

Perceptions of Portuguese about Romania as a rural tourist destination

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Abstract

Tourism has an important role in the former socialist East European Countries, with ideologists believing that travel and tourism have a positive feedback by diminishing the monotony and routine of employment. Romania has long been an important tourist destination, but interest in rural tourism has only developed strongly in recent years in the context of economic restructuring and land restitution. This paper examines the perceptions the potential Portuguese visitors might have about Romania, as a rural tourist destination. A set of a preliminary findings based on the OPTOUR Project¹ are presented.

Keywords

Romania, perceptions, image formation, destination choice.

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Resumo

O Turismo detém um papel fundamental nos países do Leste Europeu, principalmente se considerarmos a sua influência na diminuição da monotonia gerada pelas rotinas do trabalho. A Roménia foi por muito tempo um importante destino turístico, mas o interesse no turismo no espaço rural só se fez sentir nos últimos anos e como consequência da reforma económica e da restituição da propriedade privada. É objectivo deste artigo analisar as percepções que os Portugueses têm, enquanto potenciais visitantes, sobre a Roménia como destino turístico rural. Neste sentido, serão apresentados alguns dos resultados apurados no âmbito do Projecto Optour².

Palavras-chave

Roménia, percepções, formação da imagem, escolha do destino.

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¹ *Opportunities for and Barriers to Tourism Led Integrated Development, a research project looking at tourism development in rural regions of Europe. The still on going project is being conducted as part of the European Union Framework Five research programme on the "Quality of Life and Management of Living Resources" - Contract number QLK5-2000-00407 - Coordinator: Centre for Land based Studies, Bournemouth University (UK). Other participants: Technische Universitaet Muenchen (Germany); Instituto Politécnico de Viana do Castelo, Escola Superior de Tecnologia e Gestão (Portugal); Departamento de Dirección Y Economía de la Empresa, Facultad de Ciencias Económicas y Empresariales - Universidad de León (Spain); Department of Catering and Tourism, Higher Institute of Food and Flavour Industry (Bulgaria); Economics Faculty, Thracian University Stara Zagora (Bulgaria); University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine (Romania).*

² *Opportunities for and Barriers to Tourism Led Integrated Development (QLK5-2000-00407), projecto de investigação que procura analisar o desenvolvimento turístico nalgumas regiões europeias. Conduzido, no âmbito do 4º Programa-Quadro - Medida "Quality of Life and Management of Living Resources", pela Universidade de Bournemouth (Inglaterra), o projecto conta com a participação de vários parceiros europeus, nomeadamente: Technische Universitaet Muenchen (Alemanha); Instituto Politécnico de Viana do Castelo, Escola Superior de Tecnologia e Gestão (Portugal); Departamento de Dirección Y Economía de la Empresa, Facultad de Ciencias Económicas y Empresariales - Universidad de León (Espanha); Department of Catering and Tourism, Higher Institute of Food and Flavour Industry (Bulgaria); Economics Faculty, Thracian University Stara Zagora (Bulgaria); University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine (Roménia).*

1 Introduction

Tourism has an important role in the former socialist East European countries, with ideologists believing that travel and tourism have a positive feedback by diminishing the monotony and routine of employment. Romania has long been an important tourist destination, but interest in rural tourism has only developed strongly in recent years in the context of economic restructuring and land restitution. Even though some domestic organisms and European programmes were established; there are still problems to overcome. Consideration must be given to the growing need for research studies in elaborating tourism development strategies. Research in potential visitors' perceptions of tourist destinations could be part of those strategies.

One of the assumptions of the Optour project is that few Portuguese have already visited East European countries, namely Romania, therefore, the aims of the 1st. Workpackage – motivation to visit – are primarily concerned in evaluating residents' images, either organically formed or induced, about functional (physical) and psychological (abstract) characteristics of Romania as a rural tourism destination, and its formation process.

