



Opportunities for niche tourism

*Development of specialized
architecture tours in
Transylvania*

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1. Preamble

A massive expansion of tourism took place over the last decades all over the world. But while Romania enjoys a great and generous tourism potential, it is hardly present on the map of international touristic destinations. A cause for this is the struggle to communicate a coherent brand and concept.

Transylvania, through its multicultural history, offers unique heritage and architecture that can be, if used efficiently, a powerful marketing tool. A niche tourism circuit, specialized on architecture tours, could attract a certain market segment, consisting of both architects and tourists deeply interested in architecture.

The means earned through tourism can be an important source for preserving traditional cultural landscapes. Furthermore, specialized tourism could positively influence the opinion of the local population, raising awareness of the local identity and providing a confirmation of the richness of heritage and landscape in the region.

This paper will present the current national and local tourism concept and the cultural offer of Transylvania. Furthermore, the opportunities which niche tourism would bring will be demonstrated using the example of specialized architecture tours. In the end, destination examples with a focus on architectural heritage will be presented, as well as cooperation opportunities with other organizations.

2. Tourism in Romania

Romania's tourism strategy regarding the Transylvanian Saxon Villages is characterized in several official documents, elaborated by the Romanian authorities with the purpose of developing Romanian tourism, for example *The Master Plan for the Development of National Tourism 2007 - 2026* (Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration) or *The Master Plan for Tourism in Sibiu County* (Sibiu County Council).

Statistical data shows an ascending trend for the past ten to fifteen years of the country's international tourists number. However, Romania is hardly present on the map of international tourism. Overnight stays are used as an indicator for the intensity of tourism and, while it can be assumed many overnight stays are not officially declared to the government, the performance of Romania is the worst among the other European Union countries (*Fig 1: Eurostat, 2016: Tourism intensity, guest nights spent in tourist accommodation per inhabitant*), all while it is agreed that the country has solid tourism potential. This is a consequence of the fact that Romania struggles to design and communicate a coherent tourism brand. Although well known by the Romanian authorities and several concepts were developed during the past years, no significant success has been achieved yet.

Romania is not effectively promoted inside the country or abroad. In the highly competitive tourism market inside Europe, foreigners rarely think of Romania as a possible destination. The consequence is poor performance and few revenues, all while tourism could not only aid development of businesses and infrastructure, but also be a source of improvement of the economic situation of the population.

The current strategy for Southern Transylvania, specified in *The Master Plan for the Development of National Tourism*, is the development and implementation of a tourist circuits.¹ It is explained that, in comparison to the rest of the country, visitors have a preconceived idea of what Transylvania might and could offer as an experience of sightseeing.² The region not only enjoys a higher popularity than the rest of Romania – due to its cultural mix and patrimony, to Dracula's Legend or to the fact that Sibiu was the European Capital of Culture in 2007, but the richness of heritage in the whole region is best to be shown during circuits of the area. The tourists may already have knowledge of certain places such as Bran, Braşov or Sibiu, but also mental images about castles, historic cities, mountains and romantic landscapes.

The Master Plan for Tourism in Sibiu County specifically aims strengthening the Sibiu Brand and developing and communicating a strong image of the brand, with the following strategic priorities:

1. Joining the Sibiu brand to the one of Romania in order to have a stronger impact;
2. Achieving an integrated brand approach at all levels of the tourism industry;
3. Ensuring an appropriate strategic framework to build partnerships;
4. Encouraging the development of “brand” products to be representative / distinct for Sibiu (fortified churches, Saxon architecture, Brukenthal brand).³

