

## TOURISM AND TOURIST PERCEPTION IN ARIEȘENI COMMUNE, ROMANIA

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**Abstract:** The present work represents an analysis of tourism in Arieșeni commune, through the lens of existing tourist resources and accommodation infrastructure, to which is added the assessment of the perception of residents and tourists regarding what constitutes tourism in a tourist resort of local interest, Arieșeni. To capture the tourist phenomenon, bibliographic sources (both related to the resort and of a general nature) were used and consulted, supplemented by field trips to "validate" the bibliographic information obtained. The tourist's perception was obtained through the sociological survey method, based on the questionnaire. Tourism in Arieșeni commune is based on the existing tourist resources, especially the natural ones; even though human resources are equally significant but less exploited. The perception of the surveyed people on tourism in the resort is a positive one, but through the interpretation of the questionnaire, the aspects that could be improved are also identified.

**Key words:** tourist potential, tourist resources, tourist resort, Arieșeni

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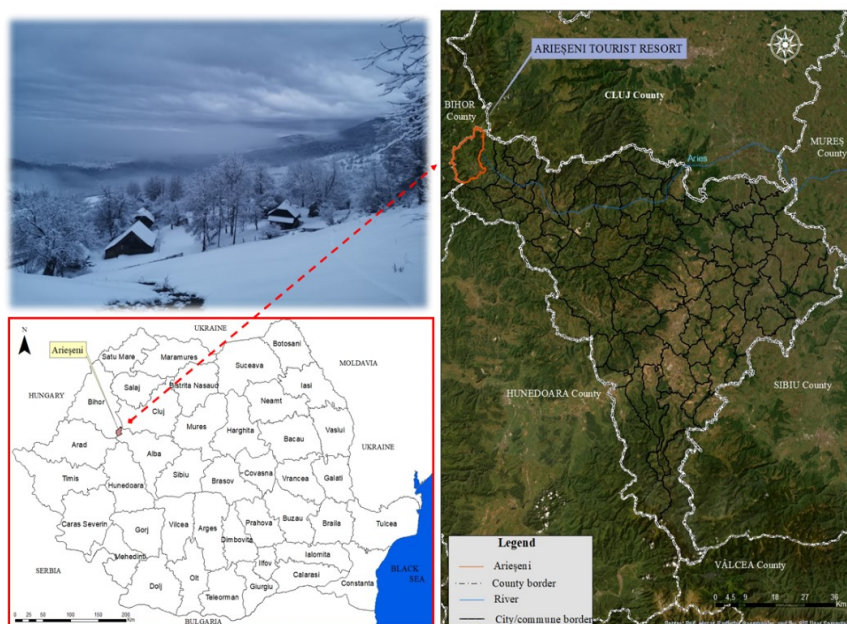
### INTRODUCTION

Given that today tourism has become an increasingly present topic, the present study aims to analyze how it manifests itself in a specific rural area in the Apuseni Mountains (Arieșeni commune), given the fact that each community rural has its own way of realizing its tourism brand, which is why each study is different, offering unique perspectives. Interesting to analyze are those premises on which the tourist activities that are currently taking place (tourist resources, tourist infrastructure) have been consolidated, as well as the way in which they are perceived by locals and tourists. Added to all this is the desire to find out if the results that emerge from the questionnaires correspond to the reality of the analyzed space. The commune of Arieșeni is located in the north-western extremity of Alba County, at the border between Bihor and Alba counties, at the

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foot of the Bihor Mountains, in the upper basin of the Aries river that springs from under the Vârtop pass (Figure 1). From an administrative point of view, the commune brings together 17 villages whose specific feature is given by the uneven distribution on the territory of the commune, influenced by the characteristics of the natural environment, being spread out, crossed by tributaries of the Aries basin. These villages are: Avrămești, Bubești, Casa de Piatră, Cobleș, Dealu Bajului, Fața Cristesei, Fața Lăpusului, Galbena, Hodobana, Izlaz, Pănțești, Pătrăhăițești, Poienița, Ravicești, Sturu, Ștei-Arieșeni and Vanvucești. Also, the commune is part of the "regional geographic system of Moților Land" (Cocean et al., 2013, p 103), which gives it an added tourist appeal, considering the unique characteristics of these "country" type territorial entities: "mentality, behavior, ethnographic, folklore aspects, speech pattern" etc. (Cocean et al., 2013, p. 106).



