

# ALTERNATIVE TOURISM WITHIN THE SOUTHERN CARPATHIANS

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## Abstract

The Southern Carpathians cover 15 000 km<sup>2</sup> and as they are massive they are also diverse in genetics and landscape. They bare the highest peaks of Romania (Moldoveanu 2 544 m, Negoiu 2 535m) and they are crossed by transversal valleys that flow to altitudes of 600-500 m (the Jiului Gorges). On their eastern side, in the Prahova Valley tourism (in an organized manner) has developed since the Nineteenth Century, especially as a relaxing area used by the capital's aristocracy.

Today the most prolific form of tourism within these mountains are cultural tourism (due to their historical background - they bordered two former "countries" of Romania: Transylvania and Valachia), winter sports tourism (especially in the Bucegi, Parâng and Retezat mountains) and trekking and hiking activities during summer.

There are two dimensions of the alternative tourism we take into account: first the alternating activities between seasons within the same areas (especially as far as winter sports for the cold season and trekking/hiking activities during summer are concerned); but also alternative forms of tourism to the traditional ones.

Alternative forms of tourism differ according to altitude. On the highest slopes which have seldom been used, the new age of adventure tourism and extreme sports dawned. During winter they are the playground of free-riders (both snowboarders and skiers), paragliding which is then transferred during the summer season as well when paragliders use the 1000m cliffs as adrenaline accelerators. Descending below the timberline we remark the shy attempts of mountain-biking on trails traditionally used for trekking. Still in the altitude area we mention the survival camp activities destined mostly to youngsters (within the Retezat Mountains). Descending onto the corridors and depressions we mention the congress-conference tourism competing with rural tourism (within the Rucăr-Bran Corridor and the lowlands of the Cindrel Mountains).

**Key words:** extreme sports, nature-conscious activities, area recovery, sustainable development

## 1. Introduction

Alternative tourism is a rather new concept in the Romanian literature dedicated to the aforementioned industry. In fact there are no definitions as yet, but is most of the time assimilated with ecotourism or rural tourism which tends to be contradictory in some areas as are particular regions in

the Southern Carpathians where rural tourism is part of the mainstream tourism (eg. Mărginimea Sibiului).

We have decided to compare the benefits of the conventional tourism, what the public tourist agencies have planned for the future, the new emerging trends that private investors /practitioners have undertaken in the area of interest.

Even if tourism has been practiced for more than a century (first declared mountain resort – Păltiniș 1894, establishment of the Saxon *Siebenbürgische Karpatenverein* tourist association in 1880 – Olaru, 1996), there are still some limitations regarding the development of conventional tourism mainly due to infrastructure (hard and soft). It will take time to establish the hard infrastructure network, more than it is necessary to design new form of tourism that would take advantage of the precarious road network, for example. This is where alternative tourism comes in and though area recovery can use the formerly used forestry routes for 4X4 riding or mountain-biking, or the alpine pastures no longer grazed by the thousands of sheep for orientation games and survival-camp activities.

We shall make notice of a few activities which have already build some infrastructure (soft – mainly networking) and some that have not yet become a part of the statistics, which have been mainly encountered during our field documentations, which are mostly related with extreme sports as paragliding and free-riding (during winter).

In a complicated developing tourism infrastructure is difficult to determine and to take note of alternative activities, for they are not anywhere mentioned as such, therefore no classification or exhaustive presentations is possible. Still the question that we intend to answer is how we can identify the alternative forms and whether they are in accordance with the already redundant sustainable development.

## 2. Theory and concepts

First of all we should understand how renowned theoreticians define alternative tourism in order to create real basis for research. Even if in Romania, this a term quite seldom used as yet, in the “western word” there has been an abuse (as Buttler, 1992 sees it) of its reclamation as commonly as the “sustainable development” collocation is used.

Most researchers (Cohen 1989, Pearce, 1992; Buttler, 1992; David, 2006; De Ros *et al*, 2006; Vargionis, 2007; Lyons, Wearing, 2008) would agree that the alternative tourism is the alternative for mass or conventional tourism. In order to emphasize what mass tourism is Buttler continues his idea by stating: *alternative* to “Golden hoards”, to the mass institutionalized tourism, to the Costa Bravas, to the Blackpools, to the Daytona Strips, to the Atlantic cities, to the tasteless and ubiquitous developments, to the environmental and spatial alienation and to homogenization.

