

## **THE SATISFACTION AND EXPERIENCE OF TOURISTS IN JIU VALLEY. INSIGHTS FOR TOURISM DEVELOPMENT**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Being a former coal region in transition, the micro-region of Jiu Valley witnessed several demographic, economic, infrastructural, housing and identity crises. These crises reshaped the micro-region, driving efforts to explore different paths for development, with tourism emerging as one of the main alternatives. While most of the literature and strategies for development highlight the touristic potential of Jiu Valley, they overlook the perspective of tourists. Little is known about their experience in the region; about their satisfaction levels regarding touristic services; on why have they chosen Jiu Valley as their destination and based on what criteria? or what places have they visited in the region and what activities have they carried out? Understanding such aspects is essential for developing strategies that align tourism experiences with visitors' expectations and promote sustainable tourism development. Thus, drawing from a survey on 460 tourists, the paper seeks to answer these questions and provide insights and supplement strategies for tourism development, specifically the masterplan for all-season tourism in Jiu Valley designed by its integrated governance structure, ADTIVJ.*

**KEY WORDS:** *tourism, Jiu Valley, all-season masterplan, tourist experiences, tourist satisfaction.*

**JEL CLASSIFICATIONS:** *Z32, O18, L83, Q01.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The closure of mines in Jiu Valley led to a series of identity, demographic, infrastructural, housing and economic crises (Kideckel, 2004; Kideckel, 2010; Stegar, 2007; Stegar, 2014; Țoc, & Alexandrescu, 2022). These crises have forced efforts to explore different paths for development beyond coal-mining, with tourism emerging as an alternative (Dobre-Baron, 2006; Slusariuc, 2011; Samuil & Ionica 2022). The region's natural landscapes, industrial and cultural heritage provide

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significant opportunities for tourism development. However, tourism alone is unlikely to replace the economic benefits of coal-mining, as the mining industry historically supported a much larger population and brought profound social and economic impacts. Nevertheless, tourism development represents one of the alternatives for the region to move away from coal-mining and redefine its identity by capitalizing on its natural and cultural resources.

Several strategies for the social or economic development of the region have been designed, in which the touristic potential of the region and courses of action for tourism development are explored briefly (*see for example Strategy of June 20, 2002, for the Socio-Economic Development of the Jiu Valley Coal Basin; From Strategy to Action: Implementing a Just Transition in Jiu Valley, Today and in the Future; The Economic, Social, and Environmental Development Strategy of the Jiu Valley 2022–2030*). The scientific literature on the subject, fundamental to such strategies, also examines the same aspects (*see for example Dobre-Baron, 2006; Domokoş, 2011; Slusariuc, 2011; Niţescu, 2018; Eugen, 2019; Samuil, et al, 2020; Samuil & Ionica, 2022*). Yet, both fail to incorporate direct insights from tourists themselves. For tourism development to be sustainable and efficient, it is essential to align strategies with visitors' experiences and expectations. Thus, the present paper seeks to address this gap by offering insights into the experiences and satisfaction of tourists regarding the region's touristic services, and serves as a supplement for tourism development strategies, specifically the all-season masterplan for the Jiu Valley, developed by its integrated governance structure, ADTIVJ (2023) (translated as The Association for Integrated Territorial Development of the Jiu Valley).

## 2. ADTIVJ STRATEGY ON TOURISM

The touristic potential of Jiu Valley can be found mainly in its natural landscape, which offers a multitude of possibilities for recreational activities and sports. Beyond its natural assets, the industrial and cultural heritage also constitute as significant opportunities for tourism.

However, one of the challenges faced in this sector is to expand beyond the winter season and capitalize on the natural, cultural and recreational resources in a sustainable manner (Functional Areas in the Eu, n.d.). As a response to such issues, the ADTIVJ is developing and implementing an “*All-Season Tourism Masterplan for the Jiu Valley*”. *The aim of this masterplan is to “support the transformation of the Valley into an attractive year-round tourist destination, overcoming dependence on the winter season and capitalizing on existing natural, cultural and recreational resources. By diversifying and improving the tourism offer, the aim is to increase the number of tourists, lengthen the length of stay and increase the income generated by tourism in the region.”*

To do so, the strategy addresses multiple objectives (ADTIVJ, 2023.):

- developing a modern and efficient infrastructure that can provide access to the region by road and rail;
- Improving the capacity for accommodating tourists and food facilities, through diversifying offer of accommodations, restaurants and gastronomic facilities

- enhancing the region's cultural heritage and existing tourist attractions through restoration efforts, promotional activities, and the development of innovative tourism products that showcase the area's traditions, customs, and cultural legacy
- The development of recreational and sports infrastructure involving constructing and upgrading theme parks, hiking trails, cycling paths and winter and water sports facilities
- enhancing tourist information services by establishing a modern tourist information center and implementing effective marketing and promotional strategies to boost the destination's visibility.