**Figure 1.** Geographical location of Arieșeni

The climate of the Arieșeni commune is typical of the mountains, generally humid and cold on the high peaks with gradual alternation towards the low regions. Climatic resort, the Arieșeni commune falls, from a bioclimatic point of view, in the medium and small mountains, which range from less than 700-800 m (in depressions and intramontane valleys) up to 2000 m. This bioclimate has a tonic character -stimulating, in the upper part, with relaxing shades in the lower part. It requires the neuro-vegetative, endocrine functions that coordinate the acclimatization of organisms to the changed environment (Gaceu and Teodoreanu, 2013). The tourist resort of national or local interest is that locality or part of a locality that has human and natural resources, highlighted in the Tourist Heritage Register and that cumulatively fulfills certain criteria provided in the annexes established by law (Decission 852/2008). Arieșeni commune (Alba County), was certified as a tourist resort of local interest, according to

Government Decision no. 329 of March 16, 2006. The existing natural and anthropic tourist resources at the commune level represent the basis for the development of tourist activities and for the development over time of accommodation units with a tourist function. Regarding the geographical studies that refer to the Apuseni Mountains, the Bihor Mountains or even the Moșilor Land, from which information was gathered about the area in which the Arieșeni commune is included, we recall the work of Bleahu and Bordea (1981) with data. on the relief of the Bihor Mountains; the work of Gaceu and Teodoreanu (2013) for climate information; Cocean and Filimon (2013) for the data relating to the Arieșeni commune as a component part of the "country" type entities; Petrea (2004) for aspects related to rural tourism in the Apuseni Mountains, etc. The studies that make direct reference to the Arieșeni commune are articles aimed at tourism aspects, for example: Herman (2022), Gozner (2015), Balintoni (2002), etc. The present study aims to expose in a simple and concise way the tourist potential of the Arieșeni commune and the way in which the locals and those who visit it perceive the tourist phenomenon at the level of this resort.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

For the realization of this work, both information from bibliographic sources regarding the Arieșeni tourist resort, as well as general data, were used and consulted. The tourist potential of a destination is the result of the spatial association of the tourist fund with the existing technical-material base (Cocean, 2000; Herman et al., 2012; Ilieș et al., 2013; Ielenicz and Comănescu, 2009; Hoang et al., 2018; Trukhachev, 2015; Dehoorne et al., 2019). Precisely for this reason, in order to be able to analyze the tourist phenomenon that manifests itself in the Arieșeni commune, a study is made both of the existing tourist fund (natural and anthropic tourist resources) and of the existing technical-material base, in this case, accommodation units, it is necessary with tourist function. The analysis of the tourist infrastructure in the Arieșeni commune assumed the use of information from the Ministry of Tourism. To capture an overview of the size of tourism at the resort level, in 2023, the main aspects targeted were the number of structures and accommodation places. Regarding the identification of natural and human resources, a field trip took place, after the analysis of existing data on them. Regarding the perception of local residents and tourists on tourism in the Arieșeni commune, the results were obtained through the sociological survey method based on the questionnaire (Bryman, 2012; Elhosiny et al., 2023; Herman et al., 2023), applied in April 2023. It was applied both to the residents of the Arieșeni commune (44% , 88 people) as well as tourists (56%, 112 people), aimed to obtain an overview of their opinion regarding the resources of the Arieșeni commune. Structurally, the questionnaire was composed of 10 questions, these aimed at: the extent to which the Arieșeni commune is considered a tourist resort; the number of days that offer leisure alternatives; comparing the degree of attractiveness of natural and anthropogenic tourism resources; the degree of knowledge of the existing tourist attractions at the level of the tourist resort; favorable season to visit the resort; the degree of knowledge of existing tourist routes and how they are organized; the opinion on the number of existing accommodation units with a tourist function as well as the quality of the services offered by them; the most suitable form of tourism for the Arieșeni commune and the opinion about how or not the Arieșeni commune is sufficiently exploited in relation to the tourist resources it

