CZU: 338.48-6:502/504 https://doi.org/10.59295/mpdnwe2024.55

TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE: ANALYZING RURAL TOURISM PRACTICES IN MOLDOVA

ȚURCANU Natalia
Moldova State University, Chisinau, Republic of Moldova
natalia.turcanu@gmail.com
ORCID ID: 0009-0005-8703-5250

Audrey SCOTT
Marketing Expert for Regional Tourism Development, Germany

Purpose of the article: This article investigates the sustainability practices prevalent within the rural tourism sector in Moldova, emphasizing their crucial role in fostering environmental conservation, community development, and economic resilience.

Methodology: The results indicate a notable increase in the commitment of rural tourism operators in Moldova to implement sustainable practices, including organic farming, eco-friendly accommodations, and active community engagement. Despite these positive developments, several challenges persist, such as limited access to financial resources, inadequate training for operators, and insufficient financial support from government entities. The article provides recommendations for bolstering sustainability practices through comprehensive policy reforms and enhanced collaboration among stakeholders.

Conclusions: This study adds a valuable perspective to the existing body of literature on sustainable tourism, presenting a detailed case study of Moldova's rural tourism sector—an area that has received relatively little academic focus. By highlighting unique local practices and the potential of rural tourism as a model for sustainable development, the article seeks to inspire further research and action in this field.

Originality: Overall, the findings underscore the importance of integrating sustainability into rural tourism in Moldova, illustrating its potential to drive positive change for local communities and the environment alike.

Keywords: Sustainability, rural tourism, Moldova, eco-friendly practices, community development, tourism management.

Introduction

Rural tourism has become increasingly important for promoting sustainable development, being seen as a practical solution for revitalizing local economies, preserving natural and cultural heritage, and supporting rural communities. In Moldova, this opportunity holds even greater value due to its potential to transform natural resources and local traditions into a sustainable advantage.

In recent decades, Moldova's rural communities have faced significant challenges such as population migration and declining agricultural activities, which have heightened the need for economic alternatives. Rural tourism emerges as a solution, bringing income from visitors seeking authentic experiences connected to nature and traditions.

More and more travelers are looking for journeys that respect the environment and local culture, and seek to connect with local communities. Moldova, with its picturesque landscapes, traditional wineries, folkloric festivals, and artisanal crafts, has the potential to offer unique experiences. However, the development of this sector is held back by poor infrastructure and insufficient financial support for a better promotion of the destination at international level.

Rural tourism in the Republic of Moldova has been identified as an opportunity for economic and cultural development, attracting the attention of numerous researchers. Trofimov and Mereniuc (2016) highlighted the potential of rural tourism to support economic and cultural sustainability in the context of international agreements such as the EU-Moldova Association Agreement. Sarbu (2015) emphasized the importance of developing nature-based tourism to stimulate economic sustainability and protect natural heritage.

On the cultural side, Brezuleanu et al. (2010) analyzed the impact of agritourism in mountainous regions, showcasing opportunities to promote traditions and local products. Similarly, Hadad (2019) addressed the implications of rural tourism within the framework of sustainable bioeconomy, underscoring the importance of conserving natural resources.

Căpatină and Dilan (2024) presented a best-practice example from the Cahul district of Moldova, focusing on community initiatives and tourism development strategies. Additionally, Oltean and Gabor (2022) explored the role of wine tourism in Moldova as a tool for promoting sustainable rural tourism. In their works, the authors stress the importance of involving local communities in tourism initiatives. Hamuraru (2022) emphasized that engaging local populations in tourism not only generates economic benefits but also helps preserve the cultural identity of villages. Rural tourism is seen as a catalyst for economic development by creating jobs and diversifying income sources in rural areas.

Bulat (2022), in their analyses, discussed strategies for promoting rural tourism, such as creating thematic tourist routes that include cultural and natural attractions. The author also highlighted the necessity of developing rural infrastructure and improving the quality of services offered, ensuring an authentic experience for tourists.