The masterplan includes evaluation of the current situation of infrastructures in transport, internal mobility, accommodating, restaurants, health and safety, leisure and sports, water and sewage, energy ITC and digital connectivity, waste management, tourists' attractions and facilities. It provides information on aspects related to the management and administration of the tourist destination in the Jiu Valley, an action plan, a portfolio for projects.

Even though this masterplan is centered specifically on tourism and therefore more comprehensive, it lacks the perspective of tourists. Research papers focusing on tourism, which should constitute an empirical basis for a development strategy, share the same limitation. Taking some examples, Dobre-Baron (2006), Domokos (2011), Slusariuc (2011), Niță (2014), Nițescu (2018), or Eugen (2019) mainly explore the touristic potential of the area and argue for tourism as an alternative to coal-mining. Lazăr & Faur (2016), Samuil et al (2020), Samuil & Ionica (2022) focus more specifically on industrial tourism as an alternative. An exception is Sanda and Schmitz (2024) who incorporate the perspective of tourists from their photos, reviews and ratings on online platforms like Google Maps and TripAdvisor. The authors argue that travelers should be seen as key stakeholders in tourism development, as they actively shape a destination's image through this type of content (Sanda & Schmitz, 2024).

In summary, despite the emphasis on tourism in both development strategies and academic research, the perspective of tourists remains mainly overlooked. Without engaging with visitors to understand their needs and expectations, any strategy or plan risks becoming disconnected from the realities of their expectations and experience. As such, the present paper aims to bring insights from tourists themselves and serves as a supplement for the all-season masterplan developed by the ADTIVJ (2023).

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

The aim of this paper is to provide insights from tourists themselves by addressing key questions related to their experience in the Jiu Valley:

1. Perception of the region - what do they associate Jiu Valley with?
2. Decision criteria - what criteria mattered most in choosing this region as their destination?
3. Visitor activities and spending - what places have they visited here? what activities have they carried out? How long did they stay and how much did they spend in their last visit?

4. Satisfaction with services – how satisfied were they regarding various touristic services in the region?
5. Overall experience – how did tourists evaluate their overall experience in the Jiu Valley?
6. Intention to come back and recommend - to what extent are they interested in returning and recommending Jiu Valley to others? What would bring them back to the region?

To gain such insights an online survey was used. The survey was promoted on social media platforms and completed by 460 respondents (non-representative sample) that visited the region.

Based on demographic variables, the sample consisted of:

- Gender distribution: 53% male, 46% female, and 1% other gender.
- Age distribution: The average age was 41 years, with a minimum age of 14 and a maximum of 73. The median age was 40, meaning half of the respondents were under 40, while the other half were over 40.
- Regional distribution: Most respondents came from the West development region (31%), followed by Bucharest-Ilfov (21%), North-West (14%), South-West (12%), Center (8%), South-Muntenia (6%), South-East (5%), and finally North-East (2%).
- City distribution: The highest number of respondents came from Bucharest (20%), followed by Timișoara (11%), Cluj-Napoca (9%), and Craiova (7%).

Furthermore, it should be mentioned that a tourist was defined in this research as anyone who visited at least one location in the Jiu Valley, stayed between half a day and no more than 31 days, and engaged in at least one tourist activity. The survey contained questions that could identify what is a tourist according to the definition.

#### **4. DATA ANALYSIS**

The analysis is structured as follows. First, the associations tourists make with Jiu Valley are examined, highlighting the predominant perceptions of the region. Second, the factors tourists consider most important when selecting Jiu Valley as a destination are presented, along with an overview of the activities they engaged in, the amount they spent on their last visit, and the duration of their stay during that visit. Third, their satisfaction with various services and overall experience is analyzed, identifying strengths and areas for improvement. Fourth, the likelihood of tourists coming back and recommending Jiu Valley to others is explored, along with the main factors that would bring them back to the region.

##### **4.1. Perceptions of Jiu Valley**

Despite the reputation that the Jiu Valley had and possibly still has to people that did not visit the area (due to the mineriads or poverty), most respondents associate it primarily with nature. While image of mines is still present even in this case, it can be used as an advantage for specific forms of tourism, such as industrial tourism.

