

## RURAL TOURISM DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A CASE STUDY FROM NORTH-WESTERN TRANSYLVANIA

MONICA MARIA COROȘ<sup>1</sup>, OANA RUXANDRA BODE<sup>2</sup>,  
EMANUEL-EMIL SĂVAN<sup>3</sup>, TUDOR ALEXANDRU CIUCIOIU<sup>4</sup>

**ABSTRACT.** The current restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic have a strong impact on all forms of tourism. Rural tourism holds certain advantages over alternative/classical forms, which reduce the risk of infection i.e. unpolluted air and tranquility, low population density, reduced human interaction, easy social distancing and smaller lodgings. This paper analyzes the rural tourism potential for a village situated in North-Western Transylvania (Romania): Mănăstireni. The data was captured by developing and distributing a questionnaire consisting of 34 question. The results indicate that, whilst the local infrastructure is deficient, respondents are generally satisfied or very happy with the rural tourism in the analyzed area. Among the most frequently quoted advantages were found to be tranquility, clean air, beauty of landscapes, and the hosts' hospitality. These identified characteristics represent clear advantages that rural tourism holds over classical/ alternative forms (e.g. city breaks), especially in the current pandemic conditions.

**Key words:** rural tourism, sustainability, Mănăstireni, Cluj County, COVID-19

**JEL classification:** *L83, Z32, L80.*

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- <sup>1</sup> Associate Professor Dr, Department of Hospitality Services, Faculty of Business, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, monica.coros@ubbcluj.ro.
  - <sup>2</sup> Lecturer Dr, Department of Hospitality Services, Faculty of Business, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, oana.bode@ubbcluj.ro.
  - <sup>3</sup> Assistant Lecturer Dr, Department of Hospitality Services, Faculty of Business, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, emanuel.savan@ubbcluj.ro.
  - <sup>4</sup> Graduate of the Business Administration in Hospitality Services Bachelor Program, Faculty of Business, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, tudor.ciucioiu@yahoo.ro.

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## **Introduction and brief literature review**

Tourism was seen in many countries around the world as being a profitable business, even though the Travel and Tourism industry is facing nowadays the challenges of an unprecedented period, because this ongoing COVID-19 pandemic impacted it the most.

In many countries at global level, rural tourism became one of the most common forms of tourism, but different in what regards its stage of development. As long as rural tourism in these countries does not convert into mass tourism and continues to be practiced at a low level, it represents an important form of sustainable tourism. This means that tourism is and can be economically feasible without ruining the natural resources and the environment (human and physical) of host communities and of destinations.

According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), “Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. It is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life support systems”.

Rural tourism represents a main form of sustainable tourism since it has a minimized negative impact on the natural environment, it ensures rational exploitation of natural resources, it facilitates the protection of cultural resources, and it contributes to the welfare of local communities.

Given the importance of rural tourism an increasing number of articles in the literature highlight an intense interest for this topic. Anghelache, Fetcu, and Anghel (2012) examined the evolution of tourism in 26 European Union countries, including Romania. Lane and Kastenholtz (2015) highlight that rural tourism has become popular ever since 1970s; the same authors, further analyzed its growth and change. Thus, since the

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1970s, tourism activities in rural areas have expanded obviously in many countries worldwide, and this has played a key role in their development both economically and socially (Perales 2002). The literature underlining rural tourism has faced a significantly increasing number of case studies in different countries (Devesa M. et al. 2010, Rønningen M. 2010, Duk-Byeong et al. 2012, Huang, R. and Chen, Y. 2016, Kumar A. 2019, Coroş, 2020).

Rural tourism is one of the main forms of tourism in Romania, providing local communities from rural areas good opportunities to promote attractions, events and activities that cannot be accessible in urban areas, to improve the quality of their life and to face economic growth, consequently, reducing the economic disparities between urban and rural areas. The UNWTO defines this form of tourism as “a type of tourism activity in which the visitor’s experience is related to a wide range of products generally linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle/culture, angling and sightseeing” (UNWTO, 2021).

After 1990, rural tourism started to develop in Romania. The core was the Moieciu-Bran area, followed by destinations such as Bucovina, Maramureş or Mărginimea Sibiului; later on, the phenomenon spread throughout the country, as tourists began to orient towards regions featuring unpolluted air and tranquility in rural areas instead of hotel-based mass tourism (Bran et al, 1997, p.128; Marian I. 2017).

