

# Preserving Heritage, Promoting Sustainability: Rural Tourism in Romania through Via Transilvanica

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## Abstract

Inspired by the success of initiatives like El Camino, Romania's Via Transilvanica trail, inaugurated in 2022, highlights the country's priority for rural tourism as a driver of economic growth and heritage preservation. Passing seven regions: Bucovina, the Highland Region, Terra Siculorum, Terra Saxonum, Terra Dacica, Terra Banatica and Terra Romana, the trail transits diverse landscapes and communities, offering travelers a chance to immerse themselves in nature and culture, connecting local villages, history, and nature along its route. Via Transilvanica embodies the global shift towards nature-based tourism, aligning with growing concerns for sustainability and responsible travel, promoting slow living and fostering meaningful connections between tourists and local communities. The comparative analysis for the years 2019-2023 performed using the official data of the lodging opportunities reveals the stability, on one hand, and the change, on the other, of within the accommodation sector. While traditional forms of accommodation, such as hotels, guesthouses remained relatively stable in numbers, there were notable fluctuations observed in new accommodation types. Specifically, the rise of apartments and agritourism guesthouses suggests a growing interest among travelers in a more flexible lodging option and a more personalized experience.

## Keywords

Via Transilvanica, rural tourism, sustainable tourism, accommodation, tourism trends

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## Introduction

Romania's beauty lies not only in its imposing castles, charming landscapes and quaint villages, but also in its warm and welcoming people, delicious food and vibrant cities. As people's need to unwind in their free time in a place away from the chaos of the city is particularly pressing given the modern lifestyle, characterized by speed and technology, rural areas provide a viable solution not only for those seeking to escape the city, but also for other basic needs that can be satisfied by the natural and cultural resources that are valued through rural tourism (Dobre, et al., 2023).

The World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism) defines rural tourism, a concept that can help raise living standards in rural region and boosting the local economy (Scutariu and Scutariu, 2023), as an *experience* often connected to nature-based activities, getting a grasp of the specific elements of the region: agriculture, understanding the lifestyle and the culture and sightseeing (The World Tourism (UN) Organization, n.d.), basically engaging with the area in a meaningful manner. As extrapolated from the definition above, one of the actual directions for the tourism industry is to focus on returning to nature, being more and more prevalent worldwide (Popescu, et al., 2022). The economic, social, and environmental aspects of rural places are all included in rural tourism. It has particular consequences on the environment and on economic growth and is intimately related to people, space, and goods (Yang, et al., 2021). The activities of which the tourists are part of, are usually organized by the locals, incorporating the close connection between the natural and human environment (Marin and Godja (Dănilă), 2017). Thus, such concept impacts the needs of both locals and tourists (Sin, et al., 2020).

This shift towards nature-based tourism reflects a growing awareness concerning sustainable and responsible travel and, in a time marked by increasing environmental concerns and a desire for genuine experiences, rural tourism stands out as a chance to provide tourists the opportunity to connect with nature, learn about the local culture and contribute to the preservation of natural and cultural heritage. However, as tourism becomes more and more prominent driver of economic growth in rural areas, the need of sustainable development becomes obvious.

As Romania embraces tourism as a driver of rural development, preserving the heritage becomes even more important. In this context, Via Transilvanica emerges as symbol of optimism, illustrating how tourism can serve as a catalyst for positive change while honoring the values of rural areas.

### **1. Via Transilvanica – connecting seven Romanian regions**

A trail is supposed to contribute and increase the appreciation of the values and experiences met along the way, building up the regional culture and identity and in this context, hiking is pivoting from a sports-exclusive activity to a form of tourism and leisure (Gomez-Martin, 2019). They are essential components of the natural and cultural environment, and many historic routes have evolved into very significant routes for travel and leisure in modern societies (Godtman Kling, et al., 2017). Inspired by the El Camino\* phenomenon, the Via Transilvanica initiative was inaugurated in Alba Iulia in 2022, by members of the Tășuleasa Social NGO in Romania (Necula and Spănu, 2022).

Via Transilvanica is a network. It connects local communities, villages, history and nature along its route, as trails became a well-known way to develop rural areas, preserving the cultural heritage of the region (Meyer-Cech, 2004).

A 1,400 km trail from Putna to Drobeta-Turnu Severin reveals 2,000 years of Transylvania's past, it blends into every tourist's preference: by foot or riding the bike. It is dedicated to people, no matter the age, willing to experience slow living and light packing, while walking through variety of regions. Split in 7 main regions from both a cultural and historical perspective, the trails' primary goal is to encounter people tales and locations that enhance and promote mental and spiritual healing (Székely, 2024).

