



Traditional Architecture, a Triggering Factor for Rural Tourism Development in Romania

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 June 2023

Revised 28 October 2024

Accepted 30 October 2024

Published 29 November 2024

JEL classification:

L83; R51; Z32

Keywords:

Authenticity

Traditional houses

Rural tourism

Architectural heritage

Baby boomers

Millennials

Romania

ABSTRACT

Rural tourism has been identified as one of the most attractive types of tourism among Romania's international visitors. Furthermore, the entire context generated by the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the orientation of Romanian tourists towards remote destinations and small lodgings, located especially in rural destinations. Thus, new opportunities have been identified and capitalized upon by entrepreneurs in the hospitality sector. This paper is a research note that aims to highlight the development of a new niche on the Romanian rural tourism market. Namely, employing desk research methods, this paper focuses on identifying the destinations where new lodgings were developed making use of traditional houses, which were moved and rebuilt there. The main research question can be formulated as follows: *Does rural authentic architecture contribute to the development of a qualitative offer of lodging services in rural areas, in line with the expectations of baby boomers and millennials?*

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This article is derived from the paper with the same title presented orally at the 25th International Conference on Tourism and Rural Space in National and International Context - TARS, held in Vatra Dornei, Romania, from May 25–27, 2023. It was accepted for publication in the TARS 2023 Proceedings on August 4, 2023.

1. Introduction & Literature Review

According to the most recent strategy (Ministry of Tourism & World Bank, 2018, pp. 20-21) for Romania's tourism development, the country features a large variety of tourist experiences and possesses a high potential to ensure economic growth at local, regional, and national levels via its existing tourism forms (nature and adventure; winter sports and ski; culture and history; health and wellness; sea and sun; city-breaks; MICE; and gastronomy).

The same strategy points towards the fact that, compared to its main competitors relative to the international markets, Romania benefits from comparative advantage and the development potential of modern tourism and visitor experience, derived from four key segments, highly attractive for foreign visitors:

- cultural heritage, cultural and historic tourism, with gastronomic experiences;
- nature and adventure, which include eco-tourism and rural tourism;
- health and wellness, with a focus on Romania's rich thermal and spa resources;
- MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions).

The remaining three sectors (sea and sun; winter sports and ski; and city breaks) feature high importance for the domestic market.

The specialists indicated that Romania faces two major challenges (Ministry of Tourism & World Bank, 2018, p. 4): tourist spending (both domestic and international) is too low, and, at the same time, Romania attracts an insufficient number of foreign tourists with above-average budgets. Among the most important causes of this reality, specialists have identified the following ones: attractions are insufficiently developed and/or difficult to reach; tourism consumption opportunities are insufficient and hard to find; at destination level, tourist services and experiences lack qualitative competitiveness; and a poor capacity of developing public policies in the field of tourism, translated into an inappropriate market segmentation and a limited international visibility of Romania's tourist attractions and travel experiences (Ministry of Tourism & World Bank, 2018, p. 4).

Several travel trends (Ministry of Tourism & World Bank, 2018, pp. 63-66) have been identified at global level related to baby boomers. Due to their available spare time and their financial resources, baby boomers have become the most important age-based segment while millennials are expected to represent 50% of the travel market by 2025. Solo travelers are an increasing market segment, particularly among women. Furthermore, both solo and group travelers seek learning opportunities and local cultural experiences. Like the previous groups, millennials are eager to explore, interact, and have emotional experiences while using digital technologies, getting informed online, and making bookings and reservations online, using e-mail,

websites, platforms, social media, and co-travel applications. Trends bring up personalized and authentic travel experiences, with travelers relying on technology to plan and book their vacations, while collecting information regarding the reputation of the destination, and also aiming at achieving a good cost/benefits ratio. Technology is essential throughout their trip, as their key preoccupation is to be well-informed but also when shopping for tourism products and services, both before and during their trip. A major global trend is the increase in education levels among tourists, who, consequently, express demand for more education-related tourism activities (e.g., educational trips, photo safaris, trekking and mountaineering activities, the observation of fauna and flora, etc.). Furthermore, they prefer authentic experiences and lodgings and are oriented towards quality suppliers. Short breaks appear as an important trend among tourists and are supported by the increased diversification of destinations. Moreover, tourists seem to have become more focused on social and environmental aspects. These trends match the four major segments of Romanian tourism as described above.

