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ANALYSIS OF THE TOURIST ATTRACTIVENESS OF URBAN SETTLEMENTS IN MEHEDIŢI COUNTY

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Abstract

The position of Mehedinţi County in the southwestern part of Romania, on the left bank of the Danube at its exit from the gorge, together with the territorial planning actions, contributed to the socio-economic evolution of the regional territorial system.

As far as the tourist activity is concerned, it is focused on the exploitation of some resources, through actions and tourist products, which is done through the infrastructure created for this purpose, namely the infrastructure of accommodation, public food, transport and leisure, with the aim of attracting as many tourists as possible.

The aim of the study is the analysis of the existing tourist potential correlated with the thorough examination of the tourist market, carried out through a series of qualitative and quantitative methods with the help of which the evolution of the tourist circulation and the accommodation capacity in operation is highlighted. The calculation of some economic indicators, as well as some tourist indicators, is noteworthy as the methods used. The main results of the study reflect the diversity of types of tourist resources in the urban centers of Mehedinţi County, with Drobeta Turnu Severin standing out in particular.

Keywords: built cultural heritage, geomorphosites, Danube Gorge, cultural tourism, cruise tourism, tourist traffic.

1. Introduction

Tourism is a complex activity, which raises a multitude of problems, being positioned at the intersection of several economic branches and sectors (Bădiţă, 2013: 58), involving both man and nature (Cuvelier, 1998), being

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a consequence of the increase in the human standard of living (Muntele, Iațu, 2006: 15).

The term tourism dates back to the 20th century (Tuns Bode, 2012), although the first record was made at the beginning of the 19th century when the use of this term referred to people who traveled (Pegge, 1814).

An exact definition of tourism is practically impossible to establish, considering the multiple economic and psycho-social implications. In a technical approach, Pearce (1993: 17) defined tourism as "a set of relationships and phenomena resulting from the travel and temporary stay of people, especially for relaxation and recreation".

Tourism activity is a complex activity that uses a series of indicators with the help of which the elements of tourism potential existing at the level of the area are highlighted. On the other hand, the area of influence of the cities does not coincide with their administrative limits, being wider (as is the case of Drobeta-Turnu Severin municipality) or narrower depending on the size and importance of the urban settlement at the regional level.

The peripheral position of the existing urban settlements in the studied region offers the possibility of polarization of the entire territory, but the stronger influence of the urban center of regional development, Drobeta-Turnu Severin, is felt. The urban phenomenon is one of the most characteristic features of contemporary civilization (Beaujeau-Garnier, 1971: 13). The growth of cities has intensified in recent decades, with increases both in the population and in tourists (highlighted by the increase in existing tourist indicators). The recreational facilities available both in and around cities are many and varied.

Due to the geographical position, Mehedinți's urban centers constitute a strong pole of attractiveness, represented by the elements of natural potential (the diversity of the relief, the existence of a climate that presents particularities of the sub-Mediterranean climate) and human tourist resources (historical, architectural buildings, memorial houses).

From a tourist point of view, Drobeta-Turnu Severin has a great historical value, being known since ancient times for being a European city with complex functions (Petculescu, 2013: 84). It should be noted that tourism is an important element for a locality, involving 3 distinct domains: economy, society and space (Băbăț, 2022: 108), aiming to create

jobs, accumulate income and create a balance of payment adjustment (Muntele, Iaşu, 2003). Although the benefits of tourism are greater than the costs involved, the final goal is to fulfill a series of steps, such as: preserving the authenticity of the elements of natural and anthropic potential within local communities, satisfying the demands of the tourist and penetrating the product on the tourist market (Costencu, Cristescu, 2008: 87).

In this article, the authors set out to analyze the natural and cultural-historical tourist potential of the urban centers in Mehedinţi County, as well as the evolution of tourist traffic and accommodation capacity in operation, in the period 2001-2021.

Mehedinţi County benefits from a remarkable anthropogenic tourism potential, the existing urban settlements at its level attracting a considerable number of tourists. An important role is also occupied by the natural factor which, through its support function for the anthropic element, becomes a strong point in local tourism development.

The purpose of this paper is to present the main objectives/elements of existing natural and anthropic potential, and how the development of tourism can contribute to the development of Mehedinţi urban settlements. To achieve this goal, the study focused on a number of methods such as the investigation method, the observation method, the interpretation method and the graphic method.

