

THE EVOLUTION OF TOURISM FLOWS IN THE CLIMATIC HEALTH RESORT SÂNGEORZ-BĂI

Mircea Mureșianu

Eduard Schuster

"Babeș-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca, Bistrița Extension

Abstract: The Evolution of Tourism Flows in the Climatic Health Resort Sângeorz-Băi. The location was once a flourishing health resort due to its mineral waters, but is presently fighting to survive the harsh economic environment caused by the financial crisis of the past several years. Since the 1990s, when state-supported treatment for union members was discontinued, the hotels Hebe and Someșul, the two main lodging and treatment facilities, are trying to attract a minimal number of tourists to assure their survival. Smaller units are also competing for tourists, but until the domestic economy will recover (due to the fact that the absolute majority of tourists are Romanians), tourism flows in Sângeorz-Băi will stay low.

Keywords: tourism flows, health resort, underutilised facilities, lack of investments

Introduction

The mineral water deposit from Sângeorz-Băi is considered "the gold" of the town, and its existence is linked to the Rodna Fault, dividing the Mesozoic crystalline structures of the Rodna Mountains from the Neogene eruptive rocks of the Bârgău Mountains. The mineral water resources of the spa have been surveyed as early as the 18th century, when the Austrian authorities from the former Năsăud Border District built some spa facilities around several rich springs.

Nowadays, both representative spa "giants", the *Hebe* Complex (900 beds) and the *Someșul* Complex (600 beds), accommodate far less tourists for treatment than their capacity would allow, as a result of the dramatic decrease of social-unionist tourism after the year 1989. The decline of tourism flows is also due to the absence of managers able to negotiate with government and union representatives for the allocation of sufficient treatment vouchers for the resort to be profitable. These negative aspects are amplified by the lack of investments in recreational facilities which could create an all-year interest in the location and attract tourists looking for leisure and recreation, thus diminishing seasonality.

Materials and methods

The present paper represents an effort to monitor the development of local spa industry and supporting tourism flows over the past three decades. This temporal span comes with inherent difficulties, given the regime change in Romania in the year 1989 and the incoherent and deficient system of quantifying tourism flows.

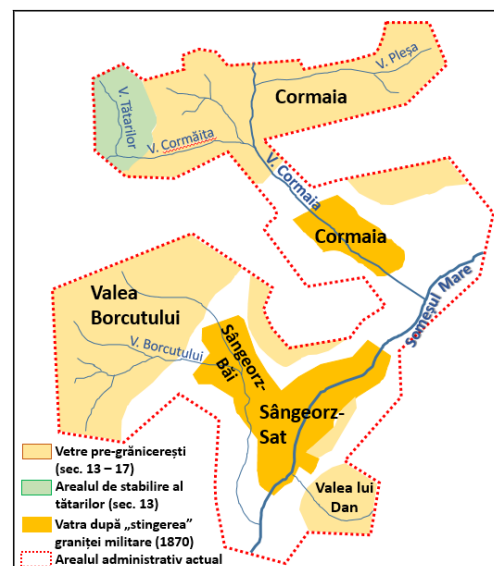
The focus of the paper is directed towards four distinctive data collecting methods: 1. Consulting bibliographical sources which can provide relevant information on the topic; 2. Conversations with local authorities and the management of the *Hebe* and *Someșul* hotels and spa complexes; 3. Collecting statistical data directly, from the aforementioned lodging facilities; 4. Tourist interviewing, asking two questions: *How do you appreciate the spa and wellness services in the resort?* and *How do you appreciate the lodging, eating, and recreational facilities?* with the answers being noted within a simple matrix.

Geographical and historical features. Spa treatment factors and spa infrastructure

The climatic health resort Sângeorz-Băi is situated in the upper basin of the Someșul Mare River, upstream its confluence with its right tributary, Cormaia, in a geological and geomorphological contact zone between the Rodna Mts. to the north and the Bârgău Mts. to the south.

Sângeorz-Băi is the only town in the area, an old settlement known for a very long time by its Saxon name, Sânt-Gergen, first documentary mentioned in 1245, ten years after Rodna, together with several other settlements on the Someș River (Maieru, Feldru, Rebrîșoara, Năsăud, Salva) (Mureșianu, M., 2004).

The first habitation core was built around the present-day Orthodox church, on the natural and communication axis of the Someș River, from where the settlement extended along the river and the lower course of the Cormaia stream, on the Borcut Valley (where, at the end of the 18th century, the initial health resort took shape).



