

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM IN HISTORICAL MARAMURES CASE STUDY: BREB VILLAGE

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Abstract

Sustainable development has become an extremely important issue for both the academic as well as the economic and political sectors during recent years. The concept of sustainable development has emerged in the context of the announced danger of planet and surrounding environment destruction as a result of the investments made in all areas of activity throughout the world. One of the concept objectives is to find a solution to reconcile three desiderata: economic growth, environmental quality and social justice. The specialists have introduced this concept in order to make investments and to create business environments able to bring about an economic growth in a strong connection with nature, without destroying the natural resources. Tourism comes from behind with a tremendous force, a new economic market orientation strongly connected to nature. It provides us with the opportunity to review the main challenges faced during recent years in relation to the environmental, cultural and interpersonal relationships, in order to develop, protect and preserve the touristic potential. The historical *Maramures* represents such a region with a strong touristic potential. A study performed by *Pricewaterhouse Coopers Management Consultants* on the attractiveness of Romania's development regions places it on the II-nd position and illustrates the capacity of the region to develop and attract investments able to support the sustainable development of the area without destroying its uniqueness and originality.

The herein study focusses on one of the *Maramures* villages that has managed to fully retain its originality and cultural uniqueness through the wooden houses, the *Maramures* traditional gates, the local traditional vestments and the ancient customs. Foreign investors have come into this village to set up traditional accommodation facilities, true to the style of the area, to restore old wooden houses, thus becoming sometimes more fond of the area than the population itself. It is interesting to notice how these investors move out from the big capitals into a mountain village and struggle to preserve the strong tourism potential in the area, while local residents want to leave this community towards the big metropolis.

The study presents the touristic potential of *Breb* Village as well as several projects for sustainable development of tourism in this mountain hamlet. Some of these projects are still undergoing, others are already completed. All are run by foreign investors who undertake actions in order to make the local population aware of the importance of preserving the natural environment and cultural heritage of this area.

Key words: sustainable development, nature, touristic potential, investors, *Breb*.

Introduction

Human activities are dependent on the natural resources provided by the surrounding environment which has undergone a continuous degradation during recent years due to its intensive exploitation. The historical *Maramures* focusses on

the eco-exploitation of the natural resources by settling the factors with a negative impact on the environment with a focus on the preservation of cultural heritage and the development of creative capabilities to provide a healthy development for future generations.

As tourism has become a priority sector for the economic development and given its influence over the traditional way of life of the inhabitants, the aim is to preserve the specific, traditional elements of certain settlements. In the herein study we try to identify a way to preserve the socio-cultural identity and to see how the investors in the historic *Maramures*, namely in *Breb* Village, have managed to develop the natural and cultural resources and what are the newly created job opportunities provided by the activities they carry out here in the tourism field.

We also try to identify the significant effect that the traditional way of life of the inhabitants has in preserving the specific natural features through a harmonious interaction between nature and culture. *Breb* Village has managed to keep its originality despite the foreigners who have come here from far away countries and, impressed with the originality of these areas, have undergone actions to invigorate the cultural assets, to introduce them in the touristic circuit without damaging the natural environment.

***Breb* Village– *Maramures* Traditions and Customs Holily Treasured**

Breb Village is one of the most beautiful villages of *Maramures* County which still preserves ancient traditions and customs. Here one can see how the defining elements inherited from the Daco-Romans hand down from generation to generation, remaining unchanged over time.

The memory of this origin stores itself alive through customs and traditions still unspoiled. The Dacian legacy stands out strongly through the traditional garments: *ițari* (a pair of long peasant trousers that were sewn from a special breed of sheep wool and had a length of 2 m), *suman* (a long peasant coat (knee-deep) made of brown, grey or black cloth and richly decorated), the woollen coats, the shirts opened at the chest, the belt, *opinci*, (footwear worn with woollen or felt foot wraps or woollen socks fleece), the long curly hair worn covered with hat, *catrința* (an embroidered apron), the embroideries on the shirts, necklaces of beads or coins; the house construction, *casa mare* (the main room) decorated with woven blankets, pillows, plates, the small door and the wattle. The Roman influence can be found in the wedding and funeral customs as well as in the language.