2. General presentation of the area

Administrative organization

The position of Mehedinţi county at the level of the Southwest Oltenia development region (in the southwestern part of Romania, on the left bank of the Danube at its exit from the gorge), together with the anthropic component, have contributed to the evolution of the regional territorial system.

From an organizational point of view, Mehedinţi County is made up of 2 municipalities (Drobeta Turnu Severin and Orşova), 3 cities

(Strehaia, Vânju Mare and Baia de Aramă), 61 communes and 344 villages (see Fig. 1).

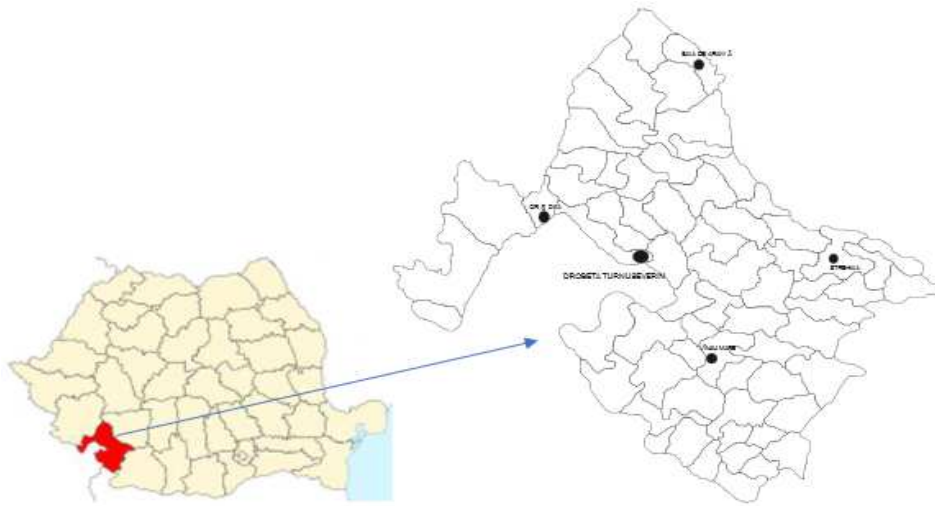


Fig. 1. The delimitation of Mehedinți County at the level of Romania
(Source: Oglindoiu et. colab. 2018)

The defining features of the natural component highlight the relationship between the natural and the human element, based on the influence of the particularities of the natural elements (relief, climate, hydrography, natural resources) and the way in which they contributed to human development and evolution, over time highlighting the human pressure on the environment determined by the main activities carried out in the occupied space.

The natural factor has a special role through its support function for the anthropic element, through its role as a barrier both for climatic factors, but also for historical, economic and social factors. Also, the relief can influence, through the nature of the rocks or the exposure of the slopes, the other natural elements: climatic factors, the spread of biogeographic areas, the orientation of the hydrographic network, all of which further contribute to the determination of the way of land use, to industrial development through the exploitation and processing of natural resources, outlining the functions of the analyzed territorial system. Depending on

these factors, the first human settlements in Țara Severinului (the Country of Severin) became individualized and later developed.

3. Methodology

The research methodology used to carry out this study took into account 2 categories of main methods: the research method and the statistical method. Within the research method, the study focused on the observation of existing phenomena in the field, the analysis and description of elements of tourist potential and bibliographic documentation, by identifying the main works written in accordance with the chosen theme.

Regarding the statistical method, a series of data provided by the National Institute of Statistics and the Ministry of Culture were used, data that were graphically and cartographically interpreted during the study.

4. Results

4.1. Urban settlements in Mehedinți County

The factors that influence the humanization of the territory are: settlement and accessibility, relief, climate, hydrography, soils (natural factors), age of residence and continuity of residence (historical factors), economic development (economic factors) (Oglindoiu, et al., 2021: 87-88).

Currently, from the point of view of the urban-rural division, of the county's total of 410 localities, 1.2% are actually urban, and 98.8% are rural. The population of the county is approximately 277,994 inhabitants, the percentage of the urban population being equal to that of the rural population (50%).