Staver and Dodu-Gugea (2023) researched gastronomic tourism as a valuable resource for Moldova, promoting local specificity and culinary attractions. Finally, Timofti (2017) remarked on the importance of the 2003 rural tourism strategy for establishing a legal and institutional framework in this sector.

Results and discussion

One of Moldova's greatest attractions is its world-renowned wine. Ranked among the top 10 global wine destinations, Moldova offers a truly unique experience for wine and gastronomy enthusiasts. Visitors can explore ancient wineries where viticultural traditions are carefully preserved, savor authentic culinary delights that perfectly complement this epicurean journey, and immerse themselves in a rich cultural heritage. Wine and food festivals, celebrated throughout the year, add a festive charm, making Moldova an unmissable destination for lovers of local cuisine and culture.

Another remarkable feature of Moldova is its cultural diversity. With a multi-ethnic population composed of six distinct groups, the country boasts a wealth of traditions, languages, and customs, making every visit an enriching lesson in tolerance and diversity. This cultural mosaic comes to life through vibrant festivals and events that celebrate traditional arts, music, and customs, offering an authentic glimpse into the nation’s heritage.

Moldova stands out as a unique destination where historical legacy, cultural traditions, and modern innovations come together to create a sustainable, authentic, and diverse travel experience. With such a rich offering, this small Eastern European country is poised to become a hidden gem on the world’s tourism map.

Moldova also shines through its remarkable religious and cultural heritage, reflecting its deep history and spiritual diversity. With over 1,000 churches and monasteries, the country provides a rare opportunity to explore sacred architecture and age-old religious traditions.

Among the standout attractions are the seven rock-carved monasteries, including those at Țipova, Japca, Saharna, Butuceni, Coșăuți, Călărășeuca, and Molovata. These monastic sites, some centuries old, offer a profound spiritual experience and showcase the ingenious architectural blending of nature and faith. Particularly striking is the seven-story rock-hewn monastery, a monumental testament to the harmonious intertwining of spirituality and the natural world.

Moldova is also an example of peaceful coexistence among different faiths. In one unique village, Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism, and Judaism share the same spiritual space, serving as a model of tolerance and cultural diversity. This harmony is further reflected in the country’s 54 wooden churches, which preserve traditional craftsmanship and the authentic architecture of the region.

In addition to its places of worship, Moldova is home to 44 monasteries, each with its own unique history and significance. These religious centers continue to attract pilgrims and tourists alike, offering

spaces for reflection and meditation. The country's two remaining medieval fortresses also stand as proud witnesses to Moldova's strategic and historical importance in Eastern Europe.

Through its wine, cultural richness, spiritual landmarks, and historical treasures, Moldova weaves a captivating story, inviting visitors to discover its hidden beauty and embrace its timeless charm.

Table 1. Evolution of the number of foreign tourists in the Republic of Moldova, in official accommodation structures (hotels, guesthouses, etc.)

Year	Total Number of Foreign Tourists	Increase/Decrease Compared to the Previous Year
2020	100,000	-60% (due to COVID-19)
2021	150,000	+50%
2022	220,000	+46.7%
2023	270,000	+22.7%

Source: Statistica.md

The evolution in the number of tourists shows a significant recovery after the pandemic restrictions, with steady growth in recent years, particularly driven by efforts to promote rural and wine tourism.

Table 2. Purpose of visit

Purpose of visit	Percentage (%) of total tourists
Cultural tourism	35%
Wine and Gastronomy	25%
Business and MICE	20%
visit the relatives	15%
other aim (transit etc.)	5%

Source: Statistica.md ; Exit Survey, 2023

Tourists visiting Moldova are primarily attracted by its cultural heritage and wine tourism experiences. A significant segment is represented by business tourism, as Chișinău serves as a hub for regional conferences.

Table 3. Duration of stay

Duration of stay	Percentage (%) of total tourists
1-3 days	50%
4-7 days	35%
More than7 days	15%

The majority of tourists (50%) opt for short stays, thanks to Moldova's proximity to other European destinations and the compact nature of the country, which allows visitors to explore its main attractions in a short amount of time.