has. Through the prism of the questionnaire, socio-demographic data of the people surveyed were also obtained, which can be used in the analysis of some tourist indices for this area. So, from a number of 200 people surveyed (44% locals, 56% tourists), in terms of age, 66% are between 16-25 years old, 12% are between 26-35%, 13% are age 36-45, 5% are 46-55 years old, 3% are 56-65 years old and 1% are over 65 years old. Of the total number of respondents, 39.5% are men (79 people), 60.5% are women (121 people) and regarding the level of education, the situation is as follows: 5% have primary education (10 people), 6% have secondary education (12 people), 51% have high school education (102 people), 40.5% have university education (81. persons) and 10.5% have postgraduate studies (21 persons). In terms of ethnicity, 96% are Romanian, 2% Hungarian, 1% Moldovan and 1% Slovak.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

"The Aries and its main tributaries form an important axis of polarization, the most clearly highlighted area being the Ariesului Mare valley. This area, the best defined in Apuseni, includes numerous well-individualized tourist areas, especially the tourist villages (Arieșeni) and a large number of tourist points" (Petrea, 2004, p. 127).

### Natural tourism resources

Following the consultation of the existing bibliography at the level of the commune and following the trip in the field, a number of 13 natural tourist resources were identified (Table 1) of which only one of the tourist resources has the status of a tourist objective (appropriately. arranged for visiting): Vârtop Glacier Cave (Figure 2). Access to some tourist resources is facilitated by certain bridges or wooden railings - the route to Izbucul Tăuz or Vârciorogu Waterfall (Figure 5). Many of these natural tourism resources are more attractive without facilities to visit, offering a distinct aspect of wilderness, all being located in a special natural setting, most of the time surrounded by coniferous or mixed deciduous forests, with a course of water nearby.

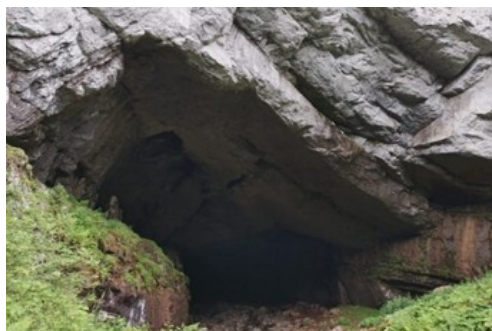
**Table 1.** Natural tourist resources

	Name	Resource type	Village
1	Coiba Mare Cave	Orographic	Casa de Piatră
2	Coiba Mică Cave	Hydrographic	Casa de Piatră
3	Glacier from Vârtop Cave	Orographic	Casa de Piatră
4	Gura Apei Cave	Orographic	Casa de Piatră
5	Hodobana Cave	Orographic	Casa de Piatră
6	Huda Orbului Cave	Orographic	Casa de Piatră
7	Huda Oilor Cave	Orographic	Casa de Piatră
8	Șura Popii Cave	Orographic	Casa de Piatră
9	Biserica Scoachii Cave	Orographic	Casa de Piatră
10	Pătrăhăițești Waterfall	Hydrographic	Pătrăhăițești
11	Vârciorogu Waterfall	Hydrographic	Vanvucești
12	Tăuzul Spring	Hydrographic	Casa de Piatră
13	Coliba Gheoabului Spring	Hydrographic	Casa de Piatră

It should also be mentioned that, on the list of natural tourist resources, there are also some superlatives of the Romanian karst: the largest portal of the cave (Coiba Mare Cave - 47 m high and 74 m wide) (Figure 3);<sup>1</sup> the most ramified cave (Hodobana Cave), the place where the oldest trace of Neanderthal man in Romania was found (Ghețarul de la Vârtop Cave).