Several papers discussing the importance of baby boomers in the tourism market have been identified. Starting from these, a database containing 25 articles addressing baby boomers and millennials in the context of rural authenticity-related concepts (rural tourism, authentic tourism, traditional design, authentic rural design, or fair design), and also Romania. The bibliometric analysis reveals the following connections between rural tourism (as a core element) and the other concepts: traditional fairs and traditional food, training, traditions, mass communication, rural areas, baby boomers, tourism, and sustainable development. From among Romanian destinations, Banat is a region that appears in some studies (Fig. 1).

Among these, some believe that baby boomers represent a growing market that marketers and travel agencies are increasingly focusing on (Patterson & Pegg, 2009). This trend has been linked to the fact that compared to other generations of older people, baby boomers are generally healthier, financially secure, better educated, and more eager for novelty, escape, and authentic experiences (Patterson & Pan, 2007). Vojvodić (2017) supported this theory by observing that older visitors exhibit a need for escape in addition to a desire for novelty when looking for genuine experiences.

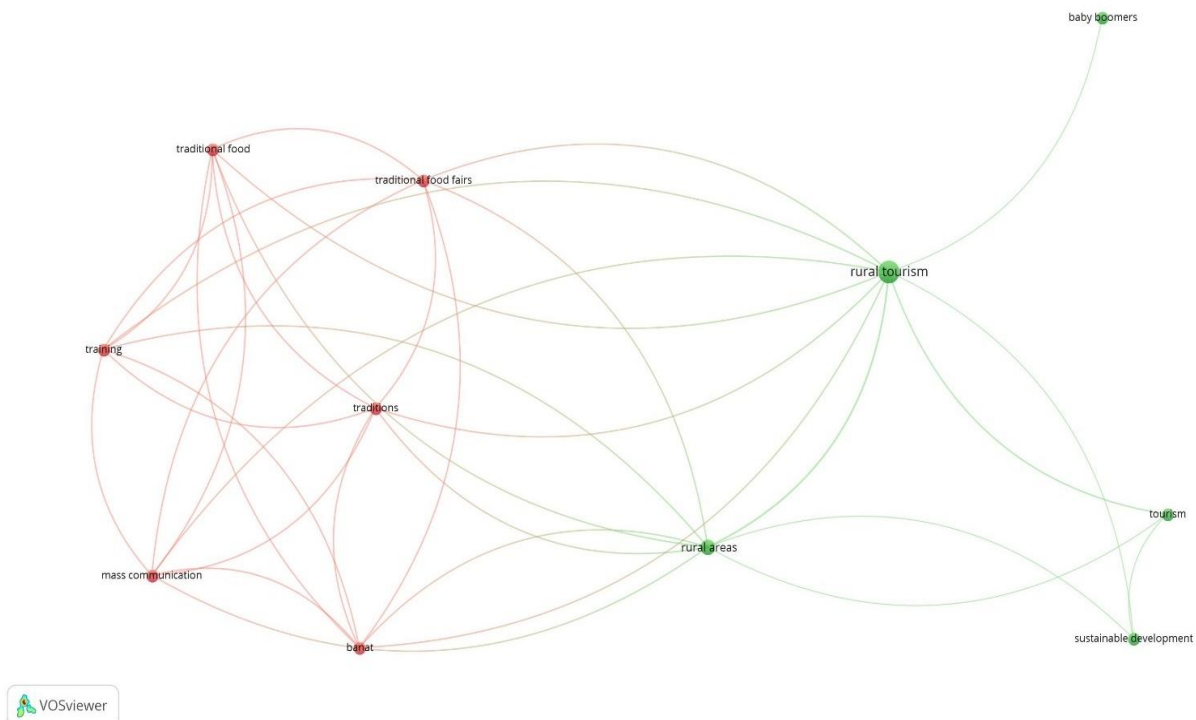


Fig. 1. Bibliometric analysis of 25 WoS publications based on 2-keywords co-occurrence for “baby boomers”, “millennials”, and rural authenticity-related concepts

