

THE TOURISTIC POTENTIAL OF BANAT MOUNTAINS IN THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE REGION

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Abstract

Banat is a territory with inherited structures, yet constantly renewed by the sequence of influences and dominations it was subjected to throughout history. The identity of Banat is rendered by its capacity to assimilate and harmonize values of different origins. The reverence for the other's specificity is a lifelong rule established here, also confirmed by the lack of intercultural tensions in a region traditionally characterized by an exquisite melange of nationalities, customs, mindsets and internal organization. All these represent powerful arguments for the purpose of this article, namely the assessment of tourism development over time in Banat, this Romanian territory being successor of a multicultural material and spiritual patrimony of high value not extensively known and included in the national and international tourist circuits.

Key words: *mountain tourism, tourism potential, Banat patrimony*

JEL Classification: Z32

1. Introduction

The Banat Mountains are part of the old historical region of Banat with an indisputable touristic potential. It benefits from an original natural setting, unique through remarkable tourist objectives. From the tourist potential standpoint, it exceeds many of the geographical sections of the Romanian Carpathians. The Banat Mountains, compared to other units in the Carpathians, have a position potential, being thus accessible for neighboring countries but also for others in Central, Northern, Southern and Western Europe. The Banat Mountains boast attractive natural and anthropic resources of high touristic value, with tourist tradition rendered by multiculturalism and the presence of several ethnic groups, inhabitants' hospitality and generosity (Olaru, 2010, p.34).

According to the Romanian encyclopedic dictionary, tourism equals: "the totality of relationships and phenomena resulting from people's movement and time spending outside their abodes but also from recreational or sports activities consisting of walking or traveling by various means of transport throughout a picturesque region or interesting from a certain point of view. In specialty literature, tourism is described as a solution to all the economic problems a country or region could face, also being responsible for balancing the payments balance as capital investment generator in many fields of activity (Neacsu et al., 2016 , p.14).

From an etymological perspective, tourism comes from the English term "to tour", which means to travel, to roam, with reference to trips. Invented in the 17th century in India, this Gallic word comes from the French word "tour" (traveling, outdoor movement, walking, hiking), which is also derived from the Greek "turnos", respectively the Latin "turnus", preserving the meaning of circuit. As a social and economic phenomenon, tourism began to be enhanced in Europe as early as 1880 and in 1905 the first definition showed that tourism, in the modern sense of the word, is a contemporary phenomenon based on increasing the need to improve health and change environment for the manifestation and development of the receptivity feeling to the beauties of nature (Ehmeyer Feuler in the work "Handbuch der Scweizeishen Volkswistshaft", quoted by Guran V, 2015). As a synthesis of the two types of relationships established in tourism (the material ones - tourists using paid services, and - the

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immaterial ones (stemming from the contact with the local inhabitants, culture, tradition, public institutions in the area visited) we can say that tourism is the activity with recreational character that consists of walking or traveling by different means of transport with the purpose of visiting picturesque regions, localities, or sightseeing. Tourism is a complex phenomenon that also involves social and economic trends and material values circuit between countries, in the process of spending free time.

2. Overall physical-geographical and economic presentation of the Banat Mountains

The Banat Mountains represent the southern section of the Western Carpathians and are located between the Danube valley in the southern part and Mures valley in the north. The eastern part is indicated by the separation corridors from the Southern Carpathians (Timis - Cerna Corridor and Bistra Corridor), and in the western part it comes close to the Western Hills and Plain. The Banat Mountains were formed by intense processes of folding and converging movements of the tectonic plates along the alpine orogeny. Granitic intrusions were previously formed during the Hercynian orogeny. The Banat Mountains represent the lowest Carpathian mountain unit, with a maximum altitude of 1446 m of the Semenicul Mare peak.

The main attraction factors are represented by the value of certain tourist areas, with the possibility to visit from all directions. Other favorable elements worth listing would be the hydrographic network, the climate with Mediterranean influences and the proximity of larger urban centers. In the southern part, the Danube has formed a valley in the gorge (Iron Gates Gorge) distinguishable through its amplexness, length (154 km-the largest gorge in Europe of this kind) and picturesque character. The western hills enter the mountain area through bay depressions: Oravita Depression. Other depressions have an intramontane aspect: the Almajului (Bozovici) Depression on the Nera River, the Caras-Ezeris Depression on the Barzava River. The Banat area has one of the most interesting *geographical positions*. Located in the southeastern part of the Pannonian Basin, it mostly spans a smooth and low plain, with vast marshy areas (Timis, Bega, Aranca) but also with wind accumulations (sand dunes of Deliblata). The region also includes areas of low and medium height mountains (alpine Banat), which culminates in its eastern border at over 2,000 m altitude (Tarcu Peak, 2,190 m). Units of low hills (200-300 m) border these mountains interrupted by the indentations of real plain "bays", which extend along the main rivers toward the inner mountain mass, facilitating traffic. The geographical position of the Banat mountains is presented in figure 1.

