

THE POTENTIAL OF ROMANIAN DESTINATIONS TO MEET THE NEW LUXURY TRAVEL TRENDS. THE CASE OF MARAMURES COUNTY

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Abstract

As consumer tastes are constantly transforming, the tourism sector has adapted and had started to approach travellers differently. It is no surprise that the ongoing pandemic impacted individuals' attitudes and implicitly travelling tastes, which are now oriented towards more authentic and life-changing experiences. If ten years ago, a luxury vacation was described as a one-week long stay at a 5-star hotel, now it is shifting towards what we call 'a new luxury travel'. Travel agencies worldwide witnessed this trend and described it through five criteria: untouristed and unexpected destinations, country coupling preferences, tasty travels, group getaways, emotional intelligence encounters and enjoying the journey. By following these criteria, our research aims at describing the potential of Maramures county, located in Romania, of meeting this trend. We follow a qualitative type of research that is capable of creating a framework of area's capacity for becoming a top-rated travel destination. Findings of the paper show positive highlights of Maramures for meeting these trends, through the landscapes, culture and customs it unveils. Results have implications for future scholars in multiple fields, including touristic hosts, travel agencies, tourists but also researchers in the field.

Keywords: tourism, new luxury travel, Maramures, authentic destinations, COVID-19

JEL Classification: L19, L83, O10, Z31, Z39.

I. INTRODUCTION

The tourism sector has been one of the most affected industries as the COVID-19 pandemic hit the markets. With unexpected travel restrictions and borders suddenly closed, the tourists of today seem to be more sensitive when choosing their next holiday destinations. If two years ago an ideal luxury vacation was described as a one-week-long stay at a five-star hotel, having meals at a 5star Michelin restaurant, the COVID-19 era has modelled new travelling tastes, centred on different values. Traditional luxury travellers are now considering aspects such as making new and unique experiences as a starting point when booking their next vacation. After a long period of staying close to their homes, with no alternative to recreate and feel the beautifulness of life, individuals now seem to search for lifetime experiences, personalized vacations offering a taste of the authentic life.

We next turn our attention towards Romania and its unexplored lands, natural heritages and local traditions and culture. We target Maramures as the main point of interest for our paper, the place where ancestral traditions, folk costumes and old arts are

preserved like nowhere else in the country. The traditional Maramures architecture occupies a significant place in the art of wood processing not only in Romania but also in the whole Europe, the originality of the villages in the area consisting of carved gates. This is why we can state that the strong point of tourism in Maramures is the life of the village gathered with its century-long traditions, which form the perfect setting for a new luxury traveller. Not to mention the natural heritages in the area, such as tall waterfalls and impressive natural parks. All these experiences are kindly topped by the warm welcoming behaviour of locals and guesthouse owners, who are always happy to have a nice talk while serving tourists a cup of hot milk or a glass of their house wine.

Our research, therefore, targets a still unexplored land and matches its potential with the new luxury travel of today, a trend of having unique experiences and building authentic memories. We highlight the importance of the chosen area by integrating six-point criteria developed by a global well-known travel advisor agency.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

World's famous travel advisors and agencies Trafalgar and Virtuoso witnessed a 'changing face' of the common luxury travel, a new one shaped by the modern changes in consumers' tastes, that can contribute to a global booming of the travel industry (Trafalgar and Virtuoso, 2021 cited in Luxury Travel, 2021). International travel network Trafalgar observed that the traveller of today does not perceive trips just as an ordinary escape from everyday activities, but also as a novel experience able to create challenges and lead to a learning story. Therefore, the new era of luxury is characterized by a strong desire to gain memorable experiences, not only to share with family and social media followers but to carry on the long-term, as lifetime experiences (Trafalgar, 2021 cited in Luxury Travel, 2021). The global luxury travel network Virtuoso conducted studies in 2019 and 2020 among its travel agencies located in 50 different countries, with the purpose of having better control over consumer preferences and market changes over the years. Results of 2020 revealed consumer inclinations towards 'celebrating life milestones' as a first motivating factor when choosing vacations, compared to 2019 when individuals used to primarily travel to 'explore new destinations', which, in 2020, ranks second. In the third place in the motivating factors list of 2020, we find 'spending time with loved ones'. (Virtuoso Luxe Report 2019; Virtuoso Luxe Report 2020) Changing travelling tastes has been noticeable since some years ago as, according to a LEK Consulting poll of over 2,000 U.S. travellers, in 2017 the definition of luxury travel was shifting to one in which individuals were prepared to spend lavishly on the aspects of travel that matter most to them, and what they preferred were authentic, meaningful, and powerful interactions (LEK Consulting+Skift, 2017).