The present paper emphasizes the opportunity of developing rural tourism in Cluj county area, in the Mănăstireni village, as its neighboring destination, Sâncraiu, has proven to have grown into a successful rural tourism destination, highly attractive for international visitors (Coroş et al., 2017). The authors consider that tourism in Mănăstireni has a great potential due to its heritage, culture, rural life and art. Mănăstireni is a commune located in the western half of Cluj County, Transylvania, Romania. It comprises six villages: Mănăşturu Românesc, Mănăstireni (community center), Ardeova, Bedeciu, Bica, and Dretea. It is located in the South-Western part of the Păniceni Plateau, meeting to the South with the Gilău Mountains and towards the North of the plateau meeting with the hills of Cluj.

Mănăstireni is the only village in Northern Transylvania officially listed in the genealogical tree of the last seven generations of predecessors of the British Royal Family (Pop, Sălăgean, and Bolovan, 2005). Some of

the ascendants of the Royal Family are from Transylvania and it is certain that Kemeny family, ascendant of Queen Elizabeth II, originates from Mănăstireni.

This commune is a special place, full of cultural resources and well-preserved traditions, where ancient crafts are kept sacredly and carried from generation to generation. Over time, the basic occupations of the villagers have remained agriculture and livestock. Another particularity is the practice of the trade with animals, wood and household goods.

Based on the above-mentioned facts, rural tourism can have a successful development in this village.

Therefore, the purpose of the present paper is to investigate and identify the prospects for sustainable development of rural tourism in Mănăstireni village, considering at the same time its impact on the social and economic life of the commune, respectively the factors that may positively or negatively influence the whole process. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: the second section describes the research methodology that has been employed, while the third outlines and emphasizes the research results, and finally, the last section of the paper points towards the most important conclusions of this research.

## **Data and methodology**

Considering the main objectives of the present paper we used as a method of research a questionnaire made up of 34 questions. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first one included questions aiming at gathering information about the respondents' preference in what regards tourism, with a special focus on their orientation towards rural tourism and remote destinations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic situation, to finally asses their perception regarding Mănăstireni as a rural destination. The second part was designed with the purpose of collecting identification information regarding the respondents.

Different types of questions were used: both unstructured and structured ones, multiple choice questions, one dichotomous question, open-end questions, and a Likert scale question. When elaborating the questionnaire, the authors paid attention to the time needed for its completion, making sure that the responses provided were as accurate

as possible and could be collected within a reasonable time frame via a self-administered online survey tool. Involving an elaborated work, the research lasted more than four months and was performed right after the implementation of the state of emergency in the spring of 2020.

The questionnaire was conducted on a relatively small sample, adding up to 139 individuals and its role was to point towards the advantages and disadvantages of the Mănăstireni village from the touristic point of view and to assess the perception of individuals concerning a possible holiday in this rural area. The choice of the sample members was randomized, making it essential not to vitiate the results.

The structure of the investigated sample is further presented. From the total number of respondents, 47% are female and 53% are male. In terms of age, 46% are aged between 24 and 35 years old and 23% are between 36-45 years old. The predominance of young respondents and is not necessarily a bias of the research, as other studies have pointed towards the preference of young adults and younger generations for independent travel and remote rural destinations (Cozma, Coroș, and Pop, 2021). A positive and admirable element is that the majority of those who completed the questionnaire form a young majority aging up to 45 years. It is a dynamic majority, which can refresh the Romanian rural tourism, such tourists prefer rural tourism, expressing certain justified expectations and demands related to infrastructure and telecommunications but also hygiene.

Half of them are employed in the private sector and almost a third of them work in the public sector. Entrepreneurs represents a percentage of 9% and pupils and students only 3%. Therefore, employees in the private sector are more open to rural tourism, followed by state employees.

The favorite activities during a holiday of the people who completed this questionnaire are to relax in the fresh air, to visit tourist objectives in the area and to go hiking.

