individuals)
1. Bucharest	2.005.391
2. Brașov	744.389
3. Constanța	528.775
4. Cluj-Napoca	501.683
5. Sibiu	411.860
6. Iași	340.202
7. Timișoara	286.614
8. Oradea	243.196
9. Târgu Mureș	168.926
10. Suceava	135.524

Source: compiled by the author based on data provided by <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table>

The increase in the number of overnight stays reflects the diversity of recreational activities and the attractiveness of organized events, with the average length of stay exceeding 3 days. If 2023 represented a continuation of the recovery that began in 2022, 2024 represented the year of reaching or even exceeding pre-pandemic values. Thus, in 2024, the number of overnight stays in Oradea increased by over 8% compared to 2023, representing the first year exceeding the overnight stays before the pandemic, the reference year 2019. In terms of individual arrivals, in 2024 Oradea recorded a number of 243,196 tourists, which represents an increase of approximately 9% compared to 2023, being 10% above the values recorded in 2019. The accommodation capacity of the destination, according to the INS, increased from 77 accommodation units in 2023 to 86 in 2024, double compared to 2019 (TEMPO Online, 2024).

2. Urban Tourism. A Theoretical Overview

Tourism, as one of the fundamental pillars of urban development, exerts a significant influence on the economic, social, and spatial configuration of cities worldwide, positioning it as a crucial element in contemporary urban development strategies (*UN Tourism*). Urban tourism can serve as a key catalyst for the development of cities and nations, aligning closely with the objectives of the New Urban Agenda and contributing directly to the achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 11, which focuses on making cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable (*World Bank Group*).

Urban tourism stands out as one of the most dynamic and rapidly expanding forms of contemporary tourism (Panasiuk, 2019). The importance of urban tourism in stimulating economic growth (Postma *et al.*, 2017) is highlighted through its roles in generating revenue, creating jobs, and enhancing infrastructure and international visibility (Petrović *et al.*, 2024). Urban or metropolitan tourism is closely associated with destinations characterized by advanced urban infrastructure, which includes well-developed transport systems (tram, bus, subway) accommodation and food service facilities (hotels, restaurants, pubs) cultural institutions (museum, theatre, cinema, libraries) centers for sports and recreational activities (football/tennis stadium, ice skating rink) entertainment venues (outdoor concerts, film screenings) commercial areas (mall, market, fair) communal infrastructure (roads, highway, airport) and other services designed to meet the needs of both tourists and permanent residents (parks, bookstores, health services). The main motivations for choosing such destinations typically involve visiting tourist attractions, participating in cultural events, engaging in business or professional activities, attending sports events, maintaining family and social relationships, as well as engaging in commercial activities, particularly shopping (Panasiuk, 2019). Law (1992) adds that urban areas must meet several key criteria to function effectively as tourist destinations. Cities have large populations, which attract visitors coming to see friends and relatives. They also tend to have more developed attractions compared to other types of destinations. Accessibility is another major advantage, with urban areas typically well-connected through airports and regular transport services. Additionally, cities often have a wide range of accommodations originally built for business travelers. Urban destinations also appeal to multiple types of tourists by offering comprehensive infrastructure, including communication networks, transportation, services, and facilities that cater to visitor needs (Pavlic *et al.*, 2013). The “tourist city” has been defined as “an original novelty of our modernity” (d'Eramo, 2019 by Cristiano and Gonella, 2020). Cristiano and Gonella (2020) argued that future research agendas need to be framed using several concepts now emergent in the urban tourism literature: sustainability, resilience, management (Page *et al.*, 2023). In contemporary discourse, the term *urban conservation and regeneration* have gained prominence, emphasizing the integration of economic and social dimensions into urban conservation strategies and underscoring the importance of holistic, integrative planning approaches (Ramlee *et al.*, 2015).