Breb Village is located in the centre-northern side of *Maramures* depression, at an altitude of 600 m, in the upper side of *Mara* River, at the foothills of *Gutai* Mountains. From the administrative point of view it is part of *Ocna Sugatag* Commune, along with *Hoteni* and *Sat-Șugatag* Villages. The distance between *Breb* and the Capital City of *Baia Mare* is of 52 km and between *Breb* and *Sighetul Marmatiei* the distance is of 25 km. The access road in this village is the *Ocna*

Șugatag - Sighetul Marmatiei road. *Breb* has a surface of 3 490 hectares and it is crossed by a rich hydrographical network that streams from the *Gutai* Mountains. The main water courses which cross the village are: *Mare* Valley, *Breboia* Valley, *Sunatoare* and *Caselor* Valley, all flowing into *Mara* River.

As a large surface of the land consists of natural pastures and meadows the traditional occupation here is the sheep breeding.

The village name has been known since 1715 and it was given after the name of the animal „*Breb*” of the local fauna.ⁱ The documents relating to this village and to the families who ruled it are dated back in the XIV-th, XV-th and XVI-th centuries.

Breb Village has a strong tourism potential, both natural and anthropic. Its uniqueness and originality has drawn the attention of foreign investors who are trying to make the local population aware of the importance of environment preservation, appreciation and respect for the touristic values.

A symbol of *Breb* Village is the natural reservation *Creasta Cocosului* (Cock's Comb) of *Gutai* Mountains. *Gutai* Mountains has an average altitude of 1200 m with the highest peak at 1443m - The Crest of *Gutai* Mountains.

One of the most attractive sights of the village and the pride of local people is the wooden church located nearby the meeting point of *Buboaia* and *Caselor* Valleys.

According to the villagers, this architectural beauty was initially built around 1530 by a Maramures craftsman in an area of the village called *Copăciș*. 100 years later it was moved to another part of the village, closer to the its centre, being more accessible for the church-goers. In 1643 the church was enlarged and then repaired in 1715. The Church's architecture is typically Maramures like for this kind of constructions. The roof, with a steep slope, has only one gutter and the entrance into the Church is made through a gate on the southern wall. The inside walls were painted in 1626. The repairs made in 1864 had a disastrous effect over the whole architecture of the assembly and destroyed the mural painting made on canvas. A strip sized 0.35 X 5 m has been preserved and several icons from the 17th century and 18th centuries. The village elders say that the Church lost its components from 1530 due to the enlargement and repair works. A piece of wood in the church tower dates back to from this period. "One can see in the cemetery several crosses with circular crowns, unusual in the region." (George Cristea and Mihai Dancus, *Maramures. Un muzeu viu în centrul Europei* (Maramures. A Living Museum in the Centre of Europe), 2000, p. 137.

The Church also preserves old pieces of furniture, icons on wood and glass, carpets, woven towels and an old church book. One of the church's bells is inscribed "IN DOMINE SPERAVI, ANNO DOMINI 1796" and it weighs 100 kg.

ⁱ (The) **Breb** (*Castor fiber* or "european Beaver") is a rodent (the biggest and heaviest in Europe), closely related to the North-American Beaver (*Castor canadensis*) which gave birth to many toponyms such as *Breb*, *Breboia*, *Brebeni*, *Brebina*, *Brebenei*, *Bibor*, *Biber*, *Biborțeni* and so on in the areas inhabited by Romanians;

The inhabitants of *Breb* do not only hold an old wooden church but also a new construction, the "New Church" as it is called by locals, built in neo-Byzantine style with certain specific traits. The parsonage has become over time a small museum, exhibiting a lot of glass icons, rare books and the famous Herbarium, the priest being passionate with the ethno-botanic field.

Morăreni Lake, with an area of 20 hectares and a depth of 20 m is a protected area, being in the custody of the Ecological Association of Baia Mare. It deserves the attention of the tourists as it is located at an altitude of 850 m, beneath Creasta Cocosului. It was formed as a result of a landslide.

Flora and fauna are varied. We can meet here the crowberry, the sundew - a carnivorous plant, bladderworts, clovers, and golden willow as well as the Carpathian salamander, the wild duck, the great bittern or the red mountain frog.

