



Exploring the Growth and Challenges of Agritourism in Sibiu County, Romania

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Abstract: Agritourism has become a significant component of Romania's tourism sector, contributing to rural development, cultural preservation, and economic diversification. This research paper focuses on developing agritourism in Sibiu County, a region with rich cultural heritage and picturesque landscapes. The paper analyzes agritourism's current state and potential growth in Sibiu County, identifying key factors that influence its success. Statistical data from the Romanian National Institute of Statistics were analyzed to identify trends and patterns in agritourism in Sibiu County, providing insights into the challenges and opportunities within the agritourism sector. The results highlight the significant role of agritourism in promoting sustainable rural development in Sibiu County and underline that targeted policies and investments are essential to support the growth of agritourism, ensuring its long-term viability and positive impact on the community.

1. INTRODUCTION

Agritourism, a dynamic blend of agriculture and tourism, has become an integral part of Romania's tourism landscape, playing a pivotal role in enhancing rural development, preserving cultural heritage, and diversifying the economy. In recent years, the sector has gained significant traction, especially in regions rich in cultural and natural resources. Sibiu County is one such area, famous for its stunning scenery and rich cultural history. This region serves as an ideal case study for understanding the growth and challenges of agritourism in Romania.

Sibiu County, with its rolling hills, traditional villages, and historical landmarks, represents one of the regions of great tourist attraction in Romania with plenty of natural and anthropogenic factors for the development of agritourism. The county's rural charm, coupled with its agricultural practices, presents numerous opportunities for agritourism activities, from farm stays and local food experiences to cultural events and outdoor adventures. However, the path to realizing these opportunities is fraught with challenges that need to be addressed to ensure sustainable growth.

This research paper intends to explore the particularities of agritourism in Sibiu County, examining both its growth potential and the obstacles that impede its development. By considering statistical data collected by the Romanian National Institute of Statistics, this study seeks to identify trends and patterns in agritourism within the county, offering insights into the sector's dynamics. The analysis will highlight key factors influencing the success of agritourism ventures, such as market demand, infrastructure, policy frameworks, and stakeholder engagement.

Ultimately, this paper underscores the importance of targeted policies and investments in bolstering the agritourism sector. It advocates for a strategic approach to developing agritourism that leverages the county's unique attributes while addressing the inherent challenges. By doing so, agritourism can become a catalyst for sustainable rural development in Sibiu County, contributing to its economic resilience and cultural vitality.

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Agritourism has emerged as a significant component of Romania's tourism sector, contributing to rural development, cultural preservation, and economic diversification. This literature review explores the growth and challenges of agritourism in Sibiu County, Romania, by examining various research studies and their findings.

In the paper "An Extensive Study on the Sustainable Exploitation of Sibiu County's Agritourism Potential", [Balcu et al. \(2023\)](#) investigate "the sustainable exploitation of agritourism potential in Sibiu County, focusing on rural development, economic sustainability, environmental impact, and cultural heritage preservation". The research highlights "the mechanisms through which agritourism generates employment opportunities, stimulates local production, and fosters a sense of pride and identity among residents" ([Balcu et al., 2023](#)).

[Mihăilean et al. \(2023\)](#) analyze the agritourism potential of Sibiu County, considering indicators regarding "the number of accommodation units, accommodation capacity, tourist arrivals, and overnight stays". This research identifies key resources that constitute the agritourism potential of the region and "emphasizes the importance of involving local communities" ([Mihăilean et al., 2023](#)) in the tourism sector.

A paper worthy of consideration is that of [Adamov and Iancu \(2023\)](#) which focuses on the role of tour operators in the logistics of agritourism, examining how they impact an increased evolution of rural tourism. The conclusions suggest that tour operators have an essential role in differentiating the social structure of rural areas, promoting local crafts, and supporting economic diversification.

The book of [Bran et al. \(1997\)](#) provides an overview of rural tourism in Europe, with a focus on the European model and its applicability to Romanian rural areas. The authors discuss the potential of rural tourism to solve urban-rural imbalances and promote cultural values, offering insights into the development of agritourism in Romania.

