

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM IN BAIA DE FIER - POLOVRAGI AREA, GORJ COUNTY, ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT: *Tourism in rural areas, complementary to other forms of tourism, contributes to its support, offering the necessary conditions for transforming circuit tourism into holiday tourism. Polovragi Depression, represented by the Baia de Fier - Polovragi sector, can and must become a holiday tourist area, a destination for spending holidays all year round, because it responds not only to the motivation of cultural and knowledge tourism, but also to another modern requirement: that of spending free time in nature, a fact that has also been observed in other countries: surveys conducted among visitors to historical monuments demonstrate that attention is directed not only to the monuments, but also to their surrounding environment.*

KEY WORDS: *rural tourism, religious tourism, sustainable development, Polovragi Depression, Baia de Fier*

JEL CLASSIFICATIONS: *J2, J6, R0, R1, Z3.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism is the expression of the orientation of a significant part of contemporary tourists towards nature, as a result of the implications of post-industrial civilization (Fletcher et. al. ,2023). Today, nature becomes a pretext for reflection, for discovery, for education, but also for treatment, sports performances and implicitly for a new life (Nimară, 2022).

The Baia de Fier - Polovragi sector is located at the southwestern foothills of the Căpățânii Mountains, in the depression of the same name, in the northeastern part of Gorj County, on the left bank of the Olteț River. The analyzed sector is part of the Oltețan Subcarpathian Depression. The commune of Baia de Fier is made up of the

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communes of Baia de Fier and Cernădia. The commune is bordered on the east by the Olteț River. The name of the commune comes from the primitive exploitation of iron ore, which was purified with the help of water that was directed into large pits dug in the ground and into which the iron ore was placed. The commune of Polovragi is located in the Polovragi Depression, consisting of two villages: Polovragi - the commune's residence and Racovița (Candea, et al., 2003).

The mountain and submountain landforms, supported by a geological complex structure, enrich the landscape of the area and create opportunities for practicing various forms of tourism. The scientific importance (geological, geomorphological, botanical and forestry) of the entire karst area determined its declaration as a protected area. Natural tourist resources are: Yellow Gorge, Woman's Cave, Billy Goat Cave and Olteț Gorge. The anthropogenic tourist resources are: Geto-Dacian fortification, Polovragi Monastery, Wooden Church from Cernădia and Măldărești Museum Complex.

The Polovragi ethnographic center is an ethno-folkloric center, with traditions related to herding and transhumance, famous for (<http://www.gorj-turism.ro>):

- the popular shepherd's costume with influences from the Mărginimea Sibiului area;
- traditional architecture, old wooden houses with porches, specific to the ethnographic area "Oltenia under the mountain";
- the folk costume, in black and white colors, similar to the Mărginimea Sibiului area;
- artistic stitching and weaving (bags, saddlebags), crafts with an increasingly reduced spread;
- making of musical instruments, whistles;
- artistic woodworking, household objects: boxes, baskets, wool spinning forks, etc.

2. TYPES OF TOURISM IN THE ANALYZED REGION

The diversity and value of the existing tourist potential on the territory of Polovragi commune are premises that favor multiple ways of actively spending free time, rest, recreation and practicing specific forms of tourism. *Religious tourism* is favored by the presence of religious sites of exceptional value, already included in the national circuits and with a loyal segment of tourists who periodically come on pilgrimage to the monasteries in northern Oltenia.



Figure 1. Polovragi Monastery and the "All Saints" Church in Baia de Fier commune

Ethnocultural tourism. The character and tradition of this area have oriented the inhabitants towards Romanian-specific handicrafts, such as hand-made fabrics (folk costume, Oltenia wiping), sewing, artistic woodworking. The old ties of the local population with the "Hungarians" from across the mountain in the villages of Mărginimă Sibiului, have left their mark on the customs related to sheepherding, unfortunately preserved less and less, on the traditions, folklore, dialect and folk costume. The existence of these archaic ethnocultural traditions supports the practice of ethnocultural tourism (The National Strategy of Romania for Tourism Development, 2024–2035).

Rural tourism is still in the pioneering phase, but the analyzed sector benefits from all the opportunities for its development: attractive natural setting, varied tourist resources, direct accessibility to DN 67 and through this to two European roads with wide tourist circulation, the existence of rural guesthouses that can constitute a model for other owners of peasant households, the existence of technical and administrative facilities that can form the basis of the tourist development of the area. The promotion of rural tourism will ensure a sustainable and balanced development for this space that preserves traditional Romanian values.