4.2. Economic activities

Mehedinți County has had since ancient times a rich commercial activity, of naval transports, especially those of goods, being advantaged by its

geographical position, opening to the Danube. Regarding road transport, they have a network of 1856 km, of which 374 km are national and European roads (Mehedinți County Monograph). Post and telecommunications have their beginnings in 1862 (Braghină, 2000) gaining momentum in recent years. Commercial and public services designed to meet the growing demands of the population have seen an important development in recent years.

From an economic point of view, the county has important production capacities in the field of shipbuilding, wagons, wood processing, manufacturing of inorganic products, manufacturing of wooden furniture, pulp and paper, textiles, food industry, capacities for coal extraction and electricity production (hydro and thermal) (Mehedinți County Monograph).

After 1999, the economic condition of the northern county system registered a slight improvement, but not enough to lead to substantial changes in the population's standard of living.

At the level of 2020, the number of commercial companies existing at the level of urban settlements (2455 economic agents) registers a percentage of over 70% of the total existing at the level of Mehedinți county (3366 economic agents) (see Fig. 2).

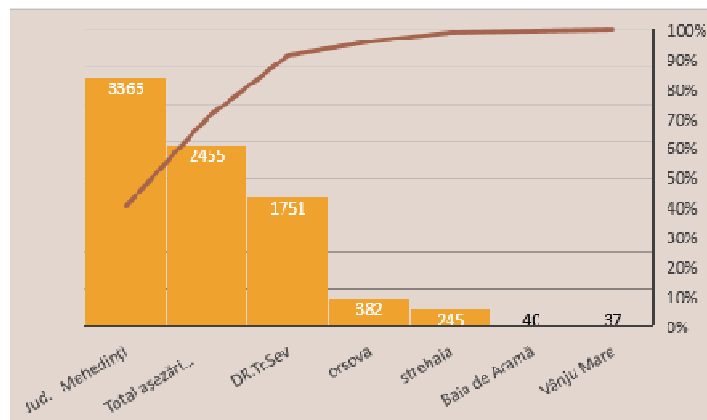


Fig. 2. Number of urban commercial companies in relation to the companies in Mehedinți county (2020)
(Source: processed INS data)

Regarding the number of employees at the level of urban settlements, it represents over 80% of the total number of existing employees at the

county level (see Fig. 3). For their part, the number of employees in tourism had an increasing evolution until the level of 2019, followed by a pronounced decrease due to the pandemic situation (5 %) (see Fig. 4).

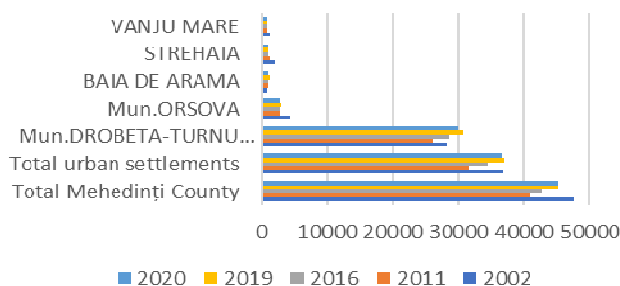


Fig. 3. The evolution of the number of employees at the level of urban settlements
(Source: processed INS data)

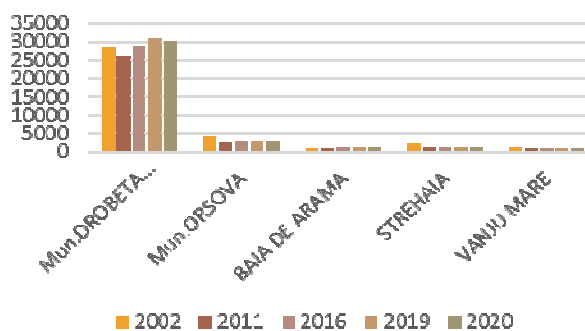


Fig. 4. The evolution of the number of employees in tourism at the level of urban settlements
(Source: processed INS data)

4.2. Analysis of the tourist potential of urban settlements in Mehedinți county

Being crossed by the Danube in the south-southwest part, Mehedinți county is very rich both in landscapes and natural places of extraordinary beauty (on its territory there are 2 national natural parks), as well as in cultural-historical objectives represented of the ruins of Roman forts and medieval fortresses that are still visible today.