During a tour of the village we have encountered many remnants of the ancient life of the *Maramures* peasant: the *Maramures* gates, the traditional costumes, the everyday habits, the vortex (the old washing machine). We also meet here village craftsmen from whom one can always find stories from the history of the place. As *Breb* is a mountain village, everything here is made of wood and the villagers realize pieces of work unique in the world, thus developing a real wood craft. A famous craftsman from *Maramures*, named Pătru Pop, lives in *Breb*. We had the opportunity to meet him and visit his famous workroom. He greeted us with a warm smile and a special sense of humour, his hospitality being well known. He showed us the art he creates, wooden miniatures, various items unique in the world, as well as his personal collection of pipes and caps from the war clothing.

He urged us to sign in his notebook and we were impressed with all the good wishes written by tourists from all over the world.

Another person with an extraordinary history, a unique humour and tenderness in the voice and soul is a grey-headed man who deals with the production of honey. You just watch him working around his bees and realize how much passion he puts in his work. Tourists everywhere know him as the "Honey Man" (the man with the honey). While listening to his stories, you realize that his place, his house, has quite a tumultuous history. He has managed to keep an old document dated back in 1660, transmitted from generation to generation, telling us that he kept it secret during the Communist period because the former regime would have confiscated it if they found it.

It is a document in Latin written on dog skin by Sigismund Bathory providing protection and rights to the forebear of the house.

Prince Charles visited *Breb* in 2004 and enrolled his name in the history of this locality. In order to seal an even stronger connection with this village, he purchased an old house of beams, which today bears his name.

Actually, the truth is that these wooden houses are not held by the prince. Several years ago the famous writer William Blacker lived in *Breb* for 7 years and wrote a book about the life in the countryside, the people in *Breb* and about his life experience here. The book is titled „Along the Enchanted Way”. He was a friend of Prince Charles and he brought this village to the attention of „Mihai Eminescu

Trust". This British foundation supported by Prince Charles is trying to save the traditional *Maramures* wooden houses. This is the reason why they bought 3 wooden houses in the centre of the village, one of them being the one in which the writer has lived. This is the origin of the myth of Prince Charles's houses in *Breb*. As a great number of Jews have lived here over the time, there is a Jewish cemetery on the hill, in which it is said that the deceased persons are buried in a standing position. This story and their exciting history bring about an interesting tourist attraction.

When you take a walk through the village there is a great chance to meet foreign and Romanian tourists curious with everything surrounding them. They are pleasantly surprised with the beauty of this place, the daily life of the peasants, the labour they do from ancient times, the simplicity of their living and how they still manage to give you a warm smile and delicacies from their household. Here's what a Scottish tourist says in few words: "It's a wonderful place, where I can make masterpiece photos, just passing by the village lanes. Every household stands for an entrepreneurship."

Customs and Traditions. „The life of the *Maramures* mountain village, in all its significant moments, regardless of the season, has always been dominated by the mountain landscape in which it has developed.

The mountain and the forest have put strong footprint on the entire existence of *Maramures* villager who has created a permanent, lifetime connection with them." (Petru Ulian, *Satul maramureşean*, 2011, p. 87.)

Maramures area concentrates in itself evidence of popular culture of great originality. Almost every household has monumental wooden doors, various wooden objects encrusted with different symbols, specific for this area, novelty traditional costumes, rugs, carpets, towels, masks, etc. Any *Maramures* household has something special.

Due to the fact that wood has represented a strong natural resource, the villagers have made everything of wood, keeping the old items as prototype (the house, the gate, the barn, the shed, the chicken coop or the piggery, the furniture, the sleigh, the carriage, etc.). Each item reflects the craftsman's talent to develop the art of wood through creation. Each sculpture has a meaning: the "twisted rope" signifies infinity but also the connection between heaven and earth; "Sun" is the symbol of the "giver of life" deity, the sign of life, etc. There is a tradition also with respect to the cutting and preparation of the oak wood which is to be processed. This is done only during full moon and only in December and January because the wood sleeps and there is no danger of rotting. The wood is transported from the forest only on the days when there is no religious fast (Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday) in order to bring luck.

