

DISCOVERING THE ROOTS – ANCESTRAL TOURISM IN ROMANIA. A PILOT STUDY

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ABSTRACT. Ancestral tourism is a less explored field in Romania, although it has a great development potential due to the large masses of Romanian immigrants established all around the world, over time. The aim of this paper is to explore ancestral tourism in Romania, to identify what are the main reasons that trigger an individual's desire to start searching his ancestors and to analyze the experience he has during the visit in the country of origin. To reach our research goals, we conducted an interview with six persons of Romanian descent established in several non-European countries that have visited Romania in order to discover their roots, meet their alive relatives or to reconnect with their past. Based on the received answers, we were able to create the ancestral tourist's profile and to identify whether the genealogical experience achieved our respondents' expectations.

Key words: ancestral tourism, genealogical research, genealogical experience, roots exploration

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Introduction and literature review

The genealogical data research phenomenon, both at personal and collective level, started to be analyzed in the field literature at the end of the '70s, when it was intensely discussed in fictional writings and autobiographies (Smith, 1979 in Murdy, Alexander & Bryce, 2018). Also, the desire to connect with origins or birth places determined various TV channels and producers to create different shows, movies or documentaries which allowed people to discover their roots and also inspired masses to start their own ancestral researches. One eloquent example was the TV mini-series "Roots".

According to Iorio and Corsale (2013), one of the most common ways a person uses to discover its origins is by traveling to and exploring the homeland in order to maintain and strengthen personal and emotional bonds. Therefore, people are motivated to travel to places they assume they originate. In consequence, nowadays we assist to an increased interest of immigrants to return to the places their ancestors came from in order to explore the family history as well as to fulfill their sense of belonging (Murdy, Alexander and Bryce, 2018).

Because of the fact that migrants and their descendants are longing to connect with their homeland and ancestors' history, tourism flows can intensify as they decide to travel to places they have personal interest to explore, as Josiam and Frazier (2008) and Iorio and Corsale (2013) stated in their studies. Hence, we can start discussing about the so-called ancestral tourism that besides traveling, also implies learning during the trip in order to accomplish the personal needs of discovering the roots.

The definitions of ancestral tourism can vary mainly because the concept is not unanimously accepted in the field literature, being also referred as roots tourism, genealogy tourism or legacy tourism.

According to Basu (2004 and 2005 in Iorio and Corsale, 2013), an individuals' return to roots can be defined as “[...] a performative act of belonging expressed through visits to ancestral heritage locations, and a more generalized collective project of connection to the homeland”. Another definition of ancestral tourism belongs to Murdy, Alexander and Bryce (2018) who defined the ancestral tourism as “any visit which might be partly or wholly motivated by a need to connect or reconnect with an individual's ancestral past”.

Several authors, such as Santos and Yan (2010), Savolainen (1995) or Yakel (2004) (in Bryce, Murdy and Alexander, 2017) identified that ancestral or genealogy tourism is the type of tourism that makes “the transition from desk-based ancestral research to related tourist consumption”.

In their study, Poria, Butler and Airey (2003), have proved that an individual's motivations, behavior and perceptions are strongly linked to the perception about a certain place or area. Also, the authors suggested that tourists are not only driven by the desire to visit a certain place in order to be there, but also because they tend to consider the place as being part of their personal heritage and to learn more about it and themselves.

Because ancestral tourism is an action done by individuals, we consider it is also important to approach in our paper aspects regarding ancestral tourists. McCain and Ray (2003) defined ancestral or legacy tourists as persons “who travel to engage in genealogical endeavours, to search for information or to simply feel connected to ancestors and ancestral roots”.

According to Russell (2008), the tourist traveling for genealogical purpose can also be called nostalgic tourist, because he is longing for a past experience and is driven by the desire to complete his ancestral identity through the consumption of cultural experiences. When he visits his or his ancestors' country of origin, the nostalgic tourist is actively

seeking to explore the homeland's culture, be profoundly engaged to the experience and even be immersed into the new world that he is discovering (Escalas, 2007; Green and Brock, 2000 in Russell, 2008). All the activities in which the nostalgic or ancestral tourist is involved during his visit to the homeland, can be beneficial even to the economy and the development of that country. In consequence, Newland and Taylor (2010) have tried to analyze the advantages of ancestral tourism in a developing country, such as Romania. They have revealed that in the case of a developing country, the tourism infrastructure is poorly developed or limited to a few touristic areas, the connection to the local economies is weak and the employment rate is low. Moreover, these tourism areas are managed by international companies located outside the country, therefore they are sending their profits back to the countries of origin.