Source: Authors' processing using VOSviewer

In the countryside, rural architecture is expressed through vernacular architectural style, with houses and other buildings being developed with local materials, to integrate into the landscape and to respond to the peasants' needs; it is the result of the local builders' skills and crafts, respecting traditions rather than using formally trained architects. Along with the many rural natural, material, and immaterial heritage resources, of which many are included in the UNESCO heritage (Ministry of Tourism & World Bank, 2018, pp. 80-81). Many rural destinations have faced for many years developments that were not in line with the local-specific architecture and the regulations that indicate the use of local materials and architectural plans. However, over the most recent years, many rural destinations have attracted entrepreneurs who have oriented towards the rebuilding and/or refurbishing of old houses in their original places or novel locations, respectively who have opted to build new properties in line with the local architecture and traditions. Such businesses seem to have developed quickly and represent today an important part of the preferred supply in various destinations throughout Romania.

However, the academic literature addressing this particular segment seems to still be scarce and limited. The paper continues with the sections dedicated to methodological aspects, findings and discussions, and concluding remarks.

2. Methodology

The present research consists of a desk research-based case study.

The paper's literature review and context identification have been developed employing VOSviewer-assisted bibliometric analyses conducted on the identified articles in the Web of Science (WoS) database. Because the standard 5-keyword co-occurrences revealed only a few connections among the considered keywords, bibliometric analyses have also been carried out using 2-keyword co-occurrences, which provide a somewhat more detailed image of the literature-related developments. Given the orientation of the authors towards the European market, the WoS database has been refined and papers not addressing the European space have been only briefly discussed or even excluded. Future analyses will be conducted on the Scopus database, as a potential extension in the coming stages.

For this initial stage of the investigation, a research question has been formulated: *Does rural authentic architecture contribute to the development of a qualitative offer of lodging services in rural areas, in line with the expectations of baby boomers and millennials?* To respond to this question, an introductory case study dedicated to Romania's rural tourism authentic facilities has been designed relying on online data collection (using social media platforms, own websites of the lodgings, destination websites, bloggers, vloggers, and other influencers). A database has been created for the old/recognized rural destinations completed with new/emerging/remote destinations, in line with tourists' preferences.

3. Literature-based Brief Findings and Discussion

In the first stage, a total of 96 papers were identified when searching the following combination of keywords: “traditional village”, “rural tourism”, and “architecture” in the WoS database. As Fig. 2 shows, most of the identified articles address tourism in relation to: traditional villages, heritage, areas, rural tourism, and China. Rural tourism presents a very clear interaction with sustainability, heritage, areas, traditional villages, and sustainable development. Unsurprisingly, sustainable development is linked directly to rural tourism, and via traditional villages to tourism in general. Rural tourism is mainly linked to the traditional village(s) and heritage. The keywords that appear most often are tourism (29), traditional village (15) and traditional villages (11), heritage (12), and sustainability (10) together with sustainable development (6).

