

SHORT FOOD CHAINS ON THE VIA TRANSILVANICA - TERRA SAXORUM, OPPORTUNITY TO DEVELOP SUSTAINABLE RURAL TOURISM

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Abstract: *Via Transilvanica is a road that breaks the barriers between generations and cultures. Also called "the road that unites", Via Transilvanica is a fascinating journey with stories about diversity, about landscapes that gradually reveal themselves during the journey. The places crossed by the Via Transilvanica are different, just as the people who choose to cross this route or who live along it are also different. The Via Transilvanica route, in its 1400 km length, is divided into seven historical and cultural regions: Bucovina, Tinutul de Sus, Terra Sicularum, Terra Saxonum, Terra Dacica, Terra Banatica and Terra Romana. Throughout this route, the local gastronomy is varied, sprinkled with traditional dishes and with the possibility of purchasing local products through short food chains. In the south of Mureş county, on the border with Braşov and Sibiu counties, Via Transilvanica runs through an area where the short food chain "Bucate din vecinătate" operates, which promotes well-known domestic products as well as culinary innovations. The gastronomic events in Saschiz have crossed the borders of the area, the "Rhubarb Festival" being known at the national level. In the north of Sibiu county, the "Bucate din Proximitate" cooperative aims to facilitate cooperation between local producers in the Mediaşului Plateau and consumers in the county. The Food Hub also operates in Sibiu county, which markets the products of local producers through a short food chain. The products are accompanied by the manufacturer's contact details as a guarantee of quality. In this way, the consumer has the certainty of the authenticity of traditional local products. The Terra Saxona route on Via Transilvanica is an opportunity for local producers to promote their traditional local values and capitalize on the multi-ethnic gastronomic heritage.*

Keywords: *rural tourism, short food chains, sustainable development*

JEL classification: *L83, Q56, Q57, Q01, Q13*

1. Introduction

The Camino de Santiago or the Way of Saint James is the name of one of the most famous pilgrimage routes through Spain, all of which end in the city of Santiago de Compostela, where the remains of Saint James are located. Annually, more than 150,000 pilgrims and almost 3 million tourists from all continents reach Santiago de Compostela on foot. The four pilgrimage routes are part of the World Heritage. At first, this pilgrimage was focused only on the spiritual part of the route. Today, the pilgrimage has a double purpose, on the one hand the religious one, and on the other hand it has also become a cultural motivation, which represents a test of physical resistance, but also a unique life experience. The shell, the symbol of the pilgrims who cross the Camino, in addition to its legendary and symbolic appearance, also had a practical use for ancient pilgrims: due to its size and shape, it could also serve as a plate and a mug.

Deeply marked by the magnitude of El Camino phenomenon, those from the Tășuleasa Social Association of Romania officially launched, on October 8, 2022, in Alba Iulia, the Via Transilvanica project. This route connects cultures, ethnicities, colorful traditions and customs, old but still alive. The

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first route of this kind in Romania opens the beauties of nature, history and culture to hiking lovers, being an open invitation to really get to know our country.

Via Transilvanica route offers a very authentic experience that puts the traveler in new situations that cannot be experienced in any other way. What makes hiking on this trail so special is the fact that the hikers can enrich both their physical and spiritual state by means of personal experience, as well as empathy towards the stories of others, people met on the road. Culturally speaking, the hiker can experience in a unique manner, both the deep history of Romania and the reality people live in these days. Thus, one can fight the stereotypical views, having their minds open to how things are in reality.

Via Transilvanica is divided in seven main regions from a historical and cultural point of view: Bucovina, The Highland, Terra Siculorum, Terra Saxonum, Terra Dacica, Terra Banatica, and Terra Romana. The trail is also divided between the ten counties that it passes through: Suceava, Bistrița-Năsăud, Mureș, Harghita, Brașov, Sibiu, Alba, Hunedoara, Caraș-Severin and Mehedinți. In every new geographical or historical area, the culinary experiences can be various. That is why one should not miss out the opportunity, so in order to make sure that it is possible to get to taste traditional food, reservations should be made at the right time.