2 Image destination formation process

Interest in destination image and its role in influencing travel behaviour have received consideration for several decades. Several authors have recognised and stated the importance of destination image on traveller buying behaviour. It is argued in many of these studies that in order to efficiently market a travel destination area, it is essential for a marketer in travel and tourism to identify the images associated with this respective destination area (Chon, 1990). That is particularly important because the potential tourist, when making a travel purchase decision, relies on his mental images about the destination which is a sum of his previously accumulated images and modified images obtained through further information search (Mayo, 1973).

However, regardless the importance it has widely been given, it is not always clear what various authors, agencies and individuals are referring to when they use the term image (Edwards *et al.*, 2000). In the area of product sales, there has been since long the concern of understanding image formation and perception as a way of understanding consumer behaviour. In this context image is referred to as a set of meanings by which an object is known and

through which people describe, remember and relate to it. That is, and image is the net result of the interaction of a person's beliefs, ideas, feelings, expectations and impressions about an object (Chon, 1990).

In the travel and tourism context, studies of destination image is a longstanding area of interest for researchers, being for understanding its components (Mayo, 1973; Hunt, 1975; Crompton, 1979; Pearce, 1982; Gartner and Hunt, 1987; Gunn, 1988), definition of models for measurement (Echtner and Ritchie, 1991, 1993; Walmsley and Young, 1998), or understanding factors influencing its formation (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999).

Introducing its complexity, Crompton (1979) has considered a destination image as the aggregate sum of beliefs, ideas, and expectations that a tourist has about a tourist destination area. Later in time, Dobni and Zinkan (1990) introduced a more precise and useful definition, which considers image as consisting of the perception of a consumer based on reasoned (cognitive) and emotional (affective) interpretation.

According to these authors, images arise from our understanding of the nature of images, the cognitive perception of the destination, and the affective translation of that perception into an attitude. The cognitive perception reflects the way a person (tourist) would describe the physical attributes. The affective translation of image consists of the interpretation of the cognitive perception by the individual into feelings. It may be argued that our decision whether or not to visit a destination depends on what we know about it, but mainly on our feelings towards it.

In 1993, Echtner and Ritchie stated that destination image should be envisioned as having two main components: those that are attribute based and those that are holistic. Each of these components contains functional (or more tangible) and psychological (or more abstract) characteristics, which can range from common function psychological traits to more distinctive or unique features.

As important as to understand the forces that influence image development, it is to determine and understand the factors that influence its formation. The literature review revealed three major determinants existing in the absence of actual visitation or previous experience: tourism motivations, sociodemographics and various information sources, which represent stimulus variables (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999). These stimuli have earlier been classified by Gunn (1988) as: *organic, induced and experiential*. Organic stimuli derive from peoples' assimilation of non-touristic directed communication, coming from formal or informal, written and broadcasted discourses. The per-

ception each person gets is most of the times, very general, and not based in any knowledge in particular. Induced stimuli derive from a conscious effort of image development, through promotion, advertising and publicity. Marketers in charge for destinations' promotion try to develop positive images of those places, in order to attract tourists.

These images, prior to tourist experience, cannot but be indirect, resulting from imagination. When the personal experience of visiting the destination exists, the individual has the chance to compare organic and induced images with reality. It is when the image becomes experiential.

3 Tourism in Romania

In 2001, the Romanian travel and tourism industry contributed with 5.3% to the GDP³ and 8.2% to the total employment, which is 1 in every 12.4 jobs. By 2012, this should total 9.2% of total employment or 1 in every 10.9 jobs (WTTC⁴, 2002). There are continuous increases in international tourist arrivals also. For example, such numbers raised 8.2%, from 2,966,000 in 1998 to 3,209,000 in 1999, a growth rate of percent. According to WTTC (2002), travel and tourism demand in Romania is expected to grow by 4.5% per annum, in real terms, between 2002 and 2012. Even if Romania has long been an important tourist destination, with particular emphasis on the Black Sea Coast, interest in rural tourism has only developed strongly in recent years in the context of economic restructuring and land restitution. However, the agrotourism was officially established since the early 80s, when 33 villages from all ethnographic areas of Romania were selected for agrotourism development. Unfortunately, the initiative stopped for political reasons, being restarted only in the 90s.