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic made humans unable to travel to celebrate personal and professional successes. Travel restrictions and social distancing regulations kept people away from each other, from exploring new places and celebrating achievements. The psychological impact celebrations can have upon the human being is enormously positive, starting from improved physical health to increased general optimism and lowered levels of stress (Family&Children's Center, 2021).

Additionally, Villa-Clarke (2022) identified 'Green mapping' as an increasing trend for the future of travel. It is about the eco-consciousness of travellers, who now opt for eco-friendly destinations, looking for sustainable choices. In recent years, it has been identified a growing interest in eco-tourism, with more than half of global travellers (83%) opting for a low environmental impact travel destination, especially for respondents belonging to Generation Z and Millennials

(Lock, 2021). The increasing interest towards Planet conservation when travelling is therefore becoming a strong component of the definition of new luxury travelling, with responsible travellers trying to gain valuable experiences while also preserving natural resources.

With tourism being capable of directly influencing a country's growth and economic development, we turn our attention towards the case of Romanian tourism. According to Statista, in 2020, the Romanian tourism sector accounted for 3.69 per cent of the total GDP (Statista Research Department, 2022), a significantly low percentage if we consider other countries such as Spain and Italy, with more than 12% contribution to the GDP according to statistics of 2019 (World Data Atlas, 2019).

Additionally, the graph provided by Eurostat offers us a clear overview of the current state of the tourism sector in 2019 among European Union countries and the high need of Romanian tourism to take action, as the country ranks among the last touristic destinations by night spent by international guests:

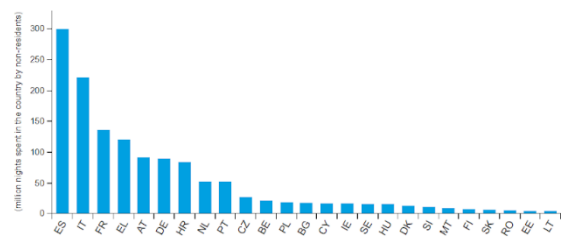


Figure 1- EU tourism destinations by country, according to nights spent by international guests at touristic accommodations. Source: Eurostat, 2020.

Romanian tourism can by far be characterized by a strong potential for cultural tourism, rural tourism and eco-tourism, all part of the new luxury travel we have just discussed. Romania is capable of offering unique experiences, through the landscapes and traditions it possesses. We turn our attention towards one of the major touristic destinations in Romania, that of Maramures County, located in the North-West of the country. Maramures blends local traditions with unique culinary experiences, all of these topped by various touristic objectives such as wooden churches, impressive wooden gates, spectacular waterfalls. (Stef, 2008) According to Aluculesei et al. (2015), Maramures has one of the richest natural and cultural sites to offer, however, it is undervalued and fails to attract enough number of tourists to sustain a consistent development plan. The author suggests that tourists do not allocate the necessary amount of time to reach all the heritage in the area, as they usually opt for short trips.

III.METHODOLOGY

The potential of Maramures County was evaluated according to six trends of the new luxury travellers identified by Virtuoso Travel Advisors Network. The trends were established in 2020 and are the results of the last annual surveys distributed to 50 countries worldwide. These trends, acting in this article as our main criteria, define the new luxury of travellers during the COVID era, mainly defined by “personalized adventures shared with family and friends” (Virtuoso LUXE REPORT, 2020). AS the year of 2020 points out a relevant ongoing event for the tourism industry created by the COVID-19 virus outbreak, we consider this report as still being viable for defining the changing tastes of the traveller.