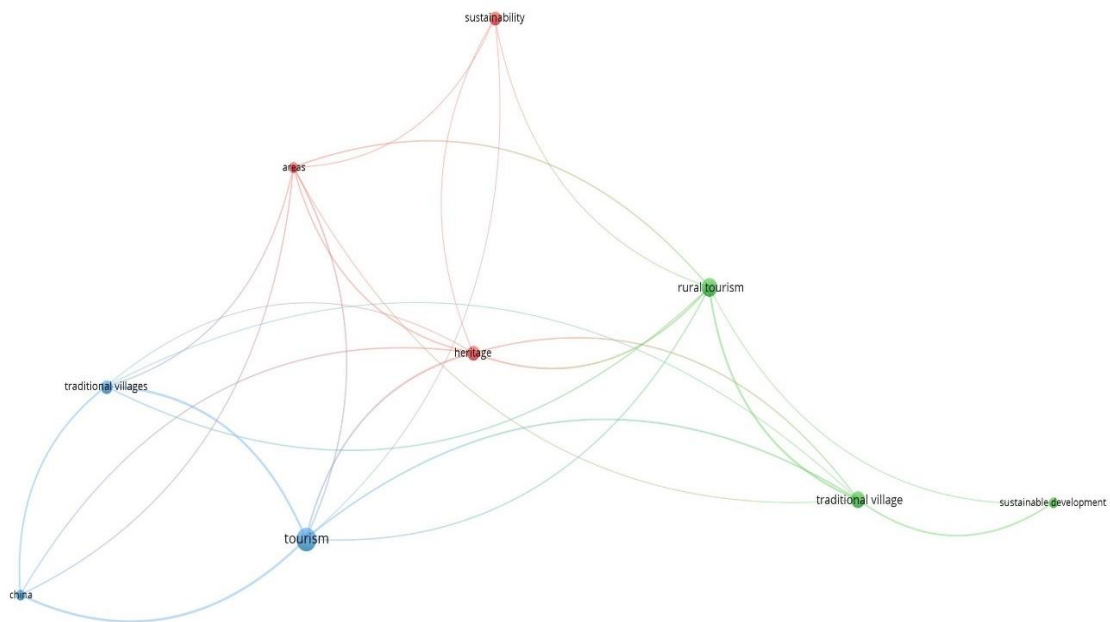


Fig. 2. Bibliometric analysis of 96 WoS publications based on 5-keywords co-occurrence for “traditional village”, “rural tourism”, and “architecture”

Source: Authors' processing using VOSviewer

For a better understanding of the connected concepts, the same 96 WoS papers were analyzed using 2-keyword co-occurrences (Fig. 3). Thus, tourism turns out to be the central point, being linked to major concepts such as: sustainability, traditional village(s), architecture, rural tourism, heritage, preservation and conservation, historic village, cultural heritage, etc. Via rural tourism, entrepreneurship is also one of the tourism-connected concepts. At this stage, the only country that appears is China. None of the studies bring up European destinations. A distinct research area seems to focus on rural activities, such as agriculture and manufacturing.

Some of the most relevant papers for the present research address the concept of traditional villages as tourism villages, where traditional houses become tourism lodgings. Vitasurya et al. (2018) point out that traditional Javanese houses are essential ingredients for the authenticity of the destination's rural tourism, with family bonds being the key factors for the preservation of traditional Javanese architecture. A group of Chinese researchers (Zhu et al., 2021) have focused on the sustainability provided by the transformation of farming villages into tourism destinations. Traditional tourism villages are considered genuine hotspots of Chinese tourism (Ma et al., 2017). Wang et al. (2023) emphasize the need to balance tourism development with heritage conservation in Chinese destinations, while Liu et al.

(2023) bring into discussion the need to consider villager satisfaction while developing rural tourism. Along the same line, Li and Wang (2023) point towards the importance of cultural authenticity in the development of rural sustainable destinations.