**Figure 2.** Calcareous formations from Vârtop Glacier Cave



**Figure 3.** Coiba Mare cave portal



**Figure 4.** Vârciorogu waterfall



**Figure 5.** Tăuzul Spring

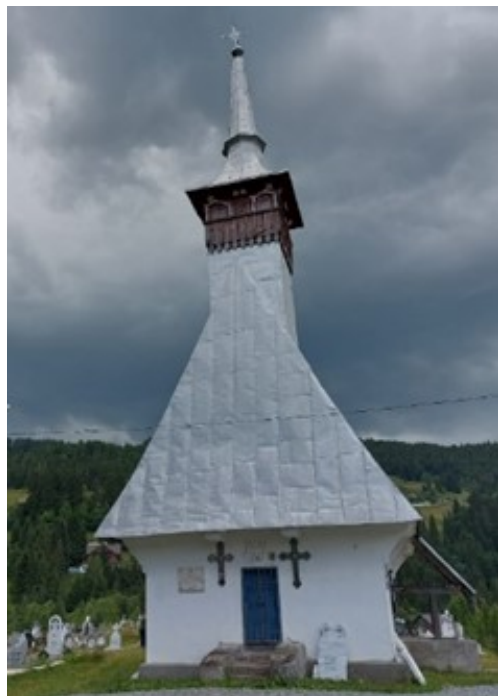
### **Anthropogenic tourism resources**

The "endowment" of human tourism today is given by those elements that man built in the past, for purposes other than tourism, becoming over time, due to their attributes (age, uniqueness, function, size) real tourist attractions (Coccean, 2000). The rural area, the commune of Arieșeni presents an extremely rich anthropic tourist "endowment", in close connection with the community of

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.arieseni.pro/9-arieseni-obiective-turistice/76-pestera-coiba-mare-arieseni>



moti in this mountainous area. Its very membership within the territorial entities of the "country" type - Moșilor Land, demonstrates the existence of unique, special characteristics at the level of the commune. In the list of historical monuments, the commune of Arieșeni is included with the following objectives: the ensemble of the "Înălțarea Domnului" wooden church with: the "Înălțarea Domnului" wooden church (Figure 6) and the edict for the toca (Figure 7).<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 6.** The wooden church "Înălțarea Domnului"



**Figure 7.** The edict for the "toaca"

Ethnographic tourism resources are significant for the inhabitants of Arieșeni commune: occupations and crafts; exploitation and processing of wood; woven to "război"; traditional clothes; folk songs; peasant architecture and technical installations: "the thatched roofs of Apuseni defy the abundance of wood through the durability of the roof itself" (Coccean, 2000, p 150).

### **Analysis of accommodation units**

"The tourist infrastructure is a defining indicator in shaping and developing tourist destinations. The most representative structural elements of the tourist infrastructure are: reception structures with accommodation functions; ..." (Herman et al., 2020, p. 106). Accommodation structures represent an essential element, with roles and functions in the valorization of the tourist heritage, which are reflected in their ability to retain tourists in tourist destination areas (Herman and Tătar, 2015; Ilieș et al., 2013).

In Arieșeni, in 2023, the accommodation base was represented by a number of 68 tourist reception structures with the function of accommodation,

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cultura.ro/lista-monumentelor-istorice>

distributed as follows: rooms and apartments for rent (56%, 38 units), tourist guesthouses (34%, 23 units), tourist villas (4%, 3 units), agritourism guesthouses (3%, 2 units) and tourist cabins (3%, 2 units).

The analysis of the comfort level of accommodation structures in Arieșeni, in 2023, highlighted the predominance of accommodation structures classified as 3 stars (49%, 33 units), followed by those with two stars (36%, 24 units) and 1 star (13%, 9 units). At the opposite pole were the accommodation structures classified as 4 stars (2%, 2 units).

In Arieșeni, in 2023, the accommodation base was represented by a number of 1,191 places, distributed as follows, by typological categories: rooms for rent (531 places, 45%), tourist guesthouses (439 places, 36%), tourist villas (135 places, 11%), tourist cabins (69 places, 6%) and agritourism guesthouses register the lowest percentage (2%), with 26 places.

In 2023, in the tourist resort, Arieșeni, a number of 8 tourist reception structures with a public catering function were registered, classified by typology, as follows: classic restaurants (5); fish restaurant (1), guesthouse restaurant (2). Regarding the comfort category, these units are classified as follows: 2 stars (3 units), 3 stars (4 units), 4 stars (1 unit). The analysis of the number of places shows that in these establishments there are 482 places, of which the most places are registered at the level of classic restaurants (358 places), followed by restaurants in guesthouses (64 places) and the fish restaurant (60 places).

