

MARKETING PROGRAMME FOR TOURISM POTENTIAL VALORIZATION THROUGH AGRITOURISM

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Abstract

Mehedinti is the county that "excels" in most areas. On the one hand, it is a county with exceptional tourist potential and, on the other hand, is one of the most economically underdeveloped counties. In these circumstances, agritourism appears as one of the best solutions to capitalize the area's tourism potential without substantial investment. This is encouraged by the current concern of the European Union reflected in the approval of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) by the EU Council, which has created great opportunities for funding and action in the Danube region.

In this context, through the following paper we seek to emphasize the importance of agritourism as a solution for developing tourism in the Mehedinti county, developing in this regard a marketing programme that aims to valorize this region's tourism potential.

Keywords: *agritourism, tourism marketing, marketing programme, tourism potential, tourism resources*

1. Introduction

Mehedinti county is part of an area that has become a priority for the European Union. Thus, considering the initiative launched by Romania and Austria in 2008, the European Council (June 8 to 19, 2009) requested from the European Commission to make all the efforts for the adoption of an EU Strategy for the Danube Region by the end of 2010. The EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) was adopted in June 2011 as a macro-regional strategy of the European Union, aiming at developing the economic potential and improving the environmental conditions of the region, encouraging for this purpose long-term cooperation both between local and regional authorities, and between authorities, the private sector and NGOs, by generating projects for the region's development.

Capitalizing the exceptional tourism potential and geopolitical position of the Romanian part of the Danube region in the European context, harmonized with an appropriate legal and institutional framework will entail a full integration of Romania into the regional and European structures.

On the other hand, given that the Danube Region is characterized by vulnerability accentuated by any kind of local anthropic intervention, a reassessment of the activities impacting these areas is required, including tourism, and finding a compromise solution, that of the optimal environmental pollution. Regarding tourism, this solution can be represented by agritourism. Through the additional revenue that it could provide, agritourism can help improve the economic stability of rural communities and farms given that agricultural products have low prices, and agricultural production costs and the suburban areas development are growing. Also, agritourism allows the

diversification of households and farm activities and represents a buffer against the fluctuations of their income.

In order to emphasize agritourism as a solution for capitalizing the tourism potential in the area of Mehedinti county the features and importance of this type of tourism for the area subjected to analysis, and the actions undertaken so far by the authorities to capitalize the tourism potential through agritourism will be presented, a SWOT analysis on the area of interest will be conducted and, finally, we will propose a series of solutions that consider the superior capitalization of the area's tourism potential through agritourism.

2. Considerations regarding the importance of agritourism in the Mehedinti county area

Agritourism is the activity that transforms rural households in tourist destinations for recreation and education purposes.

In the specialty literature agritourism is defined as: "the activity of reception and hospitality performed by individual or associations of agricultural entrepreneurs and their families using their own enterprise (household, farm) or a rented one such that the performed activity is complementary to the activities related to the land cultivation, forestry and livestock, which must be further considered as main activities".

Specialists in the field consider agritourism as a segment of rural tourism represented by tourism products that have a direct link with the environment, products or stays of agrarian nature. As a distinct segment within rural tourism, agritourism involves: accommodation in peasant household, consumption of

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agricultural products from the household and a greater or lesser participation in specific agricultural activities . Agritourism products are offered by agricultural entrepreneurs and their families that are connected and complementary to agricultural activities .

In addition, there are authors that are integrating walks on farms organized for families and schoolchildren, harvesting for own consumption, carts of hay or sleigh rides and overnight stays in peasant households into the agritourism category.

On the other hand, there are specialists who disagree with the idea that agritourism is an extension of rural tourism supporting instead the idea that this is "a freestranding form of tourism because despite of the fact that capitalizes the same rural areas agritourism brings something new namely is introducing the tourist in the peasant activity, allows him to participate, and become an integral part of the household not just a spectator" .