## **Results and discussions**

One of the first findings regards the frequency of choosing various types of destinations among the respondents. Thus, concerning the frequency with which the tourists visited rural destinations in Romania over the

past five years, from the total number of respondents, around 40% had opted for rural areas 2-3 times per year, while nearly 30%, had chosen such destinations more than 3 times per year. These results are very encouraging in terms of the perspectives of Romanian rural tourism development, as nearly 65% of the respondents had visited rural areas relatively often over the past five years. Those persons who had not been in a rural destination during the past years, explained their choice either through their busy schedules or due to the lack of information regarding the destinations available in their proximity, particularly in the Northern part of the County of Cluj.

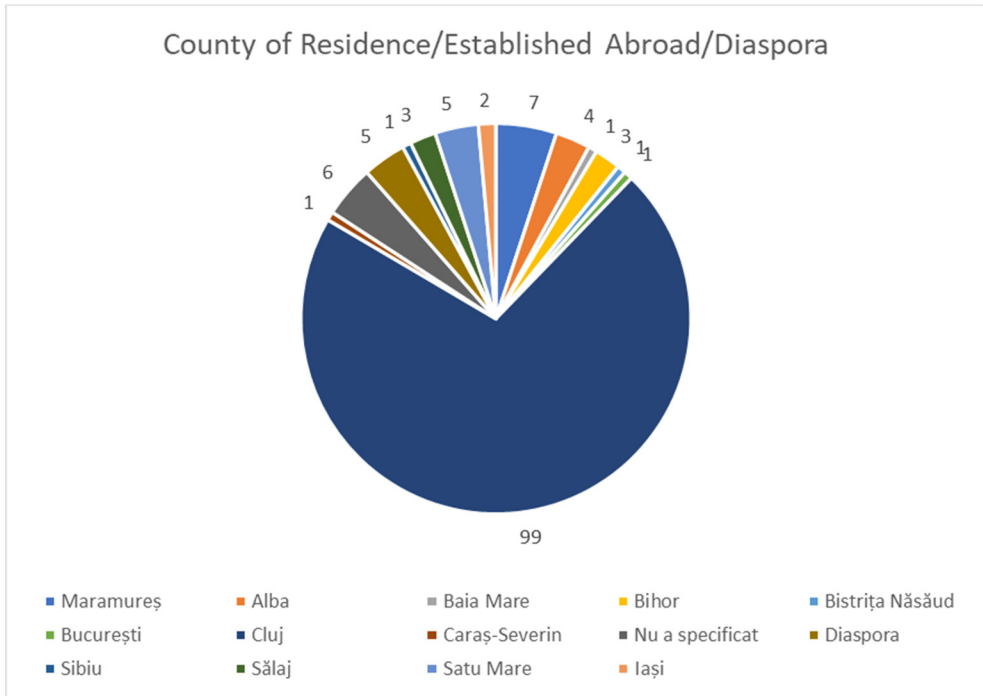
For the majority of the respondents (65%), the last level of studies graduated is the university, while 25% have a postgraduate degree, and only 10% of the respondents have only undergraduate studies. Hence, persons with higher education practice rural tourism and appreciate such destinations.

A very high percentage (86%) of all those interviewed live in urban areas, most of them being residents of the municipality of Cluj-Napoca (Figure no 1). This result it is understandable and consistent with their preference for rural destinations, as considering the alert rhythm of city life, congestion and pollution, more and more people prefer to go on holidays in a quiet and peaceful destination. Furthermore, with the health threat generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, one can easily understand the respondents' orientation towards nature-based tourism, less frequented, remote, and quiet areas.

Regarding tourists' residence, 99 respondents out of 139 were from Cluj County and the rest live in nearby counties. This emphasizes that the target market for an eventual accommodation unit in Mănăstireni commune would be represented by the young inhabitants of Cluj County.

The people who have responded to the survey questions have a relatively good financial power and are willing to go on holidays, vacations and short breaks. Most of them (41%) earn between 2500-4000 RON, a range that also includes the average net salary in Romania. At the same time, more than a third earn between 4000-7000 RON, above the average net salary of the country. In fact, this leads towards the fact that educated respondents, with a stable budget, afford mass-tourism destinations but prefer rural ones.