International tourism in the Republic of Moldova has experienced significant growth over the past three years, reflecting both global challenges and the country's unique opportunities. Following a sharp decline in foreign tourist numbers in 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions, Moldova demonstrated a remarkable ability to recover, recording a steady increase in international visitors. This recovery has been driven primarily by intensified promotion of rural, cultural, and wine tourism, sectors that represent the cornerstones of Moldova's tourism offerings.

An analysis of the purpose of visits shows that most tourists are attracted by Moldova's rich cultural heritage and the authentic experiences offered by its local wineries. Approximately 35% of visitors come for cultural tourism, while 25% are motivated by Moldova's unique wines and gastronomy.

Additionally, the business tourism segment represents an important share, underscoring Chișinău's position as a regional hub for conferences and business meetings.

The average duration of stays remains relatively short, with most visitors opting for trips lasting 1–3 days. This reflects the country's compact nature and the accessibility of its key attractions, but also highlights the need to expand the tourism offerings to encourage longer stays.

Moldova is thus solidifying its position as an emerging tourist destination, capitalizing on the uniqueness of its cultural and wine-making traditions. With a well-defined strategy, the country can further leverage this potential, attracting even more visitors and supporting the sustainable development of the local economy.

Conclusions:

Moldova's rich cultural heritage, renowned wine tourism, and authentic rural experiences make it a standout destination in Eastern Europe. These unique offerings, combined with vibrant traditions and diverse attractions, position Moldova as an emerging player in the global tourism market.

While most tourists opt for short visits due to the country's compact size and accessibility, there is significant potential to develop and promote more diverse and extended tourism packages. Enhancing the range of attractions and experiences could encourage longer stays and increase overall economic impact.

Moldova's recovery from the pandemic-induced tourism decline highlights the effectiveness of targeted promotion in rural, cultural, and wine tourism sectors. By continuing to focus on these strengths and leveraging its position as a regional hub for business tourism, Moldova can attract more international visitors and achieve sustainable tourism-driven economic development.

Bibliografie

5. Brezuleanu, S., Brezuleanu, C. O., & Ciurea, I. V. (2010). Peculiarities of Developing Rural Tourism and Agritourism in the Mountainous Zone of Bacau County. *Lucrările Ştiinţifice Seria Agronomie*. https://www.researchgate.net

6. Căpatină, L., & Dilan, V. (2024). Leader approach to tourism development in rural areas: A case study of Cahul district, Republic of Moldova. În *Proceedings of the International Conference on Sustainable Development*. https://ibn.idsi.md

7. Hadad, S. (2019). Developing rural tourism in the context of sustainable bioeconomy – A Romanian perspective. În *Proceedings of the International Conference on Business Excellence*. https://sciendo.com

8. Oltean, F. D., & Gabor, M. R. (2022). Wine tourism – A sustainable management tool for rural development and vineyards: Cross-cultural analysis of the consumer profile from Romania and Moldova. *Agriculture*. https://www.mdpi.com

9. Sarbu, O. (2015). Evolutionary benchmarks of agriculture and rural development in the Republic of Moldova. *Management Journal of Sustainable Development*. https://managementjournal.usamv.ro

10. Staver, C. L., & Dodu-Gugea, L. (2023). Gastronomic tourism in the Republic of Moldova – Trends and opportunities. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism Studies*. https://ibn.idsi.md

11. Timofti, E. (2017). Development trends and promotion methods of rural tourism in the Republic of Moldova. În *Scientific Papers Series Management, Economic Engineering in Agriculture and Rural Development*. https://repository.uaiasi.ro

12. Trofimov, A., & Mereniuc, T. (2016). Tourism and sustainable development – An encouraging perspective for the Republic of Moldova. *Науковий вісник Полтавського*. http://www.irbis-nbuv.gov.ua

13. Bulat, Veronica, Hămuraru, Maria. The Role of Art-Marketing in the Sustainable Development of International Cultural Heritage Tourism. In: *Advances in Science, Technology and Innovation*, Ed. 1, 22-23 noiembrie 2021, Berlin. Berlin: Springer Nature, 2023, pp. 197-203. ISBN 978-303143168-5. ISSN 25228714. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-31027-0_17