Despite this trend of internationalization, according to Newland and Taylor (2010), tourists who are traveling in order to discover their roots, are more likely to bond with the local economy by choosing smaller accommodation facilities, often owned by the locals or their own relatives, by eating in local dinners or by experimenting the local culture. Therefore, there are higher chances that the money spent by ancestral tourists actually supports the local businesses and the local economy, generating an extremely positive impact on the local economic development.

Furthermore, Iorio and Corsale (2013) stated that tourists seeking for their roots are also behaving as conventional tourists and are engaging to specific tourist social practices such as landscape contemplation, photography or filming, or souvenir purchase. Therefore, encouraging tourism managers and travel agencies to create and promote ancestral tourism packages that would meet the ancestral tourists' expectations, can have positive benefits for the local tourism. Several authors (such as King & Gamage (1994), Duval (2003), Asiedu (2005) and Scheyvens (2007) in Iorio & Corsale, 2013), have also highlighted this aspect, asserting that ancestral tourism implies relatively long stays and is often associated with

other forms of tourism (cultural, natural, rural, mountain, seaside, etc.) in various locations of the same country or same region, helping to the increase of tourism revenues.

According to Scheyvens (2007, in Iorio & Corsale, 2013), another advantage of ancestral tourism is that it more likely resembles domestic tourism rather than international tourism, having therefore less fluctuations over time due to a strong personal interest in a particular destination. Also, by not having a seasonal particularity, as the international tourism, it can support a constant occupancy along the year and also foster off-season hiring opportunities (Perez-Lopez, 2007, in Newland & Taylor, 2010).

An eloquent example is Scotland. Here, most of the ancestral journeys take place between June and September, but they are also happening in other months of the year, especially in the case of tourists traveling on a low budget (Ancestral Tourism in Scotland: opportunities for growth, 2013). Also, ancestral tourism can contribute to the geographical expansion of tourism, mostly because ancestral tourists, in comparison with international tourists, can travel to less visited places in order to discover their roots (Newland & Taylor, 2010).

Research methodology

In order to examine the perspectives of ancestral tourism in Romania, we started a pilot exploratory research based on an interview that we took to six persons. The interviewees were tourists that have visited Romania between 2015 and 2018 and whose main purpose was to explore their genealogical legacy. To contact the tourists, we discussed with the representatives of a Romanian travel agency which is also specialized in organizing private tours for ancestral tourists, as well as assisting them in the process of their genealogical research.

Data were collected using a structured interview that was submitted online, by e-mail, directly to the ancestral tourists that have contacted the travel agency over the past three years. The interview had 21 open questions that required the interviewees to provide details about themselves and their bondage to Romania, their motivations of traveling to Romania, the way they have traveled, the genealogical research process they undertook, as well as the experience they have had in Romania.

The main goal of the study was to analyze the ancestral tourist's behavior, in order to investigate the ancestral tourism phenomenon and its development perspectives in Romania. To achieve this goal, our research objectives were to:

- ✓ identify the ancestral tourist's profile and to validated the hypothesis according to which elderly persons are more likely to start seeking their ancestors and explore their family legacy;
- ✓ identify the motivations upon which the genealogical researches rely, as well as to determine the factor that triggers the desire to begin a genealogical research;
- ✓ analyze the way that ancestral tourists use to travel;
- ✓ analyze the genealogical research process and to identify the means to obtain genealogical data as well as the barriers encountered in the genealogical research;
- ✓ analyze the tourists' genealogical experiences and to establish whether their expectations were achieved.

For a better understanding of the information we gathered, the most relevant statements of our interviewees are presented as quotes.

Results

Ancestral tourist's profile

The profile and behavior of a tourist traveling for genealogy purposes differs from the one of a regular tourist, as the first one has both a connection with the visited place and different motivations in contrast to the regular one (Poria, Butler & Airey, 2003). The six persons we interviewed have visited Romania at least once and all stated that genealogy was the main purpose of their journey. They live in USA, Canada or Israel, but their background is quite diverse, as three of them descend from Romanian Jews that emigrated to the USA or Israel, one person from Swabs originating from Banat region, while another person from Romanians living in Transylvania. The ancestors of another person are Hungarians and Italians that settled in Valea Jiului for mining.

The age of the interviewees ranges from 40 to 80 years. In average, their age is of 56 years, therefore, the hypothesis that the elderlies are more prone to initiate a genealogical research and undertake a trip in this purpose, is confirmed.

The opinion of Price, Arnould and Curasi (2000, in Rusell, 2008) is similar to the one resulting from our study as, according to them, people tend to develop more reflexivity on life with aging and feel a stronger need for personal accomplishment that cannot be satisfied with tangible goods.