Therefore, the main criteria followed in the current analysis, which is able to create a framework and highlight the potential of Maramures for the new luxury travel, are:

- *Untouristed and unexpected factor*- the new luxury is characterized by ‘unspoiled’ destinations, no crowd, decrease interest in mass tourism, distinct for local culture, rich in natural resources;
- *Country Coupling*- besides visiting more countries in one holiday, the criteria also refers to mixing experiences in a short trip, such as a ski adventure with a beach day or a day in a famous city with a touch of unexplored places;
- *Tasty Travels*- the trend targets culinary experiences, travellers taking meals in private homes, farm-to-table visits or even Michelin-starred restaurants. Travellers expressed such a strong focus on culinary experiences as they even ask for a table reservation at the time they book their journey.
- *Group Getaways*- Individuals express strong feelings of connecting with similar people in thinking while travelling. Especially Generation Z, Boomer and even Matures feel like socializing with friends and other people that have the same passions and attitudes. This criterion includes the trend of travelling with family, with a group of friends (especially women) and even group of couples.
- *EQ Encounters*- people ask for trips that can lead to a deep understanding of certain aspects so that they increase personal emotional intelligence. They admit that getting out of their comfort zone, communicating and bonding with locals makes them understand the underlying aspects of local cultures. As a result, travellers want authentic experiences such as tasting wine from a local winery or getting food from a local shop. They also ask for authentic private accommodation places, reflecting the character of the area, in small neighbourhoods.
- *Enjoying the Journey*- the new luxury traveller

avoids waiting in long lines, opting for exclusive services that save them time in between flights. These services include private cars that take them from the airport that take them to a relaxing room until their next flight.

Data was gathered by consulting the latest touristic and scientific relevant articles. Additionally, the author’s own knowledge in the field of tourism was integrated into the analysis, for a more authentic approach.

IV.RESEARCH FINDINGS

• **Untouristed and unexpected**

We observe that Maramures possesses consistent preservation of traditional elements in the true sense of the word. The beginnings of tourism in Maramures date back to December 1989. After the collapse of communism, many inhabitants in the county moved abroad to work, as a response to the poor economy. When they returned, the face of Maramures had slightly changed, from the wooden peasant houses to new and modern styled houses. The famous large wooden faces got replaced by metal ones. Afterwards, after sensing the high appreciation of visitors for the authentic experiences, guesthouse owners started to integrate into their accommodation offers old houses, with one or two rooms in ‘vernacular’ style, with wooden decorations. What is more, displaying old artefacts in exhibit rooms inside the accommodation places is a frequent practice in the county of Maramures (Catrina, 2016). This resulted in the preservation of cultural identity, without insisting on the luxury factors, but on that of the original and specific characteristics of the region. Although consumerism has had a strong impact, locals have tried to preserve the authenticity of the area, while all the modern elements added later have been intended to better promote the area.

Objects from the material culture of the peasants from the Maramures area are exhibited to tourists in what we call 'pride room' or in private family museums. Also, for an authentic experience for the tourists, the owners of the accommodation places show tourists traditional customs ad practices, which in many areas of the country almost disappeared. Through these practices, a world is shaped, as tourists are welcomed to explore 'the old'. We are talking about a distinct idea of living compared to everyday life, which matches tourists' new luxury travel of "mixing traditional extravagance with authentic interactions and local connections" (Aggarwal, 2019). Tourists' desire to know more about the culture of the area makes them involuntarily get closer to customs. Travellers are thus introduced into the timeless feelings of past time and are directed towards an experience that will mark them in terms of the uniqueness of the crafts and early life. The discrepancy between past and present will arouse

interest to discover more about Romanian culture. Often, the hosts invite tourists to actively participate in workshops or traditional processes. Active participation can mean weaving or sewing on different materials the small traditional symbols of the area, weaving baskets of hazelnuts.

Therefore, the rural region of Maramures offers a journey back in time, which many tourists consider to be a new luxury trend in terms of experiences. The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly changed people's perception of travel, implicitly through the travel restrictions imposed. Tourists then have turned towards unexplored lands, local culture and traditions, more intimate places that can offer a taste of what life really used to be.