[Glăvan \(1995\)](#) in "Agroturismul-Factor Determinant în Dezvoltarea Economico-Socială a Satului Românesc" examines the role of agritourism as one of the primary agents in both economic and social development of Romanian villages. In this study, the author highlights the increasing importance of agritourism on rural communities by showing its positive effects, including increased income, employment opportunities, and cultural preservation.

[Căărăuș Stanciu \(2017\)](#) discusses the development of agritourism in Sibiu County highlighting its role in sustainable development. It is based on a sociological survey conducted in 70 rural pensions across 15 localities between 2015 and 2016, utilizing data from the Romanian Tourism Ministry and the Sibiu Association of Tourism and concludes that rural tourism and agrotourism are vital for promoting Romania internationally, enhancing the quality of life, and contributing to economic growth through sustainable practices ([Căărăuș Stanciu, 2017](#)).

Another research paper published in the Cactus Tourism Journal ([Ana, 2017](#)) explores the growing significance of ecotourism, agri-tourism, and rural tourism within the European Union, particularly focusing on the New Member States. It highlights the evolution of these tourism forms as responses to changing lifestyles, tourist behaviors, and increasing environmental concerns, which have led to a demand for sustainable tourism practices.

The study by [Stanciu et al. \(2023\)](#) provides a comprehensive analysis of the state of research in rural tourism, agritourism, and ecotourism in Romania. The authors conducted a bibliometric analysis using

VOS Viewer software to evaluate the literature from 1990 to January 2023, highlighting the importance of sustainability, job creation, and digital transformation.

An in-depth analysis of the tourism sector in Romania's Central Region could be found in the research of [Iancu and Hurmuzache Tabita \(2014\)](#), which considers the counties of Alba, Braşov, Covasna, Harghita, Mureş, and Sibiu. The authors highlight the significance of tourism as a dynamic economic force that has evolved from a primarily social activity to a crucial economic contributor.

The paper titled “ETIS in Sibiu County” by [Iştoc et al. \(2022\)](#) analyzes the implementation of the European Tourism Indicators System (ETIS) in Sibiu County, Romania. The ETIS is part of the EU's Sustainable Development Strategy aimed at promoting sustainable tourism through economic growth, social equity, and environmental protection.

3. PARTICULARITIES OF AGRITOURISM IN SIBIU COUNTY, ROMANIA

As an emerging trend in tourism, agritourism merges agriculture with travel, allowing visitors to immerse themselves in rural life, engage in farming activities, and savor local products. The present research is focused on Sibiu County in Romania, as the current state of this type of tourism in this region has seen a steady increase, with a notable rise in the number of agritourism guesthouses and farms offering various experiences.

With reference to the evolution of accommodation structures in Sibiu County, there has been a notable increase in the number of accommodation structures over the years. From 2005 to 2018, there was an increase of 165.76% in the number of accommodation units. Specifically, for agritourism guesthouses, the increase was 168.29%. However, in recent years, there has been a slight reduction in the number of agritourism guesthouses. The existing accommodation capacity in Sibiu County includes a variety of types, such as hotels, guesthouses, and agritourism units. The county offers a mix of cultural, health, and wellness tourism options, although these forms are currently underexploited. The accommodation capacity in operation in Sibiu County is characterized by a mix of traditional and modern facilities. The county has seen investments in modernizing existing units and developing new ones to cater to the growing tourism demand.

About the evolution of the number of overnight stays in Sibiu County, the number of overnight stays in Sibiu County has been increasing over the years, reflecting the growing popularity of the region as a tourist destination. This trend is supported by the county's rich natural and cultural heritage, which attracts both domestic and international tourists.

According to the data from the Tourism Activity series of documents corresponding to the years 2020 and 2023, in Sibiu County, the number of accommodation places offered to tourists by type of tourist reception structures are represented in Table 1.