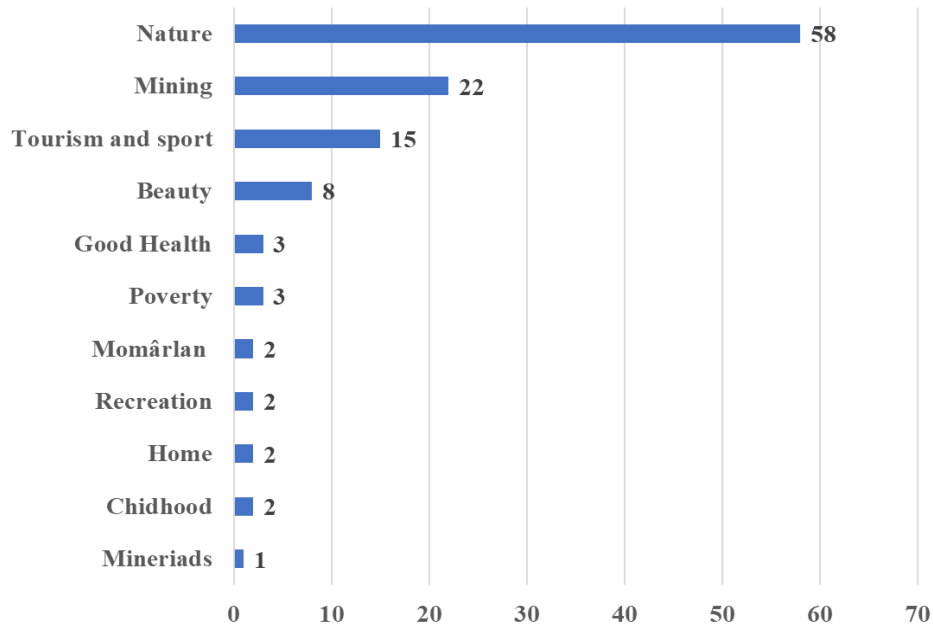


Figure 1. Perceptions on jiu Valley (%)

The question was an open-ended one, and the responses were categorized as follows:

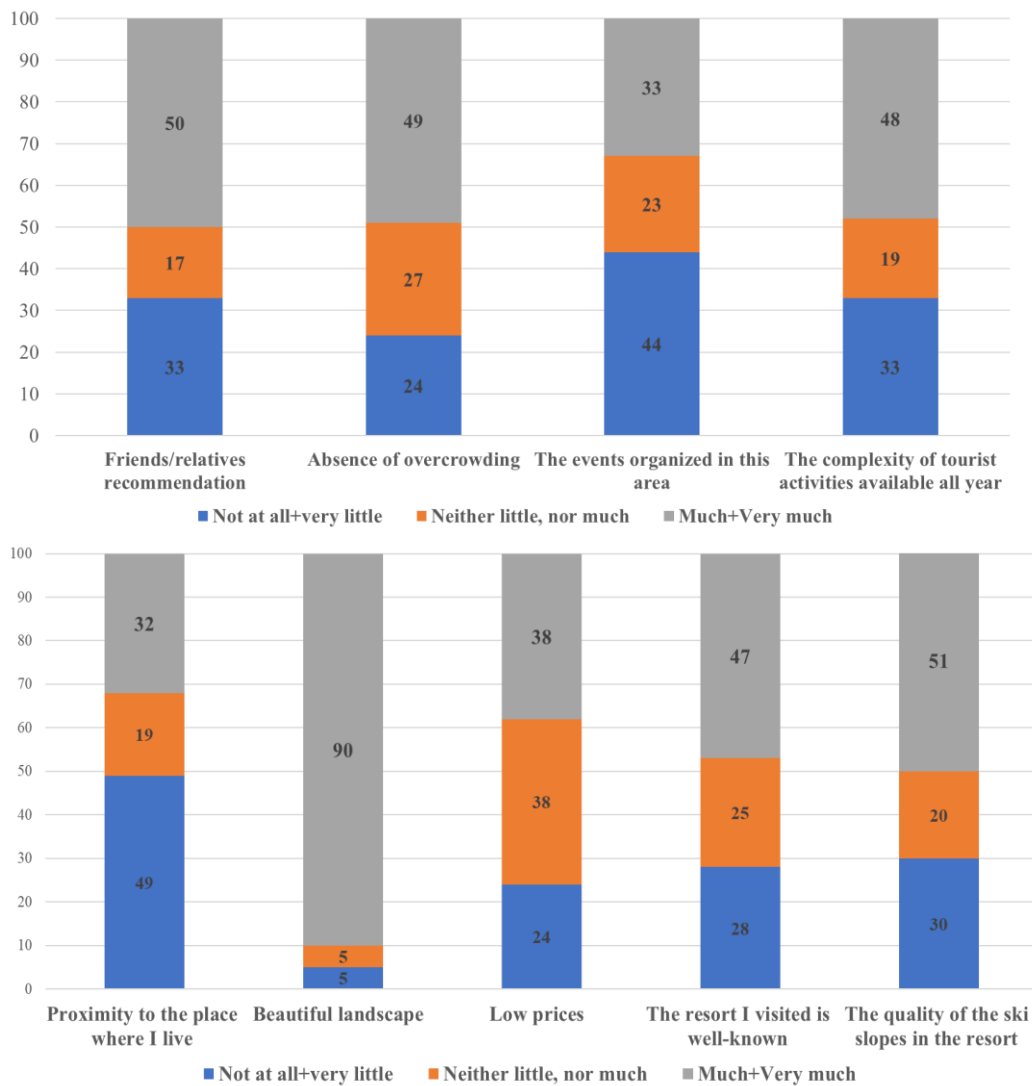
- Any mention of mountains or specific mountain names (e.g., Retezat), as well as references to forests, nature, or gorges, were grouped under the nature category.
- Any reference to mines, mining, coal, or miners was categorized under mining.
- The tourism and sports category included all mentions of tourist activities or sports such as skiing, snowboarding, mountain hiking, tourism, or mountain resorts.
- The beauty category encompassed responses mentioning scenic landscapes, beauty, or words like "stunning" and "magnificent."
- References to fresh air or health benefits were grouped under health.
- Mentions of the mineriads or Miron Cozma were categorized under mineriads.