• Country Coupling

This criterion is very easy to witness in Maramures. The touristic area is so diverse in terms of attractions that it is very easy for visitors to have complex, unique and diverse experiences. There is no need for tourists to focus only on culture when visiting the region, as they can mix it with the natural beauties of the region, through its unique places and picturesque views.

A unique ride in the famous 'Mocanita' can offer tourists a once in a lifetime experience, as this is the only in-use railway in Europe that uses a steam engine. Thus, tourists can reconnect with nature through the landscapes they see along the journey. Reconnecting with nature is nowadays an increasing trend, which has become more and more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic and has made people turn to places like Maramures. Also, travellers can explore a series of cities and their attractions, which are not as well-known as other European capitals, but which can be a real delight for their rarity. Among such attractions, we mention Merry Cemetery in Sapanta. A place seen from a different perspective, which brought newness to the area at the time and continues to be a popular emblem. The Cemetery is famous for its' lovely colours and the amusing quotes cited on the tombstones of buried locals

Additionally, among the veritable objectives that tourists have to visit in order to understand the non-material substrate of the area is the impressive wooden churches. The remarkable churches have significant historical importance, as they date back to the 16-17th centuries, and their craftsmanship and specific architecture are unseen in any other area. In 1999 the wooden churches' value has been highlighted by UNESCO by being included in their World Heritage (Transylvania Private Guide, 2018), a fact which made the popularity of the area grow and the region be recognized for such constructions. Even though according to research (Segura, Nistoreanu and Dinca, 2018; Bertacchini and Saccone, 2011), economic and political implications created inequality of the inclusion of sites in the World Heritage list, despite the

introduction of the Global Strategy, the uniqueness and high value of the wooden churches of Maramures made them become part of UNESCO Heritage list. Interestingly to note is also the justification of inscription stated by UNESCO for including the churches in the UNESCO World Heritage List: "The Maramures wooden churches are outstanding examples of vernacular religious wooden architecture resulting from the interchange of Orthodox religious traditions with Gothic influences [...] showing a high level of artistic maturity and craft skills". (UNESCO, 1999)

A different experience that the region offers is hiking trails, which tourists can enjoy if they want to diversify their activities. Additionally, as mentioned in the previous section of the paper, another day can be dedicated to local crafts Maramures has to offer, when visitors can learn together with folk craftsmen different crafts, such as sewing traditional clothes, painting on glass, making clay pots, weaving carpets or weaving baskets from hazel branches. The concept of country coupling is therefore present in the area, considering the large cultural and natural alternatives visitors can choose from.

• Tasty Travels

As our chosen criteria highlight trends of travelling focused on a more traditional and cultural approach, where tourists can escape the quotidian life and experience the local folklore, Maramures is a place where the culinary art is seen as an integration act regarding all types of meals (community, family and even for guests). The residents are trying to consolidate an efficient non-verbal dialogue notwithstanding language, culture or religion by experiencing traditional products and analysing gestures, impressions and behaviour.

Pamfil Biltiu (2004) affirmed that "the guest desires so much bad things for the host as the amount of food left on the plate" which locals consider is a way of showing respect for the hard work and the traditions proffered. Maramures is famous for its traditional culinary arts, out of which we mention corn soup with cheese, Gulas cooked on the cauldron, "vegetables Coltunasi" and some refined sweets, for instance, dumplings with plums and pancakes with sweet cheese and greenery.

• Group Getaways

The new luxury traveller has been recognized as being passionate about experiencing the new with loved ones. Being either family or the person they love, people feel the need to share valuable moments every day. This is why we propose Maramures as forming a compatible set for this increasing trend, as it is able to combine the cosiness of a warm room with the active walks around the cultural and natural attractions. By introducing the tourist into a new and authentic setting, the frame created by Maramures is able to lead to bonding between people. Locals in the area are open to

nice talks, the culture encourages communication and sharing values. With nice views, wooden churches and authentic gates, an emblematic cemetery and the possibility to take a ride with Mocanita, Maramures county is able to meet various consumer tastes when travelling. It is able to create a sense of harmony and inner-peace in each of us, thus contributing to improving person-to-person relationships.

