

CULTURAL TOURISM AS A TOOL FOR ECONOMIC REVITALIZATION IN SMALL CITIES

SLUSARIUC GABRIELA CORINA

University of Petrosani, 332006, Romania

ellashusariuc@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines the role of cultural tourism as a strategic instrument for economic revitalization in small urban areas, with a particular focus on post-industrial regions. In the context of economic restructuring and industrial decline, many small cities face persistent challenges such as unemployment, population decline, and limited economic diversification. Cultural tourism offers an alternative development pathway by valorizing local cultural and industrial heritage and transforming it into a source of economic growth. The analysis is based on secondary data and focuses on key tourism indicators, as well as on the identification of development opportunities and structural constraints. The findings indicate that cultural tourism can significantly contribute to local economic development through job creation, support for local entrepreneurship, and increased public revenues. At the same time, the research highlights major challenges, including insufficient infrastructure, limited promotion, and the lack of coherent strategic planning. The paper proposes an integrated development model based on the valorization of industrial heritage, the development of thematic tourism routes, the organization of cultural events, and the integration of cultural tourism with other forms such as mountain and ecotourism.

Key words: cultural tourism, economic revitalization, industrial heritage, regional development, small cities

JEL Classification: L83, R11, Z32

1. INTRODUCTION

The increasing importance of cultural tourism in the global economy has positioned it as a key driver of local and regional development. In recent decades, the growing demand for authentic and experience-based tourism has transformed cultural tourism into one of the most dynamic segments of the tourism industry.

Small cities, particularly those affected by deindustrialization, face significant economic and social challenges, including unemployment, population decline, and reduced economic activity. In this context, identifying alternative development pathways becomes essential. Cultural tourism offers such an alternative by transforming local cultural resources into economic assets.

This paper aims to analyze the role of cultural tourism as an instrument for economic revitalization in small urban areas. The study focuses on the Jiu Valley region in Romania, a former mining area that has experienced significant economic decline following industrial restructuring.

The main objectives of the research are to define the concept of cultural tourism, analyze its impact on local economic development, identify opportunities and challenges in small cities, and propose development strategies based on European best practices. Therefore, this study provides both a theoretical and empirical contribution by examining how cultural tourism can

support sustainable economic revitalization in small post-industrial cities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Cultural tourism has become one of the most dynamic segments of the global tourism industry, reflecting the increasing demand for authentic, experience-based travel. It is commonly defined as a form of tourism motivated by the desire to explore cultural resources, including heritage, traditions, and artistic expressions. According to World Tourism Organization, cultural tourism represents a significant share of international tourism flows, emphasizing its growing importance in economic development processes.

From a theoretical perspective, cultural tourism is closely linked to the concept of cultural heritage, which includes both tangible elements, such as monuments, museums, and historical sites, and intangible elements, such as traditions, customs, and local practices. These components form the core of tourism experiences and contribute to the uniqueness and competitiveness of destinations. As highlighted by Timothy and Boyd (2003), heritage tourism plays a crucial role in preserving cultural assets while simultaneously generating economic benefits.

The literature emphasizes that cultural tourism contributes to economic development through multiple

channels. It supports job creation, stimulates local entrepreneurship, and generates revenues for both private and public sectors (Brida et al., 2016). Furthermore, cultural tourism produces multiplier effects by influencing related sectors such as hospitality, transport, and creative industries. In this sense, cultural heritage can be transformed into a strategic economic resource, particularly for regions seeking diversification.

In addition, cultural tourism is increasingly associated with sustainable development. International institutions such as the European Commission underline the role of cultural heritage as a driver of inclusive and sustainable growth (European Commission, 2019). However, the literature also points out the need for balanced management, as excessive tourism development may lead to over-commercialization and loss of authenticity (Smith, 2006).

A significant body of research explores the relationship between cultural tourism and urban regeneration, particularly in post-industrial contexts. Urban regeneration refers to the process of revitalizing declining urban areas through economic, social, and spatial interventions (Evans, 2005). Cultural-led regeneration strategies have proven effective in transforming former industrial cities into attractive tourist destinations. The case of Bilbao is frequently cited as a successful example, where cultural investments contributed to economic recovery and city rebranding (Plaza, 2000).