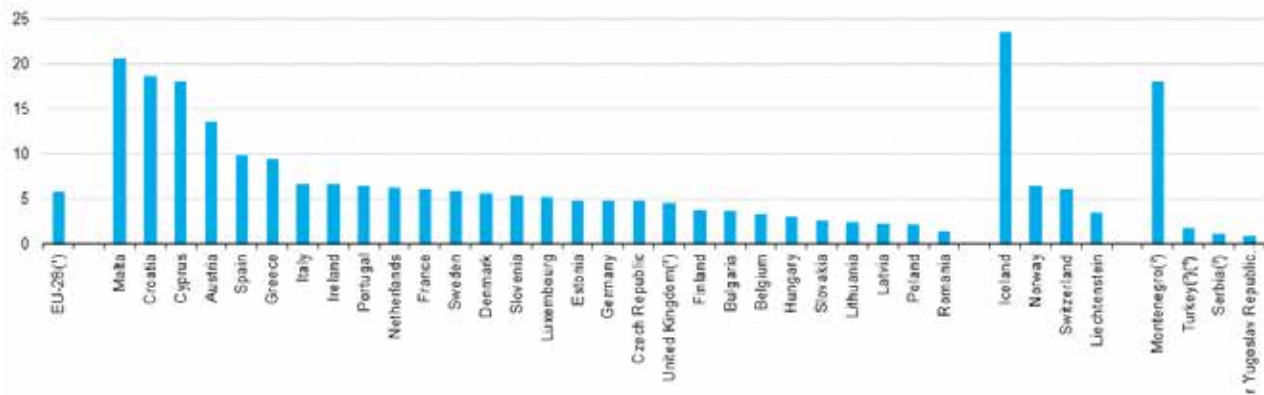


Fig 1: Eurostat, 2016: Tourism intensity, guest nights spent in tourist accommodation per inhabitant



3. The Transylvanian Saxons

The Transylvanian Saxons, an ethnic German population, settled in several parts of Transylvania between the 12th and 13th centuries. They founded a number of villages, towns and cities and were granted important administrative and religious autonomy. Hermann Fabini describes the Saxons and their architecture: *“The mental efforts and the tendencies of the Middle Ages found their most obvious expression in the building of churches - remarkable, fortified medieval churches which still dominate the old towns and villages and are a focus for the survival of a legacy of architecture, arts, crafts and local traditions.”*⁴

At the end of the 19th century, when their previously granted privileges began to disappear, Saxons started leaving the region. Their exodus occurred in several stages, particularly after the First and the Second World War. The last major wave of emigration happened in the last two decades of the 20th century, before and after the fall of the communist regime. The generally hostile position of the Romanian inter-war and communist governments towards the ethnic minorities, as well as the welcoming position of Germany between the 1960s and the early 1990s, added to the poor living conditions in Romania, were the main reasons for leaving. The Transylvanian Saxon population changed dramatically, from 237,000 people in 1930 to 12,000 in 2011, according to the Romanian censuses.

In many parts of Transylvania, the mass emigration of the Saxons caused a dramatic change in the ethnic composition and threatened the preservation of a rich heritage, the fortified churches of medieval origin which still mark both the rural and urban landscapes of the region. Their emigration also led to the abandonment of many houses, some of which subsequently passed into the hands of Romanian and Roma inhabitants.

George Oprescu writes about the importance of the heritage of the Saxon villages and churches: *“If we thoroughly examine these unusual buildings and study the history of their birth, then we shall get a clear view not only on art issues, but also on complex historical and social-historical questions. Church-fortresses are not an exclusively Transylvanian special appearance. There are such constructions in other European countries, too. Yet, nowhere has the building of these defensive structures, out of compelling necessity over centuries of perpetual danger, taken such proportions; nowhere do they display such diversity of solutions; nowhere do we find such original combinations like in Transylvania.”*⁵



4. Transylvania's Cultural Tourism Offer

Transylvania is Romania's region that is most known for its multicultural heritage. A multitude of ethnicities, Romanians, Hungarians, Germans, Roma and other living together side by side in this area created a cultural mix that has transformed the region, enriching it with a very valuable and highly original heritage as the result of the cultures' interweaving. Graur Tiberiu describes the effects of this multiculturalism in the following way: *"This expresses itself in built, object, and folkloric hypostases. It belongs – through its texture and features – to the European thesaurus, being the result of an interesting and unique destiny of ethnic confluences."*⁶

Heritage, according to the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, is our legacy from the past, what we live with today and what we pass on to future generations. Heritage is used both in political agendas, in affirming national identity, and in conservation of buildings and traditions. Heritage and culture have become so relevant in tourism, that cultural heritage has become a basis for an independent sector. Cultural tourism focuses on the act of discovering, observing and enjoying historical monuments and sites, including cultural landscapes.⁷

Presenting a definition for cultural tourism, Medlik says that it represents *"in a narrow sense, special interest holidays (vacations) essentially motivated by cultural interests, such as trips and visits to historical sites and monuments, museums and galleries, artistic performances and festivals, as well as lifestyles of communities. In a broad sense, it also includes activities with a cultural content as parts of trips and visits with a combination of pursuits."*⁸

Cultural tourism is not only a key engine leading to economic growth. The discovery of cultural diversity, common European identity and pluralism are equally important stakes. It plays an important role in encouraging both a greater understanding of the rich diversity of the national and regional cultures of Europe and a greater appreciation of our common European heritage, roots and culture. Cultural tourism can therefore help further the cause of European integration and identity by fostering a better understanding between the people.