After the establishment of the Năsăud Border District, most of the scattered peripheral houses have been moved in the valleys and along the roads, so that the Austrian authorities could keep the local population under control.

The present administrative territory incorporates several distinct locations: Sângeorz-Village, Sângeorz-Băi, Cormaia, Valea Borcutului, and Valea Tătarilor.

Fig. 1. Territorial evolution of the settlements in Sângeorz (after M. Mureșianu, 1997)

The touristic attractiveness of the resort is given by its nine mineral springs, with bicarbonate, calcic, magnesian, sodium-chloride, mild ferruginous waters, already utilised in the 18th century (Mureșianu, 1997). Associated with the mineral water resources are curative muds and carbon dioxide escapes (mofette).

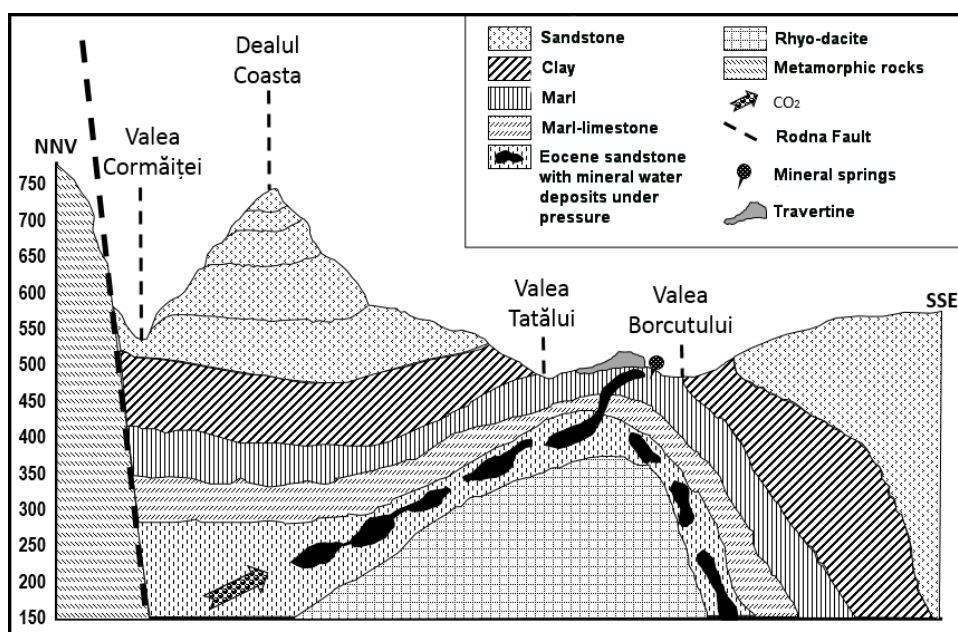


Fig. 2. Cross section of the Hebe springs area (after M. Mureșianu, 1997)

The resort infrastructure went through several changes during the spa's existence. The location was once a pretty villa resort, until the inauguration, in 1973-1974, of the spa hotel complexes *Hebe* (450 rooms, 900 beds) and *Someșul* – the former UGSR Hotel, belonging to the sole communist union, controlled by the Communist Party (600 beds), and of 17 villas accommodating a maximum of 611 tourists (until now, only 5 of these villas have been privatised and refurbished, the rest lying in decay. In the proximity of these facilities there were built numerous private guesthouses, capable of lodging 500-600 tourists, effectively revitalising the resort. Also to mention are the dining facilities (restaurants, canteens, bars, cafés), the treatment and recreational infrastructure of the two complexes, and auxiliary tourism services providers.

Results and discussions

Carefully studying and analysing the statistics and linking them with all the factors we registered in our research files we found that there can be identified three distinct periods, each having special characteristics, as follows:

1986-1990

1991-2007

2008-2015

The timeframe **1986-1990** defined the resort as a major tourism attraction, with high demand and elevated lodging facility occupation rate (between 60-66% for the *Hebe* Complex, and 88-90% for the *Someșul* Complex, at the end of the 1980s) (Coccean, Mureșianu, 1991).

In the year 1990, the growing demand trend is interrupted, with the occupation rate for the two facilities dropping to 58% (*Hebe*) and 66% (*Someșul*), respectively.