On the other hand we cannot deny the importance of the time frame or the spatial one when analyzing this concept. Thus as far back as the ‘80s for this term in Europe might have been synonymous with *sanfter tourismus* (Pearce, 1992) which has mostly found adepts in the south mountainous region of Germany, Bavaria, but also in Austria and Switzerland; whilst in the Third World Countries, the term was mostly associated with *community based tourism* (CBT) as opposed to the all-inclusive developments of former colonial leaders or of simply foreign investors whose sole purpose was the benefit of economic revenues.

After the response to what this alternative tourism is we need to ask **why** the need for an alternative to the existing form was born, though the questions can also trade places when it comes to importance. Therefore, in the first case the need for a softer tourism occurred in a frame of integrated, 3<sup>rd</sup> generation ski resorts which conquered and transformed the landscape to an extent that summer

tourism in that mountain areas was dropping at a ridiculous rate and irreversible environmental impact was emerging as a clear statement. Continuing this idea ever nowadays, the interviewed tourist segment of De Ros and his team (2006) agreed that on the alpine pastures of the Italian Alps even if they encounter some lack of comfort, the entrepreneurial business should stay local in order to preserve the balance of the natural environment and the traditional-small farm social one. On the other hand in the second example the need for an alternative to the foreign investors is fairly easy to understand since the economical benefits would not pertain in the classical management to the local community and therefore they could not develop to maybe compete with the foreign investors and most importantly they would become marginalized in their own country, as far as real fences being built. However Buttler (1992) amends this approach by the theory that more interaction between the local communities and tourists would lead ultimately to the change of the indigenous society and leakages in cultural and eventually economic aspects as well.

Still a softer and gentler tourism is continuously reclaimed (Fernell, 2006) and some offer strange alternatives to the classic CBT with the *volunteer tourism* (Lyons, Wearin, 2008). In this the alternative tourists would reconfigure the destinations as an interactive space where they become creative actors within the cultural frame of the host community, which would engage in behaviours that are mutually beneficial to the host community and to the social and natural environment.

Moreover an organization called Alternative Tourism Group was founded in 1995. It mitigates the *justice tourism* regarding the “country” of Palestine and towards Palestinians themselves (Kassis, 2006). This continues the idea of experience and becoming an international ambassador but to another political level.

Another synonym used for alternative tourism is *ecotourism* (Wallace, Pierce, 1996), which in order to work as it was destined to be it has to be developed on the following methods of assessment of the social and biophysical impacts: environmental impact assessment, estimations of carrying capacity, limits of acceptable change, cost-benefit analyses and visitor impact management (Wallace, Pierce, 1996). This model would be feasible for fragile environments (alpine, coastal), which are either virgin or by practicing area-recovery to regions affected by intensive tourism development in developed countries.

A simpler approach is offering *alternative accommodation* as the Puerto Rican *paradores* or *cabanas* (Pearce, 1992) or alternative transportation like Dr Emil Hocevar’s *Talerbus* which runs on electrical power and is the sole means of transportation allowed in the Lungau Region, Switzerland (MTE-online).

Finally one of the latest classifications of alternative tourism practices reclaims that there are 3 major directions: activities orientated (extreme sports or green endeavours), cultural orientated (ethnology, traditions, costumes) and year-round orientated (complementary/ alternating activities) (Vargionis, 2007).

Concluding this short presentation of the concepts relating to alternative tourism, we state that its role should be to ameliorate what went wrong in the conventional tourism rather than to do away with it, for this perspective is not possible from any point of view: economical (revenues, jobs), land management (existing accommodation and amenities), social (unemployment - residents, level of education – tourists), demographical (more than 8 million tourists in 2007 – WTO statistics) or even political (discrimination).

### **3. Study area**

The Southern Carpathians (fig.1) are the longest of the 3 Carpathian ranges, oriented from east to west covering 250 km in length and 50-70 km in width. This accounts for more than 14000 km<sup>2</sup>,

which would cover about 20% of the mountainous relief of Romania and around 6% of its entire surface.