Thus, it can be appreciated that the natural tourist potential within Mehedinți county is made up of natural elements that are introduced within the tourist circuits, to which is added the diversity of elements of anthropic tourist potential (archaeological vestiges, historical monuments, architecture, art, ethnography, economy, constructions with touristic value) (Oglindoiu, 2018: 70).

An important role is also played by their positioning (urban settlements) in the southern border area of Romania, but also in the geographical and touristic area of the Iron Gates Natural Park where they are present as representative values both economically and politically (Ilovan, Merciu, 2021: 45), but also as fundamental values of human existence and specific elements of tourist attraction (Drăguleasa, 2022: 153). The Iron Gates Natural Park is an important area for geoconservation in Romania, having a geological heritage among the richest in the Southern Carpathians (Grecu, 2014: 178). The tourist attractiveness is also given by the presence of geosites in this area, there are approaches regarding the accessibility of tourists to them, accessibility influenced by positioning near the main access roads (Grecu, 2014: 180).

Regarding the cultural activity in Mehedinți County, the analysis of human resources highlights the presence of a cultural-historical potential (archaeological sites, architectural monuments, monuments of technical popularity, museums, traditional cuisine) (Boengiu, 2012: 237). Thus, an important landmark is the "Theodor Costescu" Cultural Palace in Drobeta-Turnu Severin, and also the museums (Museum of the Iron Gates region, "Gheorghe Rădulescu Motru" Memorial House, Eșelnița Parish Museum) and monuments etc. Among the existing archaeological remains is the Archaeological Complex of Drobeta-Turnu Severin, which includes the ruins of the Roman fort, the ruins of Trajan's bridge, the tower of Justinian (6th century), the ruins of the medieval fortress. Other archaeological remains are the ruins of Ada Kaleh, displaced from the island Ada Kaleh on the island of Șimian, in order to build the reservoir Porțile de Fier I (Mehedinți County Monograph).

The statistical data available at the Ministry of Culture highlighted the presence on the surface of Mehedinți's urban settlements (at the level of 2015), over 200 historical monuments out of a total of 570 monuments at the county level. As a typology, 3 categories of historical monuments can be mentioned: archaeological monuments, architectural monuments and commemorative monuments.

According to statistical data, Drobeta-Turnu Severin municipality is numerically different from the other urban centers, due to the multitude of historical monuments listed on the List of Historical Monuments declared cultural heritage objectives. Towards the end of the Mesolithic era and the beginning of the Neolithic, the Cladovei Scaffolding culture appears with bone tools for agriculture and fishing (8570-7700 BC) (Ieva, Vișan, 1994: 7-8). The Cladovei Scaffolding archaeological site with the oldest stable settlement (approx. 10000-7500 years) in Romania and possibly in Europe (the archaeological materials discovered demonstrate ancient and continuous habitation: rectangular-shaped houses with hearths for heating and preparing food, over 100 burial tombs - skeletons with great heights (such a skeleton is at the Museum of the Iron Gates region) (Boroneanț, Boroneanț, 2009: 15-34).

Due to the construction of the Iron Gates hydropower plants, the site was heavily affected, a large part of it being destroyed, some of the artefacts found in the site are exhibited at the museum. The most important are the remains of the Roman Drobeta Camp (the first stone fortress built in Dacia by the Emperor Trajan, a defense construction and an important military and political center) whose image can be found on Trajan's Column (Tudor, 1965: 10; Tudor, 1978: 274-276), Traian's Bridge (built in only three years (103-105) according to the plans of the architect Apollodorus from Damascus (Drâmbă, 2003: 363, Tudor, 1979: 35-47) – the most daring engineering work of Roman antiquity, the Drobeta thermal baths, the ruins of the Roman amphitheater (it is carved on Trajan's Column), the Severin Medieval Fortress etc. These vestiges have undergone restoration processes as a result of the implementation of some projects with European funds. From the category of architectural monuments (civil, administrative, cultural and industrial buildings and structures of large dimensions, symbols of national identity, which over time also acquired the function of tourist attractions) that are in a large proportion in Drobeta Turnu Severin we mention: neoclassical style constructions (Commercial Bank Headquarters, "Theodor Costescu" House – Traian Street etc.), neo-Romanian style buildings (Former Paid Polyclinic, "Daia Alexandru" House, Dialysis Center, "Taxe și impozite" Department, etc.), buildings with the *Little Paris* style architecture (Moșneanu Adrian House, Iancu Saidac House, etc.), in Romanian style (Pogany House) (see Table 1).