As both Romanians and foreigners can agree that Transylvania has a rich cultural heritage, authorities, tourism stakeholders and benefiting communities must rejoin their efforts in properly communicating how people can take profit from the positive influences of cultural experiences.



6. Niche tourism: Architectural circuits

The concept of niche tourism defines how a specific tourism product, in this case the architectural Saxon heritage of Transylvania, can be adapted to meet the needs of a particular audience/market segment. Locations with specific niche products are able to establish and position themselves as niche tourism destinations. Niche tourism, through image creation, helps destinations to differentiate their tourism products and compete in an growing and increasingly competitive tourism environment. Through creating a brand using the Saxon heritage present in the region, Transylvania can be discovered by all travelers interested in historic architecture and local and European history.

Hermann Fabini writes in his book the following opinion about the future of the region : “*The cultural landscape of Transylvania which the German defined will probably have a similar destiny, comparable with the oases of medieval rural forms of settlement in the Provence, in Tuscany or in Wales, which, after the migration of their original inhabitants to the cities during the early 20th century industrialization, had to experience longer periods of depopulation, before the initial naturalness was rediscovered.*”⁹

Fortified churches were widely common throughout Europe during the middle ages, but they were not longer needed once the threat of war dissapeared. This has not happened in Transylvania because the churches enjoy beside the defensive function two other dimensions: they are works of art which form a particular cultural landscape and they are an impressive architectural representation of the closed, neighborly community life in the village.

Tuscany is known for its beautiful landscapes, rich traditions, long history, the impressive medieval towers overlooking the cities and being the birthplace of the Italian Renaissance. But the beauty of Tuscany lies in the every hidden village, street and tiny corner throughout the region, showing to the visitor through its architecture the history and life of the community living there. Provence has diverse and impressive landscapes and a multitude of culturally intriguing places. But one of the biggest attraction of Provence is its villages with forts and citadels evoking the region’s ancient past. Only by visiting these villages in Provence you can experience the authentic Provençal beauty, the authenticity of unspoilt and tranquil places which can transport you back in time. The authentic community life transported to the present through the cultural landscapes is a key shared element of all three regions mentioned by Hermann Fabini in the quote above,

7. Circuits content

Saxon culture and landscape can be embedded in a project of sustainable development through small-scale tourism. Transylvania has more than 160 villages with fortified churches. Seven villages (six Saxon and one Székely) are listed as an UNESCO World Heritage Site with the name of Villages with Fortified Churches in Transylvania. As a tourist which never visited the region, there are both too many churches to visit, too far apart and too little information on how to decide what should a traveler not miss. The UNESCO Villages are a good starting point, but for a potential tourist looking for a short vacation with a certain focus, better communication and publicity is highly needed. The state of the buildings one can visit varies enormously, ranging from well kept and still frequently used churches, easily accessible for tourists, to ruined and abandoned churches in villages far away from main roads.

An architecture circuit can have different approach to other tours and typologies of each type of church can be shown: at least one building fully restored where one can find out about the technical challenges and learn about innovative restoration techniques, one church as work in progress with an explanation of the progress and outcome, a large amount of historical wood work and construction techniques, examples where the community or associations saved a building, but also churches in ruins, a sad but unique occasion to see how history is vanishing.



8. Architectural circuit

8.1 Villages part of UNESCO World Heritage:

Biertan: One of the most spectacular and representative Lutheran fortified churches, built on the site of an earlier Romanesque church. The architectural masterpiece is situated on a hilltop in the center of the village and it has been preserved very well.

Câlnic: One of the most imposing defensive structures, built in the 13th century by Count Chyl de Kelling and enclosed by one and a half rings of high walls fortified with a defensive tower to the south and a gate tower to the north, the fortress withstood several Ottoman sieges

Dârjiu: Unitarian fortified church built by the Székely Hungarian community in Romanesque style in the 14th–15th centuries and was transformed into a Gothic one in the latter part of the 15th century. The church is noted for its interior frescoes

Prejmer: Considered the most powerful medieval fortified church in Eastern Europe, with thick walls of 4 meters and 12 meters high bastions. Inside the round courtyard there are almost 300 cells, one for each family in the village.