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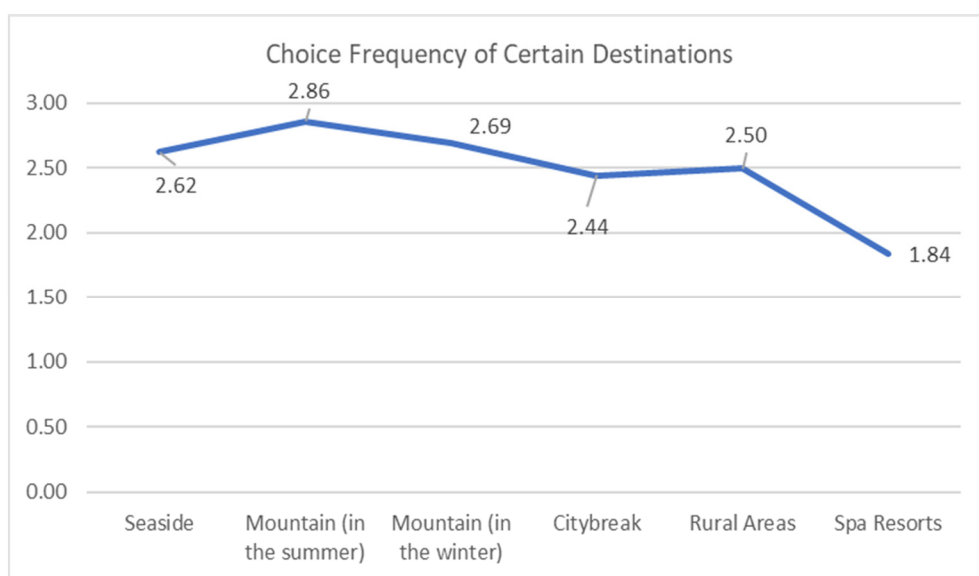
**Figure no 1. Respondents by Residence**  
Source: Authors' processing based on research data

In spite of the context generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviewed tourists were not at all pessimistic. Thus, they indicated that, if travel restrictions would be imposed for international destinations and for 100 kilometers from home, most of them would not give up on their vacation plans, being willing to stick to nearby destinations and to travel for shorter distances, opting for close destinations.

Given the perception of the respondents regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, 63% of people would opt in the coming 2-3 years for small guesthouses, available for direct rentals in rural areas, trying to avoid meeting and interacting with other tourists as much as possible. Almost 20% declared that they would not be influenced by the effects of the pandemic, but this statement can be considered rather a wish than a fact, because the government of each country decides whether to relax or tighten safety measures and to allow or restrict international travel. A tenth of

the tourists would seize their holiday-travel until all epidemiological risks would be eliminated. Based on the effects of the pandemic on the medium and long term, the majority of the respondents, namely 81%, indicated they would opt for their future holidays to travel using their personal cars, regardless of the chosen destination.

In order to identify the destinations preferred by respondents in the case they would go on a holiday, a Likert scaled-question was introduced: it started from very often (5) to the never (1).



**Figure no 2. Frequency of Choice for Destinations**

Source: Authors' processing based on research data

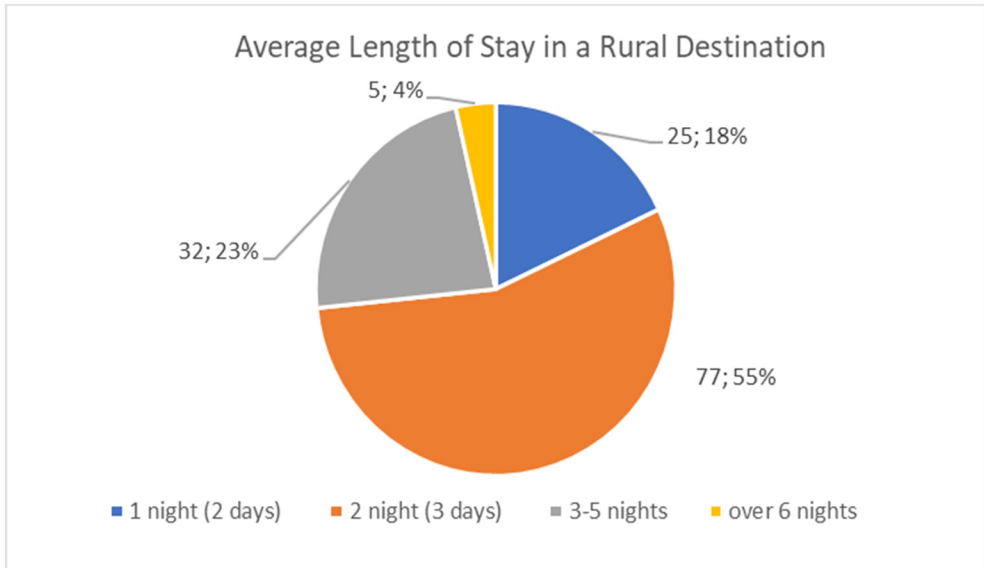
The findings of the study emphasize that mountain areas in Romania, regardless of season, are some of the most sought-after destinations at national level. Most of the tourists prefer *Mountain destinations during the summer*, followed by *Mountain destinations during the winter*. Together with the option *Rural Areas*, these preferences form the majority of the respondents' choices, as it is shown in Figure no. 2. The seaside, even if it has turned out to be the 3<sup>rd</sup> option, has not been chosen by most of the