Nevertheless, scholars argue that cultural initiatives alone are not sufficient for long-term development. According to Richards and Wilson (2006), successful regeneration requires integrated strategies that combine cultural assets with infrastructure development, governance, and stakeholder involvement. This highlights the importance of a holistic approach to tourism development.

In the context of small and post-industrial cities, cultural tourism is increasingly seen as a viable alternative for economic revitalization. These areas often face structural challenges such as industrial decline, unemployment, and population loss. Industrial heritage tourism, in particular, offers the possibility of transforming former industrial sites into tourism attractions, contributing to regional restructuring (Hospers, 2002; Edwards & Llurdés i Coit, 1996).

Moreover, small cities benefit from authenticity, local identity, and lower levels of mass tourism, which are increasingly valued by visitors (Lane, 1994). However, they also face constraints such as limited financial resources, insufficient infrastructure, and weak promotion strategies (Sharpley, 2002). These limitations underline the need for strategic planning and policy support.

Despite the extensive literature on cultural tourism and economic development, there is a noticeable gap in studies focusing on post-industrial regions in Eastern Europe. Most existing research concentrates on

Western European cases, leaving underexplored contexts such as the Jiu Valley. Therefore, this paper contributes to the literature by analyzing cultural tourism in a Romanian post-industrial region and proposing a development model adapted to small cities in transition economies.

Recent studies emphasize the increasing complexity of cultural tourism, highlighting its multidimensional impact on economic development, visitor experience, and community sustainability. Cultural tourism is no longer limited to passive consumption of heritage, but increasingly involves immersive and experiential dimensions, including creative and cultural activities such as music and artistic engagement (Mazlan et al., 2025). These experiential components contribute significantly to tourists' well-being and satisfaction, particularly when combined with active participation and information sharing, which enhance the overall tourism experience and destination attractiveness (Dini et al., 2026).

At the same time, the success of cultural tourism development is strongly influenced by local community awareness and perceptions of cultural heritage resources. Community involvement plays a crucial role in ensuring authenticity, sustainability, and long-term viability of tourism initiatives, as local stakeholders contribute to preserving and promoting cultural identity (Mteti et al., 2025). In the context of post-industrial regions, such as the Jiu Valley, the valorization of local resources requires not only infrastructure development but also strategic planning and stakeholder engagement. Previous research highlights that increasing tourism attractiveness in such regions depends on the effective integration of cultural, economic, and institutional factors (Slusariuc, 2023).

Overall, these perspectives underline the need for an integrated approach to cultural tourism development, combining experiential value, community participation, and strategic governance in order to achieve sustainable economic revitalization. This highlights the need for empirical analysis in post-industrial small cities, such as the Jiu Valley, in order to better understand how cultural tourism can support sustainable economic revitalization.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical approach to examine the role of cultural tourism as an instrument for economic revitalization in small urban areas. The research combines theoretical analysis with an empirical case study, allowing for both conceptual understanding and practical application.

The theoretical component is based on a review of relevant literature in the fields of cultural tourism, cultural heritage, and urban regeneration. This provides the conceptual framework necessary to understand the relationship between tourism and local economic development.

The empirical component focuses on a case study of the Jiu Valley region, specifically the cities of Lupeni and Petroșani. The case study method is appropriate for analyzing complex socio-economic phenomena within a specific geographical context and allows for an in-depth examination of local development dynamics.

Data were collected from secondary sources, including statistical data provided by national institutions, official reports, and existing research studies. The analysis considers key tourism indicators such as the number of tourists, overnight stays, accommodation capacity, and tourism infrastructure.

The research follows a descriptive and interpretative approach, aiming to identify the main economic effects of tourism, as well as the opportunities and constraints associated with its development. This methodological framework enables a comprehensive understanding of the potential of cultural tourism in post-industrial regions.

4. CASE STUDY: STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS FOR CULTURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

The analysis of the Jiu Valley highlights that, despite its current limited tourism performance, the region possesses significant potential for cultural tourism development. This potential can be capitalized through a set of integrated strategic directions aimed at economic revitalization and territorial rebranding.