Moreover, studies have shown that tourists who visit important places for their own personal legacy and heritage, prove a tendency to have longer stays in the country and to spend more than the conventional tourists, they have a higher income and a higher level of education (Krestetter et al., 2001 & Travel Industry Association, 1997; in Josiam & Frazier, 2008).

Motivations of ancestral tourists

In contrast to conventional tourists who observe “the others”, ancestral tourists are motivated to find their own identity which is enriched and reinforced by traveling to the homeland (Love and Sheldon, 1998, in Russell, 2008; Bhandari, 2016). Also, exploring the family history and see the birthplace of their ancestors, as well as visiting the relatives, is another important reason for traveling, as one of our interviewees said.

“Our goal was to see the villages where our Romanian Grandparents spent their youth as well as meeting the distant relatives we were able to identify.” (A., 67y, USA)

In addition, according to Highlands and Islands Enterprise organization’s report for Scotland, published in 2013, the main motivations for genealogical traveling, besides the ones mentioned above, are the desire to feel a “special connection” with the country of origin, to further research the family history and to take the parents back home or to pass on to their descendants the story of their family. Also, another motivation to travel identified in the report, was the desire to walk in the footsteps of the ancestors and to find a new significance for what home means.

In our study, we obtained similar results in the cases of several subjects. Most of them stated that their main reasons for traveling to Romania were to come back to their own or their ancestors’ birthplaces, to visit their alive relatives, to discover with their own eyes the landscapes they’ve only heard of or to walk on their ancestors’ footsteps. In addition to the reasons highlighted above, one of our subjects said that she was driven by the loss of her father and the nostalgia to reconnect with his memory and explore the places her father saw, as she wasn’t able to find some information online neither about him, nor about her legacy.

“The purpose of my travel was to visit the place where my father was born and see for myself the things he saw. When my father passed away, I felt a deep desire to reconnect to him somehow. I felt that sharing something he experienced might help me get a piece of him back. I was very interested in finding out as much information about my family and genealogy as I possibly could. I also wanted to find my father’s house and where he went to school and as many Church records as possible.” (D., 45y, USA)

Also, another of our respondents stated that

“Genealogy was my main purpose, but I combined the trip with a European River Cruise.” (J., 40y, USA)

This response supports the idea that ancestral tourism can also help the development of different types of tourism, increase tourism revenues and enhance the experience ancestral tourists have discovering their roots.

Being asked about what triggered the desire to begin a genealogical research, two of our interviewees mentioned that their relatives were quite mysterious regarding the reason they left Romania, which made them more eager to find out where they come from.

“My grandmother and her sisters were very mysterious about why they left. I wanted to understand where they came from.” (J., 40y, USA)

Another factor that made our interviewees start searching their roots, was finding some letters or addresses belonging to their ancestors, findings that determined their further investigations.

“I have many cousins on my father’s side. One had followed my father’s family and that had me curious about my mother’s family. I used the internet and was frustrated by the lack of information until in approximately 2006 my mother was diagnosed with Alzheimers. After we moved my mother to an apartment and later a nursing facility. In approximately 2009 we went through pictures and papers she had kept where we found an envelope with a Romanian address and an old letter.”
(A., 67y, USA)

Ancestral tourists’ ways of traveling

According to Butler et al. (2002) and Klemm (2002) (in Iorio and Corsale, 2013), the majority of ancestral or roots tourists choose to travel independently in order to have the flexibility they need to visit the places of their own interest.

To find out information about their ancestors, the six respondents of our study have visited city halls, searched in their archives, or reached the National Archives offices. They have also visited churches, synagogues, cemeteries and even contacted Romanian residents (alive relatives or elder people from the ancestors’ community).

Five out of our six respondents have contacted tourism professionals to help them with the research and to accompany them in their journey.

“I relied on a researcher to do the research for me. It would have been very difficult for me to find this info myself as I don’t speak Romanian.” (S., 56, Canada)

Often, in a genealogical trip, several family members or even different generations of the same family travel together, although not all of them have roots in the country they visit.

“We traveled as a family, three sisters and my husband, as a lifelong dream of the sisters.” (A., 67y, USA)

“I traveled with my husband and two teenage children.” (D., 45y, USA)

“We traveled as a family - my mother, oldest brother, two daughters and myself” (M., 49y, USA)

Roots tourists have a tendency to visit several destinations during their trip, either because they have familial bonds in more than one part of the country, or simply, because they want to see as much as possible of Romania. Therefore, all Romanian regions have the opportunity to equally benefit of ancestral tourism, as for many of the ancestral tourists traveling to Romania is a good opportunity to visit as many tourist attractions as they can, since some of them have travelled a long distance to get to Romania.