Saschiz: One of the strongest constructions of this type from Transylvania with 22 buttresses, a wall walk and an extra floor built above the nave and the choir, with rows of machicolations and loop-holes. The military architecture is balanced inside by a beautiful Baroque altar and pulpit

Valea Viilor: Built in gothic style and enlarged and fortified in the 15th and 16th centuries. A unique element is the well in the center of the church choir that provided water for the locals during sieges. Inside, you can admire Saxon furniture and decorations dating from the 16th century.

Viscri: Named the white church, it was built around 1100 by the Szekler population and taken over by Saxon colonists. This explains why this unique gothic church displays a plain straight ceiling rather than a traditional vaulted one. The church has later added two defensive walls.

8.2 UAUIM Study Center for Vernacular Architecture:

Dealu Frumos: The transformation of the former Romanesque basilica into a gothic hall church fortified with two defence towers was often used as an example of the evolution in the building of Saxon churches in Transylvania. Hosting now the UAUIM Study Center, the church is an excellent example of how restoration measurements work.



8.3 Current and future projects Fortified Churches Foundation (selection)

Agârbiciu: The fortified church with an impressive choir belfry has to be restored and made accessible. There are severe damages that must urgently be fixed: cracks in the vault, strongly weather-beaten walls in the battle house and fungus in the choir area.

Daia: Daia has been included in a 2-year restoration project funded by the U.S. Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation. Several measures were taken during the first restoration phase: repair works on the western portal and the roof of the sacristy, clearing work, removal of the cement plaster on the base of the church, geologic, topographic and further examinations, detailed construction plan.

Movile: Constant maintenance was done over the last few years and many of the acutely endangered areas have already been secured. However, there is still a need for more restoration work: especially in the church towers, the soil moisture damages the masonry.

Boz: The late Gothic hall church is surrounded by a low ring wall. Repair of the ring wall covering, cleaning up, re-placing bricks, supporting endangered parts of the old school building, removal of bird droppings from the attic.

Pelișor: The fortified church is about to become a ruin: no maintenance, damaged roof trusses, partly open access, damage to walls, open for vandalism and theft.

8.4 Additional typologies to be included

Cisnădioara: One of the few unchanged testimonies of the Romanesque construction time in Transylvania, the remarkable church on the hill was built before 1223. Rest of the ring walls and defense towers are still preserved.

Cârța: The former monastery is the easternmost church of the Cistercians and was erected according to the rules of the order. The monastery remained unfortified and parts of it burned under the Ottoman attacks.

Cisnădie: The church with two fortifications, several defense towers and a moat displays inside altars from other village churches, bought here for safety reasons.

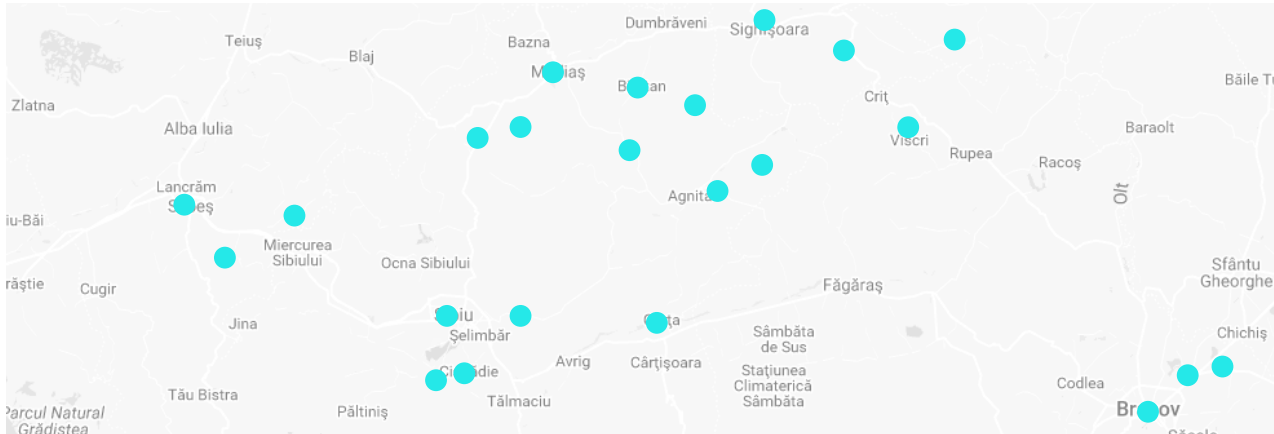
Hărman: You can find rooms embedded in the external walls of the church, where families could live in troubled times. They are partially open to the public, some of the spaces have been transformed in small museums displaying old surviving artifacts.