One of the key development directions is represented by industrial heritage tourism. The mining history of the region constitutes a unique cultural asset that can be transformed into a tourism product. The creation of thematic routes focused on mining heritage, including museums, former industrial sites, and related infrastructure, can contribute to the diversification of the tourism offer and to the preservation of local identity.

Another important direction is the organization of cultural events. Festivals, exhibitions, and artistic manifestations can increase the visibility of the region and attract visitors. Event-based tourism represents an effective tool for destination promotion and for extending the tourist season.

Infrastructure development also plays a crucial role in enhancing tourism attractiveness. Investments in accommodation facilities, tourist routes, and information centers are essential for improving accessibility and the overall tourist experience. Without adequate infrastructure, the tourism potential of the region cannot be fully exploited.

Tourism promotion represents another strategic priority. The use of digital platforms, marketing campaigns, and partnerships with tourism agencies can significantly increase the visibility of the Jiu Valley. In the current context, digital marketing is a key factor in attracting tourists and positioning destinations in the competitive tourism market.

Furthermore, the development of an integrated tourism model is essential. Combining cultural tourism

with mountain tourism, ecotourism, and rural tourism can create a diversified and competitive tourism offer, capable of attracting different categories of visitors.

Development models based on best practices

The proposed strategies are supported by successful examples from other regions that have undergone similar economic transformations.

A relevant model is the Ruhr region in Germany, where industrial heritage has been successfully converted into tourism and cultural assets. Former industrial sites have been transformed into museums and cultural centres, contributing to regional regeneration. A similar approach could be applied in the Jiu Valley through the transformation of former mining sites into tourist attractions and the creation of a mining heritage park.

Another example is Sibiu, where the restoration of the historical center and the organization of cultural events significantly increased tourism flows. In the Jiu Valley, urban regeneration initiatives such as the rehabilitation of historical buildings and the creation of pedestrian tourist areas could enhance the attractiveness of cities like Petroșani and Lupeni.

The case of Sighișoara demonstrates the importance of cultural events in tourism development. Festivals can generate high visitor numbers and contribute to destination branding. In this context, organizing events such as a mining heritage festival or cultural and gastronomic festivals could significantly improve the visibility of the region.

Similarly, Alba Iulia illustrates the benefits of integrating heritage, infrastructure, and cultural activities into a coherent tourism strategy. The Jiu Valley could adopt a similar model by combining industrial heritage tourism with natural and recreational tourism.

Proposed Development Model for the Jiu Valley

Based on the analysis conducted, the development of cultural tourism in the Jiu Valley requires a coherent and integrated strategic approach, capable of transforming local resources into sustainable economic drivers. The proposed model emphasizes the valorization of regional identity, the diversification of tourism products, and the strengthening of local economic structures.

A central pillar of this model is the valorization of industrial heritage. The mining infrastructure of the region represents a distinctive cultural asset that can be reinterpreted and integrated into tourism circuits. The transformation of former mining sites into museums, interpretation centers, or cultural spaces would not only preserve historical identity but also generate new economic opportunities and enhance the attractiveness of the destination.

In addition, the development of thematic tourism routes can contribute to structuring the tourism offer and improving the overall visitor experience. Routes centered on mining heritage, cultural landmarks, and

natural attractions can create coherent and engaging tourism products, facilitating longer stays and higher levels of tourist satisfaction.

Cultural events also play a strategic role in increasing the visibility and competitiveness of the region. Festivals, exhibitions, and artistic initiatives can attract diverse categories of visitors, stimulate local economic activity, and contribute to the consolidation of a regional identity. Moreover, such events can reduce seasonality by generating tourism flows beyond peak periods.

Infrastructure development remains a fundamental condition for tourism growth. The improvement of accommodation capacity, accessibility, and tourism services is essential for enhancing competitiveness and ensuring a high-quality visitor experience. Without adequate infrastructure, the potential of the region cannot be fully realized.

At the same time, the promotion of the Jiu Valley as a tourism destination requires a modern and coherent marketing approach. Digital platforms, branding strategies, and partnerships with tourism stakeholders are essential for increasing visibility and positioning the region within the tourism market. The creation of a strong regional brand could contribute significantly to attracting both domestic and international tourists.