Another tradition says that the man works the hard work in the field and the woman is responsible for the household work. After the wedding the girl joins the husband's family while the son always remains under the parental roof to help his parents. In winter women carry out a true traditional art as there is no more work in the field and they just have to feed their families and to take care of the animals in

the household. They weave and embroider to create carpets, rugs and clothing for the holidays, i.e. the traditional costumes powerfully flowered, coloured, preserving the same style of the ancestor times. Sometimes in winter they organize series of evening meetings called *sezatoare* where several women of the village gather for handwork and they turn these moments into an opportunity for socialization, happiness, laughter and good cheer. They say that when you walk into the house of unmarried girls you'll see all the rugs arranged on a rod in a traditional room. The more loaded is the rod the more diligent is the girl.

On holidays the villagers go to church, dressed up in folk costumes, these being the only days when they really get to socialize.

Every day you can see old habits still alive: *Sâmbra oilor* (a shepherd's celebration), the measurement of the milk, the wedding with pomp and cetera players, traditionally dressed up.

Thus *Breb* Village is a place where you feel that you turn back in time. Unfortunately, all of these are in danger of disappearing. The new generation can no longer live doing only the field work as their parents did.

They choose to go abroad, adopting the Western-style living. Unfortunately, the wooden houses and everything that makes us unique is being destroyed. The houses are being replaced with huge and diversely coloured constructions with stainless steel bars and the clothing changes as well, the traditional footwear *opinci* being replaced with high heels shoes etc.

Sustainable Development Projects Supported Through European Funding

Breb Village holds a strong tourism potential and that is why new accommodation facilities have been developed during recent years: *Mărioara* Boarding, *Lucia* Boarding, *Maramu* Boarding, The Village Hotel, *Babou* Campsite and Hostel etc. that offer accommodation, excursions, culinary specialties of the area, etc.

Two of these facilities bring something new as they are set up by foreign investors who have shifted to *Breb*. Eveline and Matthijs from the Netherlands are now Eva and Matei from *Breb* and the owners of *Babou* Campsite and Hostel. The Dutch couple have bought an old house with seven hectares of land which they have turned into a boarding facility. "When she arrived in Maramureş for the first time, Eveline felt like she had travelled with a time machine. Here the dust and noise of the streets of Amsterdam are replaced by quiet and haycocks", says Matthijs. Here, at Eva and Matei (as the locals call them), the 2013 potatoes harvest and the 11.000 pieces of shingle that cover the boarding facility matter more than any business plan or strategy. The tourists lucky enough to get into retreat here, in Maramureş, are offered eight accommodation places arranged in a former shed and a camping place in the courtyard next to the famous relaxing hammocks. Matthijs says that "Tourists are adventurers passionate with culture and civilization and thirsty for knowledge just like Eveline". Most of those who camp in the summer travel with a trailer throughout Europe.

This boarding facility, with its camping place, is a model of sustainable development of tourism, due to the fact that it comes in close contact with nature,

offering organic food and a way to relax in a place full of health. These two young men are an example to be followed through what they have created using nothing but the touristic potential of the area.

Another boarding facility which draws countless curiosities is The Village Hotel. Duncan and Penny Ridgley originate from Great Britain. They settled in Romania seven years ago and started investing in restoring old traditional houses which they then introduced in the touristic circuit. Duncan was one of the biggest paparazzo of the British tabloids, travelling around the world and chasing big stars with the hope to get on the first page of the magazines. One day, while going to work, he realized that he wanted something else from life and had to get away, far from the urban hustle and bustle. His first attempt was Sri Lanka where he invested in tourism but unfortunately the tsunami ruined his plans. He and his family survived and continued the journey to Egypt where they opened a Village Hotel, restoring clay houses specific for the area. This is how the concept of *Somewhere Different* was born. "We invested a lot of money, time and labour in Sri Lanka. I didn't get the change to reap that the tsunami came and destroyed everything. I didn't give up and I built a holiday village in Egypt.

Misfortune followed me there as well. The riots and tragic events in this country brought about the wash-out of tourism industry and implicitly my business. And so did my optimism. Everything changed, however, when I saw the landscapes and houses of *Breb*. I realized that nothing can go wrong here. Apparently I was right.", (<http://transilvaniareporter.ro>) declares Duncan.