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interviewed people, perhaps due to reasons such as: significant distance, services at the seaside are perceived as poor, and the destination is commonly overcrowded.

The average length of stay in rural destinations is shown in Figure no 3, below.



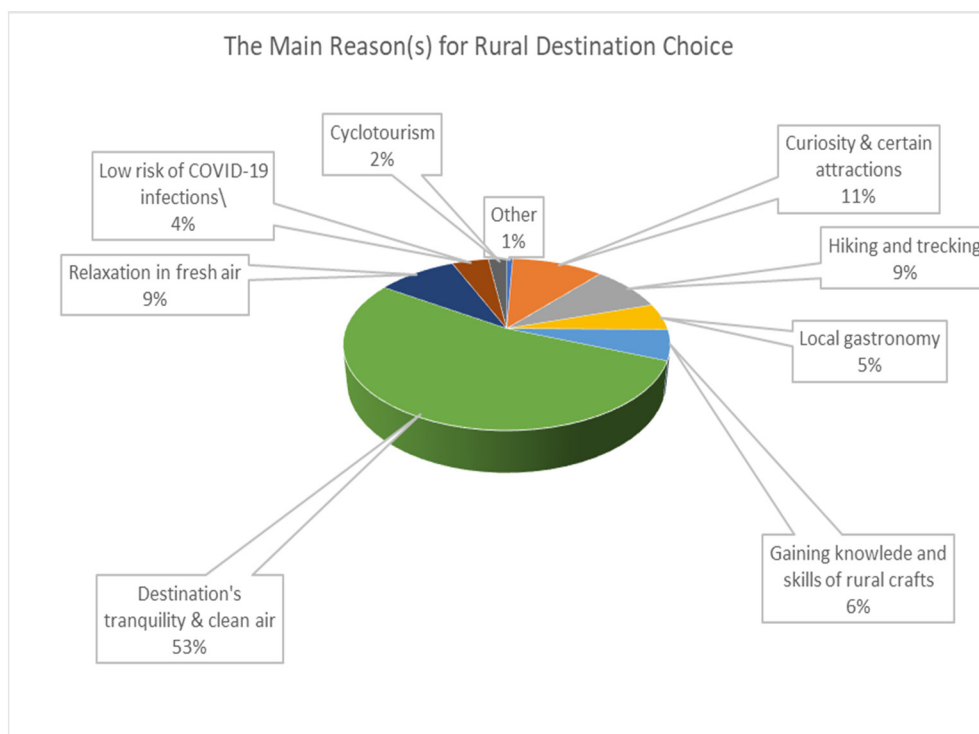
**Figure no 3. Average Length of Stay in Rural Destinations**

Source: Authors' processing based on research data

From the total number of interviewed individuals, 55% had accommodated for 2 nights during a holiday in a rural area, and nearly a quarter had stayed longer, for 3 to 5 nights. Almost 80% of them had stayed for at least 2 nights, which is a beneficial aspect for emerging destinations, because during a stay of at least three days tourists can visit many attractions and sites and can generate spending in the village, once the destination develops more amenities. The average budget per room, for two persons, per night amounts to approximately 240 lei and the average budget allocated per vacation is of 1,200 lei for a relatively short break, of 4 to 5 nights. Theoretically, Mănăstireni commune considers that it must fit in the average budget per night and per holiday taking into account the value of the area's natural and man-made attractions.