Another key dimension of the proposed model is the development of integrated tourism products. The combination of cultural tourism with mountain tourism, ecotourism, and rural tourism can generate a diversified offer, capable of attracting different market segments and reducing dependency on a single tourism form.

Local entrepreneurship represents an essential driver of tourism development. The support of small and medium-sized enterprises, including guesthouses, restaurants, and cultural service providers, can stimulate local economic activity and create employment opportunities. In this context, policies aimed at encouraging entrepreneurship and facilitating access to funding are particularly relevant.

Equally important is the involvement of the local community. Active participation of residents contributes to preserving cultural authenticity, enhancing the tourism experience, and ensuring the sustainability of development initiatives. Community-based tourism approaches can strengthen social cohesion and increase local support for tourism projects.

Finally, access to European funding represents a strategic opportunity for implementing development projects. External financial resources can support infrastructure modernization, heritage conservation, and tourism promotion, thus accelerating the transformation of the region.

The proposed model highlights that the success of cultural tourism development in the Jiu Valley depends on the integration of economic, social, and cultural dimensions within a coherent and long-term strategy. This approach can contribute to transforming the region

from a post-industrial area into a competitive and sustainable tourism destination.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that cultural tourism can function as a viable instrument for economic revitalization in small cities, particularly in post-industrial regions such as the Jiu Valley. However, the results also suggest that the effectiveness of cultural tourism is highly dependent on the existence of coherent development strategies and supportive institutional frameworks.

Consistent with previous studies (Brida et al., 2016; Richards, 2018), the analysis demonstrates that cultural tourism contributes to local economic development through job creation, stimulation of local entrepreneurship, and the generation of multiplier effects across related sectors. In the case of the Jiu Valley, the presence of industrial heritage and natural resources provides a solid foundation for tourism development, supporting the argument that resource diversification enhances regional competitiveness.

Nevertheless, the findings also reveal important structural constraints that limit the capacity of cultural tourism to generate significant economic impact. These include insufficient tourism infrastructure, limited destination promotion, and the absence of a coherent long-term development strategy. Such constraints are typical for small and peripheral regions, as highlighted in previous research (Sharpley, 2002), and indicate that tourism development cannot rely solely on the existence of cultural resources.

A critical insight emerging from this study is that cultural tourism, in isolation, is not sufficient to ensure economic revitalization. Instead, its success depends on the integration of multiple factors, including infrastructure development, governance quality, stakeholder coordination, and access to financial resources. This finding supports the argument of Richards and Wilson (2006), who emphasize the importance of integrated and multi-level strategies in tourism development.

Moreover, the valorization of industrial heritage represents both an opportunity and a challenge. While the transformation of former mining sites into tourism attractions can contribute to regional regeneration (Hospers, 2002), it also requires significant investment, technical expertise, and long-term planning. Without these elements, such initiatives risk remaining symbolic rather than economically impactful.

Another important aspect highlighted by the study is the role of local communities. While community involvement is essential for ensuring authenticity and sustainability, in practice, participation may be limited by socio-economic constraints, lack of awareness, or insufficient institutional support. Therefore, community-based tourism should be supported by targeted policies and capacity-building initiatives.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that local and regional authorities should adopt a proactive

approach to tourism development. This includes investing in infrastructure, supporting local entrepreneurship, developing coherent branding strategies, and facilitating access to European funding. Without coordinated public intervention, the development of cultural tourism may remain fragmented and inefficient.

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. The research is based primarily on qualitative analysis and secondary data, which may limit the generalizability of the results. Future research could include quantitative approaches to measure the economic impact of tourism more precisely, as well as comparative analyses with other post-industrial regions.

Overall, the study highlights that cultural tourism has significant potential to support economic revitalization in small cities. However, this potential can only be realized through integrated strategies, effective governance, and sustained investment. In the absence of these conditions, cultural tourism risks remaining an underexploited resource rather than a driver of development.

The findings of this study have important implications for local and regional policymakers, particularly in post-industrial regions facing economic decline.

First, public authorities should prioritize the valorization of cultural and industrial heritage as a strategic development resource. Investments in heritage conservation and tourism infrastructure are essential for creating attractive and competitive destinations.