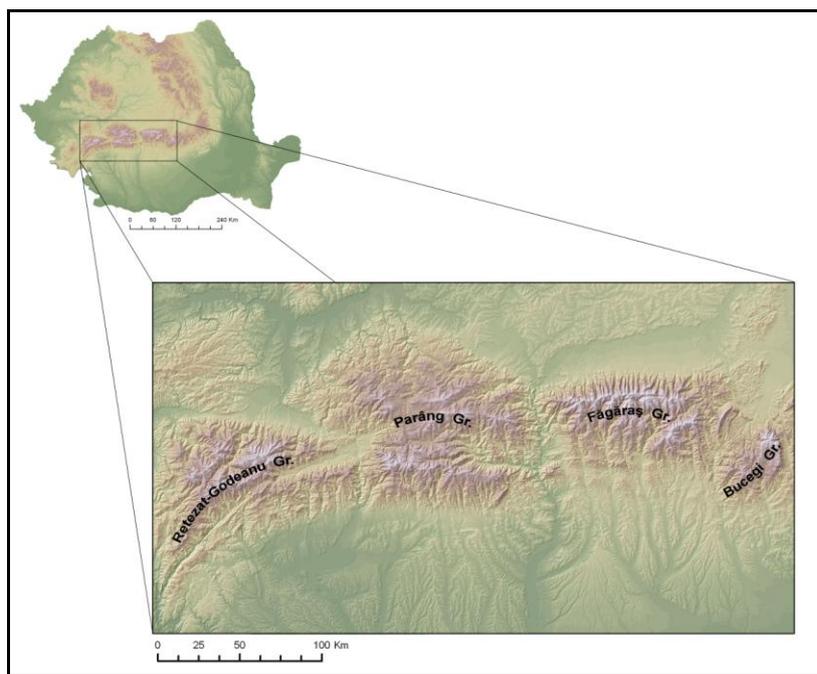


Fig 1. Location of the Southern Carpathians and their subdivisions

Even as far back as the Fourteenth century they were called by historians (J. Honterus) *Alps* due to their high altitudes (Pop, 2000), especially in their central area, the Făgăraș Mountains, which are even nowadays called the Transylvanian Alps, due to that fact that they bear the peaks with the highest altitudes, Moldoveanu, 2544 m and Negoiu 2535 m.

The southern Carpathians are divided into four major groups (on genetic and structural considerations), which are from east to west: Bucegi (I), Făgăraș Mountains (II), Parâng (III) and Retezat-Godeanu (IV). The groups bear the names of the most important mountains in that particular group.

Almost the entire ridge is characterized as having abrupt cliffs on the northern side, especially in the east; towards the west these abrupts become softer, so that in the Parâng group in the Cindrel Mountains, settlements have developed relatively high up in the mountains until approximately 1500 m altitude (Jina) in the area known as Mărginimea Sibiului. The most spectacular forms of relief in these mountains have been created by the quaternary glaciers. The climate is temperate-continental with sub-Mediterranean influences in the group of Retezat-Godeanu. Vegetation is characterized by the natural levelling of high mountains environment into alpine, sub-alpine, evergreen forests and deciduous forests. Most importantly, these mountains have almost 200 ha of protected areas: National Parks: Cozia (17 100 ha) and Pietra Craiului (14 800 ha) in the Făgăraș Group, Retezat (38 047 ha) and Domogled – Cerna Valley (60 100 ha) in the Retezat-Godeanu Group; Natural Parks: Bucegi (32 663 ha) in the mountain group with the same name and other reserves in all the four mountain groups.

With regard to settlements they have been traces discovered as far back as First Century AD, with well know fortresses from the Daco-Roman wars (Costesti, Sarmizegetusa Regia), and medieval state-like formations (Terra Blachorum). Historically the Rucăr-Bran Corridor was an important passage way between Transylvania and Wallachia. Its importance was moved westward in the Prahova Valley as soon as the Nineteenth century when the first roads passed through here (Nistorescu, 2004),

which even today is one of the most important connectors between Transylvania and the capital city and is the second largest tourist region in Romania.

Dwellers of the Southern Carpathians were mostly sheep breeders who took the herds up the mountains during summers and down to the villages which were located from 1500 m downwards, until the valleys and depressions, in a process known as *transhumanță*, which is rarely practiced today.

#### **4. Present day tourism status and planned trajectories by governmental agencies**

The most developed tourist region in the study area is the Prahova Valley and the Rucăr-Bran Corridor. The Prahova Valley is the eastern border of the Southern Carpathians and the Rucăr-Bran Corridor is the westward boarder of the Bucegi Mountain Group. In 2007 the number of places in this region represented 42.8% from the total of mountain resorts and very close to 5% of the whole accommodation infrastructure in Romania. In terms of tourist demand, close to 77% of all the arrivals in the mountain areas of Romania and a little over 11% of all the tourist arrivals in Romania have been registered here. (INCDT – 2009).

The most important forms of tourism practiced here are the cultural tourism, centred on the city of Braşov, the Bran Castle, the Râşnov Fortress and the Sinaia resort (former royal summer residence); rural tourism – the Rucăr – Bran corridor was one of the first pilot regions of the programme “country life” initiated by the Tourism Bureau in the 1970s following the French model whilst still in the communist regime; and winter-sport tourism with a total length of over 44 km of trails – the largest ski area in Romania, comprising of 4 resorts: Poiana Braşov, Predeal, Azuga, Buşteni and Sinaia – still modest compared to their potential and to their counterparts in the Alpine countries.