The potential lies in fine scenery, attractive cultural landscapes with historical monuments and villages outstanding for folklore, handicrafts, hunting and fishing, horse-riding and canoeing, choice of fruits or wine (Istrate and Bran, *cit. in* Bordanc and Turnock, 1997, p.32). However, while the opportunity exists, it cannot be exploited immediately by people who have little capital and virtually no much experience in running business, after half a century of central planning; young people continue to leave the countryside and this further reduces the human resources for effective leadership (Turnock, 1996). Even if

some domestic organisms and European programmes were established in order to support such activities, there are still problems to overcome. Consideration must be given also to the growing need for further research studies in that field.

4 Perceptions of potential Portuguese visitors about Romania as a rural destination – preliminary results

A. Data Collection The data has been collected through a questionnaire⁵ carried out to the Oporto residents. Using the city street index, of which there are 2,073 streets, the sample was 10 per street from every 50th street. The survey has been conducted during approximately 6 weeks, between April and June 2001, on a drop/collect basis. From a total of 635, 400 questionnaires were collected. The respondent rate of approximately 62% was positively surprising, particularly as no incentive was used to ensure the return of the questionnaires. From those 400, 200 questionnaires are focused on Romania, as a rural tourist destination.

B. Questionnaire development It is argued that to fully capture all the components of destination image – attribute, holistic, functional, psychological, common, and unique – a combination of structured and unstructured methodologies must be used (Echtner and Ritchie, 1993). With this in mind, a series of open-ended questions and valid set of scales, based upon similar questions used in the study of image were used.

The questionnaire contained behavioural, demographic and attitudinal questions. The behavioural and demographic questions were largely for classificatory and profiling purposes. The variables of interest in these two sections of the survey instrument included: frequency of holidays, preferred destinations for holidays, preferred lodging types, gender, age, position in family life cycle, occupation, among others. These variables were scaled by both open – and closed-ended questions, depending on the appropriateness for the variable itself. The attitudinal questions aimed the perceptions the residents had on Romania. For that propose, we have settled out alternative words and phrases to describe the area, which we asked the respon-

³ Gross Domestic Product.

⁴ World Travel & Tourism Council.

⁵ Eight types of questionnaires have been identified, corresponding of four domestic rural regions (Minho, Trás-os-Montes, Alentejo Interior, Litoral Alentejano) and two international, namely Bulgaria and Romania.

dents to “react” to. Such descriptors were divided into three sub-sections covering the physical environment, the infrastructure and the people. The perceptions were recorded on seven point semantic differential scales, having at each end semantically opposed descriptors. The mid point is value 4, so the lower means are corresponding to a positive image and the higher means to a negative one. A series of statements aiming to further identify the perception of Romania were also used in the questionnaire. The results were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale: ranging from “totally agree” to “totally disagree”. The mid point is value 3. Case those descriptors and statements were very close to the mid point, we considered that the population interviewed had not a very strong opinion, being the answers more likely to be associated to some uncertainty or lack of knowledge about it.

C. Data Analysis At this stage and, attending to the study purposes, the analysis was a descriptive one, being the data processed through SPSS⁶ 10.01.

D. Results In this section we are looking for the perceptions the respondents might have on Romania. First, we are looking for the respondents’ travel experience to this country, motivations to do, or to do not take a holiday there, activities most likely performed and their knowledge about the country. Then, we are looking for the respondents’ impressions of rural Romania as a place for a long holiday. Asked if during the last five years they ever considered, or took, a holiday in Romania, most of them (80%) answered, “not considered nor taken”; 19% “considered, but not taken” and only 1% has “already taken” (see Table 1).

Table 1 – Romania holiday decision in the last five years

	Frequency	Valid percent
Not considered nor taken	160	80,00
Considered but not taken	38	19,00
Considered and taken	2	1,00

Mainly, for those who considered but not took a holiday in Romania in the last five years, time and money (un)availability was the reason that put them off (36%). A large part of the people surveyed prefers other destinations (25%) or are completely disinterested (7%). Issues related with the location of the country (too far, by instance), its safety and socio-economical background, as well as language barriers are others aspects mentioned, even in a smaller percentage (see Table 2).