Agritourism is a solution for peasant households that may earn additional revenue in this way. Agritourism contributes to the diversification of households' activities and to the placement of their agricultural products constituting a safety net against the risks existing in the agricultural market. Agritourism appears as an appropriate diversification strategy given that this activity does not require excessive investment in the households' infrastructure. Households pursuing to achieve the diversification of their activities through tourism focus with preference on those activities that can use existing resources to the detriment of those activities which would require additional investment, agritourism being used as a method to obtain additional revenues and to deal with the risks of increasing costs of agricultural equipment and other required inputs . Thus, in Mehedinti county peasant households can practice agritourism by offering those activities already practiced by them at the farm, which will not greatly alter their agricultural production.

What would determine a tourist to choose an agritourism product to the detriment of a "classic" one? The reasons may include the need for a return to nature, the need to remove the effects of stress caused by the anonymity and uniformity of urban congestion by integration in the village community and the wellbeing that this integration provides, the desire to know the cultural and traditional art heritage of an area, the desire to know the farmers simple life and the tranquility of such a life, the desire to consume food prepared using traditional methods and to practice specific peasant occupations .

Failure to implement the agritourism solution in rural households can be avoided by implementing a careful and well-founded planning including the one regarding the involved marketing activity.

Mehedinti County has an adequate framework for carrying out agritourism, archaic activities and folkloric traditions being well preserved, giving it a unique character for tourists coming from urban areas.

The rural world can become in this case the main object of tourist attraction. Agritourism can thus contribute to solving specific problems regarding spatial planning policy and the desired balance between town-village.

3. The stage of tourism potential valorization through agritourism in the Mehedinti county area

In addition to the legislative regulatory rules regarding specific tourism activities functionality a number of strategies and programs like Romania National Tourism Master Plan 2007-2026 or the annual tourism marketing and promotion programs were founded in order to stimulate, between other things, the development of agritourism in the Mehedinti county area. Added to these are added the strategies, programs and projects for regional agritourism development such as: Regional Development Strategy 2014-2020; Mehedinti county, Drobeta Turnu-Severin municipality and Orșova development strategies.

So far, in Mehedinti county the following projects were funded in the Regional Operational Programme 2007-2013 and 2014-2020, Priority axis 5 - Sustainable development and promotion of tourism :

- "Theodor Costescu" Cultural Palace and Severin Fortress Rehabilitation;
- Iron Gates Region Museum Complex rehabilitation and valorization as a tourism product;
- Orsova touristic seafront landscaping – Phase II;
- Ponoarele village tourism potential promotion through specific marketing activities and cultural heritage, manmade sights and tradition valorization;
- Svinita village cultural, natural and historic heritage promotion through tourism marketing and strengthening local, regional and national tourism industry. Highlighting the village unique objectives and increasing the number of visitors on short and medium term;
- Drobeta Turnu Severin tourism potential, natural, historical and civilization resources promotion through specific marketing and communication methods aimed at increasing the number of visitors and strengthen local and national tourism with a focus on the Severin Medieval Fortress;
- Danube Gorge - Eșelnița, objectives with touristic potential unexplored to the true value. Unique European landmarks promotion by means of specific marketing and tourism promotion aimed at increasing with 25% the number of visitors and local and regional tourism development;
- History, genesis and culture in Orșova city;
- Simian island landscape and historical heritage, etc.

Nevertheless, the development of tourism, in general, and agritourism, in particular, is below the level of potential with which Mehedinti county is endowed.

4. SWOT analysis

The strengths are the advantages that the area of Mehedinti county holds in relation to other tourist areas, being represented by the following:

- The concerned area represents a strategic region located on the Serbian border and with access to the Danube River, important communication channel with EU Danube countries thus having a high potential for tourism development;

- The area is characterized by cultural diversity conferred by the presence of communities of Serbs, Czechs etc., and by a rich cultural heritage. Thus, the county population structure in terms of ethnicity is characterized by a rate of 4.11% Roma followed by Serbs (0.4%) and Czechs (0.2%)¹;

- Mehedinti county has important natural resources for tourism development:

- *Mehedinti County's tourism potential* is constituted by the impressive landscape formed by the Danube River and its gorge, the landscape diversity of the highlands area, the existence of particular elements of flora and fauna, many of which are recorded in scientific reserves, plus the impressive testimonials of a past millennia, expressed by a number of historical, architecture and art monuments, some unique, by their value and their novelty. Commissioning of the Rhine - Main - Danube Canal has put the county seat, Drobeta Turnu Severin, in direct contact with all the coastal cities from the Black Sea to the North Sea.