Holiday vouchers have been considered to be a stimulus for tourism and hospitality services. Therefore, the questionnaire also included a question meant to establish the proportion of those who receive such incentives and are influenced by them in terms of destination choice. The answers received were interesting, due to the fact that less than a quarter of the respondents had in fact received and benefited from holiday vouchers. One may practically presume that the Romanian state plays an important role in the development of tourism but often does not get involved to the extent of the country's tourism potential.

The most important reasons why tourists choose a rural tourist destination seem to be tranquility and the quality of the environment, as indicated by over a half of the respondents (Figure no 4).



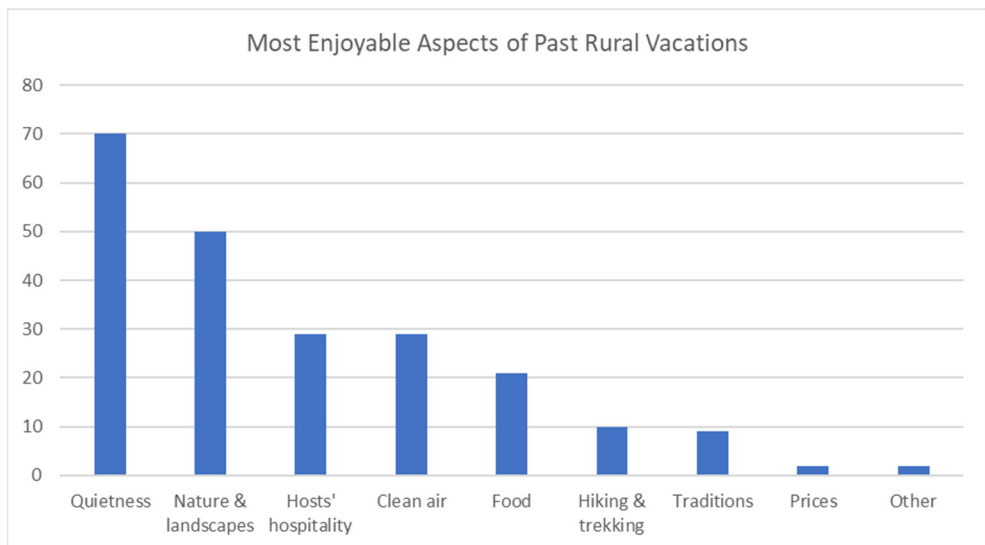
**Figure no 4. Reasons for Rural Destination Choice**

Source: Authors' processing based on research data

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Unfortunately, Romania is not among the countries that have cities with a low level of pollution, and one way to escape from such polluted areas is rural tourism. Thus, a bit more than a tenth of the respondents indicated curiosity for certain sights, so that one may only reinforce the idea that Mănăstireni presents an attractive potential, enjoying a rich tourist heritage. Hiking and local gastronomy were other triggering factors indicated by tourists and Mănăstireni enjoys the presence of such elements. Being one of the gateway entrances to the Apuseni National Park, the village proposes many hiking opportunities, and the multiculturalism of the commune can offer a lot from a gastronomic point of view. Other main reasons why they choose the rural tourist areas were different festivals or the practice of certain outdoor sports (Figure no 4).