Banat is in fact situated on the edge of *three large ethno-cultural complexes* that make contact with: the Eastern Latin complex (Romanians), the South Slavic complex (Serbs) and the Finno-Ugric complex (Hungarians). The *colonizations* undertaken by the House of Habsburg during the eighteenth century will add a fourth ethno-cultural complex, the Germanic one, which will play a decisive role in the space organization and social and economic development of the region for a long time. Mainly, depending on the spatial distribution of these ethno-cultural complexes, the territorial division of the historical Banat (1918) will be produced between the *three neighboring states*: Romania, Serbia and Hungary.

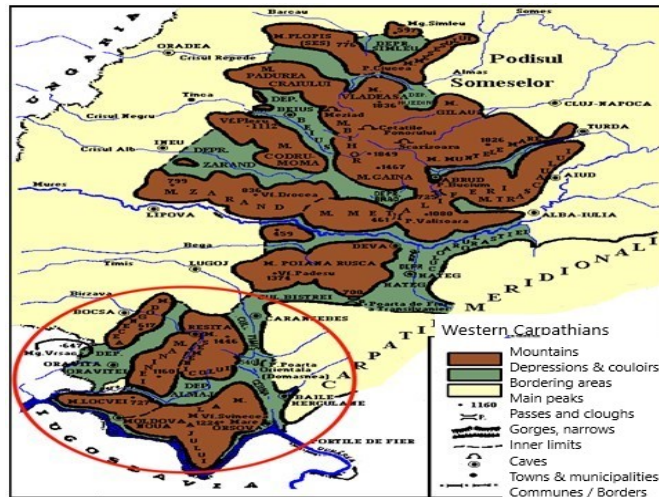


Figure no. 1. Geographic position of Banat Mountains
 Source: www.geocities.com/dmarioara/carpocc.htm edited

Banat is located in an intensely politically polarized region in Europe, less than 700 kilometers from 15 European capitals, feeding a diverse and rich local heritage spawned by the interaction with the waves of ideas and values, people and goods which it has permanently benefited from. The transport infrastructures, still precarious, attracted by large transcontinental traffic axes, registered overall on convergent directions, connecting Central Europe and South-Eastern Europe, respectively the Mediterranean and Baltic Sea (Danube valley, European couloir No. 4, the Trieste - St. Petersburg connection, etc.) basins are completed by the efficient airport infrastructures from Timisoara (with 1 million passenger traffic in 2008) and Arad, with the role of communication between the large regions from this part of Europe. The improvement of these infrastructures and the related services will allow Banat to consolidate its reputation as an attractive, open and dynamic identity area, with potential for remarkable intercultural dialogue.

Currently, it has a population of almost 2 million inhabitants, out of which 0.7 million in Serbian Banat and about 1.25 million in the Romanian Banat (including the northern part of Mures, up to the border with the Crisul Alb basin). The population density is, however, reduced in the Romanian side, especially in the mountainous Banat (38 inhabitants/sq km) and slightly higher in the plain areas (78 inhabitants/sq km in Timis County), which gives a certain inconsistency to the efforts to capitalize on the local natural and human heritage.

The Romanian Banat has an advanced degree of urbanization (61%), above the national average, but a life expectancy of only 71 years, below the national average, mainly due to the morbidity rate resulted from the traditional high-fat diet. In addition to its geographical position in Central Europe and in the socio-economic and political context of the Habsburg Empire, Banat was the first industrial region in Romania, renowned since the second half of the eighteenth century and which stood out in the nineteenth century. Based on competitive material and human resources and successful local and foreign investments, Banat has excelled as a traditional pole of attracting surplus labor and innovation resources from different regions of Europe and Romania.

3. The tourist history of the mountainous Banat

From a geographical-historical point of view, Banat has the shape of an irregular quadrangle, with an area of about 28,500 sq. km., centered around the city of Timisoara, as the main polarizing center. Its territory limits are marked by well-defined natural elements: the Danube river in the south, the Tisza river in the west, the Mures river to the north, the

ridges of the Poiana Rusca Tarcu, Godeanu and Mehedinti mountains in the east. Only the northern border is controversial in specialty literature, due to the identity interference between Transylvania and Banat, in the area between Crisul Alb and Mures rivers.