Once arrived in Romania he bought land and a house in Bran-Brasov. Unfortunately, he found himself surrounded by wealthy people, huge villas and expensive cars and decided to continue his journey in search for genuine Romanian culture and civilization. When he asked his friends in Bucharest where the genuine Romania was, they replied "In *Maramures*, where you hang the map". From that moment onwards he and his family started looking for the perfect place. On my first visit to *Breb* Duncan told me how he got there. He had heard about the ski slopes of Cavnic and thought that he would stop there for a few days, though something urged him to continue the road, he crossed the mountain and when he saw that small village at the foot of the mountains which reminded him of the hobbit villages, he looked in his wife's eyes and realized that they got home. They bought land with old houses and started to refurbish them, transforming them into a real holiday village. The business in *Breb* is carried out by the family members with the help of Maria, a native of the place and volunteers from across the world who come here to explore culture and civilization in this small village of *Maramures*.

The Village Hotel consists of four traditional houses (the Small House, the Old House, the Green House and the Painted House), all endowed with all the facilities. Tourists can find here relaxation, peace, natural relish and a staff willing to be helpful. The first two houses (the Small House and the Old House) were included in the touristic circuit at the end of 2012 and the other two only on the Easter of 2013.

The Small House is a good hire for several days. The minute you step inside you feel right at home. It is a 100 years old house which bears an interesting story about a nun who lived here. The Ridgleys' restored it and managed to organise inside three lodging seats, a kitchen with all of the facilities and a bathroom.

The Old House has the same style as the Small House but it is endowed with seven accommodation places.

The view this settlement offers is very special. Because of its isolation the location is perfect either for organising a party or just to get all the thoughts together.

The Painted House accommodates three persons and it is similar to the Small House. The Green House has three en suite rooms which can be rented separately, along with a shared kitchen. Breakfast is included and it consists of traditional "bio" food that the hosts are preparing in the kitchens of the small old houses. Dinners are taken with villagers, thus getting into contact with genuine traditional families of *Breb* and finding out all the information from the most suitable people. Duncan and his team offers guided tours through the village consisting of sightseeing and getting acquainted with the local traditions as well as a presentation of their new project for which they have already bought the furniture and decorative objects from *Breb* or the neighbouring villages.

As he himself states, it is a pity not to buy and use these items, considering that otherwise people throw away or even burn them. It is to be appreciated that these people have come up with this concept to store and preserve the area, providing a model of good practice for sustainable development in the entire area. Duncan calls this place "Somewhere Different" and he named the company in the same way too. He also provides guided touristic tours throughout *Maramures*, photo tours, all inclusive services, guided tour of *Breb* Village and many other services.

At the same time Village Hotel is a unique place, where the owners cultivate food in order to offer guests organic products of the highest quality. It is not just a hotel or a boarding facility but also a place where you can socialize with the neighbours in the other houses, around a camp fire or at a dinner organized with the villagers. The hosts will always come to help with information about the area; they will guide you to visit not only the special places of the village but much more.

Guests are always impressed with this village that seems untouched by the passage of time, the warmth of the local people greeting them, the fresh mountain air away from the bustle of the big cities, the traditions and customs holily preserved, the field and farmstead work that people do exactly as in the old times, the life stories of the villagers, the traditional tasty dishes and the mountain landscape that the village holds.

Conclusions

Breb Village can be an example that makes great strides in the touristic field. It is nice to see that here entrepreneurs explore the entire potential, keeping the originality of the place untouched, restoring old wooden houses, using old objects that in some other areas can be seen only in the Museum. This is how the people of

Breb have managed to save the authenticity of the place and thus have attracted tourists from all over the world.

This area of historical *Maramures* is unique in the world through everything it stands for. It is said that the only regions of Europe that preserve the traditions alive as a way of life are Maramures, Bucovina and Sibiu surroundings. These customs and traditions, such as the specific traditional costumes, holidays, music and traditions are going to disappear in time being replaced by modern society and its components, unless efficient actions are taken to preserve them. *Breb* Village is a vivid model of sustainable development and preservation. Follow it!!!!

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