It is also worth noting that a small number of respondents mentioned industrial heritage, traditions, or religion. However, these accounted for too small a percentage to be represented in the final chart.

#### 4.2. Decision criteria, visitor activities and spending

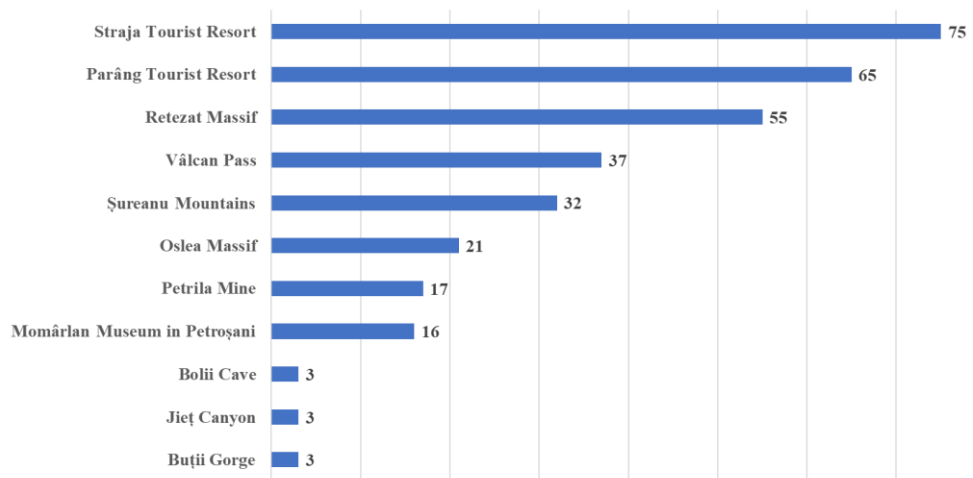
Understanding the reasons why tourists choose to visit the Jiu Valley is essential for assessing the region's appeal as a destination. Among all motivations, the most prominent is the landscape, with 90% of respondents considering it an important or very important factor in their decision to visit. Other key reasons include the quality of ski slopes in the resorts (51%), recommendations from friends or relatives (50%), the lack of overcrowding (49%), the diversity of year-round tourist activities (48%),

and the reputation of the resort they visited (47%). Conversely, the least influential factors were the proximity of the valley to their place of residence (49%) and the events organized in the area (44%). The fact that proximity is not as important suggests that the surveyed tourists prioritize the region's natural landscape over convenience. Regarding the events organized, this matter presents some challenges, as the existing events might lack the scale or appeal to draw significant attention, or that tourists we're more interested in the landscape rather than events.



**Figure 2. How much did the following factors influence the choice of Jiu Valley as a tourist destination (%)**

The most popular destinations among respondents were the tourist resorts of Straja, Parâng, Retezat Massif. Given that the region is surrounded by mountains, it is expected that most visited locations are in mountain massifs. However, the presence of sites such as the Petrila mine and the Momârlan Museum in Petroșani among the responses indicates an interest in other forms of tourism beyond mountain-based activities. Additionally, some respondents mentioned visiting the Lonea mine, Momârlan villages, wooden churches, and various museums, including the Plumber's Museum, the Mining Museum, and the Mother's Museum.