2. Rural tourism in Terra Saxonum

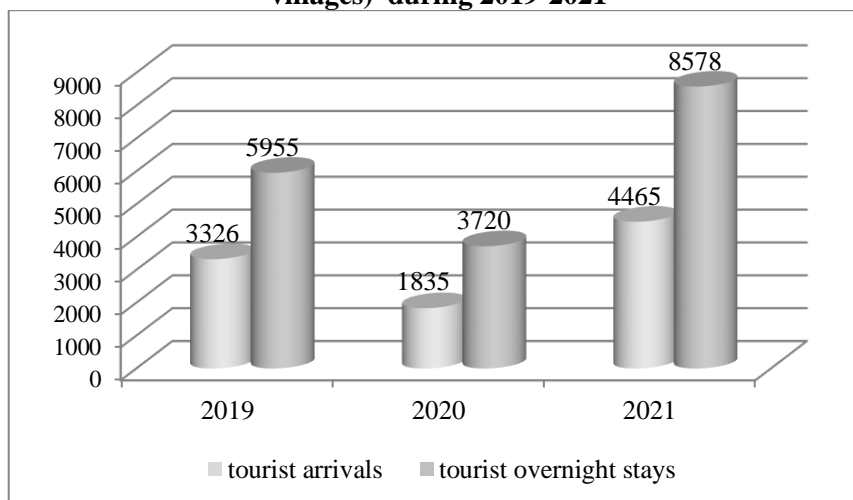
The rural tourism potential highlighted along the Via Transilvanica route in the Terra Saxonum portion is exploited through hiking tourism and scientific tourism, through agritourism, cultural and gastronomic tourism.

The village of Archita in Mureș County marks the transition from Terra Siculorum to Terra Saxonum. The first village in the area once populated mostly by ethnic Saxons is Roadeș. The history of the Transylvanian Saxons began in the second half of the 12th century, when the first Saxon settlers settled in the area. They enjoyed privileges such as the use of land, the development of crafts and the creation of guilds, to which were added commercial activities. Gradually, until the middle of the 16th century, the Saxon seats of Sibiu, Orăștie, Sebeș, Miercurea Sibiului, Sighisoara, Nocrich, Cincu and Rupea were established, followed by those of Mediaș and Șeica. The Saxon community was famous for the unity in which it lived. An example of this is the bacon tower, present in almost every village with a fortified church. In this tower the whole community stored their supplies for the winter. The tower was opened on Saturday or Sunday, and the people took from the products stored there as much as they needed for a week, without one touching another's bacon.

In Roadeș village (Bunești, Brașov county), tourists have the opportunity to see the fortified church in Gothic style, which is protected by a double wall equipped with five defense towers. In the village of Criț (Bunești commune, Brașov county), in addition to the fortified church of which only four of the five towers are still preserved, the presence of the Saxons is also a contemporary one. In addition to the "Haferland Week" festival, which takes place annually in several localities (Saschiz, Rupea, Bunești, Criț, Viscri, Fișer, Meșendorf and Roadeș), there is also the Neighborhood (Nachbarschaften) - which functioned as an institution based on mutual aid and represented a form of village organization. The neighborhood was made up of the residents of the same street or several adjoining streets, about 30 families, who contributed to the good order of the place, loaned each other money or shared agricultural tools. The neighborhood organization began in Criț in 1616 and lasted until 1991, when the last meeting of the last neighborhood. The neighborhood was ruled by a "neighbor father" or "father old man", chosen from among the oldest members, for a period of two years. He was helped by a "young father", who also ensured the connection between the generations. Their role was to advise neighborhood leaders to strengthen community ties. The rules of the neighborhood stipulated that everyone in a neighborhood contributed to building the neighbor's house, to helping him, there were "judgments" and reconciliations, or even exclusion from the community.

After King Charles made this area known at the European level, many tourists (including Romanians) discovered the beauty of the places and, despite the pandemic and post-pandemic restrictions, tourist arrivals and overnight stays recorded higher values in 2021 than in 2019.

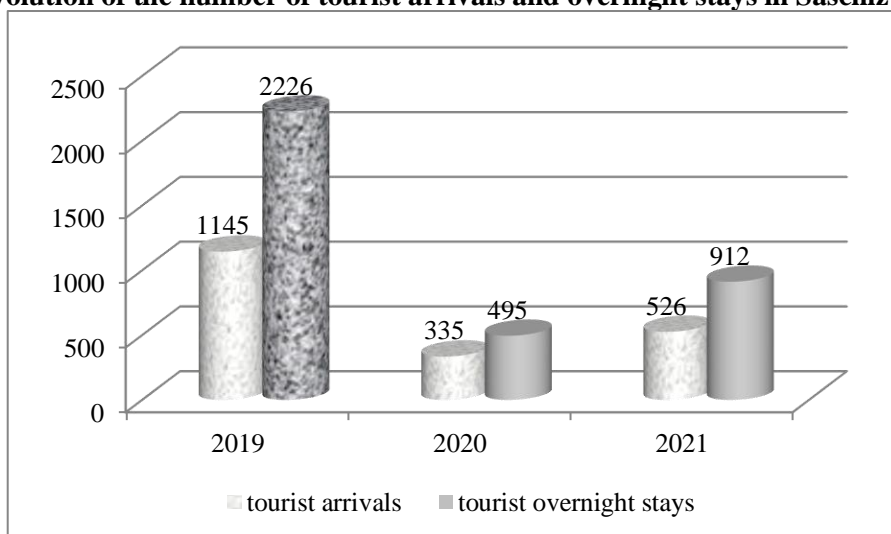
Figure 1: The evolution of the number of tourist arrivals and overnight stays in Bunești (Criș and Rodeș villages) during 2019-2021