3. Material and Methods

The research focuses on a selection of articles that explore concepts related to urban tourism and its role in the development of cities and communities. The case study on tourism in Oradea highlights the main initiatives undertaken by local authorities to

showcase the city's tourism potential. This study is based on information provided by official sources (local authorities, specialized institutions, statistical reports), which emphasize the key actions implemented over the past decade—such as projects and innovative initiatives—aimed at facilitating the transformation of Oradea into a major tourist attraction both nationally and internationally.

4. How Oradea Became a Tourism Success Story

The success of a tourist destination depends on several key factors: the creation of a successful partnership between the public sector, the private sector, and the local community; the establishment of a long-term strategy, and designing and promoting a representative city brand.

The Oradea and Region Tourism Promotion Association (APTOR), the destination management organization, was established in 2015 through a public-private partnership involving the most prominent local stakeholders: the Oradea City Hall, the Oradea Local Development Agency, the Oradea Metropolitan Area, the Lotus Centre Shopping Mall, DoubleTree by Hilton Oradea, Ramada by Wyndham Oradea, and Hotel President Băile Felix. As of November 2022, the Bihor Hospitality Association became a full member, thus becoming APTOR's eighth member. The Bihor Hospitality Association represents nearly 60 entrepreneurs from Oradea and Băile Felix who manage hotels, restaurants, cafés, and event venues. APTOR's primary objective is the development and implementation of the destination's tourism policy, through the design of an effective marketing strategy and the creation of local tourism products for commercial promotion. Another essential component of its activity is the establishment and strengthening of strategic partnerships at local, national, and international levels. At the same time, the association aims to develop visitor-oriented services and to curate an event agenda designed to enhance the destination's visibility and revitalize areas with tourism potential within Oradea (*Visit Oradea*, n.d.-a). The association's work is showcased through the platform titled *Visit Oradea*. For the promotion of the city of Oradea, APTOR has implemented a series of innovative initiatives, including: the "Oradea with Love" campaign, the organization of free guided tours, the "Oradea" City Hunt project, the development of a CRM system, among others.

4.1. "Oradea with Love" Campaign

The "Oradea with Love" campaign is organized by APTOR, with the support of Oradea City Hall, in partnership with OTL (Oradea Public Transport Company), the Bihor Foundation for the Protection of Historical Monuments (*Oradea Heritage*), local museum institutions, and hospitality sector businesses (accommodation and food services). The fifth edition took place between February 1st and December 31, 2024, offering tourists the following benefits (Oradea.ro, 2024):

- Free access to tourist attractions managed by the Bihor Foundation for the Protection of Historical Monuments (*Oradea Heritage*): the Oradea City Hall Tower, the Darvas-La Roche House, the Masonic Temple, the Sion Neolog Synagogue, and the Aachvas Rein Synagogue – the Jewish History Synagogue.

- Free access to all museum sections of the *Criș Country Museum – Oradea Museum Complex*: The Criș Country Museum, the Oradea City Museum – Oradea Fortress, the Aurel Lazăr Memorial Museum, the Ady Endre Memorial Museum, and the Iosif Vulcan Memorial Museum.
- Free public transportation for 24 hours throughout the OTL network.
- Attractive discounts at participating cafés and restaurants in Oradea.

Tourist registration, benefit code generation, and communication between campaign partners are managed via the website www.oradealifenouveau.ro, which ensures transparent communication between service providers and facilitates direct connectivity between accommodation units, museums, and the public transport network. Based on this unique code, the tourist will have access to all the benefits of the campaign. A code can be used only once and cannot be transferred, as it is personal. The 24-hour free use of the public transport network in Oradea will be activated by tourists by sending an SMS to a special OTL number. The "Oradea cu drag" campaign - 6th Edition was launched on March 1st, 2025 and will run until December 31, 2025. Tourists who stay a minimum of two nights at partner accommodations benefit, once again, from free access to tourist attractions, free transport for 24 hours and discounts at cafes and restaurants included in the program and, for the first time, discounts on spa and relaxation services (Bihoreanul, 2025a).