### **Respondents' perception of the tourist potential of Arieșeni commune**

The way in which the participants in the tourism phenomenon (locals, tourists) perceive tourism and how it manifests itself at the level of a tourist destination/resort is extremely important (Herman et al., 2021a,b; 2022; Ilies et al., 2023) to be able to create an overall picture in terms of the quality and good functioning of tourism on the one hand and how what the natural environment offers is or is not well exploited, on the other.

Analyzing the extent to which Arieșeni commune is considered a tourist destination, on a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1-very little and 5-very high), it was found that, out of a number of 200 respondents, 113 (56, 5%) considered Arieșeni commune a tourist destination to a very large extent, 57 (28.5%) to a large extent, 23 (11.5%) medium, 4 (2%) to a small extent and 3 (1.5%) to a very small extent.

Regarding the alternatives for spending free time, which the commune offers, 7 people (4%) considered that there are alternatives for spending free time for 1-2 days; 59 people (29%) – a weekend; 68 people (34%) – one week; 65 people (33%) – more than a week and 1 person did not provide an answer to this question.

When asked about the degree of attractiveness of the existing tourist resources at the level of the resort (with the options: natural resources, human resources or both), the majority (115 people, 57.5%) considered that both categories of resources present a high level. degree. of attractiveness, 87 people (43.5%) considered that natural tourism resources are more attractive, and 7 people (3.5%) considered that anthropogenic tourism resources present a higher degree of attractiveness (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Natural tourist resources in the commune and its vicinity, according to the responses of the respondents

Tourist resources	Locals	Tourists	Total
The Rusty Pit	53	54	107
Vârciorogu Waterfall	65	50	115
Galbenei Keys	21	11	32
Pătrăhăițești Waterfall	24	10	34
Bihoru Peak	13	16	29
Patrahitești Ethnographic Museum	10	5	15
The glacier from Vartop	8	4	12
Ski slopes-Vârtop	7	31	38
The glacier from Scarisoara	6	15	21
Coiba Mare Cave	5	2	7
Coiba Mică Cave	4	2	6
Tăuzul Spring	4	2	6
Piatra Grăitoare Peak	3	5	8
The wooden church "Înălțarea Domnului"	3	2	5
Poarta lui Ionele Cave	2	7	9
Ordâncușei Keys	1	3	4

As can be seen in the table above according to the responses of the people surveyed, the most famous tourist attractions in Arieșeni commune and its vicinity are: Groapa Rustinoasă, Vârciorog Waterfall, Pătrăhăițești Waterfall, Cheile Galbenei, Pătrăhăițești Museum, etc. The rather low values regarding the other touristic objectives in the table demonstrate their poor capitalization, given the fact that they are touristic resources (Coiba Mare Cave, Vârtop Glacier Cave, Izbucul Tăuz, etc.), which fulfill certain attributes special features (size, uniqueness, etc.) that give them a great degree of attractiveness, but apparently, a poor knowledge on the part of the visitors.

To find out whether or not the tourist resort, Arieșeni, is affected by seasonality, the respondents were asked about the most suitable season for visiting (with the options: spring, summer, autumn, winter, or all), so that, 91 people (33.7%) considered summer to be the most suitable season for visiting the commune; followed by winter, 81 people (30%); autumn, 71 people (26.3%), at the opposite pole are those who consider spring to be the most favorable season, 14 people (5.2%) and those who considered all seasons favorable for tourist activities, 13 people (4.8%). It is obvious that seasonality is fully manifested in Arieșeni commune, but the rather high values for the autumn season (26.3%) combined with the values recorded for spring (5.2) and those of all seasons (4.8%) create a possibility of changing the seasonality ratio in the future, through specific strategies to attract tourists and in the off-season.

When asked about the existence and good functioning/organization of tourist routes at the level of the municipality, 40% of the people surveyed (tourists and locals) considered that there are enough routes at the level of the municipality, being well organized at the level of the municipality. the opposite pole, with close values (37%) are those who consider that there are not enough tourist routes, well organized at the level of the tourist resort, and a significant percentage (23%) belongs to those who do not know the situation (Table 3).