Source: processed data insse.ro, 2022

Taking this example, the "Women's Neighborhood" was created in Saschiz. It is surprising that this concept has returned today in a modern form. In the complicated times of the 21st century, where the interest of the individual becomes more and more self-oriented, and the rhythm of life is a speed race through time, there are people who want to revive and reinvent not only ancient traditions and customs, but life at country simply. The "Women's Neighborhood" in Saschiz is a community that not only supports itself internally, but manages to implement various social economy, education and area promotion projects. Among the projects of these determined women is the "Rhubarb Festival" which promotes this local product through established recipes alongside culinary innovations, bicycle tours, readings for children, etc. Added to these activities is the Ceramic Center, where the pottery techniques of Saschiz blue pottery are revived, but also about other pottery techniques used by the Saxons. The Saxons who lived in Saschiz were not only engaged in agriculture, but were also skilled craftsmen: potters, tanners, skimmers, blacksmiths or carpenters.

Figure 2: The evolution of the number of tourist arrivals and overnight stays in Saschiz during 2019-2021



Source: processed data insse.ro, 2022

Tourist interest in Saschiz is growing. If in 2019 there were 1145 tourist arrivals and 2226 tourist overnight stays, during the pandemic their number decreased (335 tourist arrivals and 445 tourist overnight stays in 2020), followed by a revival that reached 526 tourist arrivals in 2021 and 912 tourist

nights. Analyzing the tourist data for the first nine months of 2022 it is visible a significant increase in tourist interest in this area, which will increase thanks to the Via Transilvanica route.

Mălâncrav (Laslea commune), an isolated Sibiu village, became a tourist attraction where, under the patronage of King Charles Foundation, were developed over 180 projects. In the year 2000, when the Mihai Eminescu Trust intervened for the first time in this village, many people did not have jobs and the local community faced numerous shortcomings. For the revitalization of the village, carpentry workshops, tile kilns were established, and through the mobilization of the community, the traditional houses and the church were restored. The Evangelical Church, the Catholic Church and 75 facades of traditional houses in the village were thus restored, with the support of the inhabitants of the village (Saxons, Romanians, Hungarians and Roma).

One of the projects of the Mihai Eminescu Trust aimed at opening a small fruit processing unit obtained from local orchards. The company producing natural juices is ecological, being periodically certified. Without permanent employees, the company works with day laborers between March and November, the inhabitants of the village being able to round off their income from activities carried out locally. Between September and November, apples and pears are hand-picked and juice is made from them on the same day, a guarantee of quality. The benefits are not only for the environment, but also for consumers and the community. and not least for the community.

The restoration and introduction to the tourist circuit of the Apafi mansion was the most important project of the Mihai Eminescu Trust in Mălâncrav. Dating back to the 15th century, the mansion belonged to Prince Mihaly Apafi. The spectacular landscape with the mansion located on a hill at the edge of the orchard, near a fortified church, attracts more and more tourists.

Biertan is a village very present in the tourist vocabulary of Romanians, being known for its fortified church which is said to be one of the most beautiful in the country. The village is located in a long valley, among the terraced hills where vines are grown, but unfortunately the locality no longer has the viticulturally profile it used to have.

The central square of the village is dominated by the impressive ensemble of the fortress with the church of St. Mary at the top of the hill, surrounded by three fortification walls. Whole this ensemble was included in 1993 on the list of UNESCO Cultural Heritage monuments. In the past, Biertan was an important ecclesiastical, commercial center and the seat of the Evangelical Episcopate from 1572, for a period of almost three centuries.

The church was built in late Gothic style. The church's valuable polyptych altar is impressive, with 28 icons created by artists from Vienna and Nuremberg and doors made by skilled craftsmen. Local blacksmiths created an original 19-bolt lock system for the sacristy door, which was presented and awarded at the World Exhibition in Paris in 1900. Although it was made in 1515, this lock still works today, being a representative example of medieval Saxon manufacture.