### **2. Overview of the tourism industry in Romania**

Via Transilvanica promotes sustainable tourism by encouraging travelers to explore nature, hiking and biking being the main means of transport, reducing carbon emissions associated with traditional means of travel (Lenzen, et al., 2017). It connects rural villages and communities along its route, providing economic opportunities for locals, while travelers engage with customs, traditions, and history. By highlighting the importance of preserving cultural heritage, Via Transilvanica fosters a sense of responsible consumption among both locals and visitors, ensuring that these treasures are protected for future generations. While raising awareness of responsible tourism practices, the trail helps mitigate negative impacts on the environment and local communities, encouraging travelers to minimize waste, respecting the traditions and discover the authentic rural experience.

While tourism is clearly developing, worldwide the industry generation more revenue than the export of oil, food products or automobiles (Popescu and Plesoianu, 2017), it is becoming a more and more attractive industry for people to work in. Over the years, the number of people employed in HoReCa (hotels, restaurants, cafés) grew rapidly, from approximately 158,000 employees in 2015, to approximately 195,000 in 2021 (Table 1). However, the pandemic hit the industry, this being supported by the 9% decrease in employment in the sector in 2020, but the industry managed to recover almost to values similar to those in 2019. The impact in 2020 of -9% is yet to be offset, with an additional value of 6% in 2021, resulting to a -3% decrease compared to 2019. As such, we can conclude that the Romanian tourism industry is still recovering from the impact of the pandemic, its effects being slowly offset.

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\* El Camino de Santiago has been around for more than 1200 years, and right now is one of its most active periods in history. More than 300,000 people travel at least 100 kilometers on foot—or 200 km if they arrive by bicycle or horseback—to get to Santiago de Compostela (Lois Gonzalez, 2012).

**Table no. 1. The employed population (or employees) in hotels and restaurants (value expressed in thousands)**

2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
158,3	176	189,6	195,3	202,5	184,2	195,8

Source: *insse.ro*

Examining the impact of Via Transilvanica could be performed either statistically, or by conducting interviews with both the hikers and locals providing food, housing and experiences to the prior category. Analyzing the data for all the seven regions, extracting the villages and small cities crossed by Via Transilvanica on a sample basis, an analysis of the number of lodging options based on their type has been performed. The data was accessed and retrieved via the National's Institute of Statistics website and dataset TUR101C.

### 3. Analysis of the tourist reception structures in the seven regions

**Table no. 2. Tourist reception structures with tourist accommodation functions by types of structures, counties and villages, Bucovina<sup>†</sup>**

Type of accommodation	2019	2023
Hotels	2	2
Hostels	1	2
Apartments and rooms	0	26
Motels	1	1
Touristic villas	3	3
Tourist cabins	2	3
Bungalows	1	1
Camping sites	1	1
Agritourism guesthouses	50	54

Source: *insse.ro*

As seen in Table 2, the number of accommodation structures has increased, especially in the apartments and rooms to rent category. The data above reveals several noteworthy trends in the industry – while some sectors experienced modest growth or remained stable (*e.g.* hotels, camping sites, bungalows), other saw expansions, reflecting changing preferences and demands in the market. This trend aligns with the shift towards sustainable tourism, travelers seeking connections with local communities, choosing accommodations that provide a unique and authentic experiences (agritourism guesthouses, touristic cabins, hostels).

### 4. The Highland Region

**Table no. 3. Tourist reception structures with tourist accommodation functions by types of structures, counties and villages, the Highland Region**

Type of accommodation	2019	2023
Hotels	11	14
Apartments and rooms	0	18
Motels	1	0
Touristic villas	1	1
Tourist cabins	1	1
Tourist cottages	0	1

<sup>†</sup> Samples: Iacobeni, Putna, Sadova, Sucevița, Vadu Moldovei, Vatra Moldoviței

Guesthouses	7	6
Agritourism guesthouses	18	29

Source: *insse.ro*

As seen in Table 3, the number of accommodation structures has increased, as in Bucovina, especially in the apartments and rooms to rent category. However, 61% percent increase in agritourism guesthouses signifies a switch in travelers' preference, having an impact on the demand on the market, while the traditional accommodation (hotels, motels) had the modest growth and decrease to nil, respectively.

**Table no. 4. Tourist reception structures with Siculorum<sup>‡</sup>**

Type of accommodation	2019	2023
Hotels	2	2
Hostels	3	2
Apartments and rooms	0	1
Bungalows	4	4
Touristic villas	16	14
Agritourism guesthouses	10	15

Source: *insse.ro*

Based on the sample above, interesting results can be extracted. Stability in sectors such as hotels and bungalows suggest meeting the consistent demand over the years. In defiance of the information presented beforehand, the slight decrease in the number of hostels and touristic villas may indicate challenges or changes in these segments.