Via Ferrata - High-altitude hammocks, an idea started in 2018 and which is attracting more and more tourists, entering the Book of Records. Suspended at 200 meters, thrill seekers have the opportunity to admire the indescribable beauties of the

Baia de Fier area in Gorj and relax in a way that is absolutely unique in Romania. The Via Ferrata climbing and mountaineering routes in Cheile Galbenului, Baia de Fier, Gorj County are a project of the White Wolf Mountain Club (www.via-ferrata.ro).

The development of the routes was carried out during 2018–2021, through self-financing. The result was 21 possible ascent variants, of different lengths and difficulty. In short: main route length 400 m; 21 routes in total; main route elevation difference 100 m; main route difficulty D (hard, difficult); GPS access: 45°11'35.1" N, 23°45'17.4" E; main route duration 1 hour; optimal period: May - October, avoiding rainy periods when the rock becomes slippery.



Figure 2. Baia de Fier climbing route, Gorj county

The unique feature of the routes from Baia de Fier is that they are designed more for climbing, with extremely rare artificial holds, present only on the difficult sections. Most of the routes have 8 mm cable, thinner than the recommendations in the SR EN 16869 standard, "Design and construction of Via Ferrata" and is left wide. Thus, the risk assumed by those who follow the above-mentioned routes increases.

The tourism is also favored by the presence of the Olteț Gorges karst complex, as well as the Muierilor, Polovragi and Iedului caves with the numerous karst landforms.



Figure 3. Olteț Gorges and Polovragi Cave

Weekend tourism is an increasingly popular form of tourism, with residents of large urban centers wanting to spend their weekends in unpolluted places, away from the hustle and bustle and stress of big cities.

3. TOURISM ACTIVITY ANALYSIS

3.1. Competition and market trends

The need to focus on the quality of the tourist product in Baia de Fier - Polovragi sector arises from at least three circumstances:

- a) the increase in the offer of tourist products in each country at the level of the world economy, which determines an increase in users;
- b) the increase in the weight of quality within the competition of tourist products on the national and international market;
- c) the decisive influence of quality on the other economic indicators of the tourist company.

In Baia de Fier - Polovragi tourism sector, the existing tourist resources favor the practice of various forms of tourism, among which speleological and religious tourism are the most important. From this point of view, the areas with which this tourism sector enters into competition are those with similar offers, from the neighboring area. This includes localities with religious and speleological potential from Vâlcea, Gorj and Argeș counties.

The products offered by the competing areas, strictly from the point of view of religious tourism and speleology, are based on the promotion of the tourist objectives presented for each locality.

The religious phenomenon that characterizes this area, among others takes on specific forms for each geographical space. Therefore, it is difficult to make a comparison between competing areas in terms of religious potential, each church or monastery being unique in its own way and responding to motivations whose

intensities are difficult to determine, since they have a subjective or psychological charge, which differs from one person to another.

A strong point of the analyzed tourism sector, compared to the competition, is the fact that, except for the Costești commune, the Polovragi locality is the only locality, among those chosen, that can develop and promote both a religious and a speleological tourist product. The other localities have either tourist objectives in the sphere of religious tourism, or only karst formations. In addition, to these basic forms of tourism, ethno-folkloric tourism or even extreme sports tourism can be added, which outlines a complex image of the tourist offer of the Polovragi locality.

3.2. Tourist accommodation capacity

In the Baia de Fier - Polovragi tourist sector, for the year 2024 there were a total of 55 tourist reception structures with accommodation function, of which, most (42 units) are located in the Baia de Fier commune. Of this total, the largest proportion is occupied by agro-tourism guesthouses (23 units) and apartments or rooms for rent (10), which in this case are also found in Baia de Fier (www.insse.ro).