Table 2 – Main reason for not taking a holiday in Romania

	Frequency	Valid percent
Time and money availability	16	36,36
Other preferences	11	25,00
Personal, family and friends constraints	9	20,45
Lack of interest	3	6,82
Safety	2	4,55
Language	1	2,27
Distance	1	2,27
Socio-economical background	1	2,27
Total	44	100,00

The main reasons to keep away 80% of the respondents from taking holidays in Romania are the lack of interest in, other preferences and lack of information about the country. Time and money and personal constraints are also evoked among others (see Table 3).

Table 3 – Reason for not considering Romania as a holiday destination

	Frequency	Valid percent
Lack of interest	48	24,62
Other preferences	40	20,51
Lack of information	30	15,38
Time and money availability	24	12,31
Personal, family and friends constraints	11	5,64
Distance	7	3,59
Political background	7	3,59
Level of development of tourism facilities	6	3,08
Socio-economical background	5	2,56
Level of development of infrastructures	5	2,56
Language	4	2,05
Safety	3	1,54
Country's natural heritage	2	1,03
Previous experience	2	1,03
References about the country	1	0,51
Total	195	100,00

The three activities that the respondents would be most likely to do (or expect to do) during a holiday in a rural area in Romania focus on sites of interest (74%), local markets (45%) and rural life (44%) – see Table 4.

Table 4 – Activities ranking*

	Frequency	Valid percent
Visit sites of interest	145	73,60
Attend local markets	88	44,67
Experience rural life	87	44,16
Tour area by car	51	25,89
Explore the flora and or fauna	49	24,87
Walk in the countryside	40	20,30
Winter sports	37	18,78
Rural sports	22	11,17
Other**	18	9,14
Cycle round the area	15	7,61
Mountain sports	13	6,60
Extreme sports	9	4,57

*Multiple choices.

**Other activities stated were: heritage, gastronomy/culinary experience, contact with the residents, discover all about the country, get to know Black Sea, relax, culture, anything unique, beach.

Table 5 presents the knowledge the respondents have about Romania; 43% of them nothing know about the country; from those who denote some knowledge (57%), reading or having seen pictures appears in the larger scale.

Table 5 – Knowledge about Romania *

	Frequency	Valid percent %
Read or seen pictures of Romania	88	44,00
Know nothing Romania	85	42,50
Talked about Romania	37	18,50
Other knowledge of Romania**	22	11,00
Looked for info on Romania	14	7,00
Family member visited Romania	5	2,50
Friends or relatives in Romania	4	2,00
Business contacts in Romania	4	2,00
Visited Romania	3	1,50

*Multiple choices.

** Other knowledge of Romania: TV news, political reasons, media, historical reasons, through my studies, sport events, movies and documentaries, I worked in a company with Romanian employees, research studies, I got a Romanian friend.

Thinking of the physical environment of rural Romania (Table 6), the image that the inquiries have is closer, in the majority of cases, to the positive side: natural landscape, not polluted, heavily wooded and distinct architectural style, where all the average scores were lower than the midpoint, associated with value 4 on the scale. The means of the two remaining items, higher than 4, denote negative aspects like monotonous and run of mill landscape.

Table 6 – The perception of the physical environment of rural Romania

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. deviation
Varied-monotonous landscape	193	1	7	4,53	1,51054154
Natural / manmade landscape	196	1	6	2,96	1,18267407
Heavily wooded / not wooded	192	1	7	3,42	1,27157429
Majestic / run of mill	195	1	7	4,44	1,47500095
Distinct arch style / no distinct style	196	1	7	3,36	1,47679593
Not polluted / polluted	189	1	7	3,86	1,34959270

As we observe in Table 7, the respondents' perception of the physical attributes of tourism in rural Romania are negative in some aspects like bad roads, few entertainment activities or limited choices in terms of lodging, that make it not a commercialised destination. The food is seen as positive, as being part of a distinctive cookery style, however they are unsure about whether they like it or not.