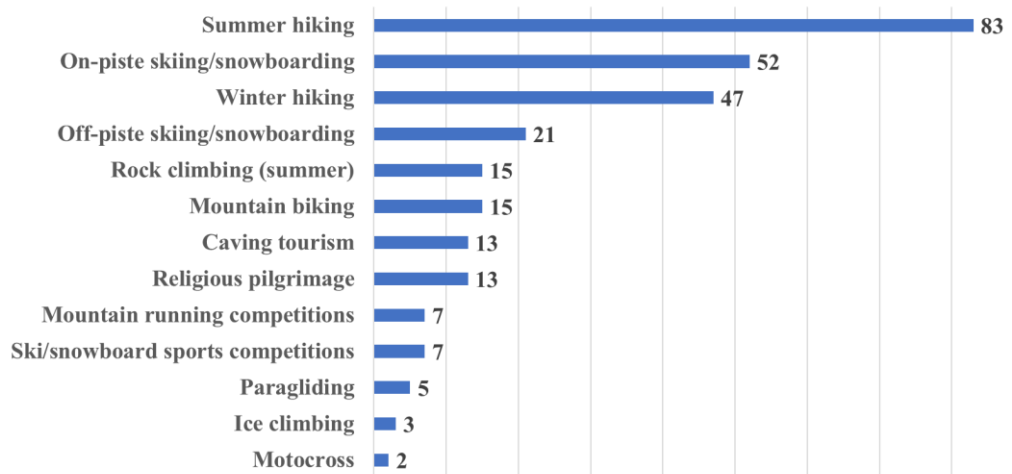
**Figure 3. The most visited places in the region (%)**

Furthermore, during their stay, tourists engaged in both winter and summer activities, depending on the season of their visit and their personal interests. The most popular activities were mountain hiking (practiced year-round) and skiing/snowboarding (on-piste, off-piste, and in sports competitions). Other frequently mentioned activities included climbing (including ice climbing), mountain biking, speleological tourism, and religious pilgrimages. A few respondents also reported participating in cultural and industrial tourism. Although many visited the Lonea and Petrila mines as well as various museums, it is possible that they did not explicitly recognize these visits as a distinct form of tourism. If that is the case, this suggests a potential gap in awareness or perception regarding industrial and cultural tourism.

For a more nuanced understanding, the following breakdown highlights additional activities practiced by the three main tourist categories:

- **Among those who engage in summer mountain hiking:** 51% also practice skiing/snowboarding on slopes, 51% engage in winter hiking, 21% ski/snowboard off-piste, 19% mountain bike, 17% climb (summer), 15% practice speleological tourism, and 8% participate in mountain running competitions.
- **Among those who practice skiing/snowboarding on slopes:** 81% also engage in summer hiking, 44% hike in winter, 35% ski/snowboard off-piste, 18% mountain

- bike, 13% climb (summer), and only 10% participate in competitive skiing/snowboarding events.
- **Among those who engage in winter mountain hiking:** 91% also hike in summer, 50% ski/snowboard on slopes, 23% ski/snowboard off-piste, 21% climb (summer), 7% participate in competitive skiing/snowboarding, and 6% practice ice climbing.



**Figure 4. Activities undertaken by tourists (%)**

Respondents were also asked about their approximate spending during their last visit to the Jiu Valley, the duration of their stay (in days). The findings are as follows:

Approximate amount spent (in RON) during the last visit (including all services such as ski lifts, ski passes, accommodation, etc.):

- Mean: 1,564 RON
  - Median: 1,000 RON (i.e., half of the respondents spent up to 1,000 RON, while the other half spent more than 1,000 RON).
  - Minimum amount spent: 0 RON. This was observed primarily among visitors who engaged in mountain hiking, stayed with friends or relatives, or camped.
  - Maximum amount spent: 9,000 RON, typically by visitors who stayed in the region for an extended period.
  - Notable observations: Some respondents expressed dissatisfaction with pricing, mentioning: *"I refuse to pay exorbitant prices for accommodation."*
- "The prices are far too high compared to Italy, where everything was exceptional, whereas here, there were always issues."*