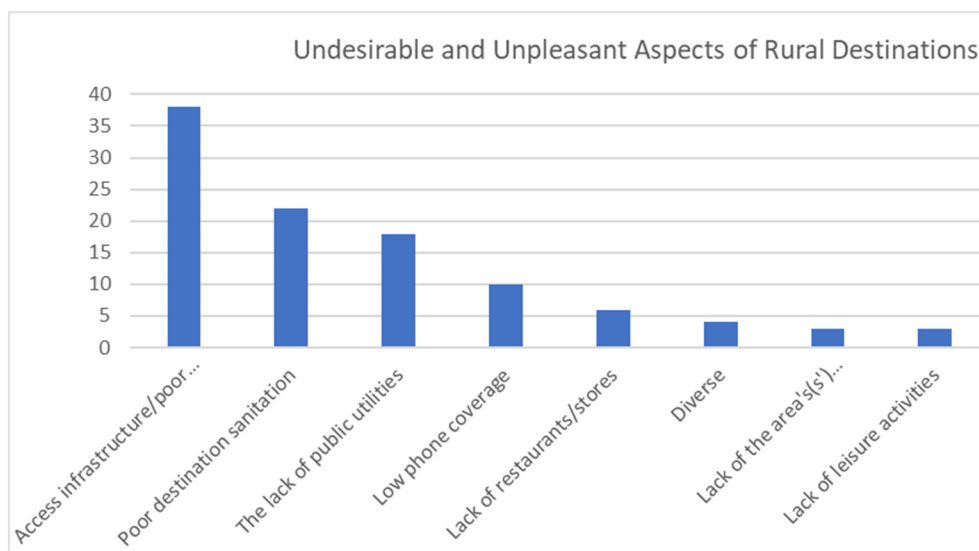
In terms of pleasant elements for tourists during holidays in rural areas, the study reveals that silence and quietness are the most important factors associated with such a holiday. In general, tourists who opt for rural tourism, seek the peace that villages provide. Of course, nature and landscapes are very important and, as one may notice in Figure no 5, the hospitality of the hosts, the clean air and gastronomy are indispensable ingredients of an enjoyable rural holiday and determine its success.



**Figure no 5. Most Enjoyable Aspects of Past Rural Vacations**

Source: Authors' processing based on research data

Obviously, aiming at improving the quality of rural tourism in the area, the unpleasant elements of such an experience must be also investigated.



**Figure no 6. Most Unpleasant Aspects of Past Rural Vacations**

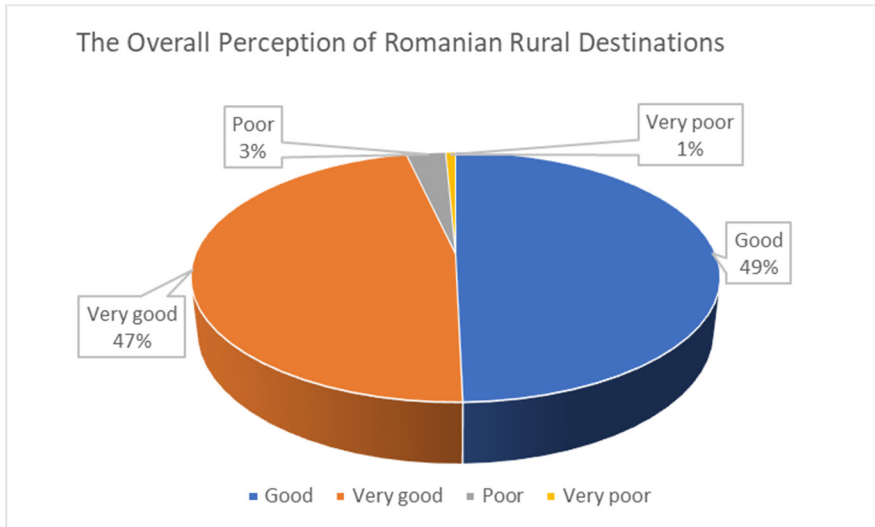
Source: Authors' processing based on research data

The main disadvantage of Romanian tourism regardless of destination is its access infrastructure. Most respondents have complained about poor roads to different rural tourist areas or tourist objectives and attractions. Mănăstireni commune enjoys an infrastructure that is good to very good, according to the official website of the Cluj County Council. Other factors that generated tourists' inconveniences were the presence of litter and garbage in the villages and the lack of a telephone signal. Fortunately, for Mănăstireni commune, the area enjoys relatively good telecommunication services, the players in the field being present in terms of infrastructure (Figure no 6).