The genealogical research

According to the answers provided by our interviewees, the genealogical research process started before visiting their homeland, by gathering as much information as possible about the family’s history. They searched on specific genealogy websites (such as *www.ancestry.com* and *www.familysearch.org*) and tried to find out information from family members.

“I tried to search the internet for my last name but nothing came up. I tried Ancestry.com but there was no information available. I just hoped that I would find something. I was able to find birth records when I visited and the church records regarding baptism and sacraments were found by my wonderful tour guide. I was unable to locate where my grandfather was buried as he was displaced from Aninoasa to Moldova soon after WWII ended. I regret I will never know where he is buried.” (D., 45y, USA)

Moreover, many of them contacted professionals specialized in genealogy, who have documented in advance about the respondents' ancestors and also assisted them whilst they began their journey. Professionals helped them contact residents and closely guided them for a successful research.

Unfortunately, during the research process, there have also been encountered some barriers, mainly because of the authorities' indifference and their reluctance in providing information.

“[...] when I tried to find addresses of location that my family owned it was impossible, even when I told them that I do not plan to request return of properties.” (M., 80y, Israel)

“We were disappointed when they would not allow us to take photos of the documents but being where my grandfather lived and meeting distant relations made up for that.” (A., 67y, USA)

In spite of the difficulties, our subjects were satisfied with the information they managed to obtain and pleased to meet their distant relatives. Three of our subjects decided to continue their ancestral research once they got back home.

The genealogical experience

Bryce, Murdy and Alexander (2017), stated that ancestral tourists are seeking for a participative experience rather than a passive one in order to support their research. Furthermore, previous studies revealed that tourists who are more involved in and are identifying themselves with the experience, can express higher levels of satisfaction (Russell, 2008).

When asked: ‘what is their overall opinion about the genealogical experience they have had in Romania?’, our respondents declared themselves very pleased and grateful to having succeeded in finding information about their ancestors and to explore their homeland.

Another important part of the genealogical experience is to meet the ancestral tourists’ expectations, as these can be very different. A real challenge can be represented by the social, cultural and physical changes that can occur in the visited place. Therefore, a fully turn back in time might not be possible because of the strong hit of reality and the changed image of their homeland (Brah, 1996; Read, 1996; Levy, 2004; Markowitz, 2004 in Iorio and Corsale, 2013).

Regarding the expectations of our interviewees, all of them said that these have been met during their visit in Romania, which was fully worthed.

“I believe that even if we had not found information and met distant relatives it would have been worth the trip. Everyone we met, regardless of where we were, was friendly. The countryside is so beautiful and I felt like my heart had come home.” (A., 67y, USA)

Another aspect discovered in our study was that our respondents felt an emotional bond to Romania.

"I felt connected, like I was home in a sense." (J., 40y, USA)

Beside these findings, all of our respondents said that the experience gave them a strong feeling of fulfillment and for some even a sense of belonging.

"The experience absolutely gave me a feeling of fulfillment. I do not feel like I "belong", but I also do not feel like an alien or stranger. The longing to see for myself where my father was born, went to school, played, hiked was fulfilled, and I have gained a sense of peace that I have seen with my own eyes what he once saw and that makes my soul happy. The countryside in Transylvania seems just as it was 70 years ago. It wasn't too hard to imagine what life was like in 1949 when my father left. That's the beauty of Romania. You can get a glimpse into when life was simpler and more pure." (D., 45y, USA)

Conclusions and recommendations

After conducting our research and discussing with several tourists that wanted to discover their roots, we were able to identify the ancestral tourist's profile. We noticed that tourists who use to travel in order to discover their roots are usually elder persons, who have more leisure time and a higher income. Also, they have the tendency to spend more time visiting the country of origins as well as to use or buy several tourist services.

Another aspect that we focused on was tourists' motivation to travel. We found out that our interviewees' main purpose to make an ancestral journey was to explore their homeland and to discover more

information about their ancestors. They used to travel to their homeland on their own, usually accompanied by family members and reached out to professionals only to help them with the research process and the fieldtrip organization.

The overall genealogical experience our interviewees had in Romania offered them a high level of satisfaction, as well as fulfillment, a feeling of belonging and connection to their homeland.

To develop the ancestral tourism in Romania, tourism authorities should focus on promoting this niche tourism by attracting persons interested in genealogy, who at their turn will attract more tourists interested or not in genealogy. Also, to develop ancestral tourism, it could be helpful to create a network with travel agencies and tourist professionals specialized in genealogy, as well as to develop the tourism infrastructure in more Romanian rural areas.

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