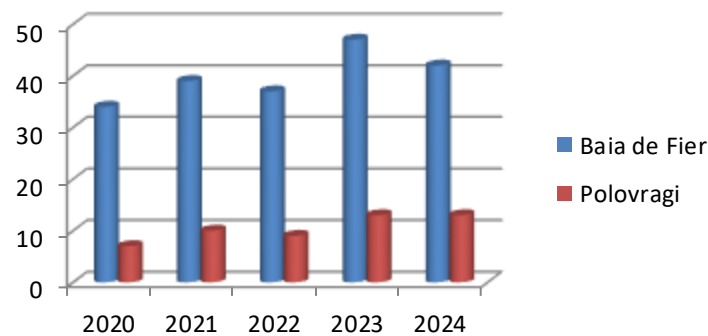


Figure 4. Accommodation facility in the Baia de Fier - Polovragi sector

From the figure above, it can be seen that the largest number of tourist reception structures in the analyzed sector is located in Baia de Fier with a slight decrease in 2024.

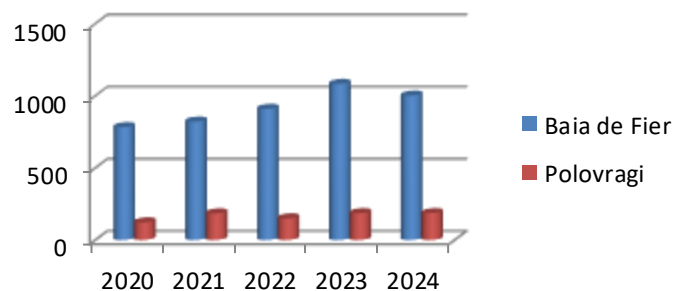


Figure 5. Existing tourist accommodation capacity in the Baia de Fier - Polovragi sector

Regarding the existing tourist accommodation capacity in the analyzed sector, it is observed that the largest number of accommodation places is held by agro-tourism guesthouses and hotels. For the year 2024, these are 651 accommodation places for agro-tourism guesthouses, apartments and rooms for rent with 182 accommodation places and 172 accommodation places for hotels, with the mention that these are completely absent from the Polovragi commune.

According to the above figure, it can be seen that the largest number of accommodation places is held by the commune of Baia de Fier, with an increase until 2023, after which there is a decrease of 81 accommodation places, this being attributed to the removal of some agro-tourism guesthouses from the tourist circuit.

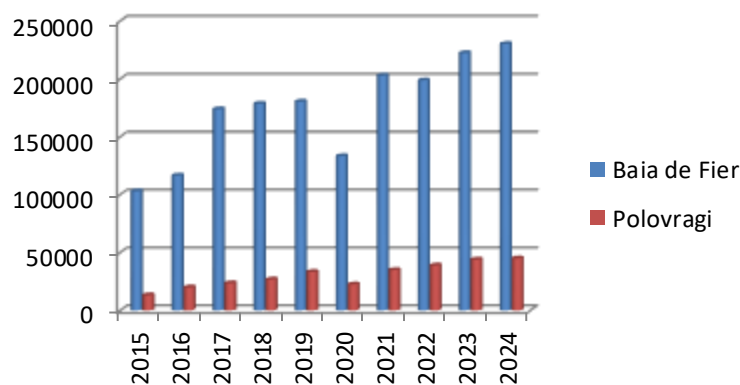


Figure 6. Existing accommodation capacity in the Baia de Fier - Polovragi sector (number of places - days)

The operational tourist accommodation capacity represents the number of accommodation places made available to tourists by tourist accommodation units, taking into account the number of days the units are open during the period considered and is expressed in place-days. Places in rooms or units temporarily closed due to lack of tourists, for repairs or other reasons are excluded. According to the figure above, it is observed that the highest number of place-days is recorded in 2024, both for the commune of Baia de Fier and for Polovragi (www.insse.ro).

3.3. Tourist flow analysis

According to the figure below, the highest number of tourists was recorded in 2023, when 26,828 tourists arrived in Baia de Fier commune and 2,861 tourists in Polovragi commune. The lowest number recorded in the last ten years was in 2015 for both localities: 10,129 tourists in Baia de Fier commune and 1,208 tourists in Polovragi commune. After the onset of the Covid 19 pandemic, when tourist arrivals registered a decline, the trend was increasing until 2023, after which they started to decrease again.

For the year 2024, the statistical data presented, shows us that August represented the period of the year with the highest number of tourist arrivals recorded. 4472 tourists arrived in the analyzed sector, 4188 tourists in Baia de Fier commune and 284 tourists in Polovragi commune. The lowest number of arrivals is recorded in the

months of March, April, October and November for both destinations and February for Polovragi commune.