- *Drobeta Turnu Severin*, through its position at the exit of the Danube River in the defile, but also because of its numerous socio-historical and cultural objectives could be a polarizing center of the Mehedinti tourism industry. Severin's main tourist attractions are:

- Trajan's Bridge ruins (built during the Dacian wars fought by Emperor Trajan against Decebal);
- Castra of Drobeta-Turnu Severin (made in the same period as Trajan's Bridge);
- The ruins of the medieval church located near the Roman castra;
- South of the municipality, on the Danube shore, lies the monumental building of the Iron Gate Museum, with sections of history, archeology, ethnography, natural sciences and a great aquarium.

- *County's main tourist areas*, outside Drobeta Turnu Severin, are:

- The Iron Gates I area with the Danube defile, clisura with the Large and Small Boilers, the reservoirs, hydropower and navigation systems, numerous viaducts raised above wild valleys;

- *Orsova Municipality* unfolded as an amphitheater on the Cerna bay shore. The city is the gateway to the Danube Clisura defile ("Iron Gates" Natural Park). It has natural beaches on the Danube shore. Together with the Danube Clisura (Boilers, in particular) and Baile Herculane (including the adjacent area) forms a traditional tourism triangle;

- Simian island - is located downstream of Drobeta Turnu Severin, where the former fortress from Ada-Kaleh island (now under the reservoir waters) was moved;

- The northern part of the county, characterized by the beauty of the landscape. Here the Baia de Arama city can be found where the Sfintii Voievozi Church can be visited. The church was built in Byzantine style and painted in 17th century. About 4 km northwest of Baia de Arama the Ponoare carsta complex and Topolnita cave (the second largest in the country with an explored length of 10.330 m) can be found;

- Not far from Baia de Arama is *Bala balneoclimateric resort* with thermo-mineral waters. Bala's mineral waters are as good as those from Herculane and in some respects even better and powerful, but unfortunately underused;

- Strehaia area, located about 40 km from Drobeta Turnu Severin, with Strehaia Monastery fortress, built around 1500, the linden forest, and eastward, Gura Motrului Monastery.

- Natural reservations have a special place in the county. Among these are: *Cracul Găioara Botanic Reservation* (The Iron Gates Colilia is growing on *Cracul Găioara*, the only place in the world where it was found), *Valea Oglănicului Botanic Reservation*, *Cracul Crucii Botanic Reservation*, *Gura Văii – Vârciorova Botanic Reservation*, *Fața Virului Botanic Reservation*, *Dealul Dohomnei Botanic Reservation*, *Bahna Paleontological Reservation* (the karst limestone preserves a 16 million years old fossil fauna), *Large and Small Boilers Reservation*, *Svinița Paleontological Reservation*.

- *The area's rich cultural heritage*: churches, monasteries, museums. In this area there are many religious (churches and monasteries dating from different centuries), ethnographic and ethno-folkloric (there are numerous celebrations which are still kept, traditional houses; in Balta there are two ethnographic sites in Prejna and Costești; there is an ethnographic center in Baia Baia de Aramă), and cultural objectives (memorial houses and monuments). There are many villages that are still keep alive the traditions, culture

¹ *The stable population by ethnicity - Romania and Mehedinti County by municipalities/cities/villages*, the official website of County Statistics Office – Mehedinți, <http://www.mehedinti.insse.ro/phpfiles/MH-etnie2011.pdf>.

and popular holidays (ethnographic site in the villages of Balta, Prejna, Dălbocița, assembly watermills from Ponoarele etc.). Also in the Mehedinți Plateau there are many tourism and agritourism guesthouses where tourists can enjoy organic products, benefit from accommodation in traditional houses and can take part, if they want, in household activities (Ponoarele, Isverna, Ilovita, Balotești Godeanu). To these are added a number of increasingly popular traditional festivals that take place annually attracting more tourists every year (Nadanova Lilac Festival, Baia de Aramă „Munte, munte, brad frumos” Festival, Titerlești „Pe fir de baladă” Folklore and Folk Crafts National Festival, Bala „Plaiul Cloșani” Festival, Ponoare Lilac Celebration).