Table 7 – The perception of the physical attributes of tourism in rural Romania

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. deviation
Good roads/bad roads	193	1	7	4,74	1,30911594
Range of activities					
/few activities	193	1	7	4,58	1,47726729
Choice of accommodation					
/limited choice	192	1	7	4,64	1,39970664
Distinctive cookery					
/not distinctive	197	1	7	2,47	1,18040214
Too few visitors -/too many	190	1	7	3,26	1,43346840
Food I know					
/food I am unsure about	194	1	7	5,12	1,52742324
Not commercialised					
/commercialised	193	1	7	3,91	1,45115120

Concerning now the local people in rural Romania, there is strong evidence that it is perceived as a distinct culture, with welcoming people, providers of a good service. Portuguese is perceived as an unspoken language in Romania.

Table 8 – The perception of local people in rural Romania

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. deviation
Distinct culture / not distinct	200	1	6	2,15	1,06755485
Welcoming / not welcoming	196	1	7	2,93	1,19185268
Good service					
/not good service	195	1	7	3,45	1,14914719
Speak language					
/not speak language	195	1	7	6,27	1,33276488

The affective perception is positive, being all the average scores lower than 4 (see Table 9). *Inter alia*, Romania is perceived as a relaxing, interesting and pleasant country.

Table 9 – The affective perception of rural Romania

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. deviation
Relaxing/stressful	194	1	7	2,96	1,33262650
Safe/dangerous	192	1	7	3,99	1,41046790
Stimulate/calm	195	1	7	3,93	1,51452567
Interesting/boring	197	1	7	2,74	1,32147512
Exciting/Not exciting	190	1	7	3,46	1,13911250
Slow paced/pressurised	193	1	7	3,65	1,38018140
Pleasant/unpleasant	197	1	7	2,81	1,30940624
Comforting/distressing	191	1	7	3,50	1,45412060

The country's cultural heritage is the first reason that would attract the respondents to spend holidays in Romania. Part of them (14%) denotes interest in the Eastern European countries, in general, being that kind of holidays seen as a new experience (13%). The country's natural heritage is another important attraction, among others.

Table 10 – Attraction of rural Romania – 1st aspect mentioned

	Frequency	Valid percent
Country's cultural heritage	76	38,38
Interest in Eastern European countries	27	13,64
New experience	26	13,13
Country's natural heritage	17	8,59
No reasons	11	5,56
Relax	8	4,04
Rural life	8	4,04
Good value for money	5	2,53
Time and money availability	4	2,02
Others	4	2,02
Accommodation	2	1,01
Welcoming	2	1,01
Safety	2	1,01
Level of tourism facilities	2	1,01
Personal reasons	2	1,01
Entertainment	1	0,51
Gastronomy	1	0,51
Total	198	100,00

The first aspect pointed out by the respondents as being unattractive in Romania, is focused on (un)safety issues; the lack of information about the country, on the other hand, it's another aspect very strongly stated. All of the aspects mentioned, focusing Romania's unattractiveness are listed below (see Table 11).

Table 11 – Unattractiveness of rural Romania – 1st aspect mentioned

	Frequency	Valid percent
Safety	23	12,92
Lack of information	21	11,80
Distance	17	9,55
Socio-economical background	17	9,55
Level of development of tourism facilities	12	6,74
Language	11	6,18
Time and money availability	11	6,18
Others	10	5,62
Political background	9	5,06
Lack of interest	9	5,06
No reasons	9	5,06
Personal, family and friends constraints	7	3,93
Country's natural heritage	6	3,37
Gastronomy	6	3,37
Level of development of infrastructures	5	2,81
Lack of entertainment	3	1,69
Lack of transport facilities	2	1,12
Total	178	100,00

A series of statements aiming to further identify the perception of Romania, as well as taking a holiday in the country, were also used in the questionnaire. The results were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale: ranging from *totally agree* to *totally disagree*. The mid point is value 3. As Table 12 shows, Romania is still pictured in a communist nuance, associated with corruption, where the people would feel intimidated by the country's authorities.