The door of the sacristy is decorated on the outside with inlays, made by the Sighișoara craftsman Johannes Reychmut, who also made the chairs in the church choir. The medieval architectural complex of Biertan consists of the church and the belt of fortifications, being located in the center of the settlement, on a hill. The hall-type church, in late Gothic style, occupies the central part of the complex, being the last one in Transylvania built in this style. The surrounding fortifications are considered to be the strongest in Transylvania for a peasant fortress: three rows of walls, 6 towers and 3 bastions, and on the upper part it has a defense corridor, the clock and the bells. The eastern tower, called the "dungeon", was used to reconcile quarreling couples. The quarreling spouses were locked up together for two weeks, so that during this time they could resolve their conflicts. Biertan is proud of the fact that during the period in which the prison operated, not a single couple in the village divorced. Biertan is an important tourist destination on Via Transilvanica. If in 2019 the number of tourist arrivals was 619, in 2021 it reached 2206, and overnight stays increased from 1316 in 2019 to 3182 in 2021.

Figure 3: The evolution of the number of tourist arrivals and overnight stays in Biertan during 2019-2021

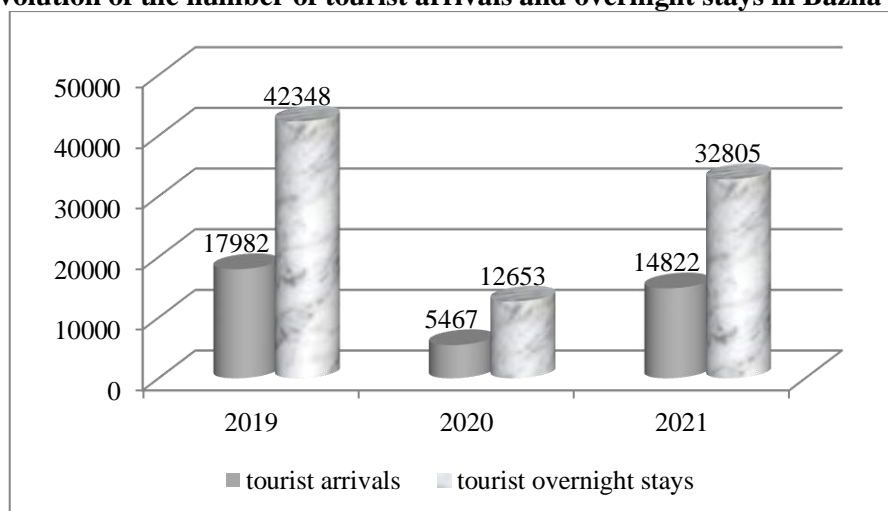


Source: processed data insse.ro, 2022

Richiş village is part of Biertan commune and is known as the multinational village of Sibiu county. Richiş has recently managed to attract people originating from Holland, Germany, Great Britain or Switzerland, who left their native lands to discover an authentic, simple and glamorous style of life "like in the country". The heron on the village coat of arms reminds of the old times, when the village was a swamp. A Saxon village, but from which most left either before or after 1990, was restored and renovated by foreigners who bought the houses of the Saxons who left for Germany. The new owners kept the original architectural style and put the village on the tourist map by opening numerous guesthouses and camping areas and in general, they adapted very naturally to the style of life here, revitalizing this village. Love for this "adopted" place can be seen in the eyes of the locals, in love with the peace and beauty of the place, of customs, traditions and crafts that are hundreds of years old, of the taste of food and drink. Many of the newcomers learned to make *țuica* themselves.

The village of Bazna is located in the Târnavelor Plateau and benefits from the healing power of the waters and springs rich in iron, utilized sparingly.

Figure 4: The evolution of the number of tourist arrivals and overnight stays in Bazna during 2019-2021



Source: processed data insse.ro, 2022

At the beginning of the 19th century, Austrian doctors and chemists studied the effects of Bazna salt and the local topoclimate. Based on the positive results, the number of tourists coming to Bazna for

spa treatments began to increase. In the 1843 the resort of Bazna was established, taken over in 1905 by the evangelical community, which turned it into a SPA resort known throughout Transylvania.

Mineral waters, sapropelic mud, Bazna salt, along with the picturesque landscape and conditions favorable climates make Bazna a favorite destination for tourists, who combine relaxation with treatment. Bazna is also a suitable destination for active tourism enthusiasts, who can go hiking or cycling on the hills with orchards and in the beech forests that surround the town.

3. Short food chains on the Terra Saxorum

Via Transilvanica is a thematic route that connects areas with diverse natural, cultural and gastronomic characteristics. This entire fabulous heritage can be successfully harnessed for the benefit of tourism consumers and local communities.