- *Special events in the county’s rural areas* such as: Pojejena - sheep measurement – May 6, Mărțișor Ball (Ilovița, February 28), Drawers Ball (Ilovița, January 31), Village Sons (Ilovița, last Sunday in July) Figs Festival (Svinița), Danube Villages Festival (Svinița, May 1-2) etc.;

- *Low industrial pollution of the environment in the scenic beauties area;*

- *The existence of therapeutic resources;*

- *Orșova is one of the points through which one of the European Greenways trails passes - Euro Velo Routes*, an aspect that contributes to linking the county to other Danube regions, representing an asset in attracting foreign tourists;

- *A significant percentage of the Mehedinți county population is employed in agriculture;*

- *The existence of excess living space in rural households usable for agritourism.*

- Mehedinți County **weaknesses** are the following:

- *Natural and human potential is very poorly exploited* although it is suitable for the development of tourism products from which border counties can benefit, including those on the Serbian side of the Danube;

- *Lack of information centers and tourist maps;*

- *The tourism infrastructure is underdeveloped* as it can be seen from the latest situation provided by the County Statistics Office – Mehedinți:

Table 1. Mehedinți County tourist accommodation capacity on July 31

Type of accommodation structure	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Total	27	35	42	42	45	55
Hotels and motels	12	15	15	15	16	22
School and preschool camps	-	-	-	-	-	-

Urban boarding houses	5	8	12	12	12	14
Rural tourist boarding houses	9	12	15	15	16	19
Tourist villas	1	-	-	-	-	-
Tourist chalets	-	-	-	-	1	-

Source: County Statistics Office – Mehedinți, <http://www.mehedinti.insse.ro/main.php?lang=fr&pageid=485>

On the other hand, the *net use index* of accommodation places in 2015 was 25.1%, 6.2 pp more compared to the same period in 2014². Also in 2015, the arrivals in the establishments of tourist reception increased by 56.3% compared to those recorded in 2014, Romanian tourist arrivals representing 86.0% of total arrivals³.

- *The poor state of the transportation infrastructure.* Within the Mehedinți county public roads are measuring 1856 km in length, 374 km of which are represented by national and European roads and 1482 km by county and village roads. The modernization of these roads is low considering that only 38% of them are upgraded.

- *Tourist offer is underdeveloped;*

- *Poor development of the SME sector;*

- *Low state of preservation of some of the anthropic sights and progressive degradation of cultural heritage;*

- *Degradation of some of the natural sights due to high human pressure⁴;*

- *Lack of a refuse disposal system and use of river basins as the village landfill;*

- *Mehedinți is Romania’s only county with no village connected to a natural gas network;*

- *Poor promotion of tourism potential, both natural and anthropic;*

- *High unemployment rate.* With an unemployment rate of 10.65%, Mehedinți County occupies the first places among the highest national rates, along with Vaslui and Teleorman.

- *The demographic context of the region is characterized by demographic decline, migration from rural to urban areas and an average life expectancy below the national level.*

- Mehedinți County is among the areas with the lowest number of inhabitants. The regions’s demographic context is the result of several trends that

² County Statistics Office – Mehedinți, <http://www.mehedinti.insse.ro/main.php?lang=fr&pageid=486>.

³ *Report on the socio-economic status of the Mehedinți county in 2015, 2016*, the official website of Mehedinți Prefecture, pp. 53, <http://www.prefecturamehedinti.ro/uploads/files/COMISII/Raport%20starea%20economico%20sociala%20a%20judetului%20Mehedinti2016.pdf>.

⁴ *Report on the socio-economic status of the Mehedinți county in 2015, 2016*, the official website of Mehedinți Prefecture, pp. 33, <http://www.prefecturamehedinti.ro/uploads/files/COMISII/Raport%20starea%20economico%20sociala%20a%20judetului%20Mehedinti2016.pdf>.

have accelerated over the past two decades - the region's general demographic decline, migration from rural to urban areas, the average life expectancy below the national level. It can be observed not only a constant rate of negative natural increase (each year more deaths were recorded than births) but also a continuous decrease of the birth rate⁵.