Table 1

**The situation of existing historical monuments at the level of urban settlements
in Mehedinți County**

	Archeological monuments	Architectonical monuments	Commemorative monuments
Drobeta Turnu Severin	20	50	100
Orșova	-	2	-
Baia de Aramă	1	3	5
Strehaia	5	3	4
Vânju Mare	5	-	1

Source: Data calculated by the authors according to the List of Historical Monuments in Mehedinți County, 2015.

The emblematic buildings of the city can be noted such as: the Art Museum – the most beautiful monument of civil architecture in Drobeta in an eclectic style with baroque elements (Sabetay House), the “Theodor Costescu” Palace (the work of the architect Grigore Cerchez, based on the Venetian model, in the Ionic style, has inside a cinema, a theater hall and a festival hall, the “I.G. Bibicescu” Library, on the building are two eagle-eyed, winged griffins with lion claws) (Butnariu, 2012:179-181), Traian National College Building, National Bank of Romania Building (Bibescu House), “Radu Negru” Hall, Iron Gates Museum (neo-Romanian style, which originally functioned as a boarding school of Traian High School), Water Castle, “Saint George” Episcopal Cathedral, Grecescu Church, Assumption Church (Maioreasa), Vodița Monastery, Askenaza Synagogue. To which are added numerous commemorative monuments (Monument to the Heroes of the First World War, Bust of King Decebal, Bust of Emperor Trajan, etc.) (see Fig. 5, 6 and 7).



Fig. 5. Theodor Costescu Palace
(Source: personal archive, 2022)



Fig. 6. Porțile de Fier Museum
(Source: personal archive, 2022)



Fig. 7. Bibescu House
(Source: personal archive, 2022)

At the opposite pole is the city of Orșova which, due to the construction of the dam on the Danube, lost forever an important part of its culture, the old Orșova is under the waters of the Danube. Among the architectural monuments, the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Orșova built between 1972-1976, according to the plans of the architect Horst Fackelmann, the "Saint Nicholas" Orthodox Church, to which the "Saint Ana" Monastery – orthodox monastic settlement, could be added, stand out. foundation of the interwar journalist Pamfil Șeicaru, an objective extremely visited by tourists due to the panorama offered.

In the other urban settlements of the county, there are a small number of historical monuments, but they have great cultural significance, let's mention the following: Strehăia - Strehăia Monastery, the cellars of the royal palace, the Holy Trinity Church; Tudor Vladimirescu's monument, Vasilescu House from Baia de Aramă, Baia de Aramă Monastery; Vânju Mare-Bucura archaeological site, Novac's furrow from Orevița Mare, Cetății Hill archaeological site from Orevița Mare.

The existence of diversified natural tourist potential and the multitude and variety of historical monuments in Drobeta Turnu Severin make the types of tourism practiced here diverse. It can be observed an increased interest of tourists for the historical-cultural objectives highlighted by the increasing number of visitors to the Iron Gates Museum, the Medieval Citadel, the Water Castle (Arts), which makes us rate cultural tourism as the better individualized.

In general, those who visit the city practice weekend and transit tourism. It can be observed, however, that cruise tourism has gained new impulses by the introduction of boats with foreign tourists in the Drobeta port in the cruise circuits from Germany. The Vodița Monastery, along with

the Strehaia Monastery and "Saint Ana" Monastery, are sights visited by tourists who come to this area, so we can say that another type of tourism practiced is the religious one (see Table 2).

Table 2

Distribution of frequented forms of tourism at the level of Mehedinți urban settlements

Municipality / town's name	Cultural tourism	Cruise tourism	Religious tourism	Geo-tourism	Weekend tourism
Drobeta Turnu Severin	+++	++	++	++	+++
Orșova	+	++	+++	++	+++
Baia de Aramă	+		+	+++	+
Strehaia			++		
Vânju Mare					

Source: Data calculated by the authors

In Baia de Aramă, geotourism presents the greatest interest for tourists who come to this area. Despite several cultural-historical objectives, religious tourism is practiced in Strehaia, but there are no accommodation structures here, so the city is only transited by tourists who make a stop to visit the Strehaia Monastery. Vânju Mare has no tourist potential. An opportunity would be to introduce it into a circuit of Oltenia vineyards and wineries.