Short food chains contribute to the knowledge of local gastronomy and traditional products. In addition, gastronomic tourism capitalizes on local products and transforms this form of tourism into culinary experiences. During the pandemic, many local producers understood the need for cooperation in order to be able to sell their products. The initiatives determined by an economic situation that started from a real need have also developed in the post-pandemic period (Renting H., 2003). The demand for local, authentic products was so great that it encouraged producers to continue deliveries. If a gastronomic tourism product is made to strengthen travel motivations centered on gastronomy, it is also included in the practices of sustainable rural development. Organizing around an efficient public-private partnership system is beneficial for both producers and consumers (Marechal G., 2008).

In addition to the food products consumed by the tourist in the visited area, in the last few years there has been an increasing interest in taking home souvenirs of a food nature to remind the tourist of the experience lived in a certain tourist destination. There is a particular potential at the level of tourist destinations to develop this market of gastronomic souvenirs, especially in those places where the food and drink differ from other regions/places (Educagri M., 2000).

In the north of Sibiu County, the cooperative "Bucate din Proximitate" has as its general objective the facilitation of cooperation between local producers of the Mediaş Plateau for the sale of local products through short food chains.

Another short food chain is The Food Hub also operates in Sibiu County, which markets the products of local producers through a short food chain. On the website of the food chain is the list of local producers, which is a guarantee for the consumer regarding the authenticity and quality of the products. The number of products sold through the short food chain varies according to the season. Importantly, however, all important categories are covered: meat and meat products, dairy and cheese, eggs, fresh and processed fruit and vegetables, bakery products. Even craft beverages, especially beer, appeared.

Table 1: List of local producers selling through The Food Hub short chain

Manufacturer name	Number of assortments sold through the short chain
Albota	50.
Alma Oil SRL Blaj	3
Art Chese Tălmăciu	27
Asinia Farm Orăştie	1
Baciu - Marpod	4
Barbosa Traditional SRL	5
Bucătăria brâncovenească - Sâmbăta de Jos	10
Cămara lui Ganea - Mediaş	6
Cucerzan Monica - Târnavă	2
Ferabbit SRL	2

Ferma Complex turistic Transfăgărășan - Cârțișoara	14
Ferma veselă - Șelimbăr	1
Grădina verde - Sibiu	69
Grădinile Mălâncrav	8
Idu Sebastian Daniel - Micăsasa	1
Legume gustoase – Șura Mare	13
Livada Amely - Galeș	1
Livada Mălâncrav	1
Livada Slimnic (fam. Stângu și Drăgușin)	10
Maftei Nistor - Tălmăcel	2
Mangalița de la Racovița	1
Mangalița Food Art	9
Minodora Herbei - Marpod	1
Nembeer - Sibiu	9
Nicant Pack SRL – Sâmbăta de Sus	1
Ograda cu struți - Sebeș	14
Păstrăvăria Sadu	2
Rinadi - Mediaș	1
SB Bere artizanală - Săliște	5
Șerban Irofim – Alma, Dumbrăveni	1
Sibiu Food Hub	44
Stoica Eugen - Tălmăciu	1
Stupina ecologică Marpod (Bălan Iulia Cornelia)	10
Toma Gheorghe Adrian - Breaza	1

Source: www.foodhubsibiu, 2022

The main objectives of these short food chains are, on the one hand, ensuring the sale of quality products to consumers (fresh and tasty, with a high intake of nutrients) and, on the other hand, ensuring direct contact between the producer and the consumer. Short agro-food chains are sustainable for the innovative development of tourism and rural communities (Visentin C., 2011).

4. Conclusions

The fact that the products are accompanied by the manufacturer's contact details is a guarantee of quality and the certainty of the authenticity of traditional local products.

Short chains involve tools specific to long logistics chains, online commerce, which facilitates the contact between the potential buyer and the local producer in a certain region.

Short food chains operated through online orders during the pandemic. The quality of the products and the seriousness of those who ensured the delivery led customers to continue the demand even in the post-pandemic period.

The Terra Saxona route on Via Transilvanica is an opportunity for local producers to promote local traditional values and capitalize on the multi-ethnic gastronomic endowment.

Short supply chains offer a wide range of high-quality traditional products (traditional food, local drinks) that can also be promoted through guesthouses in the area where they were produced. Tourists passing through the Saxon villages on the Via Transilvanica have the opportunity to consume fresh products and interact directly with local producers. The story behind the products and the way they are prepared is also important. Food has always brought people together, and Via Transilvanica represents the road that reunites.

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