- *Lack of skilled labor in tourism and staff fluctuation due to a continuous search for better jobs;*
- *Limited number of institutions with experience in developing and implementing projects.*

Opportunities refer to those elements that can positively influence the valorization of the area's tourism potential. The most important opportunities are:

- *The existence of structural and cohesion funds;*
- *The local government's interest to develop economic relations between Romania and Serbia;*
- *The local government's interest for tourism development in the area of interest;*
- *The rural population percentage in the Mehedinti county's total population was 51.21% after the latest census, in favor of rural tourism development;*
- *The possibility of a relatively simple implementation of hiking trails in the touristic circuit;*
- *New types of tourism are in the process of development;*
- *The development of tourism industry capacities and tourism products.*

The strongest **threats** for Mehedinti county area are:

- The risk of not attracting foreign investment due to poor accessibility, lack of utilities, high costs, in favor of external locations;
- Lack of coordination between projects in the area;
- Environmental protection measures at the expense of tourism activity;
- Poor environmental quality in some areas of interest;
- Touristic products' lack of competitiveness;
- The competition of tourist areas in the region, or other regions or countries, with similar tourist offer;
- Insufficient funds allocated for transport infrastructure rehabilitation (especially road infrastructure);
- Inefficient use of funds for local tourism development.

5. Marketing programme for the Mehedinti county tourism potential valorization through agritourism

The marketing programme's main objective is Mehedinti county's tourism potential valorization through agritourism, an objective that can be achieved through strategies that depend on a unitary coordination

of efforts and investments for environmental policies implementation and sustainable management in the Danube region. Only in this way, Danube communities can develop through tourism.

Mehedinti county's agritourism development is motivated by the presence of traditional rural settlements, country houses and farms, traditional architecture, folk art, agricultural occupations and folk events in an area characterized by high ethnic diversity with various traditions and habits (Romanian, Serbian, Czechs, Swabians, Roma, Hungarians).

Thus, the **main activities** to be undertaken within the marketing programme regarding Mehedinti county's tourism potential valorization through agritourism will be represented by:

- national and international market research and database development to which all the organizations involved will have access;
- creating integrated agritourism products/programs for areas with agritourism potential aiming at improving the tourists experience and a slower consumption of resources;
- development of a distribution system for the Romanian agritourism product, in order to facilitate its access to target markets.

Also, **short and medium-term measures** for Mehedinti county's agritourism development should be:

- organizing meetings for consultation and exchange of ideas, organizing information/presentation seminars and networking and socializing events aimed at establishing a social and economic connection between the local authorities from the area of interest in order to achieve a common project to support agritourism;
- creating a framework for permanent collaboration with the most important travel agencies in the county;
- developing strategies and a program for agritourism development through which the local community will be able to use all types of capital (natural, human, economic, cultural);
- developing a brand for the tourism identification of the area;
- assessment and inventory of all premises and land destined for investment and creating a database with accessible and useful background information for potential investors which may lead to reducing the time spent in the process of land searching for an eventual business;
- establishment of tourist information centers in the Mehedinti county rural and urban areas with tourist vocation;
- setting up consultancy centers and training technical assistance teams to assist tourists, owners of guesthouses and travel agencies;
- organizing fairs, ethno folk and special events that highlight the area's cultural potential;

⁵ Report on the socio-economic status of the Mehedinti county in 2015, 2016, the official website of Mehedinți Prefecture, pp. 21, <http://www.prefecturamehedinti.ro/uploads/files/COMISII/Raport%20starea%20economico%20sociala%20a%20judetului%20Mehedinti2016.pdf>.