**Table no. 5. Tourist reception structures with tourist accommodation functions by types of structures, counties and villages, Terra Saxonum<sup>§</sup>**

Type of accommodation	2019	2023
Hotels	21	19
Hostels	2	2
Apartments and rooms	0	22
Bungalows	12	1
Motels	2	2
Camping sites	1	0
Touristic villas	4	4
Tourist cabins	0	3
Guesthouses	40	38
Agritourism guesthouses	17	24

Source: *insse.ro*

Based on the sample above, there is evidence of adaptation and diversification within the accommodation sector. While some types of accommodations, such as hotels and hostels, have remained relatively stable or presenting a slight decrease, others have experienced significant shifts. Alternative accommodations, such as apartments and rooms, reflects the change in traveler preferences towards more flexible lodging options.

<sup>‡</sup> Samples: Săcădat, Lupeni, Ulcani, Odorheiul Secuiesc, Dârjiu

<sup>§</sup> Samples: Bunești, Saschiz, Sighișoara, Biertan, Moșna, Mediaș. Bazna, Axente Sever, Copșa Mică, Șeica Mică

**Table no. 6. Tourist reception structures with tourist accommodation functions by types of structures, counties and villages, Terra Dacica\*\***

Type of accommodation	2019	2023
Hotels	6	4
Apartments and rooms	0	8
Motels	1	1
Touristic villas	1	1
Tourist cabins	1	1
Guesthouses	6	7
Agritourism guesthouses	2	6

Source: insse.ro

Based on the sample above, the Romania's region landscape is rather dynamic. Overall, the data suggest a trend towards diversification and adaptation within the accommodation sector. The growth of apartments, guesthouses and agritourism guesthouses indicates a rising demand for personalized experiences, while the stability of motels highlights the continued relevance in the market. Additionally, the decrease in the number of hotels may reflect the need for accommodation providers to remain agile and responsive to changes in the market conditions.

**Table no. 7. Tourist reception structures with tourist accommodation functions by types of structures, counties and villages, Terra Banatica††**

Type of accommodation	2019	2023
Hotels	14	14
Hostels	7	5
Apartments and rooms	0	14
Touristic villas	2	2
Tourist cottages	1	3
Tourist cabins	3	3
Guesthouses	17	13
Agritourism guesthouses	11	11

Source: insse.ro

Overall, the majority of accommodation structures managed to maintain stability (hotels, touristic villas, touristic cabins and agritourism guesthouses), suggesting continued demand for these types of accommodation. The minor decreases can indicate potential shifts in consumer preferences or market dynamics, however, the significant increase in the numbers of apartments and rooms suggests a popular alternative for the traditional accommodation.

**Table no. 8. Tourist reception structures with tourist accommodation functions by types of structures, counties and villages, Terra Romana††**

Type of accommodation	2019	2023
Hotels	9	10
Hostels	6	6
Apartments and rooms	0	4
Motels	2	1

\*\* Samples: Blaj, Sebeş, Cugir, Ponor, Valea Lungă

†† Samples: Marga, Glimboca, Caransebeş, Văliug, Reşiţa, Caraşova, Prigor

†† Sample: Drobeta Turnu Severin, Cireşu, Obârşia Cloşani, Isverna

Touristic villas	0	1
Camping sites	0	1
Guesthouses	9	8
Agritourism guesthouses	4	9

Source: *insse.ro*

The accommodation market appears to be relatively stable, presenting minor fluctuations in certain sectors. The stability in the number of hotels, hostels, guesthouses suggest a continued demand for these traditional forms of accommodation, indicating that they still meet the needs of travelers, whether they are seeking luxury, budget-friendly or locally owned lodging. However, there are also signs of diversification and adaptation within the accommodation sector. The emergence of new types of accommodation, such as apartments, camping sites, touristic villas etc. reflects changing consumer preferences and evolving tourism trends.

### Conclusions

In conclusion, the analysis of Romania's tourism industry, focusing on the accommodation through Via Transilvanica, offers valuable insights into the sector's evolution and prospects. The analysis revealed a landscape characterized by both stability and adaptability, indicating the industry's resilience despite changing consumer preferences and external influences. While traditional forms of accommodation such as hotels and guesthouses showed a consistent demand, the increase in apartments and agritourism guesthouses demonstrate a diversification driven by evolving tourist expectations and desires for new experiences. Via Transilvanica symbolizes the potential of tourism to drive positive change while honoring rural values and preserving cultural heritage, by promoting nature-based activities and supporting local communities. However, to further enrich our understanding of Romania's tourism potential, future studies could explore visitor demographics, economic impacts, sustainability practices, infrastructure development, cultural heritage preservation, and visitor satisfaction. By embracing these insights and continuously adapting to changing market dynamics, Romania can leverage its natural and cultural assets to position itself as a competitive and sustainable tourism destination on the global stage.

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