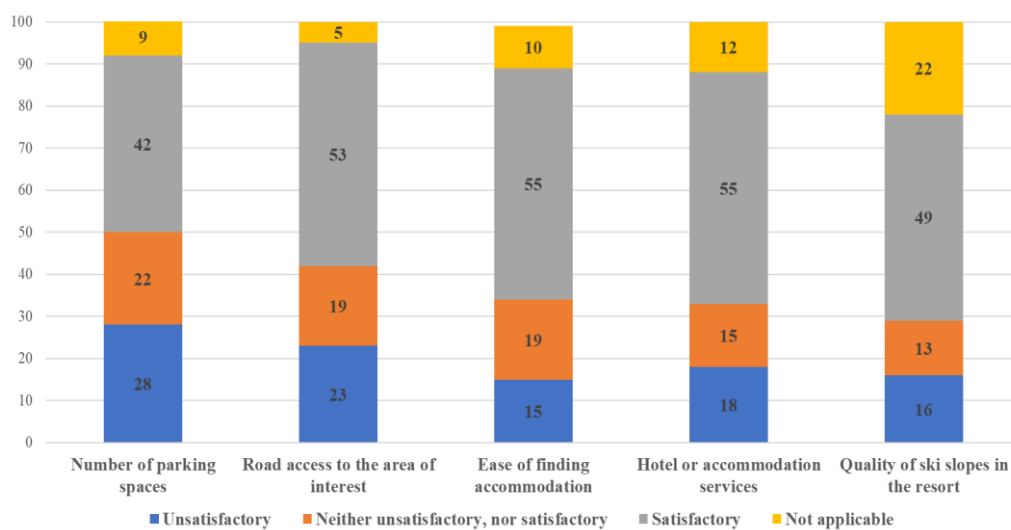
Number of days spent in the Jiu Valley during the last visit as a tourist:

- Mean: 4 days
- Median: 3 days (i.e., half of the respondents stayed for up to 3 days, while the other half stayed longer).
- Shortest stay: Half a day
- Longest stay: 31 days



### 4.3. Satisfaction with Services and Overall Experience

To assess tourist satisfaction in Jiu Valley, respondents were asked to evaluate their most recent experience in the region. Overall, most visitors reported being satisfied with the majority of services, and only a small percentage expressed dissatisfaction. However, this does not imply that the quality of tourist services is high, as some visitors reported experiencing unsatisfactory services. The most common concerns included the availability of parking, road access to points of interest, diversity of services offered, and pricing. These aspects recorded the highest dissatisfaction rates.