The number of seats in inns has remained constant, indicating a stable demand and no significant changes in this type of accommodation. A modest increase in tourist villa seats reflects a slight growth in demand for more private and luxurious accommodation options. The significant rise in tourist cabins indicates an increasing enthusiasm for nature-focused and rural tourism experiences. The decrease in tourist guesthouse seats indicates a possible shift in tourist preferences or a reduction in the availability of such accommodations. The increase in agritourism guesthouse seats highlights the growing popularity of agritourism and the demand for authentic rural experiences. The introduction of campsite seats suggests a new or emerging trend in outdoor and adventure tourism. The overall trend in the data suggests a dynamic growth in tourism accommodation structures in Sibiu County, particularly in agritourism

guesthouses also highlights the growing appeal of rural and farm-based tourism experiences. On the other hand, the decrease in tourist guesthouses may reflect changing tourist preferences or challenges faced by this segment.

Table 1. The number of accommodation places offered to tourists
by type of tourist reception structures in Sibiu County

Type of tourism reception structures	Number of places		
	2023	2020	Variation
Hotels	3,387	3,000	13%
Hostels	69	16	331%
Motels	127	122	4%
Inns	38	38	0%
Tourist Villas	624	590	6%
Tourist Cabins	408	343	19%
Tourist Guesthouses	1,177	1,368	-14%
Agritourism Guesthouses	1,624	1,458	11%
Campsites	75	0	No data
Tourist Stops	14	0	No data
Holiday Villages	0	0	No data
Bungalows	40	0	No data
School and preschool Camps	330	24	1275%
Apartments for rent	894	314	185%

Source: National Institute of Statistics (2020, 2023), Own calculations

According to the data from the document you provided, in Sibiu County, in December 2023, the accommodation capacity in operation by type of tourist reception structures is as follows:

Table 2. The accommodation capacity in operation
by type of tourist reception structures in Sibiu County

Type of tourism reception structures	Accommodation capacity (places-days)		
	2023	2020	Variation
Hotels	1,290,414	898,412	44%
Hostels	25,185	19,156	31%
Motels	54,008	44,359	22%
Inns	13,870	10,602	31%
Tourist Villas	242,926	159,212	53%
Tourist Cabins	148,920	93,286	60%
Tourist Guesthouses	488,175	424,091	15%
Agritourism Guesthouses	583,477	420,777	39%
Campsites	57,215	9,460	No data
Tourist Stops	5,110	0	No data
Holiday Villages	0	0	No data
Bungalows	16,430	9,876	No data
School and preschool Camps	121,222	60,012	102%
Apartments for rent	296,776	No data	

Source: National Institute of Statistics (2020, 2023), Own calculations

As future trends of potential growth of agritourism in Sibiu County, considering the year 2024 as a base year, one should underline the following: engaging in sustainable practices as agritourism plays a key role in promoting environmental conservation and local biodiversity; preserving cultural heritage by practicing and showcasing traditional activities, local cuisine, and crafts; and determining an economic impact as agritourism is expected to contribute significantly to the local economy by creating jobs, stimulating local production, and generating additional income for rural residents.

In Romania, the key factors to bring success in agritourism are represented by the investment in infrastructure (e.g.: developing new highways and improvement of existing roads, amplifying the accommodation facilities, and advertising tourist attractions can enhance the agritourism experience), the marketing and promotion, and also the community involvement by active participation of local communities in agritourism activities that can foster a sense of pride and identity.

4. CHALLENGES OF AGRITOURISM IN SIBIU COUNTY IN 2024

A series of factors was challenging and continue to challenge the development of agritourism not only in Sibiu County but in Romania as a whole. The most significant for the author are:

- Sustainable Development: Ensuring that agritourism development aligns with sustainable practices is a significant challenge. Balancing economic growth with environmental preservation requires careful planning and implementation of eco-friendly practices.
- Infrastructure: The lack of adequate infrastructure, such as roads, internet connectivity, and modern facilities for utilities, can hinder the growth of agritourism. Inadequate infrastructure, such as poor road conditions and limited access to technology, can hinder the growth of agritourism. Improving infrastructure is essential to attract more tourists and provide them with a comfortable experience.
- Marketing and Promotion: Effectively marketing agritourism destinations and promoting them to a wider audience is crucial. Many agritourism businesses in Sibiu County struggle with limited marketing resources and knowledge, which affects their visibility and competitiveness.
- Training and Education: There is a need for continuous training and education for agritourism operators to enhance their skills and knowledge. This includes understanding customer service, sustainable practices, and effective business management.
- Seasonality: Agritourism is often seasonal, with peaks during certain times of the year. Managing the fluctuations in tourist numbers and income can be challenging for agritourism businesses, requiring them to diversify their offerings and find ways to attract visitors year-round.
- Regulatory Issues: For agritourism operators, navigating and complying with local, regional, and national regulations can be intricate and time-intensive, particularly when aligning with EU policies for sustainable rural development. Simplifying and streamlining the regulatory process can help alleviate this challenge.
- Community Involvement: Engaging the local community in agritourism initiatives is essential for long-term success. Building strong relationships with local residents and involving them in tourism activities can enhance the authenticity and appeal of agritourism experiences.
- Depopulation and Aging Population: Many rural areas in Romania are experiencing depopulation and an aging population, which can limit the availability of labor and reduce the number of potential visitors.
- Economic Decline: Rural communities often struggle with economic decline, making it difficult to invest in infrastructure and services needed to attract tourists.
- Lack of Unified Framework: There is a lack of a unified framework for agritourism in Romania, which can lead to inconsistencies in standards and practices.
- Globalization and Market Pressures: The pressures of globalization and EU market demands can make it challenging for rural areas to maintain their cultural heritage while adapting to modern tourism trends.
- Climate Change: Climate change can impact agricultural productivity and the natural beauty of rural areas, affecting their appeal to tourists.
- Cultural Preservation: Balancing economic development with the preservation of cultural heritage is a delicate task that requires careful planning and community involvement.

A different kind of challenges for agritourism in Romania, particularly in Sibiu County, in 2024 and beyond, are represented by financial difficulties such as:

- **Economic Slowdown:** Romania's GDP growth in 2024 is expected to be sluggish, barely exceeding 1%, which is significantly lower than earlier projections. This economic slowdown can impact tourism and agritourism by reducing disposable incomes and limiting travel budgets.
- **High Interest Rates:** The high interest rates in Romania can make borrowing more expensive for tourism and agritourism businesses, affecting their ability to invest in infrastructure, marketing, and expansion.
- **Fiscal Adjustments:** Necessary fiscal corrections to address budget and external deficits may lead to tax increases and public spending adjustments. These changes can create uncertainties and financial strain for tourism businesses.
- **Seasonality:** Agritourism is highly seasonal, with peaks during certain times of the year. Managing fluctuations in tourist numbers and income can be challenging, requiring businesses to diversify their offerings and find ways to attract visitors year-round.
- **Access to Financing:** Financial needs in the agriculture and agri-food sectors, including agritourism, are significant. There is a gap between the supply and demand for financing, with many businesses struggling to access the necessary funds for growth and development.

Overcoming these challenges necessitates a unified effort from stakeholders, such as government agencies, local communities, and agritourism operators, to promote sustainable agritourism development. By working together, they can create a sustainable and thriving agritourism sector in Romania and, particularly, in Sibiu County.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has explored the growth and challenges of agritourism in Sibiu County, Romania, highlighting its significant role in promoting sustainable rural development.

Agritourism in Sibiu County has shown substantial growth, as proven by the analysis of statistical data from the Romanian National Institute of Statistics, showing insights into the trends and patterns in agritourism, emphasizing the sector's potential for further development.

The paper identifies various challenges that need to be addressed to ensure sustainable growth in agritourism. These challenges include inadequate infrastructure, limited marketing resources, regulatory issues, and the need for continuous training and education for agritourism operators.

Agritourism contributes significantly to the local economy by creating jobs, stimulating local production, and generating additional income for rural residents. In that regard, the paper underlines the importance of financial incentives in order to develop and diversify agritourism activities that leverage the county's unique attributes.

Overall, the paper concludes that agritourism has the potential to become a catalyst for sustainable rural development in Sibiu County, contributing to its economic resilience and cultural vitality. By addressing the identified challenges and leveraging the opportunities, agritourism can ensure its long-term success and positive impact on the community.

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