- creating magazines, brochures, flyers, tourist maps and illustrated guides with informations about the timing and schedule of events organized in the area and distributing them in info-kiosks, on the internet, tourism fairs and tourist offices;
- valorization of natural and anthropic tourism objectives by attracting investments for new access roads and improving the existing ones;
- tourism promotion with a focus on: the return to nature, knowledge and temporary adherence to membership groups specific of rural areas, active recreation, fresh air and fruits diet, consumption of fresh food from the household host, sports, fishing, hiking;
- investment in infrastructure, restoration, conservation;
- marking access roads for cyclists that lead to recreational areas in the county;
- restoring of existing monuments and introducing them in the touristic circuit;
- development of alternative tourism activities in the rural area, led by the local population and based on local natural and human potential: tourists' accommodation in local farms and active participation in local community life, identifying themselves with it during the stay;
- development and distribution of promotional material for the media (articles, broadcasts), web pages, various brochures, booklets, catalogs, leaflets, posters about the tourist offer;
- participation in specialized domestic and international fairs (as is the International Fair of Rural and Agricultural Tourism, Kielce, Poland or Agri & Slow Travel Expo, Bergamo, Italy), based on a concrete planning;
- promoting specific tourism products which include:
 - Agro-entertainment (fruit harvesting, animal care);
 - Agro-recreation (camping trips, hiking, cycling tourism, fishing, plant identification and collection, tractor or horse-drawn carts rides);
 - Agro-education (enriching tourists' knowledge regarding agricultural and fruit-growing production, from planting a fruit tree to ways to capitalize their products, knowledge about the country life, traditions and celebrations, recipes and ways of preparing them etc.);
 - Agro-commerce.
- active use of dedicated web platforms: Portal of EU Strategy for the Danube Region (<http://www.danube-region.eu/>), Portal of the Mehedinti County (<http://www.sejmh.ro/>), Mehedinti County Directorate for Culture and National Heritage (<http://www.mehedinti.djc.ro/Index.aspx>), ANTREC (<http://www.antrec.ro>), "Danube Boilers" Tourism and Leisure Association (<http://www.cazaneledunarii.com.ro>), Iron Gates Natural Park Administration (<http://www.pnportiledefier.ro/index.html>,

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Parcul-Natural-Portile-de-Fier/126629447364212?sk=wall>), "Camena" Ecological Tourism Association (<http://www.camena.ro/>, <http://www.muntiimehedinti.ro/home.html>), Romanian Community in Serbia (<http://www.comunitatea-romanilor.org.rs>), of social networks and all forms of mutual human contact;

- Affiliation and membership to national and european structures and meetings aiming at attracting relevant stakeholders, sponsors, consortium partners, resource persons (clubs, training sessions, forums): European Greenways Association, European Council for the Village and Small Towns, Naturefriends International, The Association for Tourism and Leisure Education (ATLAS), Danube Competence Center - the Danube region tourism cooperation platform, ACTE – The Association for Culture and Tourism Exchange, ICPDR – International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River, Danube Tourist Commission, ELARD - European LEADER association for Rural Development, VOLUM Federation (The Federation of Organizations Supporting the Development of Volunteerism in Romania).

In this respect, it is necessary to conduct a consultation and advocacy process that include the following activities:

- Organizing meetings for consultation and exchange of ideas with representatives of the County Council, Municipal Council, town halls, Mehedinti county local councils and with County Directorate for Cultural Heritage and Cults;
- Organizing meetings for consultation and exchange of ideas with representatives of the National Association of Rural, Ecological and Cultural Tourism (ANTREC), Eco-Urbi Drobeta focused on the development of ecology and ecological tourism, Mehedinti Association for Tourism Promotion, Pro Mehedinti Association, "Danube Boilers" Tourism and Leisure Association, Iron Gates Natural Park Administration, Environmental Protection Agency - Mehedinti, "Camena" Ecological Tourism Association, representatives of key businesses in the area etc.
- Organization of information and presentation seminars dedicated to all stakeholders;
- Itinerant photographic exhibition with a tourism theme organized in education institutions in the county and outside the county and in public spaces with intense traffic;
- Organizing networking and social events;
- Creating a platform dedicated to an active online promotion of the Mehedinti tourism development project.

6. Conclusions

The marketing programme proposed in this paper represents one of the ways of solving the Mehedinti county economic imbalance through tourism potential valorization.

The marketing programme has as prerequisite complying and promotion of sustainable development encouraged by the current EU concern reflected in the

EU Council approval of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), which created great opportunities for funding and action in the Danube region.

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