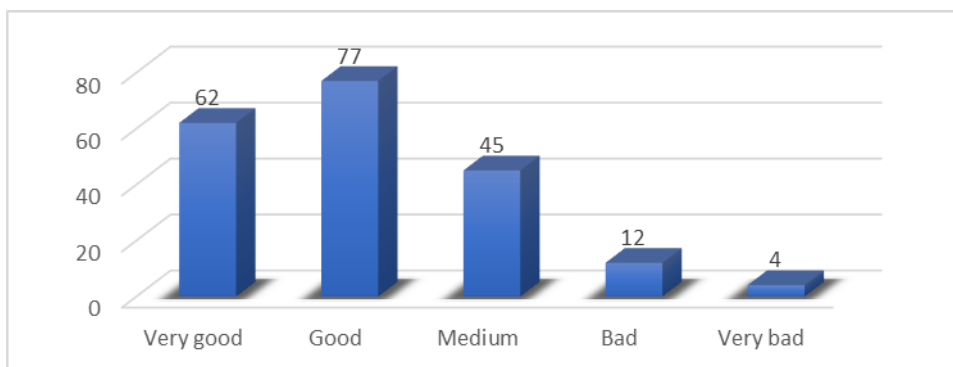
**Table 3.** The degree of knowledge of tourist routes and their organization, at the level of Arieșeni commune (number of tourists and locals)

	Locals	Tourists	Total (number and percentage)	
Yes	22	58	80	40%
No	50	24	74	37%
Don't know	15	31	46	23%

Analyzing the contribution of locals and tourists to the total value of each answer, it can be seen from the table above that the answers of locals are different from those of tourists, to the greatest extent. Their interpretation can be cross-referenced to get an overall picture like this: tourists consider that the tourist routes are sufficient and well organized (58 people) and their answer can be analyzed in terms of the fact that they are the ones who actually travel. their . On the other hand, the fact that the locals consider, in a large number (50 people), that these routes are not sufficient can also be taken into account by those who deal with tourist routes at the commune level, due to the fact that, those who live in this resort know the territorial natural capital of this space much better than tourists, so they see more possibilities for capitalizing on this area, by setting up more tourist routes.

Accommodation units with a tourist function existing at the level of a tourist destination are a good indicator of the values recorded by the tourist flow in this area, i.e. the ratio between demand and supply. The respondents were questioned about the number of these accommodation units with a tourist function existing at the level of the commune. 143 people (71%) think they are enough, 21 people (11%) think they are too much, and on the opposite side, 13 people (6%) think they are too little, the remaining 23 people (12 %) ) not being familiar with the situation of existing accommodation units.

Regarding the quality of the services offered by the tourist service providers in the Arieșeni commune, on a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 is the worst and 5 is the best), the results are as follows: 77 people (38.5 %) consider the quality of services to be good, 62 people (31%) consider it very good, while 45 people (22.5%) support the fact that this quality of services is of an average level, 12 people (6 %) say she is weak and 4 people (2%) consider her the weakest (Figure 8).

**Figure 8.** Quality of services offered by tourism service providers

Most of the people surveyed, 139 people (69.5%) believe that the Arieșeni tourist resort is not sufficiently capitalized, 33 people (16.5%) say that it is sufficiently capitalized and 29 people (14.5%) do not know the situation.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the tourist resort of local interest, Arieșeni, the natural tourist resources are the biggest generators of visitors, given the fact that the anthropic tourist resources (just as attractive), are less exploited, although they could represent special attractions for this area, complementing what the natural setting has generously provided this space. The analysis of the accommodation infrastructure shows that there is a large number of accommodation units, (if we take into account the fact that it is only a tourist resort of local interest), which offers good quality services, according to the responses of those surveyed. Although perceived as a tourist destination by those surveyed, the tourist resort of local interest, Arieșeni, is affected by seasonality, just like most tourist resorts in Romania, in the absence of economic recovery strategies through the prism of tourist activities. However, given the existing tourism resources, the future may show bright colors for what tourism activity means in this rural space.

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