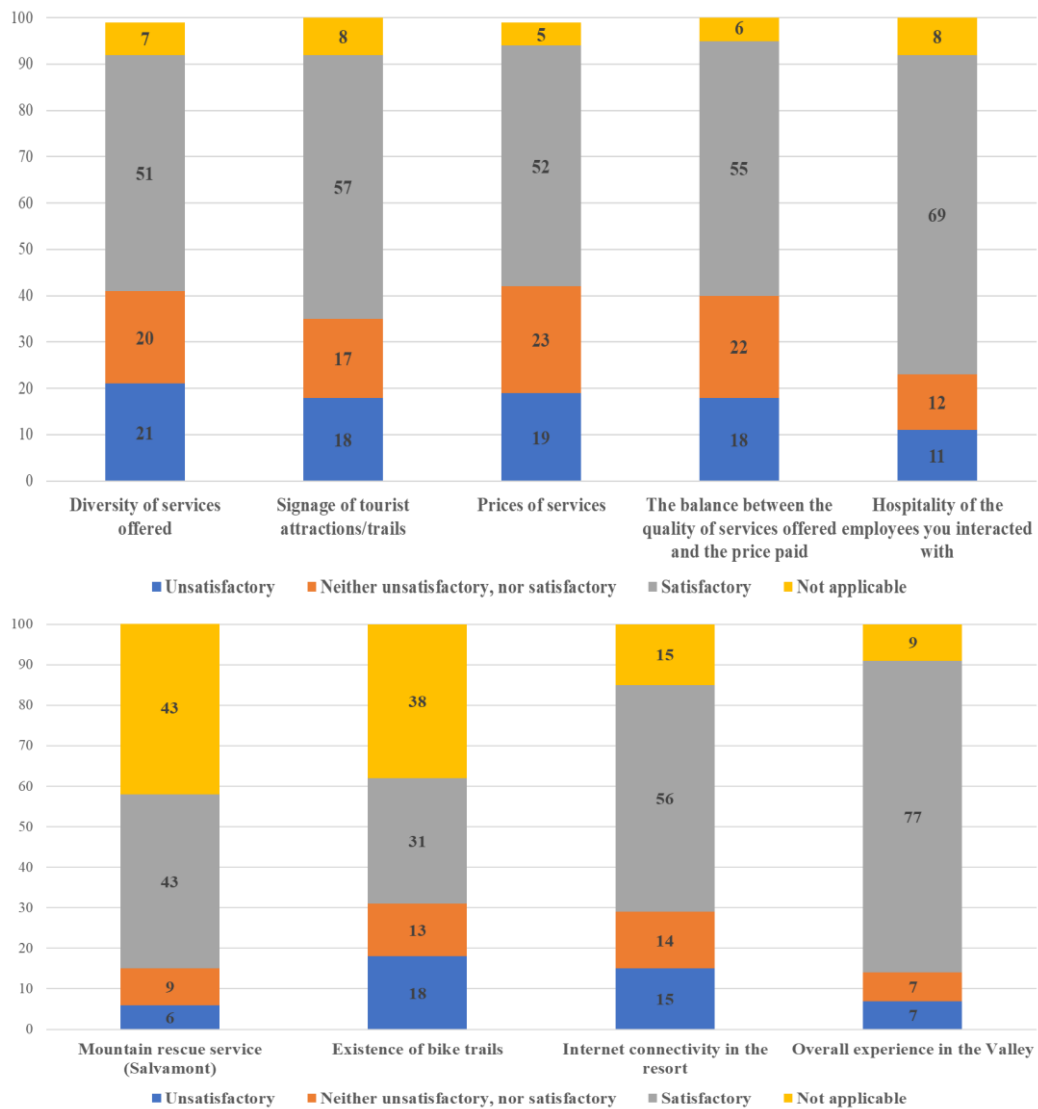


**Figure 5. Satisfaction with various services (%) continues below**

To gain deeper insights, the relationship between tourists' experiences and factors such as the duration of their stay, total expenditure, frequency of visits, satisfaction with specific services, types of activities undertaken, and the importance of certain criteria in choosing Jiu Valley as a destination, were assessed. Several statistically significant correlations (Kendall's tau-b) were identified:

**1. Experience and satisfaction with specific services, including:**

- Road access to points of interest ( $\tau_B = 0.4, p < 0.05$ )
- Ease of finding accommodation ( $\tau_B = 0.4, p < 0.05$ )
- Quality of hotel and lodging services ( $\tau_B = 0.5, p < 0.05$ )
- Condition of ski slopes ( $\tau_B = 0.4, p < 0.05$ )
- Diversity of services offered ( $\tau_B = 0.5, p < 0.05$ )
- Signage of tourist attractions and trails ( $\tau_B = 0.4, p < 0.05$ )
- Service pricing ( $\tau_B = 0.4, p < 0.05$ )
- Price-to-quality ratio of paid services ( $\tau_B = 0.4, p < 0.05$ )
- Hospitality of local staff ( $\tau_B = 0.4, p < 0.05$ )
- Internet connectivity in resort areas ( $\tau_B = 0.4, p < 0.05$ )



**Figure 5. Satisfaction with various services (%)**

This suggests that a positive experience in Jiu Valley correlates with a high level of satisfaction regarding various services in the region.

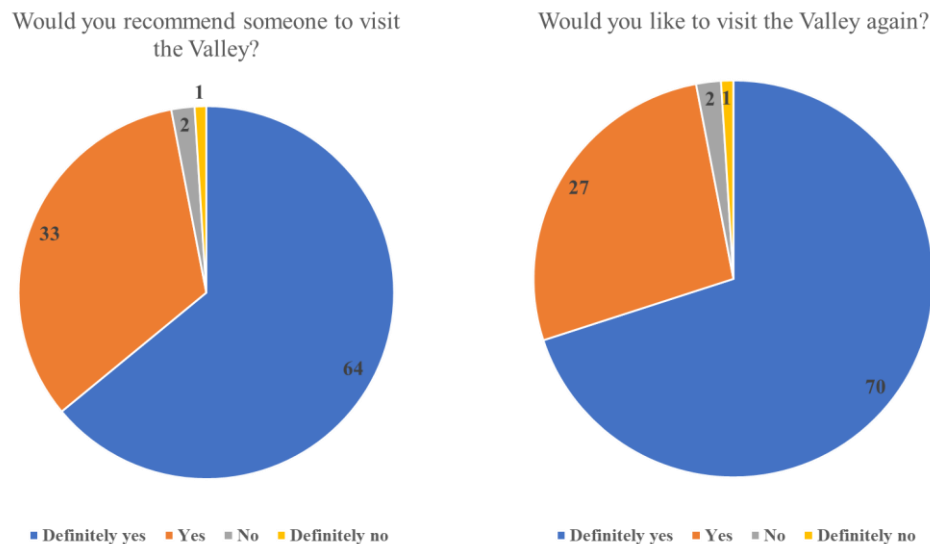
**2. Experience and the importance of specific factors in choosing Jiu Valley as a tourist destination, with the most significant being:**

- Scenic beauty ( $\tau B = 0.4, p < 0.05$ )
- Availability of diverse tourist activities throughout the year ( $\tau B = 0.3, p < 0.05$ )
- Organized events ( $\tau B = 0.3, p < 0.05$ )

Thus, a positive experience is associated with a greater emphasis on these three factors when selecting Jiu Valley as a destination.