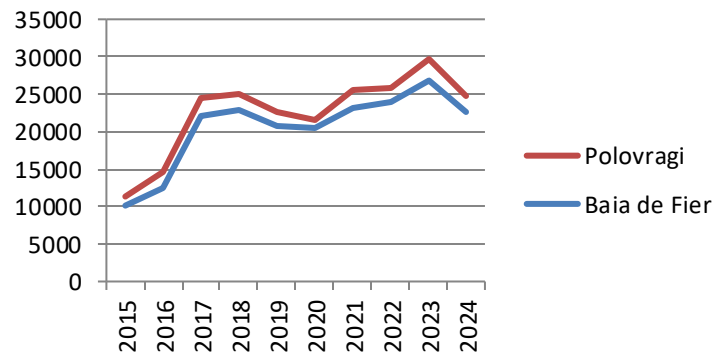


Figure 7. Tourist arrivals in accommodation facilities in Baia de Fier - Polovragi sector, during 2015-2024

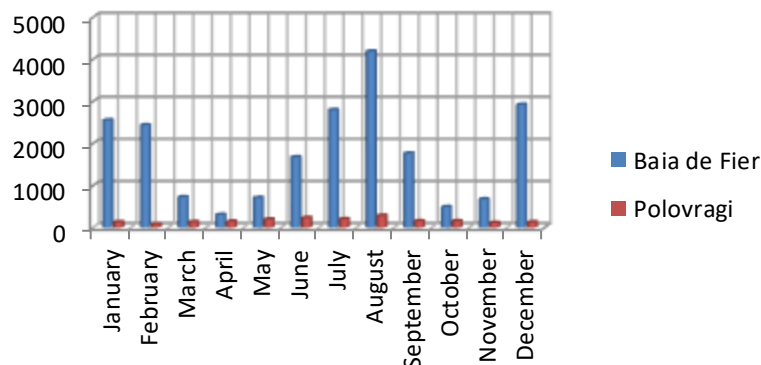


Figure 8. Tourist arrivals in accommodation structures in the Baia de Fier - Polovragi sector, during 2024

According to the figure below, we can see that the highest number of overnight stays is achieved in the years prior to the Covid 19 pandemic and immediately after the end of the pandemic, namely in 2018, when a number of 46974 overnight stays are recorded for the commune of Baia de Fier and 4375 overnight stays in 2019 for the commune of Polovragi.

In 2023, the highest value is recorded for the analyzed period, namely 49104 overnight stays for the commune of Baia de Fier and 4369 overnight stays for the commune of Polovragi (www.insse.ro).

Regarding the number of overnight stays in the analyzed area, it is observed that the lowest number recorded was in 2015 (23187 overnight stays) and 2020 (37009 overnight stays), of course with the mention that the highest value was recorded in the

commune of Baia de Fier (21272 overnight stays in 2015 and 34836 overnight stays in 2020).

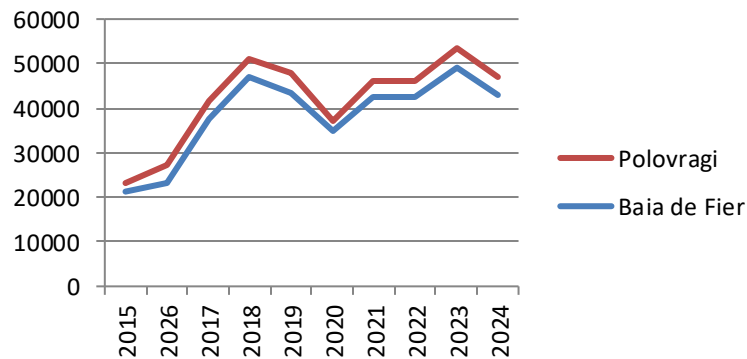


Figure 9. Overnight stays in tourist accommodation structures in the Baia de Fier - Polovragi sector, in the period 2015-2024

The highest number of overnight stays was recorded in 2023 (49104 overnight stays in the commune of Baia de Fier and 4369 overnight stays in the commune of Polovragi).