The period **1991-2007** is showing a relative reviving and stability of tourism flows, thanks to managers (directors and/or chief accountants) who accomplished productive negotiations with the Labour Ministry, the National Pension House, and the unions, thus gaining a reasonable number of treatment vouchers.

In the first part of the period (timeframe 1991-1995), tourism flows are significantly lower than before, not exceeding 3500-4000 tourists/year, as a result of a certain inertia linked to the „good times”, as many of the old clients kept visiting the resort.

Among the causes of the decrease of tourists, we mention:

The transition from a mass tourism special to socialist societies (as it was state subsidised), to a free market tourism, afforded only by those with a high enough income to spend for treatment and recreation;

A dramatic increase of tourism services prices, in clear contrast to the income of the general population;

The occurrence of far more stringent social problems for the majority of the population than health and leisure concerns;

A drop in foreign visitors from the neighbouring former socialist countries due to their own social-economic problems.

On the other hand, the resort successfully keeps its activity thanks to union leaders from the county of Bistrița-Năsăud (growing in both number and presence) which, profiting from a lack of legislation and clear rules, raised the interest of employees from the county's industries and

companies for vouchers for Sângeorz-Băi. Thus, accepting and promoting unwritten rules of mutual advantage, the employees went to the spa, where they acquired groceries (canned food, meat products, oil, sugar, etc.) covering 60-70% of the free voucher offered by the union, while the rest of 30-40% of the voucher's value remained to the service providers. In the timeframe 2000-2005, there still were state facilities operating with substantial government subventions (e.g. the Mining Facility from Rodna, closed at January 1, 2006).

The last part of this period starts with a decrease in tourist numbers to under 3000 visitors/year (in 2006) for the first time since 1986 and to less than 2000 tourists in 2007.

Between 2005 and 2007, an Arab businessman who leased the *Hebe* Complex invested in the renovation of just the first two floors of the nine of the hotel, while the rest entered a visible state of degradation. We face a hotel and therapy giant that is hard to be maintained and managed efficiently. The coexistence of abandonment and wealth is hard to ignore.

This period witnesses the loss of a large share of the traditional tourists, caused by the lack of an active and dynamic manager-negotiator, but also by the poor financial means of old clients who lost their jobs.

Between **2006 and 2015**, the effects of the economic-financial crisis that disturbed the entire society also affect the resort, and tourist numbers fall dramatically to 1041 in 2008, and 893 in 2012.

The last three years of the period (2013-2015) show a slightly rising trend in tourism flows (from 1312 in 2013, to 1525 in 2015), as well as a shift in tourism preferences towards guesthouses, villas, and other private-owned houses that offer better conditions, with an adjustment to the time interval spent here (weekend – week-long stay). Traditional tourists, spending the classic spa treatment period of 2-3 weeks, are still bond to the old units *Hebe* and *Someșul*, and number some 1500-1600 visitors/year.

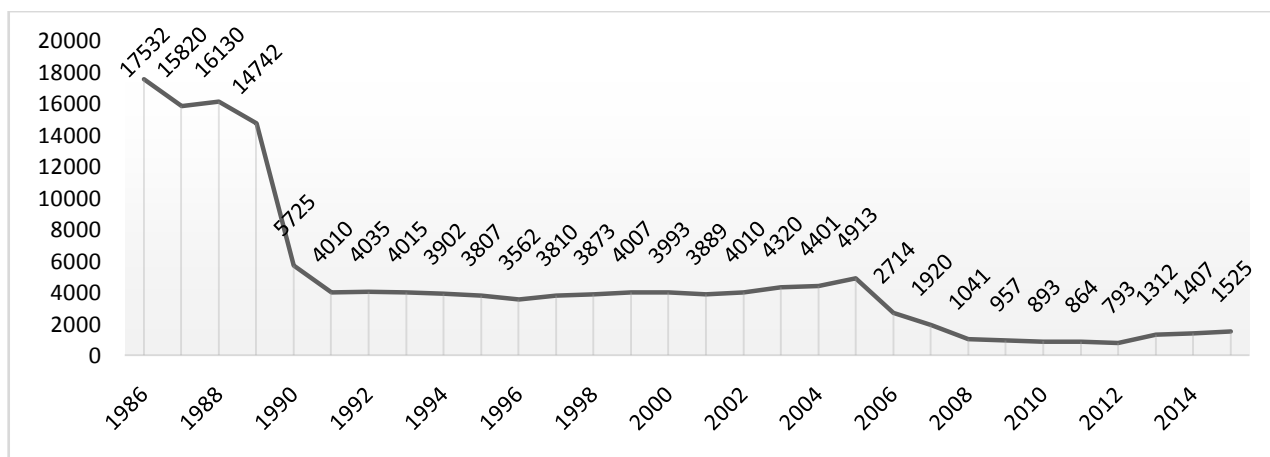
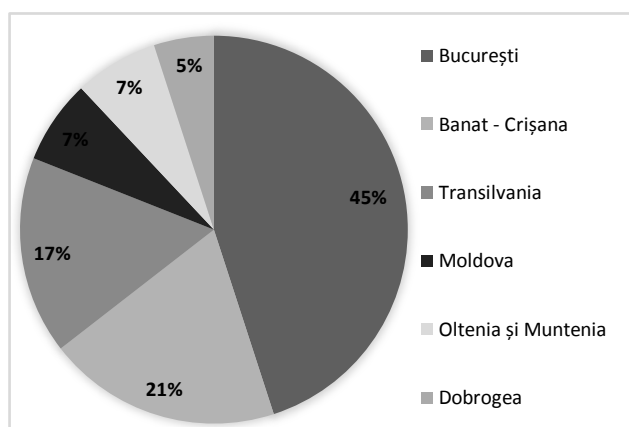