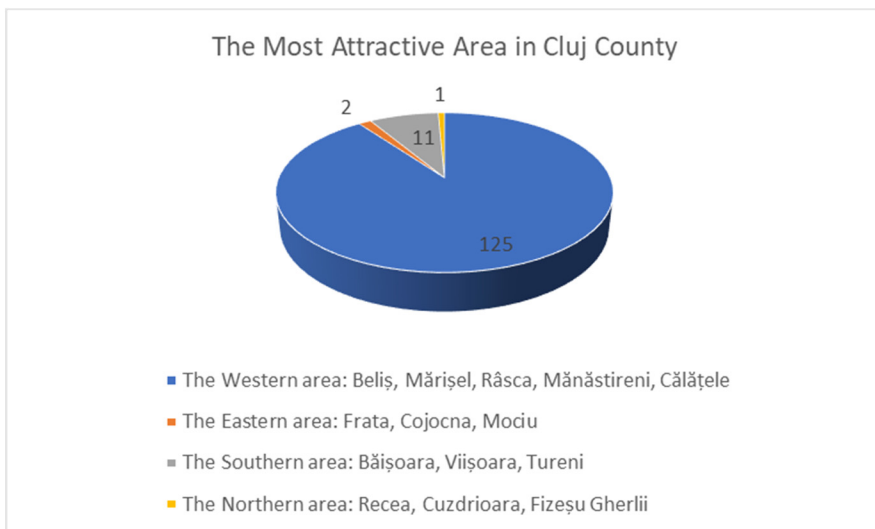
Despite the many indicated deficiencies connected to rural infrastructure, telecommunications, or cleanliness, close to a half of the respondents have a very good perception regarding their interaction with a rural tourist area. Practically, the advantages are the beautiful landscapes, the tranquility, and the friendly and hospitable villagers prevail (Figure no 7).

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Furthermore, it is obvious that except for 4% of the respondents who indicated dissatisfaction, the very large majority were contempt with the destinations they had chosen in the past.



**Figure no 7. The Overall Perception of Rural Destinations Visited in the Past**  
Source: Authors' processing based on research data



**Figure no 8. The Attractiveness of Cluj County Destinations, by Area**  
Source: Authors' processing based on research data

When asked to indicate the most attractive region in terms of rural tourism in Cluj County, the respondents' answers indicate without any doubt their categorical preference for the Western area, an area which also includes Mănăstireni commune (Figure no 8).

Even though the Western area enjoys the greatest appreciation of tourists from among all areas of Cluj County, Mănăstireni commune cannot say that it has the same success. Only 41 respondents are familiar with this village, so only a third of all tourists know something about and perhaps had visited Mănăstireni. Anyway, this is a cornerstone on which the commune can be build a beautiful project from a tourist point of view, focusing on the development of sustainable tourism and relying on the involvement of the local community members. Various fairs can be organized so that villagers can participate, supplying handcrafted products and local food, so that not only tourism develops but also the local economy. Those respondents who have indicated the commune of Mănăstireni, were asked to list a few positive aspects of the area from a tourist point of view. The most important advantage of the commune is described to be the very good position relative to the Apuseni Natural Park, which can be easily exploited. Tourists appreciate the good road to the commune and the fact that the village is very quiet. The church, the old buildings and the holiday traditions of the villagers are listed among other positive and attractive aspects.

## **Conclusions**

The results presented throughout this paper support the existing literature, which indicates that rural tourism represents an increasingly important form of tourism for Romania. A very encouraging 63.5% of the respondents indicated that they had visited rural areas fairly often over the past five years. It is expected that the percentage will rise, especially given the lasting effects and restrictions of the current pandemic.

A somewhat surprising finding is that only 4% of the respondents from the carried study indicated the low risk of Covid-19 infection associated with rural tourism, as the main reason for choosing it. Nevertheless, it can be observed that the most frequently indicated

response: the tranquility of the area, is a facilitator for social distancing and infection risk avoidance. This can have further inference from the main advantages indicated by the respondents, which were found to be centered on the same concepts: tranquility and clean air.

The present study highlighted that weaknesses of the tourism in the Mănăstireni commune are given by the following major disadvantages:

- the insufficient promotion of the tourist potential of the area due to the lack of a tourist information center;
- the lack of a zonal program that informs and motivates tourists to visit this area, on one hand, and organize residents such that to promote the tourism potential of the commune;
- the existence of a very small number of officially ranked lodgings in Mănăstireni commune.

In order to develop tourism in the commune of Mănăstireni and to make it more attractive, it is essential to launch a national advertising campaign promoting the sights in the area but also to develop a genuine destination offer, with appropriate lodging and food services, respectively with leisure activities and amenities. The key to success in rural tourism is to make areas known, to ensure the necessary price-related accommodation conditions and eliminate or reduce the indicated problems- mainly related to poor infrastructure: lack of roads, overall cleanness, lack of public utilities.

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