4.2. The Organization of Free Guided Tours

The project, initiated in 2022 and continued in the summer of 2023, was a real success, gathering 1,676 participants in the first two years, tourists and Oradea residents, eager to discover the history and architecture of the city of Oradea.

The project was also very popular in 2024, gathering 1,195 participants in 39 tours, between June 28 and September 15. The tours are organized in Romanian, English or Hungarian and last approximately 2.5 – 3 hours. These tourist circuits in Oradea are carried out by accredited tour guides, who are well-versed in the tourist potential of Oradea (*Visit Oradea*, n.d.-b).

4.3. The Oradea City Hunt Project

With the intention of increasing the activity of the destination among tourists, but also among locals, in 2024, Visit Oradea, in partnership with Spark Communication, launches a new initiative to promote and visit the destination: the Oradea CityHunt experience. This event is an interactive guided tour on a route of approximately four kilometers, with an estimated duration of three hours. Oradea CityHunt is a project that addresses everyone interested in discovering and getting to know Oradea more closely, to find out the little-known things about the architecture and history of the tourist destinations, in a unique and interactive way (Chișbora, 2024).

4.4. Development of a CRM System

The main purpose of the project "Strengthening the capacity to manage and coordinate tourism development at the level of the municipality of Oradea - VisIT Oradea" implemented during the period July 2022 - September 2023, was based on supporting the relaunch and development of Oradea tourism. Through the project, a CRM (Customer Relationship Management) system was developed for better communication, information transfer, data collection and results at the tourist destination

level. The system is a national innovation, which helps to efficiently manage, at the level of Visit Oradea, the relationships between local stakeholders and interested parties in the Oradea destination: tourists, potential tourists, bloggers, travel agencies, mass media, etc. This system allows the analysis of available data and the generation of reports to support local public policies in the field of tourism (*Visit Oradea*, n.d.-d).

4.5. City Brand of Oradea

Additionally, APTOR is responsible for designing and promoting a representative city brand, which is to be integrated across all promotional activities, the events agenda, and ongoing strategic collaborations (*Visit Oradea*, n.d.). On May 9, 2019, APTOR officially launched the city brand of Oradea, conceptualized in collaboration with the consultancy and design firm Brandient (Oradea.ro, 2019). The Oradea city brand employs a color palette inspired by the Art Nouveau style, reflecting the elegance and architectural diversity of the city. According to APTOR, the graphic symbol of the Oradea brand is the "Supercrown"—a circle composed of six colored icons, each representing a distinct element of the city's identity (Chișbora, 2019):

- golden crown symbolizing royalty and the historical past;
- purple crown highlighting the art-nouveau architecture of the city;
- green crown symbolizing nature and green spaces;
- blue crown representing the thermal waters of Oradea;
- orange crown indicating a multi-ethnic society, a cosmopolitan city;
- red heart symbolizing the hospitality of the people.



Fig.1 The Oradea city brand
Source: Oradea.ro (2019)

The chosen slogan, *Art Nouveau – Life Nouveau*, blends French and English and is rooted in the city's Art Nouveau heritage. According to APTOR, "the brand promise is 'Art Nouveau, Life Nouveau', a unique expression that unites the past, present, and future of this wonderful and blessed city." The organization also notes that "the Super crown symbol harmoniously captures the history, culture, and rich heritage of the city, while also standing as a symbol of tolerance and the acceptance of diversity in all its forms" (Chișbora, 2019).

5. Projects Implemented in the Field of Tourism

In the last 10 years, Oradea has implemented several projects that were based on developing the city's attractiveness. Among these projects, the following stand out:

- *valorization of the Art Nouveau heritage* - Oradea was accepted in 2011 as a partner in the Art Nouveau Cities Network. Thus, the Art Nouveau architectural heritage of Oradea is protected and promoted both locally, by the Oradea Heritage Foundation, and internationally through the Art Nouveau Network. Through the European project 'Art Nouveau as a New EUtopia' (New EUtopia), the Réseau Art Nouveau Network (RANN) and its partners want to invite contemporary artists from all disciplines (visual artists, writers, musicians,

choreographers, etc.) to reinterpret Art Nouveau works and their link with nature through the prism of the past and the present. Between 2024 and 2025, five of RANN's European partner cities will be setting up six artists' residencies: Aveiro in Portugal, Brussels (two venues) and Mons in Belgium, Nancy in France and Oradea in Romania (RANN, n.b.). On 5.04.2025, Oradea hosted a unique international symposium on the theme of Art Nouveau. The event entitled "Architecture-Art-Design 1900: A New Unity", took place at the Darvas-La Roche House, and was held in English by three renowned specialists in the field of architecture and art history: Paul Stirton, Professor Emeritus in Modern Design at the Bard Graduate Centre in New York and editor of 'West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture'; Juliet Kinchin, former curator in Modern Design at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; and Professor Anthony Gall from Óbuda University in Budapest. The theme of the lectures was Art Nouveau/Secession art and architecture, the sources and characteristics of "new art" supported by examples from Scotland and Central Europe (Bihoreanul, 2025b).

- *creation of new cultural and exhibition spaces* - Titled "Oradea, a city with an artistic soul", the Pact for Culture was created out of the desire to help both the community that wants to participate in dedicated events, and the artists who face difficulties when they want to organize events. The Pact for Culture aims to provide concrete solutions to revitalize culture in Oradea and transform it into a driving force for the development of the city. (BIHON, 2024). The Oradea Arena Multipurpose Hall was inaugurated on April 20, 2022 and is the most modern multifunctional arena in Oradea. The architectural line of the construction and the historical atmosphere of the city bring events to life. From memorable concerts to sports competitions, the created space assumes the role of a bridge between tradition and modernity. Another ongoing project is the construction of the 17,778 square meters Multifunctional Cultural Centre. The building will be intended for cultural events, congresses and conferences on various themes. The centre will have a main hall and two secondary multifunctional halls, foyers and a co-working space with cultural specificity. At the beginning of 2025, the National Investment Company launched a new tender for the design and construction of a new football stadium in Oradea, with an area of 13,000 square meter and a capacity of 16,291 seats. The complex consists of 5 investment objectives: the stadium which will also have a hotel, a restaurant, conference rooms and a SPA centre (Chișbora, 2025). The 2024 calendar of events included 31 public events, some of which were already established, such as the Medieval Festival, Oradea Festifall, Christmas Fair, Sounds of Oradea Festival, Dilema Vechela Oradea Conferences, Unchain Fintech Festival, Oradea Nights Festival, but also unique events such as the European Ice Swimming Championship, the Robotics Championship Olympics or the extraordinary Andrea Bocelli concert (*Visit Oradea*, n.d.-b).
- *rehabilitation of the Oradea Fortress* - Oradea Fortress is one of the most important medieval monuments in Transylvania. Today, the Citadel Park is one of the most beautiful promenade spaces in the city. The versatility of the indoor and outdoor spaces within the Fortress provides an exceptional setting for

business events, in a location with a very strong historical and cultural background (*Visit Oradea*, n.d.-c).

- *construction of Nymphaea Aqua Park* - The project was completed in 2016, the main objectives being based on the diversification and improvement of tourist services in general, and leisure services in particular, offered to the residents of Oradea and tourists, raising the standard of tourist offer, sustainable and responsible exploitation of geothermal mineral resources.