Tourist traffic

The evolution of tourist traffic is manifested under the influence of a complex of factors, some essential, others with a reduced and less significant influence. As such, in the analysis of the connections we will use non-parametric correlation models, in which the determining factor will be the accommodation capacity in operation, and the dependent factors will be total tourist arrivals and total overnight stays.

The analysis of the existing accommodation capacity at the level of Mehedinți urban settlements highlights a preponderance of units at the level of Drobeta Turnu Severin Municipality, followed by Orșova and Baia de Aramă. As an evolution, the curves are predominantly increasing, a significant increase can be observed at the level of 2019, followed by a stagnation until 2019 and an increase again in 2021 (see Fig. 8).

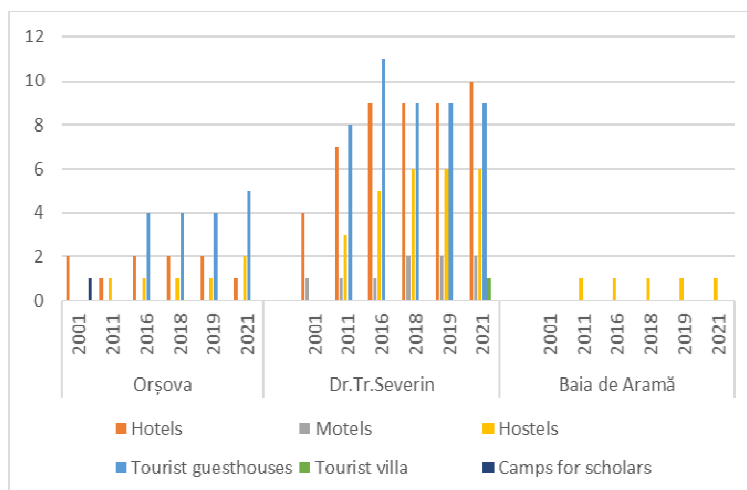


Fig. 8. The evolution of accommodation capacity at the level of Mehedinți urban settlements (2001-2021) (Source: processed INS data)

From the point of view of the distribution by types of structures, there is an upward trend in the value curves for all types of existing accommodation units at the level of the area, the highest percentage being occupied by structures of the tourist boarding house type, followed by hotels and hostels (see Fig. 9).

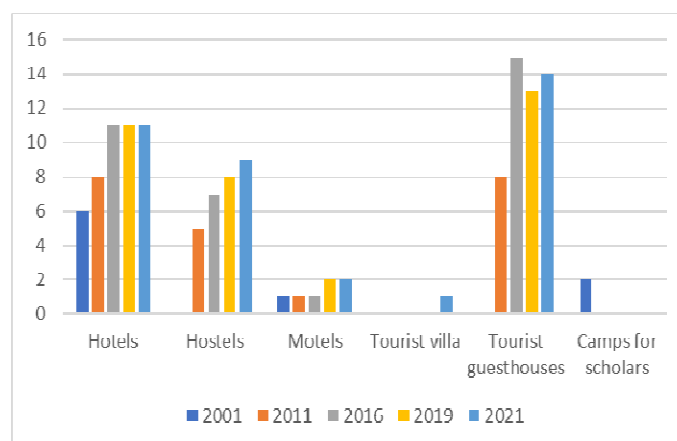


Fig. 9. Distribution of accommodation capacity by types of units (2001-2021) (Source: processed INS data)

Evolution of the number of arrivals and overnight stays in accommodation units

The number of arrivals in accommodation units at the level of urban settlements registered a significant increase until 2019, when a continuous decrease is recorded (by approximately 25% of the capacity), a phenomenon due to the pandemic conditions existing at that time.

From the point of view of no. of overnight stays in accommodation units, an increasing trend can be noted at the level of urban settlements until 2016, followed by sharp decreases (the difference between 2019 and 2020 being 40% of capacity) (see Fig. 10).