The regional association responsible for tourism development (Asociația Microregiunea Turistică Munții Bucegi) together with the National Tourism Development and Research Institute put forth a regional master plan within the national framework of the Master-Plan for the Development of the National Tourism of Romania (2007-2026). Most of the requested funds (from the Operational Regional Programme – 5.2 Axis) would go to the rehabilitation and the development of the utilities infrastructure, road-network and most of all to the development of winter-sport tourism infrastructure: new trails, new cable transportation that would at least double the ski area and the transportation capacity of the whole region (INCDT, 2009).

Moving on westward to the Făgăraş mountains we need mentioning the cultural tourism ongoing at all lower altitudes and even in the Sibiu Basin based on Medieval Fortified Saxon Churches or solely fortresses (Cristian, Cislădie, Călnic) and the city of Sibiu which was the European cultural capital of 2007. Within the mountain area only trekking and climbing activities during summer make up the mainstream offer. During winter they are seldom visited due to the lack of development in the infrastructure - there is only one road crossing them from north to south – the Transfăgăraşan which is closed during winter. For the sake of comparison, we mention the number of tourists registered in 2008 both in the previous region and in the Făgăraş Mountains. In the area of Prahova Valley and the Rucăr – Bran Corridor more than 635 000 arrivals were registered and in the Făgăraş Mountains almost 70 000 (INSSE 2009), therefore representing only a bit more than 10% from the previous region and having a 60% larger surface. For this area or the following there have not been established regional tourist development associations which would have established rigorous development plans as for the area of the Bucegi Mountains.

The Parâng group is among the largest as far as surface, and number of massifs. In the north-east of the group, the Cindrel mountains are famous for two types of tourism: rural tourism within the Mărginimea Sibiului Area, where the first tourist village was established – Sibiul (1974) and the first mountain resort from Romania – Păltiniş in 1894. The later together with the resort from the mountain Parâng are the support of the winter sports, but together they barely sum up less than 7 km of tracks.

Nevertheless trekking is practiced during summers especially within the areas with lime stone relief (Galbenei and Oltețului Gorges, the Muierii and Polovragi Caves).

In the Retezat-Godeanu the most famous are the trekking routes within the post-glacier relief and the lime stone relief (on the Cernei Valley) and there is a rapidly-developing ski resort called Straja, on the northern slope of the Godeanu Mountains.

Unfortunately the degree of the development regarding to soft infrastructures does not facilitate the easy access to the statistical data bases as for the two groups before. Thus we can conclude that going westward the development status of the hard and soft infrastructure is diminishing as is the tourist demand.

## **5. New endeavours and future perspectives**

The difference between the groups of the Southern Carpathians in terms of tourism is undeniable. As such are the reasons for the occurrence of new forms of tourism.

In order to follow an organised pattern, we shall present our findings within the classification of Vargonis (2007), with the three main directions for alternative tourism.

### Active forms of tourism

As these mountains benefit from abrupt cliffs and little planned environment in those regions, most of the sky around high altitudes are populated with hang-gliders and para-gliders (with or without engines depending on the altitudes and currents). This sport is transferred in the winter season as well, when experienced skiers or snow-boarders use these to become independent of cable transportation and explore new realms. Continuing the idea of off-pistes, we need to take account of all the free-rides that prefer these mountains for their steep slopes and little managed areas. In these respect we need mentioning the organised endeavours - in the Bucegi mountains around the slopes of Sinaia there have been organised training free-riding camps in the winters of 2005-2006 and in the Făgăraș Mountains around the Bâlea Lake resort every year the competition known as Inferno is organised, this year already at its 3<sup>rd</sup> edition in Romania ([www.inferno.ws](http://www.inferno.ws)). Also in the Făgăraș mountains heliski tours are organised by a Czech company and the tours are lead by Romanian and Austrian experts ([www.xventure.net](http://www.xventure.net)).

Motor-sports during winter reclaim the snow-mobiles usage, even competitions – the first organised in 2006 again in the Făgăraș Mountains. Thus we can mention that the alpine territory is the realm of extreme sports.