5.1. Oradea - Tourist Resort of National Interest

The Romanian Government implemented in 2020, at the request of the Oradea municipality, a decision by which the city of Oradea becomes a tourist resort of national interest. With this status, Oradea, through the Historical Centre – Crișul Repede Corridor tourist area, has managed to more easily attract investments and European funds for the development of tourism. Given the high concentration of natural and anthropogenic resources, the areas for which the tourist resort status was obtained are: the central area of Oradea Municipality, with the historical monuments, starting from the Roman Catholic Basilica, the central pedestrian street, with everything that the historical centre means and going to the University, and the area of the Crișul Repede green corridor, starting from the Mareșal Prezan Bridge, the Nymphaea Aquapark, the Crișul Meadow, Dealul Ciuperca, Brătianu Park, crossing the central area, to Ștrandul Iloșia. According to Jurca M., director of APTOR *"by obtaining the status of a tourist resort of national interest, both the municipality of Oradea and the private sector economic agents will have the advantage of being able to access European and government funds, which otherwise could not be accessed, and the image of a tourist city will also be strengthened, being highlighted, along with the architectural heritage of the city, the possibilities of spa treatment that the municipality offers"* (Oradea.ro, 2020).

5.2. Oradea City Award Ceremony

Oradea – winner of the title “Art Nouveau Destination in Europe”
In 2024, Oradea was designated by Best European Destinations as the second most beautiful Art Nouveau destination in Europe. Oradea stands out for its buildings with refined ornamental details and a unique combination of architectural influences. The Art Nouveau style with Secession accents and influences, the Baroque style and the medieval star, give the city a special architectural value that has earned it the reputation of being the Art Nouveau capital of Romania (Ion, 2025a).

Oradea - winner of the title “Destination of the Year” 2025
Oradea won 1st place in the “Cities that inspire” category, at the “Destination of the Year 2025” Gala, held on 08.04.2025, in Sibiu. Oradea impressed the jury, the public and the experts with its spectacular urban transformation, the integration of Art Nouveau architecture and the promotion of sustainability as a pillar of tourism development. With modern public spaces, attractive pedestrian areas and a rehabilitated medieval fortress that has become a cultural landmark, Oradea surpassed cities such as Sibiu (2nd place) and Brașov (3rd place) in this competitive category (Ion, 2025b).

6. Promotion Strategy at Destination Level

In order to reach a diverse audience, the association's activity is present through various TV campaigns but also on most social networks: Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, etc. through influencers and bloggers (such as: Călători în bascheți, Aer de vacanță, Hai Hui în doi, Christian Grossi, etc.). The city's promotion activity is also carried out by participating in tourism fairs organized at national and international levels. In order to attract a growing number of international tourists, in 2025, Oradea participated, through Visit Oradea, in the most important tourism fairs in Europe: Matka Nordic Travel Fair in Helsinki and Ferien-Messe Wien in Vienna (Oradea.ro, 2025a), ITB Berlin (Oradea.ro, 2025b) and BIT Milano (BIHON, 2025). These events provide an excellent opportunity to present the city's attractions to a wide audience, consisting of travel agencies, tour operators, specialized journalists and tourists interested in authentic destinations in Central and Eastern Europe. Oradea presents its offer, emphasizing (Oradea.ro, 2025a):

- the Art Nouveau architectural heritage, which makes the city unique in the European landscape;
- the thermal baths recognized for their curative effects;
- local gastronomy, inspired by the multicultural influences of the region;
- the cultural events and festivals that animate the city throughout the year;
- the tourist packages offered by Oradea hoteliers, etc.

7. Conclusion

In recent years, Oradea has undergone a remarkable transformation, becoming a success story in the field of sustainable development and the promotion of urban tourism. The city is distinguished by its exceptional architectural heritage (Art Nouveau capital), elegant and dynamic atmosphere, recent urban development and has also established itself as a significant landmark in the progress of urban tourism in Romania. Elements such as Art Nouveau buildings (the Black Eagle Palace, the Darvas-La Roche House and the Regina Maria Theatre) along with investments in infrastructure and lively vitality contribute to the creation of an urban identity in which the past and the present intertwine harmoniously. Reconfigured public spaces, interactive museums, as well as the network of cafes and concert venues support a complex and attractive tourist experience. Through its active presence at tourism fairs, APTOR reaffirms its mission to promote the city as a top tourist destination in 2025. Both completed projects and those currently under implementation aim to strengthen the city's visibility nationally and internationally, with the aim of attracting an increasing number of tourists and supporting the sustainable development of the local tourism sector.

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