Mălâncrav: The village with the largest Saxon population in the region, a rare element of the church are the interior frescoes that cover 20 meters with 53 scenes from the Old and New Testament.

8.5 Cities of Saxon Chairs:

The territory that was colonized by Germans covered an area of about 30,000 km² and the Saxons were organized in the Saxon Chairs (or seats). Following cities, all former Saxon chairs, can be included in the tour, not only for their churches, but also for the other historic streets and buildings:

Sibiu, Mediaș, Bistrița, Brașov, Orăștie, Sebeș, Sighișoara



9. Cooperations with other activities

Tourism is an important factor in the development of businesses and infrastructure and can also be a source of improvement of the economic situation of the population. People visiting Transylvania can aid to this development by participating in various activities:

Traditional Festivals: Yearly festivals dedicated to the cultural heritage of the Transylvanian Saxons exist, featuring a diverse program: religious services in the fortified churches, film displays, the traditional ball of the Transylvanian Saxons and photography exhibitions are only a few examples. It includes villages like Archita, Rodeș, Saschiz, Rupea, Criș, Bunești, Meșendorf, Cloașterf and Viscri.

Bike and hiking tours: Promoting eco-tourism, during the last years the network of bike and hiking trails in the Natura 2000 region Podișul Hârtibaciului – Târnava Mare expanded, allowing travelers to bike or hike between more than 60 churches.

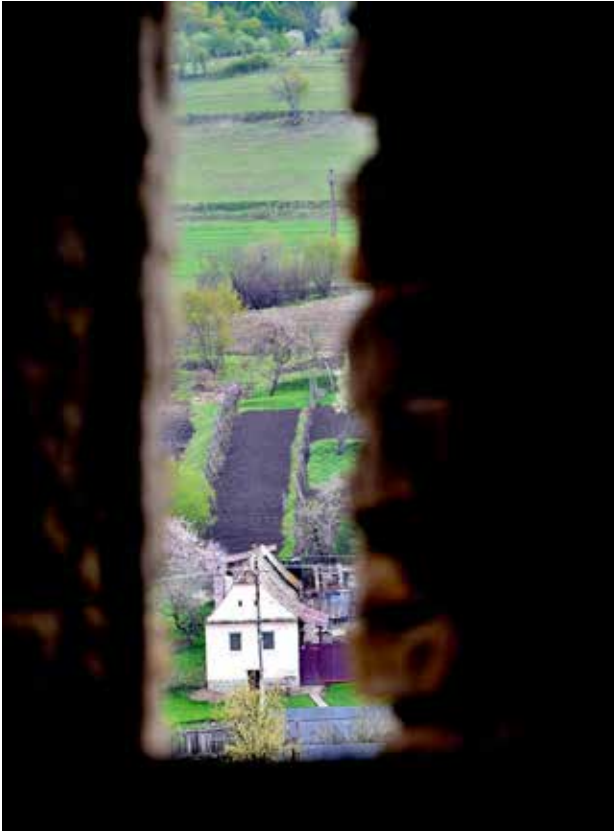
Local Food experience: Many associations offer unique traditional food experiences like having dinner in a citadel, neighborhood cooking or traditional Sunday brunches where people learn how to cook local recipes and or simply enjoy tasting different foods and wines.

Food market: While visiting traditions and culinary culture markets, both locals and tourists enjoy hand made recipes and fresh produce. One can find food markets Saturdays in Sibiu and in neighboring towns and villages.

Hands on workshops: Tourists can find many workshops, interesting especially for architects, about monument preservation and craftsmanship.

Guesthouses: To experience the essence of a traditional Transylvanian home, down to every last nook and cranny, an old refurbished house can be chosen for accommodation.

Cultural activities: Apart from the already popular theatre, jazz or film festivals, there are many activities that can be included in a trip to Transylvania: theatre plays, classical and organ concerts are often played inside fortifications.





10. Notes

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6. Dulau, Alexandra Viorica, and Monica Maria Coros, *Is cultural tourism attractive in Transylvania? A focus on Cluj and Sibiu counties, Romania* (WSEAS Transactions on Business and Economics, 2009), p.2
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