Fig. 3. Evolution of tourism flows in Sângeorz-Băi between 1986 and 2015 (based on data provided by the hotels Hebe and Someșul)

Of real interest were the answers to a small interview from July 2015 from the 220 tourists (120 from *Hebe* and 100 from *Someșul*). To the question *How do you appreciate the spa and wellness services in the resort?* 58 tourists were satisfied; 39 considered that the services were not modernised for the past decade; and 38 tourists were very dissatisfied. The question about *the lodging, eating, and recreational facilities* received different answers from the visitors of the two facilities, with those from *Hebe* being far more satisfied about the hotel (95 positive answers), because the rooms from the two refurbished and modernized floors, as well as restaurant services are of higher quality, and tourists have reasonably priced buses at their disposal for visiting the area; only 25 tourists from *Hebe* had higher expectations, expressing some concerns. On the other hand, all 100 tourists from *Someșul* complained about the old, damp rooms and bathrooms, and the expensive bus tours. The answers shed light on the visitor's disposition, explaining, at the same time, the modest numbers of visitors.



Regarding the **origin of the tourists** (relying on data from the hotels *Hebe* and *Someșul*), the majority is domestic (95%), while foreign tourists represent only a small part – a situation that didn't changed during time. Also unchanged remained the regional structure of domestic tourists for the past two decades, showing only minor fluctuations from one period to another (fig. 4).

Fig. 4. Structura fluxurilor turistice interne din Sângeorz-Băi după aria de proveniență a turiștilor (2011; surse: Hebe, Someșul)

Conclusions

The Sângeorz-Băi health resort is undergoing a deep crisis caused by the dramatic recess of social-unionist tourism and the associated decrease of state-supported treatment vouchers.

The lack of investments in the recreational infrastructure (gyms and sports grounds, spa centres, discos, winter sports facilities, swimming pools, bowling alleys, training camp facilities, etc.) also contributes to low visitor numbers, rendering it unattractive for those who seek only recreational activities.

Under these circumstances, it is not easy to predict the future of a resort with huge geographic and human potential, once the proud of the upper Someșul Mare River. It is still too early to give a precise answer to the question: where is the spa and leisure tourism from the only national ranking resort in the county of Bistrița-Năsăud heading to?

References

- Coccean, P., Mureșianu, M. (1991), *Circulația turistică în stațiunea Sângeorz-Băi în perioada 1986 – 1990*, în: Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai, Geographia, 2/1991, Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj-Napoca
- Mureșianu, M. (1997), *Potențialul turistic din Bazinul Superior al Someșului Mare (ed. a II-a)*, edit. Focul Viu, Cluj-Napoca
- Mureșianu, M. (2004), *Rumänisch Sankt-Georgen - Geodemografisch-historische Anhaltspunkte*, Studii și Cercetări (Bistrița-Năsăud), Seria Geologie-Geografie, Complexul Muzeal Bistrița-Năsăud
- Mureșianu, M. (2011), *Valea Superioară a Someșului Mare - repere morfogeografice*, în: Cetatea Rodnei, Rodna
- * * * statistical data from the hotels *Hebe* and *Someșul*