4. DYSFUNCTIONS OF THE CURRENT TOURISM OFFER AND PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Although it has various tourist resources, which allow the practice of different forms of tourism, such as religious tourism, speleological tourism or even extreme sports tourism, the Baia de Fier - Polovragi tourist sector does not have an efficient tourist activity, identifying the following problems and dysfunctions of the current tourist offer:

- tourist accommodation structures that are not very diversified, in terms of type and comfort category;
- insufficient tourist food structures, in relation to the current number of accommodation places;
- lack of specific leisure facilities;
- tourist activity inconsistent with the value of the tourist potential;
- lack of efficient distribution and promotion actions.

In order to regain the tourist markets, I believe that, within the framework of policies to promote the hospitality industry, the following steps must be taken into account:

- differentiated stimulation of the interest of different categories of tourists to visit the Baia de Fier - Polovragi tourist sector;
- encouraging the proactive attitude of the tourist industry and travel in the country, as well as of local communities in the promoted area to exploit the tourist potential;

- increasing the efficiency of the campaign to promote Romanian tourism;
- developing more information, documentation and assistance centers;
- restoring, updating and enriching the range of advertising materials and making them available to tourism consumers;
- close and principled collaboration with all ministries, embassies, consulates and tourism offices in order to promote the image of the region's tourist offer;
- increasing financial funds for advertising and promotion and spending them in an efficient manner, eliminating unnecessary expenses;
- organizing as many shows and competitions on television, radio and in the specialized press as possible with the theme "Tourism in Northern Oltenia", with the awarding of prizes consisting of free circuits and stays;
- organizing by rotation, in as many county capital cities as possible in the country, symposiums, communication sessions, exhibitions, fairs to promote the image of the tourist product in the Baia de Fier - Polovragi sector;
- initiating a legal provision that would determine advertising companies (or encourage/stimulate them) to allocate free of charge a determined number of street billboards dedicated exclusively to promoting the tourist attractions of the areas where they are located;
- periodic organization, both in the country and abroad, of events such as: the day of Romanian gastronomy, art and folk costume, national customs and traditions; Romania as a tourist seen in photographs, paintings and prints etc.

The recommendations for the local authority are:

- within the City Hall's own apparatus, it is necessary to establish a Department for Tourism, whose activity should focus on organizing local tourism activity and providing consultancy for travel agencies;
- in order to support the sustainable development of tourism in the analyzed localities, it is absolutely necessary to arrange a household waste transfer point, in accordance with the environmental policy in this field. Very few investors will want to start an economic activity in a locality without infrastructure and basic utilities;
- for the tourist exploitation of the spectacular Oltet Valley, it is necessary to arrange an observation platform near the entrance to the cave;
- for the introduction of the Dacian fortress of Polovragi, located above the cave with the same name, at 1000 m altitude, into the tourist circuit, it is necessary to redevelop the access path and provide appropriate signage at the branching point from the forest road;
- it is recommended to preserve all the old, valuable buildings in the locality by rehabilitating them and placing plaques with explanatory text on each one (year of construction, architectural style, owner). The owners of the respective houses must benefit from various facilities granted by the local administration, in order to be interested in making these rehabilitation investments;
- marking, with the help of students, during the summer vacation, all the tourist trails that leave from Baia de Fier and Polovragi to the Căpățânii Mountains or to the Lotru tourist basin, is a pleasant and educational activity for students, but at the same time necessary for the development and promotion of tourism in the area.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The future of tourism in the Baia de Fier - Polovragi sector depends decisively on the capacity of economic agents and the space to capitalize on the special potential it has, to adapt to the growing demands of tourist demand and to raise the quality of tourist activity in all aspects, that is to say to organize and achieve modern and competitive tourism. At the same time, overcoming the shortcomings and difficulties that Romanian tourism is currently facing requires a coherent and efficient national policy. The example of countries that have achieved sustainable tourism is instructive in this regard. The main problem of tourism in this area, in the coming period, including rural tourism, is the quality of the tourist product, mainly viewed in terms of tourist services, without which no tourist heritage, no matter how valuable, can be effectively capitalized.

The Baia de Fier - Polovragi tourist sector and its surroundings have undeniable advantages to become a sought-after destination for ecotourism at the national and Eastern European level. The development of ecotourism in the area must be seen in direct relation to nature conservation (protected natural areas), to the preservation of authentic culture and to the involvement of local communities in all stages of this process.

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