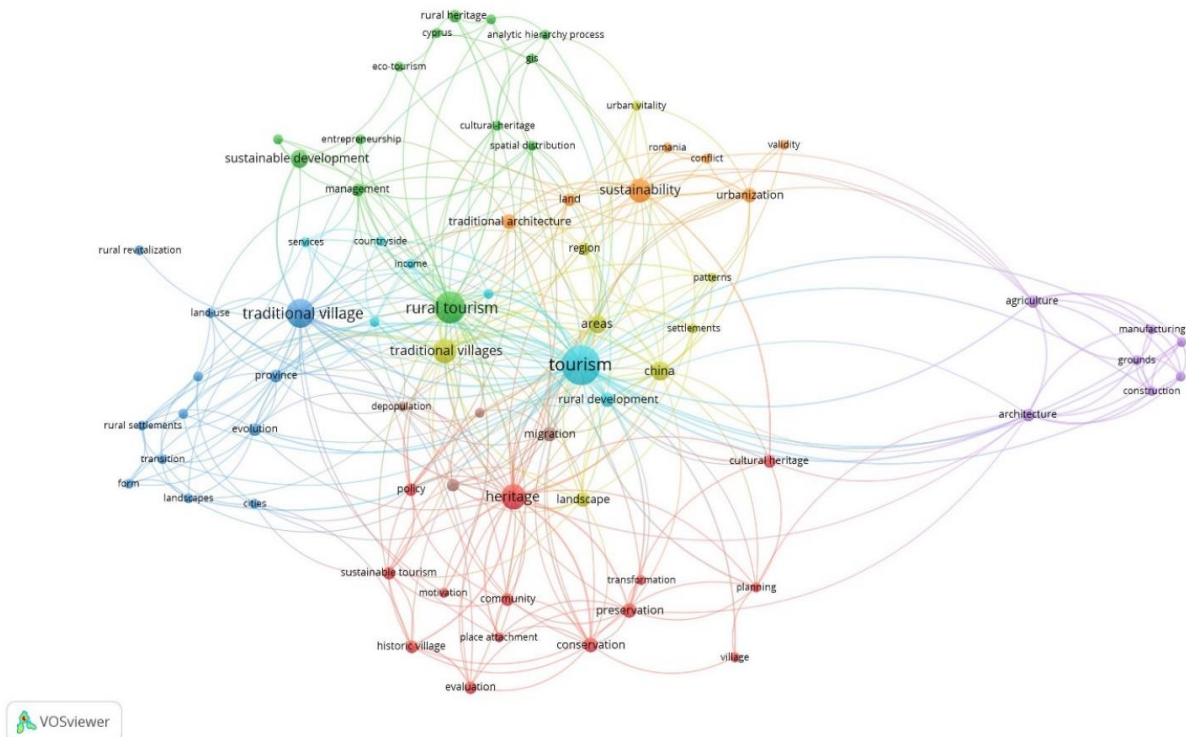


Fig. 3. Bibliometric analysis of 96 WoS publications based on 2-keywords co-occurrence for “traditional village”, “rural tourism”, and “architecture”

Source: Authors' processing using VOSviewer

While the academic research and literature seem to be dominated by studies dedicated to China (with 60 of the 96 identified papers) and other Asian destinations, a limited number of articles address European destinations. For example, Ballesteros et al. (2021) discuss the importance of traditional building materials (namely stones) in traditional architecture and for the development of cultural and heritage destinations, with direct positive impacts on the diminishment of population loss in rural areas.

Tuğun and Karaman (2014) elaborated a conceptual framework for ensuring rural sustainable development. The framework encompasses the following principles: compact and efficient land use; improving accessibility and diminishing automobile usage; increasing resource-efficiency consumption, decreasing pollution and developing waste management strategies; natural system restoration; developing improved housing and living conditions and environments; implementing social

ecology models; developing sustainable economic systems; increasing community participation; and ensuring the conservation of local culture and knowledge.

Pavlović et al. (2012) analyzed the relationship between national architecture, protection, development, and tourism, emphasizing that traditional rural/folk architecture presents high value among tourists. The authors suggest capitalizing on such resources by organizing open-air (eco)museums. The same idea was also brought up by Ghorbanzadeh (2018) in the context of the villages' major challenges, namely, unemployment and job scarcity, which can be counter-fought by entrepreneurial initiatives in tourism and ecotourism. Building on the same idea, an interesting concept was developed in Croatia and some of its neighboring countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Montenegro), where ethno-villages were established by private entrepreneurial initiatives (Čiča & Mlinar, 2010). However, we consider that a more appropriate way of exploiting such resources is provided by the renovation of traditional houses and by transforming them into attractive rural lodging facilities.

Rural economic activities have also been brought up in various research papers, such as the potential of traditional oil mills (Yüceer et al., 2018), of local fisheries (Waldo et al., 2023), or wineries (Dýr, 2016a, 2016b).

While searching in the WoS database the following set of keywords: “traditional village”, “rural tourism”, and “demand”, 28 articles were identified. The network of 2-keywords co-occurrence is presented in Fig. 4.