- **EQ Encounters**

Maramures seems to set the perfect frame for an authentic local experience, as two foreign travellers in the area stated “We [came to] a Romania that remained rather authentic and we found it quite authentic”. Travellers admitted that guesthouses owners have a “culture of authenticity” (Steiner and Resigner, 2005 cited in Catrina, 2016) while others stated that Maramures offered them “affective memories” (Gao et al, 2012 cited in Catrin, 2016), words that can highly strengthen county’s characteristics of a new luxury travel destination.

Maramures is one of the few areas that noticed tourists' strong wish to experience the old rather than the modern and comfortable setting. A highly representative village for this trend is Breb village, an emblematic place for all the aspects that represent Maramures: wooden houses, a church from the 16th century, hospitable people and one of the most famous craftsmen in the region, the wooden sculptor Petru Pop. Here the new luxury traveller can experience the local culture by walking through the village, meeting the locals and hearing their stories. Emotional intelligence is activated by participating in traditional activities, such as working the land or picking vegetables in the garden. All the locals are good-willing and welcoming. Additionally, if the trip is planned in time, travellers can even step into the past by attending a traditional wedding, observing local customs and rituals. Thanks to the sublime landscapes and the hospitable people, Breb was declared one of the most beautiful villages in Romania in the pages of the Spanish newspaper "El Pais" (El Pais, 2019). Then there's Biertan village, with its splendid fortified church, and Viscri, which rose to prominence after Prince Charles of Wales purchased property there.

This is just an example of the various traditional experiences Maramures has to offer, full of villages that are able to enlighten the underlying culture of the area while activating the emotional intelligence of tourists.

- **Enjoying the journey**

This criterion makes reference to private and fast transportation tourists can benefit from. Many visitors will try to find transport in time to be able to travel to Maramures. Unfortunately, for this area, the transport part is moderately developed. Maramures county possesses the nearest airport in Baia Mare. Baia Mare

is a main city in the area, which further offers transportation by bus, train or taxi to the county's attractions. However, no exclusive and private transportation for luxurious tastes is available. An opportunity in this respect would be for the city hall to organize special private transport to facilitate the access of people from the airport to the tourist sites. This is an opportunity for many guesthouses to be able to offer complete experiences to visitors. Most visitors prefer this category of transportation because they want to get to their destinations as soon as possible so they can start exploring Maramures and not waste time on the roads.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Having a wide variety of impressive attractions, we evaluated the potential of Maramures county towards becoming one of the biggest attractions in Europe in accordance with the new traveller changing tastes. New travelling preferences, oriented towards a more authentic moment, able to enhance emotional intelligence and bring new feelings are shaping tourism. New attractions are gaining interest, as we have witnessed in our literature review.

By following five criteria developed by a famous international travel agency, we highlighted the strong points of a well-preserved area of Romania and its capability for attracting a great number of tourists. We witnessed almost all criteria being met. Our targeted area has proved to offer unexpected active participation of visitors in traditional costumes while delighting them with an authentic frame. It couples a large variety of activities, from riding with the only railway in Europe that uses a steam engine, to visiting century-old wooden churches and taking a moment of amusement in the Merry Cemetery. Additionally, travellers will be delighted by the traditional culinary meals that the area offers. Our analysis shows that the region is perfect for group getaways, with either family, friends or a life-partner. We consider the combination of quiet places with culinary art and unexpected experiences as being able to meet all kinds of traveller tastes. Maramures additionally creates a perfect journey for enhancing emotional intelligence, as it integrates the traveller into customs and traditions, authentic landscapes and talks with locals.

Referring to our last criteria, personalized private rides to and from the airport can not be fully met. We recommend further investments made in the area of transportation so that more private and exclusive trips for the ones in the hurry or just no bus or train transport adopters is available. For a more authentic approach, we recommend further research in the area, that engages primary research with samples focused directly on travellers' perspectives upon the region.

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