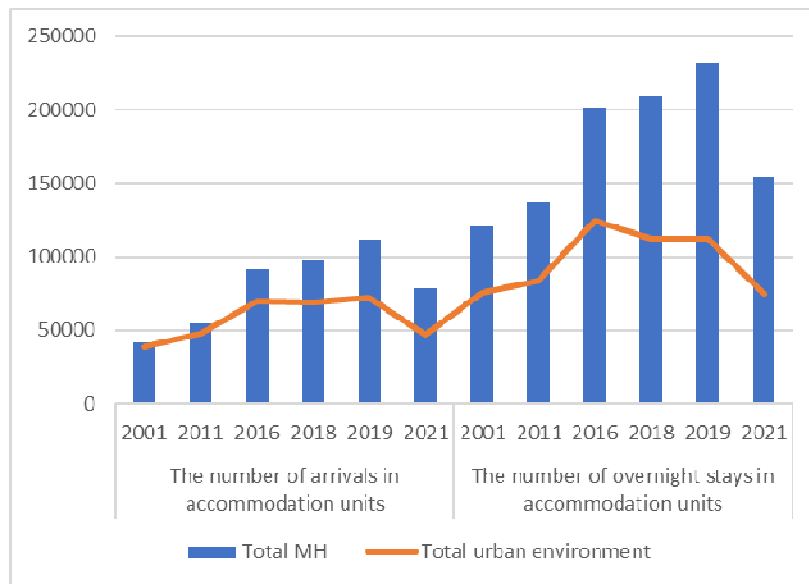


Fig. 10. The evolution of the number of arrivals and overnight stays at the level of urban settlements in Mehedinți County (2001-2021).

Source: processed INS data

On the other hand, it can be noted that the evolution of the number of tourists during the period 2001-2021 marks an upward trend. The minimum value of 39196 tourists is recorded in 2001, and the maximum value being recorded in 2019 by 72609 tourists. In 2021, there is a sharp decrease compared to 2019 in the number of tourists, reaching 47,372

tourists. A possible cause can be the pandemic situation that marked the entire tourist activity.

In terms of overnight stays, the lowest value is recorded in 2001, followed by an increase to the level of 124,699 tourists (at the level of 2016) and then a decrease to the level of 2021 when the values reached 74,565 tourists.

Index of the use of accommodation places in urban settlements in Mehedinţi County

The index or coefficient of use of the tourist accommodation capacity represents an indicator that helps to assess the efficiency of the exploitation of accommodation spaces. The indicator shows the percentage of the existing accommodation capacity that has actually been used (see Fig. 11).

At the level of the area, the trend of this indicator is downward, the accommodation capacity being effectively used at a percentage below 15%.

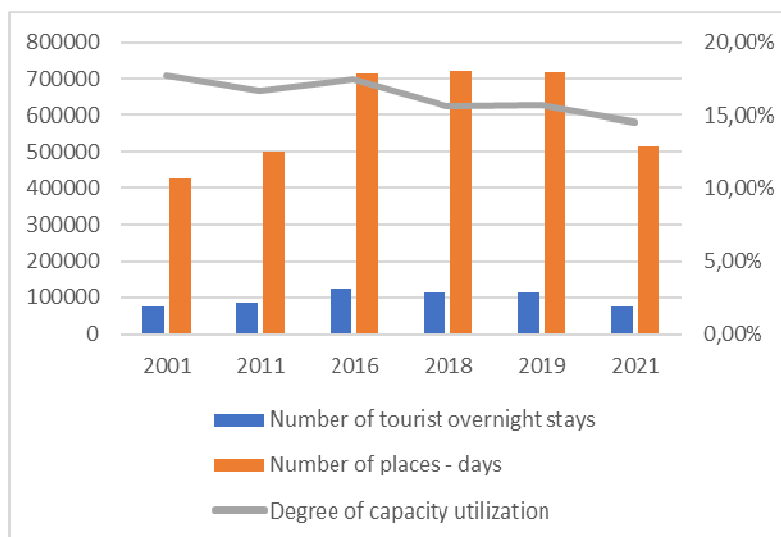


Fig. 11. The index of use of accommodation places at the level of urban settlements in Mehedinţi County (2001-2021)
(Source: processed INS data)

Average length of stay in urban settlements in Mehedinți County

The indicator shows the average length of stay (days) of tourists in accommodation spaces and thus reflects the ability of the destination to retain tourists in a certain area. At the level of the area, this indicator registers decreasing values, the average length of stay being at the level of 2020 from 1.57 days (see Fig. 12).