Second, policymakers should support the development of integrated tourism strategies that combine cultural tourism with other forms of tourism, such as mountain and ecotourism. This approach can enhance diversification, reduce seasonality, and increase economic resilience.

Third, the promotion of local entrepreneurship should be encouraged through financial support mechanisms, access to funding, and training programs. Small and medium-sized enterprises play a crucial role in the tourism ecosystem and in generating local economic benefits.

Fourth, effective destination branding and digital marketing strategies are necessary to increase visibility and attract tourists. Public-private partnerships can play a key role in implementing such strategies.

Finally, community involvement should be actively supported to ensure sustainability and authenticity. Participatory approaches can strengthen social cohesion and improve the quality of tourism experiences.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This paper set out to analyze the role of cultural tourism as a strategic instrument for the economic revitalization of small cities, with a particular focus on post-industrial regions. The findings confirm that

cultural tourism represents not only a complementary economic activity, but a complex development mechanism capable of generating significant economic, social, and territorial transformations.

The theoretical analysis highlights that cultural tourism is strongly connected to the valorization of cultural heritage and to the increasing demand for authentic and experience-based tourism products. Unlike traditional forms of tourism, cultural tourism integrates economic objectives with identity, memory, and social cohesion, thus positioning itself as a key component of sustainable development strategies. In this context, cultural heritage—both tangible and intangible—emerges as a critical resource that can be transformed into a competitive advantage for local economies.

The study demonstrates that cultural tourism contributes to local economic development through multiple channels. Direct effects include the creation of jobs in tourism-related sectors such as accommodation, food services, and cultural activities. Indirect effects are equally important, as tourism stimulates local entrepreneurship, supports small and medium-sized enterprises, and generates multiplier effects across the local economy. Furthermore, tourism development leads to increased public revenues and encourages investments in infrastructure and urban services.

However, the findings also indicate that the development of cultural tourism is not without challenges. Key constraints include insufficient infrastructure, limited financial resources, weak promotion strategies, and the lack of coherent long-term planning. In addition, there is a risk of over-commercialization of cultural assets, which may lead to the loss of authenticity and cultural identity if not properly managed. These challenges highlight the importance of adopting a strategic and sustainable approach to tourism development.

One of the main contributions of this paper lies in proposing a development model tailored to post-industrial small cities. This model emphasizes the integration of industrial heritage tourism with other complementary forms of tourism, such as mountain tourism, ecotourism, and event-based tourism. The diversification of tourism products is essential for increasing competitiveness, extending the tourist season, and maximizing economic benefits.

Another important contribution is the emphasis on community involvement as a key factor for successful tourism development. Local communities play a crucial role in preserving cultural authenticity, providing services, and shaping the tourist experience. Therefore, participatory approaches and local stakeholder engagement should be considered central elements in tourism strategies.

The research also underlines the importance of digitalization and marketing in enhancing the visibility of emerging tourist destinations. In the current global tourism market, the ability to promote a coherent and

attractive regional identity is essential for attracting visitors and investments.

From a policy perspective, the results suggest that local and regional authorities should prioritize cultural tourism in their development strategies, particularly in areas affected by industrial decline. Public policies should focus on heritage conservation, infrastructure development, financial support for local entrepreneurs, and the creation of integrated tourism products.

Thus, cultural tourism has the potential to become a catalyst for economic revitalization in small cities, especially in post-industrial contexts. The transformation of cultural and industrial heritage into

tourism assets can generate long-term economic benefits, strengthen local identity, and contribute to sustainable regional development. The case of the Jiu Valley illustrates that, although challenges remain, the strategic use of cultural tourism can provide a viable pathway for economic recovery and territorial transformation.

Future research directions may include quantitative analyses of tourism's economic impact, comparative studies with other post-industrial regions, and the evaluation of specific tourism policies and development programs.