Moving on below the timber line we encounter more extreme sports like enduro-racing on old forestry routes. Making use of this routes are the 4X4 cars which are used as the motive of camping trips. Furthermore ATV rides are practiced here and last but not least the mountain bikers whom chose either the old forestry routs or even the trekking trails if they are advanced practitioners. We need therefore mentioning that no special trails are designed for them. Most of these activities are practiced in all the mountain groups. In Sibiu there is an organisation called Xventure Offroad Romania, who is responsible for organizing such trips all over the Southern Carpathians.

In the lower part of the Baiului Mountains, a new activity developed – golf. “Lac de verde” is the first such 18-hole Putting Green in Romania, but due to the relief is one of the most difficult in Europe ([www.lacdeverde.ro](http://www.lacdeverde.ro)).

### Cultural orientated practices

Since rural tourism is part of the mainstream why would there be the need for new culturally oriented activities? Unfortunately the agri-tourism is almost completely obsolete because the traditional practices of sheep herding specific in these mountains is undergone only by a few more families. So if the substance of the cultural aspects that are connected with the traditional occupation

are on the way of extinction then the demand for this type of tourism has already begun to shrink (personal query – field documentation in the village of Sibiel, 09.2009).

Having lost this purpose, the entrepreneurs from the Rucăr-Bran Corridor have reoriented the offer to the conference, congress and business tourism (including team-buildings). Individually or associated entrepreneurs have developed conference halls and amenities pertaining to this sector. Consequently the new form of tourism has an over all larger demand than the traditional one.

Close to 200 ha of protected areas pertaining to 4 National Parks (one in each mountain group), 3 Natural Parks and numerous reservations should be the base grounds for eco-training camps organised for children and volunteer actives for keeping the mountains clean and the routes well marked for teenagers and scout clubs. In order to attract young tourists at the cultural heritage landmarks, theme parks could be built: “Tracking the Dacians”; “the Saxons and the Transylvanians” etc. The two afore examples could create the *alternative tourist* (reclaimed by Butler, 1992) and the future militants for environmental causes being this way more aware of the precise matters.

In terms of accommodation there is an alternative one that is hard to over look. We need mentioning the ice-hotel at Bâlea Lake and also the chapel. The hotel is built every year since 2006 and has a varying capacity each year.

#### Year-Round Resorts

This supports the idea of alternative as alternating tourism and can be practiced in most of these mountains. One such example is the Straja Resort in the Godeanu Mountains where during winter specific sports are practiced: skiing, snowboarding, and for the rest of the year (but especially during summer) survival-camp activities for teenagers and young tourist are organised. The down-side of these particular camps is that they are not organised by the locals, but by different sport associations and the participants are club-members only. They are dedicated to the management of activities within the mountain areas with specific training regarding risk situations (personal query field documentation in the Straja Resort, March, 2009).

The cultural sites have a year-round activity, the tourist villages as well (with the peak of the seasons around the religious holidays – especially the winter ones) and also the salt mines around Sibiu as well.

We have another suggestion regarding the on going planning of the development of the ski resorts. In order for them to become revenue gainers within the summer season as well, the ski-lifts, could be modified for summer usage. That is every 3-4 carts, the seats could be replaced with bicycle racks, for the mountain-bike downhillers. We suggest the usage of the beginners and medium difficulty ski slopes for downhill rides, but also the implementation of specific tracks that could develop into conventional competition grounds.

The above lines tried to offer a classification frame for the punctually developing new actives that could be organised in the direction of the alternative tourism.

### **5. Conclusions.**

Taking a short tour of the new endeavours or the new reclaimed alternative forms of tourism (existing and proposed), we realise that there is no legal framework what so ever for their development, and therefore at the moment they are chaotically dispersed and all the more poorly or wrongfully managed.

If these endeavours are to become the parts of the reclaimed “alternative tourism” they need to undergo more than one process. Most importantly as we saw no all new endeavours are environmentally-friendly, and part of the definition or assimilation of the alternative tourism has great importance in what sustainable development is. Thus for the eco part, an environmental impact

assessment for every activity is reclaimed. Furthermore, having in view that a large percentage of the new practices are synonymous with extreme sports, risk management and safety precautions should be undertaken.

The benefits of such new endeavours, apart from the emancipation of the tourists practicing it, are job creating opportunities for all the activities that cannot and should not be undertaken without the close supervision of the specialists in the different fields stated above; area-recovery grounds of no longer used fields for agriculture and the forest industry; and also a higher degree of ecological education of tourists who are practicing the nature-conscious activities.

Finally, we need to mention that even if the National Master-Plan for the development of tourism has not mentioned in specific terms the alternative view, the key to development and success is to find the means within the plan for the development of a legal frame-work and the establishment of supportive associations or organizations and also entrepreneurs from the private sector.

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