Table 12 – Respondents' perception concerning the authorities in Romania

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. deviation
Intimidated by authorities	198	1	5	2,96	0,92257851
Racist country	199	2	5	3,43	0,75442622
Impression is positive	197	1	5	3,03	0,91422226
Corrupt country	197	1	5	2,63	0,66886013
Old communists die hard	198	1	5	2,50	0,74554515

On the other hand, the natural environment of Romania is seen as unspoiled, mainly rural, with beautiful scenery, rich in wildlife, with the average-scores lower than the mid point (see Table 13). However, it seems that the respondents are not sure about the climatic conditions, namely, if, Romania is, generally, a sunny country.

Table 13 – Respondents' perception concerning the natural environment of Romania

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. deviation
Very industrialised	200	1	5	3,26	0,88106833
Mainly rural	200	1	4	2,34	0,65184315
Beautiful scenery	200	1	4	2,22	0,68111643
Weather generally sunny	200	1	5	3,09	0,72137153
Rich in wildlife	199	1	5	2,97	0,64696015
Rural areas unpolluted	199	1	5	2,70	0,70175659

As the Table 14 shows, go to Romania for a long holiday would be for the respondents a good cultural experience, where the folklore is an important attraction. People are seen as friendly, even is difficult to communicate with. Generally speaking, they point out to an under-developed place in terms of tourism, with no wide range of shopping facilities, poor public transport and where to rent a car might be difficult. However, the image they've got is that Romania is a cheap destination.

Table 14 – Respondents' perception about Romania as a place for a long holiday

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. deviation
Cheap holidays	199	1	4	2,66	0,69791251
Folklore important for tourists	200	1	4	2,13	0,68954868
Good cultural experience	199	1	4	1,90	0,70059834
Accommodation of high standard	200	1	5	3,15	0,59645098
Well developed coastal tourism	199	1	5	3,17	0,66487501
Good place for skiing	200	2	5	3,07	0,54459427
Hygiene standards questionable	200	1	5	2,93	0,59739804
Under-developed for tourism	200	1	4	2,50	0,72291982
Easy to rent a car	200	1	5	3,08	0,51470829
Wide range of shopping	198	1	5	3,09	0,68166862
Public transport under-developed	197	1	5	2,85	0,66020819
Wonderful wines	200	1	5	2,85	0,63481489
Unlikely to travel to country	199	1	5	2,28	1,08302141
Nothing for me as a destination	198	1	5	3,18	1,12076512
Culture too different	200	1	4	2,33	0,88601644
Difficult to communicate	199	1	5	2,50	1,03413640
No food I would like	200	1	5	3,14	0,73011323
People are friendly	199	1	4	2,64	0,63544206
Go only if friend there	198	1	5	3,49	1,09797911

5 Conclusion

The image the people got on a country is determinant for them to the decision process in visiting or not that country. This aspect might be very important for the Eastern European countries, widely remembered as "isolated" by the communism regime. However, the wind of change brought new opportunities in the last decade, even if there are still problems to overcome.

One of the assumptions of the OPTOUR project is that few Portuguese have already visited Eastern European countries. In the case of Romania, this is particularly true. Only two people in 200 visited Romania in the last five years, being the lack of interest the first reason keeping them away to considering this country as a holiday destinations. For those who considered but have not taken a holiday in Romania in the last five years, time and money (un)availability was the reason that put them off. Visiting sites of interest will be the first motivation for them, case a long holiday will be taken in Romania. This

motivation is supported by the country's cultural heritage that was mentioned by the respondents, as the most attractive aspects offered. The major constraint that keeps them away from Romania is focussed on unsafety issues.

It becomes clear that, even if opportunities exist, there is a special need for more information about the country as well as promotional efforts to "read", attract and capture new markets.

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