REFERENCES

1. Alnaim, M. M. (2026). *Cultural Tourism as a Driver for Sustainable Urban Development in Hail City*, Saudi Arabia. Environmental and Sustainability Indicators, 101135.
2. Anappattath, M. S., & Thomas, S. M. (2024). *Role Of Cultural And Psychological Factors In Shaping Kerala's International Tourism: Evidences From Thematic Analysis*. Revista De Turism - Studii Și Cercetări În Turism, (37).
3. Anghel C., Neamțu A., (2025), *Valorization of the Cultural and Natural Heritage of Gorj County - Tourism Potential and Sustainability Challenges*, Annals of Constantin Brancusi University of Targu-Jiu. Economy Series/Analele Universității Constantin Brâncuși din Târgu-Jiu Seria Economie
4. Brida, J. G., Meleddu, M., & Pulina, M. (2016). *Cultural tourism and economic growth: Evidence from European regions*. Tourism Management, 53, 1–14.
5. Dini, M., Cicco, R. D., Curina, I., Francioni, B., & Cioppi, M. (2026). *Enhancing well-being in cultural tourism: the role of experiences and information sharing*. Current Issues in Tourism, 29(1), 22–39.
6. Edwards, J. A., & Llurdés i Coit, J. (1996). *Mines and quarries: Industrial heritage tourism*. Annals of Tourism Research, 23(2), 341–363.
7. Evans, G. (2005). *Measure for measure: Evaluating culture's contribution to regeneration*. Urban Studies, 42(5–6), 959–983.
8. Hospers, G. J. (2002). *Industrial heritage tourism and regional restructuring in the European Union*. European Planning Studies, 10(3), 397–404.
9. Lane, B. (1994). *What is rural tourism?* Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 2(1–2), 7–21.
10. Mazlan, C. A. N., Abdullah, M. H., Nor Hashim, N. S., & Abdul Wahid, N. (2025). Music in cultural tourism: insights from a dual approach of scoping review and bibliometric analysis. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 12(1), 1–17.
11. Mtei, S. H., Mpambije, C. J., Manyerere, D. J. (2025). *Unlocking cultural tourism: Local community awareness and perceptions of cultural heritage resources in Katavi Region in southern circuit of Tanzania*. Social Sciences & Humanities Open, 11, 101295.
12. Matteucci, X., Koens, K., Calvi, L., & Moretti, S. (2022). *Envisioning the futures of cultural tourism*. Futures, 142, 103013.
13. Mai, N. T. T., Tuan, H. T., Tien, N. H., Van Tho, D., Trang, N. T. T., & Mai, N. P. (2023). *Cultural tourism resources: state policy and solutions for SMEs in tourism industry*. International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business, 1, 1–17.
14. Plaza, B. (2000). *Evaluating the influence of a large cultural artifact in the attraction of tourism: The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao case*. Urban Affairs Review, 36(2), 264–274.
15. Popovici, R., & Stanciu, P. (2025). *Current trends and influencing factors in tourist consumer behavior*. Studii și Cercetări în Turism, No. 40.
16. Richards, G. (2018). *Cultural tourism: A review of recent research and trends*. Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management, 36, 12–21.
17. Richards, G., Wilson, J. (2006). *Developing creativity in tourist experiences: A solution to the serial reproduction of culture?* Tourism Management, 27(6), 1209–1223.
18. Sharpley, R. (2002). *Rural tourism and the challenge of tourism diversification: The case of Cyprus*. Tourism Management, 23(3), 233–244.
19. Slusariuc, G. C., Nedelea, A. M. (2013). *The role of cultural tourism in socio-economic regeneration of communities*. Studii și Cercetări în Turism, No. 16.
20. Slusariuc G.C., (2023), *Strategies for increasing the tourist attractiveness of the Valea Jiului region*, Annals of the University of Petroșani. Economics,
21. Smith, M. K. (2006). *Tourism, Culture and Regeneration*. Wallingford: CABI Publishing.
22. Timothy, D. J., & Boyd, S. W. (2003). *Heritage Tourism*. Prentice Hall.
23. Wasela, K. (2023). The role of intangible cultural heritage in the development of cultural tourism. International Journal of Eco-Cultural Tourism, Hospitality Planning and Development, 6(2), 15–28.
24. European Commission. (2019). *Cultural Heritage as a Driver of Sustainable Development*. Brussels.
25. World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). (2018). *Tourism and Culture Synergies*. Madrid: UNWTO.