Divided after 1779 into provinces and after 1920 into counties, Banat suffered some separations that could very well have been avoided, given its relatively small area, similar to that of Belgium or the Netherlands. Unfortunately, the central interests often pursued both its splitting into distinct and unrelated territorial units, led in a centre-based spirit, and the separation of some marginal areas, which were discreetly attached to other regions. The autumn of 1716 marks the liberation of the city of Timisoara from the ruling of the Ottoman Empire. Subsequent to the conquest, the Habsburg Empire will reintegrate Banat into European Christianity, the imperialists bringing the modernization specific to those times to Timisoara. The release of Timisoara from Ottoman domination was achieved in a particularly turbulent European context, a context in which the great empires were governed either by the ambition to rule new territories, by the fear of strengthening competitors, or by erasing the failures that weakened their power.

The region was part of the Hungarian Kingdom, then, in the sixteenth century, of the Ottoman Empire, after which it was incorporated in the late eighteenth century in the Archdiocese of Austria, which became the Austrian Empire. After 1867, it was part of the Hungarian side of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and after the First World War, Banat was divided per ethnic lines between the three national states whose ethnic groups lived in the area, Yugoslavia, Romania and Hungary. The proclamation of the Banat Republic in 1918 was an attempt to preserve the unity of the multiethnic and multi-denominational Banat, but failed due to the promises made to Romania prior to the war and Serbia's territorial claims.

The analyzed territory forms what is commonly known as the "historical Banat", with a unitary evolution starting from 1718, from its conquest under Ottoman control by the Habsburg Empire until 1918. The regional identity of Banat has been strengthened especially during this period, when the House of Habsburg directly administered the province (until 1867), subjecting it to a complex process of identity reconstruction, through colonization, a real social engineering experiment (luckily successful).

Following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, after the First World War (through the Treaty of Trianon), the geographical-historical Banat is divided, according to the principle of nationalities, between Romania, Yugoslavia and Hungary. Thus, a "Romanian Banat" (18,977 sq. km) and a "Serbian Banat" (9,276 sq. km) are formed and included in the Vojvodina Autonomous Region, to which a small area (248 sq. km) is added, south of the Mures River streaming into Tisza river, which returned to Hungary. Currently, the main regional structures in the Banat area are presented in figure no. 2.

Following this division, the resulting sectors evolved distinctly, each within the policy of the state to which they belonged, but without losing all of the common characteristics, deeply instilled in the material structures, spiritual values, social behaviors of the population.

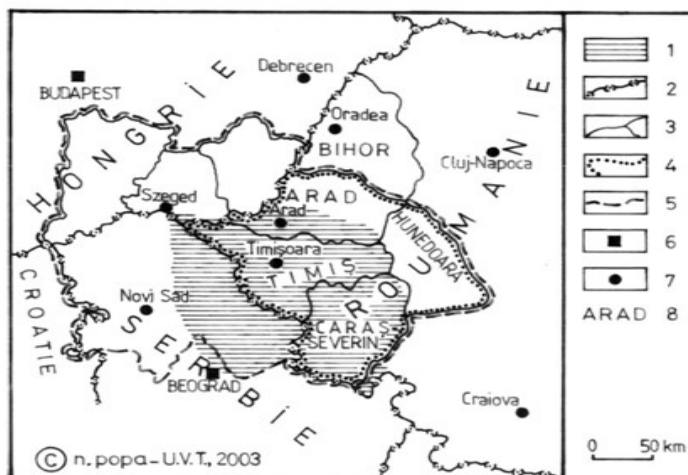


Figure no. 2. Regional structures at the western border of Romania

Source: <http://turism.cjcs.ro/ro/turism-montan.php>

1 – Geo-historical Banat; 2 – state border; 3 – county border; 4 – Western development region border; 5 – DKMT Euroregion border (DKMT = Danube-Kris-Mures-Tisa Euroregion); 6 – state capital; 7 – town with over 150,000 inhabitants; 8 – western county of Romania.

These will be recurrent when, after 1989, the first premises for the development of freer cross-border relations would occur, which would lead to the formation of new regional cooperation structures, this time with a cross-border character, as is the case of the Danube-Cris-Mures-Tisa Euroregion, presented in figure no. 3.