Regarding the analysis of tourist circulation in the urban settlements of Mehedinți County, a pronounced seasonality is noted, with a peak period overlapping the period between the months of July and September, the month of August registering the highest value of tourist visits (see Fig. 13).

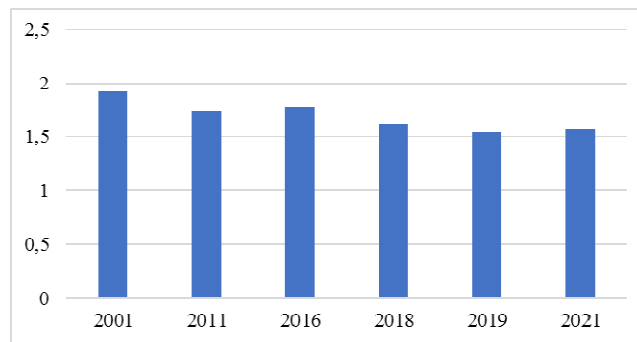


Fig. 12. Average length of stay in urban settlements in Mehedinți County (2001-2021)
(Source: processed INS data)

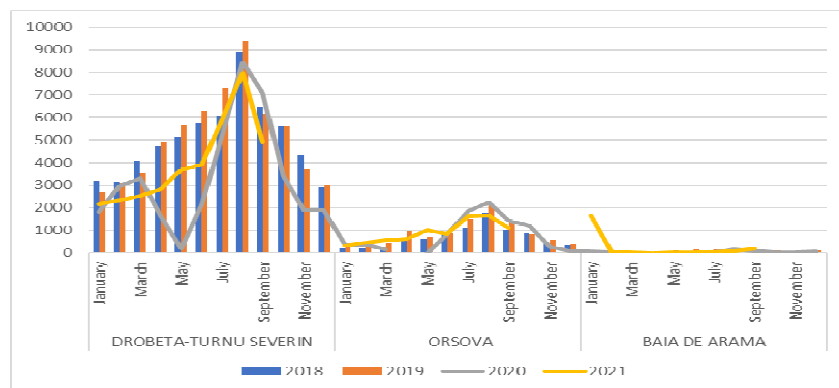


Fig. 13. Seasonality of tourist traffic in urban settlements in Mehedinți County
(Source: processed INS data)

Starting from 2020, although the same trend of values is maintained, the circulation has decreased quite a lot, something that can be observed through the analysis the number of arrivals and overnight stays analyzed and presented previously.

Overall, the analysis of statistical data on the development of tourism shows that tourist traffic is increasing, although there is a contradiction between the upward trend of tourist flows and the delay in large-scale tourist infrastructure, with the predominant type of accommodation being guesthouses and hotels.

Conclusions

The urban settlements in Mehedinți County benefit from a diverse, natural and anthropogenic tourism potential, a potential that should be exploited through the continuous development of sustainable tourism, by increasing the economic level, as well as reducing or even eliminating the pollution caused by these activities. The identification and launch of nature-oriented tourist products could represent a means of attracting a growing number of tourists, from all segments, ensuring an increase in the average length of overnight stay.

As a first conclusion of the analysis carried out, we can highlight the need to capitalize on all existing opportunities at the present time, to ensure an increase in the share of tourism at the level of urban settlements in Mehedinți.

Based on the interpretation of the statistical data, it was possible to demonstrate the existence of an accommodation capacity necessary for the development of tourism and the satisfaction of the interest shown by tourists for the analyzed area. Although in the first part of the analyzed period the values are increasing, the pandemic period generated downward developments in all these indicators.

As a general conclusion, the authors consider it necessary and useful to develop some plans and strategies for the development of the tourism sector at the county level, which would better value the existing potential. It is necessary a real promotion of the area by participating in tourism fairs, especially at the national level, but also internationally, the

organization of events in various fields with attractiveness for tourists, the capitalization of existing European funds for the realization of projects with a direct or indirect impact on tourism. The pandemic has affected the tourism sector so much that it has profoundly changed the business models of the entire system. It is necessary that they adapt to the new needs of tourists, with increased attention to health, safety and their desire to seek outdoor travel to rediscover nature, authenticity, traditions and beauty.

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