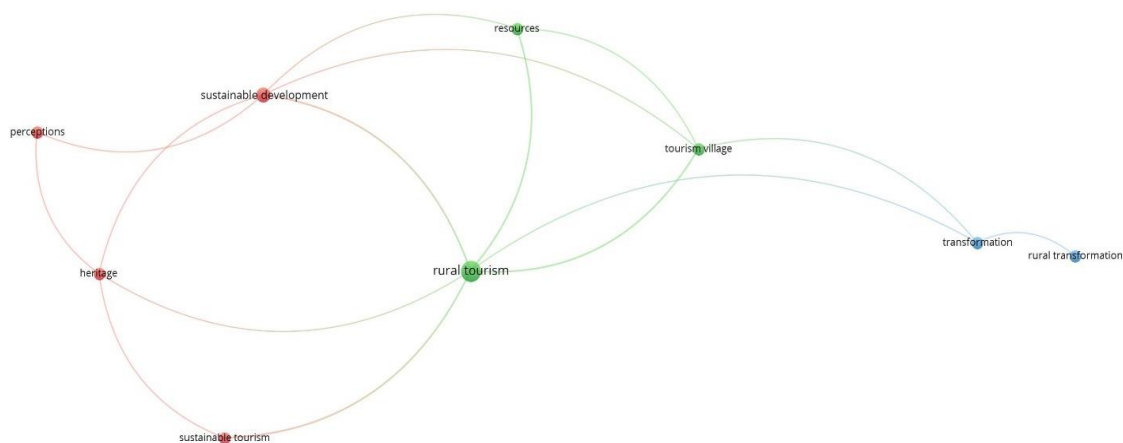


Fig. 4. Bibliometric analysis of 40 WoS publications based on 2-keywords co-occurrence for “traditional village”, “rural tourism”, and “demand”

Source: Authors' processing using VOSviewer

As Fig. 4 reveals, rural tourism is the core element, contributing to sustainable tourism, via heritage to perception generation, to sustainable development. Tourism villages are directly connected to rural tourism and have a positive impact on rural transformation and on managing resources.

Very few papers link rural tourism demand to the style of the lodging facilities and to the traditional architecture of the destination. The following paragraphs are dedicated to briefly discussing the studies identified in this respect. Jegdić et al., (2017) emphasize that rural tourism development should rely on investments generated by entrepreneurial initiatives that respond to contemporary tourism demand trends. While indicating that rural tourism can contribute significantly to the economic development of rural areas, Stankov (2007) also points out that such developments must be sustainable. Mountain area authenticity has been identified as a key resource for quality agro and rural tourism (Ciolac et al., 2013). Some studies addressed less-favored regions and their challenges related to (rural) tourism development (Hutárová et al., 2021). Armenian agritourism seems to be preferred by single international tourists who are willing to pay more than married couples with children; however, no information has been provided regarding the types of lodgings preferred by these tourists (Tovmasyan et al., 2020). Tomčíková and Rakytová (2018) discuss a highly valuable Slovak destination, Vlkolinec, where local people have excellently co-habited with nature over the centuries but also have high expectations regarding their standards of living.

Only very few studies addressing lodging services were identified. Two of these papers discuss diffuse hotels as innovative Croatian lodgings (Dragičević et al., 2015; Baćac & Demonja, 2021); conceptually, diffuse hotels are designed to connect small tourism providers into a complete tourism services supply that promotes authentic tourist services.

A very low number of research papers discussing Romanian rural tourism services were found in the WoS database. The first focuses on the Dorna-Călimani mountain area, emphasizing the need for local master plans to preserve the relationship between communities and protected areas (Chiriță & Matei, 2012). Vijulie et al. (2021) bring up one of the saddest realities from a highly valuable rural destination, Certeze, namely that of imported architectural styles that have generated the irremediable loss of rural architectural authenticity and landscape aesthetics. Kiraly and Bota (2014) discuss the importance of developing buildings in rural areas according to local traditions and the contribution of rural and agri-tourism to the conservation of the Transylvanian-built heritage.

4. A Brief Case Study of Authentic Romanian Rural Lodgings

Overall, the entire literature discussion has pointed towards the lack of studies dedicated to the attractiveness of authentic rural lodging facilities among tourist and their potential to become triggering factors for destination choice and development.

The analysis carried out on the various booking platforms and on the websites of the identified authentic lodgings have enabled the presentation of a synthetic situation of traditional houses transformed into lodgings in rural areas (Table 1).

Table 1. Synthetic presentation of the identified lodgings throughout Romania

| | County/Counties | Number of Lodgings |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Bucovina | Suceava | 6 |
| Maramureş | Maramureş | 23 |
| Danube Delta | Tulcea | 9 |
| Transylvania | Alba, Bihor, Bistriţa-Năsăud, Braşov, Harghita, Mureş, Sălaj, Sibiu (8 counties) | 31 |
| | 11 counties in total | 69 lodgins |
| | 44 localities in total | |

Source: Authors' elaboration

Up to this moment, a total number of 69 lodgings developed in traditional houses have been identified. However, more are expected to be further identified, as many of their owners and/or managers seem to neglect to a certain extent the importance of digital marketing. These lodgings are mainly present in Transylvania and Maramureş, followed by Suceava and the Danube Delta; these function in 44 localities, spread over 11 counties (Table 2). Many of these lodgings have been developed in destinations acknowledged as traditional rural areas, while others have been open in remote villages, where they themselves contribute to rural sustainable development.