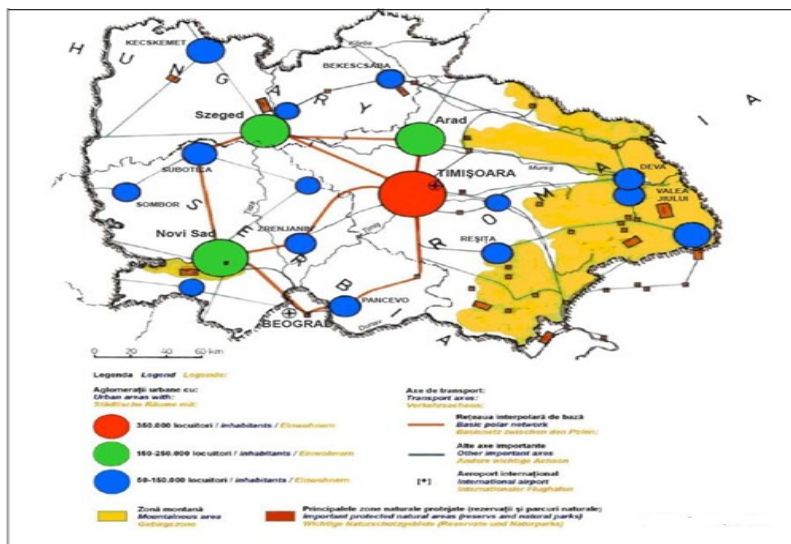


Figure no. 3. Multipolar Transborder Dunare-Cris-Mures-Tisa Euroregion

Source: editing acc. to Popa, N. (coord.), (2017), *Banat: identity, development, regional collaboration*, Mirton Publishing House, Timisoara, p.32

The Banat Mountain area was, prior to this unfavorable present, one of the Romanian tourism cores. The rich nature and picturesque beauty of the area have attracted many tourists. Up until now, many of the tourist attractions in Banat have been swallowed by time, and those that have endured over time are just scars of the past and loss of interest. Whether they were recreational areas or real spas in the past, the balneary resorts in the county were real attractions for tourists everywhere. The first mentioned on the list of wonders now extinct was the Steierdorf resort, also called the Aurora of Banat. This beautiful place was found five

kilometers from the town of Anina, in an oasis of peace and fresh clean air. Especially the preservation of multiculturalism and an obvious intercultural dimension, both in the Romanian and in the Serbian part of Banat, was a favorable premise for the competitive unfolding of the socio-economic processes but also for the cooperative attitude. In a magical place, surrounded by tall fragrant fir trees, a real tourist paradise was opening up. The development of the area closed its wings at the end of the First World War, which left deep marks on the buildings there.

In addition to these areas with a unquestionable tourist potential decades ago, but which sadly became slowly extinct, we must not forget those that survived the battle with time. Resorts such as Herculane, Dognecea, Brebul-Nou, Calacea or Valiug still preserve, among ruins, the memories of the times when they used to shine.

4. Forms of tourism practiced in the Banat mountains region

The tourist potential of an area can be defined by the set of elements that can constitute tourist attractions and that could properly be prepared for visiting and receiving tourists. The concept of tourist attraction expresses the affective, cognitive-aesthetic side of the elements of the tourist potential, which influences certain sectors of the tourist demand through the impressions produced. The tourist resources include, besides natural or anthropic tourist attractions, all the specific infrastructure and facilities that can be exploited into tourist activities. Depending on the conditions offered by each locality or rural area, but also on the reasons tourists have when traveling in rural areas, as forms of rural tourism, we distinguish: cultural-historical tourism, cultural-religious tourism, balneary tourism (for maintaining or restoring health), business tourism, adventure tourism, leisure and recreational tourism, transit tourism and, last but not least, tourism for winter sports, hunting and fishing.

Next, depending on the natural and anthropic tourist resources, we will deliver a presentation of the rural tourist potential of the Banat mountains region, classified in the forms that we consider to be more present.

4.1 The cultural-historical tourist potential

Cities full of history, dozens of churches and architectural monuments, typical mountain villages, people who preserve an authentic way of life, in a nutshell, the Banat mountains area has a cultural heritage dating back over 2000 years, supported by a peaceful quiet nature. The region under scrutiny belongs to a geographical area located at the merging of two great civilizations, Eastern and Western, which during the first and second millennia marked the political, religious, economic, social and cultural destiny of the European society. The rural tourist potential with cultural-historical character of Banat historical region is very rich and consists mainly of ancient and medieval fortresses, castles, museums and memorial houses.