#### 4.4. Intention to come back and recommend

Given that most respondents had a positive experience, it is expected that they would not only visit Jiu Valley again but also recommend it to others. Indeed, the vast majority responded affirmatively, with only 3% stating they would not return.



**Figure 6. Would tourists come back and recommend others to visit the region (%)**

Tourists were also asked (through an open-ended question) what would bring them back to the region. Looking at figure 7 below, we can observe that a significant number of tourists are drawn to the mountainous landscape and nature (41%). These aspects represent the region's main advantage, and capitalizing on them is essential. Meanwhile, 20% cited the diversity of tourist activities (skiing, mountain hiking, mountain biking, etc.).

The third most cited reason involves improvements in services, including aspects such as the availability of parking spaces, slope maintenance, additional ski slopes, investments in tourism, more accommodation options, cleanliness, and transportation. Even though a relatively small percent (10%) cites this, it should be emphasized that most services need to be improved either way or maintained at a high-quality level.

The fourth reason pertains to the hospitality of the local people and the friendships that tourists have formed in the area. This suggests that facilitating networking can improve the experience tourists have and possibly draw them back to the region. The fifth reason highlights better accessibility and road infrastructure, specifically addressing the lack of transportation options (rail and road), weak road infrastructure or its absence, and poor connectivity between resorts and tourist attractions. The sixth reason, which is recurring is the need for lower prices.

The final two reasons concern industrial and cultural tourism. Industrial tourism includes references to transforming mines into museums and making them accessible for visits, while cultural heritage encompasses all references to the local "momârlani" community, museums, and local traditions.

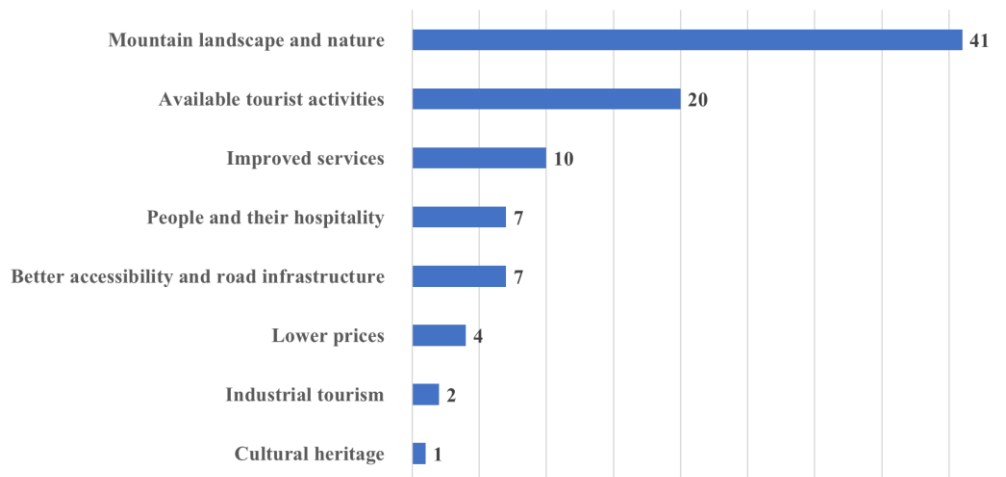


Figure 7. What would bring back the tourists? (%)

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

This research serves as a supplement to the all-season masterplan for integrated tourism in the Jiu Valley, developed and implemented by ADTIVJ. Any such plan, whether related to culture, tourism, education, or other areas, should be grounded in empirical studies and not in theoretical considerations.

The findings offer insights for stakeholders to improve their services, develop new ideas for tourism and enhance the overall experiences of tourists. For example, efforts to balance pricing strategies with improvements in service quality, road infrastructure, and accessibility could attract a broader audience and increase visitor satisfaction. Addressing such challenges will make the Jiu Valley more competitive and appealing as a tourist destination.

While nature remains the region's primary attraction, the research also highlights opportunities for diversification through alternative forms of tourism. Transforming the region's industrial heritage (specifically its mining sites) into museums offering both above-ground and underground experiences could serve as a unique opportunity in Romania. Promoting the cultural heritage of the "momârlani" community and local traditions would further improve the visitors' experience.

Encouragingly, most respondents expressed their intention to come back and recommend Jiu Valley for others to visit, showcasing its potential for growth. By capitalizing on its natural and cultural strengths, the Jiu Valley has the potential to become a more attractive destination for a wider range of local, national and international visitors.

## 6. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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