Table 2. Localities with authentic lodgings

| County | Village | County | Village |
|-----------------|----------------|---------|------------------|
| Alba | Cheia | Mureş | Apold |
| Alba | Glod | Mureş | Cund, Sighișoara |
| Alba | Runc | Mureş | Sighișoara* |
| Alba | Sălcuia | Sălaj | Brebi |
| Bihor | Groși | Sibiu | Amnaș |
| Bistrița-Năsăud | Ghinda | Sibiu | Cârțișoara |
| Braşov | Criț | Sibiu | Porumbacu de Sus |
| Braşov | Sâmbăta de Sus | Sibiu | Richiș |
| Braşov | Șimon, Bran | Sibiu | Veseud-Agnita |
| Braşov | Vama Buzăului | Suceava | Breaza |

| | | | |
|-----------|-------------------|---------|-----------------------|
| Braşov | Viscri | Suceava | Câmpulung Moldovenesc |
| Harghita | Odorheiu Secuiesc | Suceava | Fundu Moldovei |
| Maramureş | Breb | Suceava | Gura Humorului |
| Maramureş | Budeşti | Suceava | Vama |
| Maramureş | Ieud | Tulcea | Crişan |
| Maramureş | Mara | Tulcea | Jurilovca |
| Maramureş | Poienile Izei | Tulcea | Murighiol |
| Maramureş | Ruscova | Tulcea | Sarichioi |
| Maramureş | Săpânţa | Tulcea | Somova |
| Maramureş | Surdeşti | Tulcea | Tulcea |
| Maramureş | Vadul Izei | Tulcea | Uzlina |
| Maramureş | Vişeu de Sus | Tulcea | Vişina |

Source: Authors' elaboration

*Although not a village, Sighişoara has been included because it is a UNESCO heritage site that capitalizes on authentic architecture.

The development of rural tourism in Romania, particularly targeting millennials and baby boomers, can be significantly influenced by the preservation and promotion of traditional architecture. Romania boasts a rich cultural heritage and a diverse rural landscape that can attract this target market seeking authentic and immersive travel experiences.

Traditional architecture reflects the unique cultural identity of a region. Both millennials and baby boomers often seek authentic experiences that connect them with local traditions and history. Preserving and showcasing traditional buildings can provide a genuine sense of place, offering visitors a glimpse into Romania's rich cultural heritage.

5. Conclusion

Rural areas often have well-preserved historic buildings that tell the story of a community's past. Integrating heritage preservation into rural tourism initiatives can enhance the overall experience for tourists, fostering a deeper appreciation for Romania's architectural history.

Renovating and reconverting traditional buildings into lodgings, such as guesthouses, can attract tourists looking for unique and Instagram-worthy places to stay. The blend of modern amenities with traditional architecture can provide a comfortable, yet culturally immersive experience.

Traditional architecture in rural areas often complements natural landscapes, providing picturesque settings that appeal to tourists seeking relaxation and escape from urban life. To cater to the preferences of both millennials and baby boomers in rural lodging with Romanian traditional architecture, it is essential to strike a

balance between preserving the authenticity of the architecture and meeting the comfort and amenity expectations of modern travellers.

Further studies will be conducted to establish the entire supply of authentic rural lodgings and to assess their attractiveness among both Romanian and international tourists.

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Image-based presentation of traditional architecture of rural lodgings

Maramureș



Casa „Floare de nu-mă-uita”



Casa lu' Ion



Complexul tradițional „Casa din Vale”



Casa Moroșenilor



Transylvania



Casa Savri



Casa Bunicii



Convivium Transilvania



Veseud 11



OberWood



Castle Garden



Casa Glod



Gospodăria lui Nea Ion



Mesendorf Gasthaus



Casa Prințul de Țara Galilor din Viscri



Raven's Nest



Amfiteatru



Danube Delta



Stufino Crișan



Sailors' Guest House Jurilovca



Casa Dima Sarichioi

Bukovina



Pensiunea „La Moară”



La Roată



Casa de Poveste



Casa Străbunicului



Source: Authors' elaboration based on the digital presence of the selected lodgings