4.2 Balneary touristic potential

Mineral waters, this natural gift has been cherished from ancient times. They still offer opportunities to improve health and relax for both young and especially the older generations. The emblematic resort of Caras-Severin County remains Baile Herculane. Crossed by clear watercourses, forests and extensive natural meadows, the town is known for its healing springs since Roman times. The resort town of Baile Herculane is located in southwestern Romania (Caras-Severin County), on the Cerna Valley, between the Mehedinti Mountains in the east and the Cerna Mountains in the west at the altitude of 160 m, 41 km northwest of Drobeta-Turnu Severin Municipality (the residence of Mehedinti County). The thermal-mineral springs located here have been used since the Dacians, being documented during the Romans in 152BC. Due to their curative action, they were used by the locals during the

Middle Ages, yet the erection of the first balneary constructions began only in 1724; destroyed by the Ottomans in 1738 and 1788, the buildings were quickly rebuilt. The middle of the 19th century finds the resort at a European level of development, both in terms of therapeutic character and high standards regarding accommodation and food offered. The heritage buildings, built in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, boast the Baroque, Neoclassical, Neo-Renaissance, Secession styles as a whole or architectural combinations.

Through their antiquity and beauty, the historic buildings confer the Herculane Baths the sensation of its glorious past; Unfortunately, nowadays, due to negligence, carelessness and divergent interests, these jewels are affected by an advanced process of degradation, which requires urgent intervention measures to protect and restore them.

4.3 Cultural and religious touristic potential

Spending leisure time, holidays or vacations in rural areas and visiting places of worship is, according to some opinions, how the so-called religious rural tourism is actually practiced. Our opinion is that depending on the motives of the visits to places of worship, we can distinguish cultural rural tourism, when the reason is architecture or painting of objectives, respectively religious rural tourism when going on pilgrimages on the occasion of certain religious celebratory days or when visiting these objectives for praying to certain miracle-working religious paintings or other symbols that people believe to be beneficial to human health. On the other hand, the ecotourism and leisure tourism potential seems to be a necessity springing from the desire to rediscover nature, to closely get in touch with the flora and fauna, true natural treasures, with significant scientific, tourist and landscape value and which the Banat mountains region is not missing.

The maximization of Banat's cultural heritage through cultural tourism currently encounters multiple difficulties determined not only by the above mentioned aspects, but also by the lack of modern accommodation and food facilities and a viable infrastructure such as access roads, parking lots, hygienic-sanitary facilities. The lack of specialized staff to deal with the future of the monuments, together with the lack of promotion are the main shortcomings in the tourist capitalization of this extremely rich and diverse heritage. These conditions require measures to regulate the unfavorable impact of these factors and, in the not too distant future, to allow the protection, restoration and enhancement of Banat's heritage through cultural tourism, nationally and internationally.

4.4. Ethnographic and folkloric potential

These lands offer a spectrum of ethnofolkloric attractions for potential tourists, from traditional crafts to traditional holidays, from customs to cultural events already integrated within traditions. The mountainous areas in Romania, and especially in Banat, deserve special attention and a political strategy at EU level, for social, economic and ecological reasons. Models of economic development during this period did not take into account that some natural resources are non-renewable and that the environment must be preserved healthy for future generations. They did not lead to ensuring equity between people or similar material, social and cultural conditions for human development. Due to these findings, the development crisis was defined as "a rupture between the accumulation process and the set of spontaneous regulatory mechanisms and procedures for regulating social relations, on the one hand, and the relationship between man and nature, on the other" (Harribey, JM, 1998, p.6).

Acknowledgment of this crisis has led modern societies to take steps to find a new path of development, as there is a possibility of destroying not only the environment but also their own future. The touristic enhancement of the regional cultural heritage must be a constant concern of the authorities and specialists involved in these cultural fields. The results thus obtained can be spectacular and beneficial on multiple levels: cultural, tourist and financial.

5. Conclusions

Banat is a territory with inherited very old structures, but constantly renewed by the succession of influences and dominations it has endured throughout its history. The identity of Banat is paradoxically conveyed by its ability to assimilate and harmonize values of different origins, in a symphony in which, although the initial nuclei lose firm contours, rarely are they completely "melted" into forming a homogeneous mass. Respect for the specifics of others is a lifelong rule set here, confirmed by the lack of intercultural tensions in a region traditionally characterized by an extraordinary fusion of nationalities, religions, customs, mindsets and internal organization.

All these are challenging arguments for the development of cultural tourism in Banat, inheritor of a multicultural material and spiritual heritage of great value, still little recognized and included in the national and international tourist circuits.

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