

PROMOTING ROMANIAN TOURIST RESORTS. CASE STUDY: GEOAGIU-BAI

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Abstract: In the 21st century image plays a key role in all aspects of life and business. In the mind of the consumer, attractiveness, quality, reliability are linked to reputation and therefore promoting products and services is key to any business endeavor. In the tourism sector, for example, Romania faces a special challenge, i.e. the attempt to revive tourist resorts which have known great success in the communist time but which have been forgotten and deserted ever since. The paper presents the results of a research conducted in Geoagiu-Bai, a typical communist balneal resort from Hunedoara county, where considerable marketing and PR efforts are made to resurrect people's interest for the resort and its surroundings.

Keywords: promotion, tourist resorts, marketing, PR, Geoagiu-Bai

1. Introduction

The subject of Romanian tourism has been largely debated in the last decade. Efforts towards creating a distinct brand that would help Romania promote its beauties and assets have proved less effective than expected and needed. Therefore more and more people from the tourism business, as well as researchers, try to point out that we should start by reviving internal tourism and by making Romanians interested in spending their holidays within the borders of the country. This means putting spas back on the map. Romania has been known as an important tourist destination for the zonal market, promoting mostly tourism products such as coastal resorts, spas, mountain resorts and monasteries in northern Moldavia. Taking into consideration that Romania has almost 1/3 of the European thermal and mineral springs and that it has been renowned for its resorts, where a couple of hundred years ago Europe's emperors and kings would spend holidays, developing balneal tourism should be part of any strategy of driving tourism forward in this country.

2. Tourism in Romania

The former success of tourism in our country was based on a legal framework that, in interwar period, encouraged foreign tourists to visit us and had well developed domestic tourism as well.

In the first half of the 60s our country has experienced a significant growth in tourist accommodation capacities, especially in the Black Sea area. By the early '70s Romania was already known on the main European markets that generated tourist flows: Germany, UK, Scandinavia, France, Italy, Austria, Belgium, etc.

Starting with the 1980s Romania experienced a sharp decline of tourist arrivals, a trend that has remained as such even in the 1990s, mainly because of poor financing for the development, modernization and rehabilitation of tourism infrastructure. The lack of funds was a result of the slow and complicated privatization process, of the gap

in strategic moderate taxation, of the absence of any facilities for bank credits allocation and the absence of a marketing/PR strategy.

As mentioned above, there are significant issues to be overcome regarding tourism infrastructure and resource allocation. However, "tourism and strategic management are economical issues found nowadays in the center of attention" (Bacanu, 2009:11). In order not to leave the international tourism competition it is necessary to upgrade, relaunch and develop Romanian tourism, as well as to create modern and competitive tourism products, original and attractive programs. By fulfilling these goals, coupled with continuous marketing activities aimed at both national and international markets, important tourist flows could be directed towards Romania. In this respect, the development of the leisure and animation offer, through the creation of theme parks, water parks, and other offers would make a big difference in the way Romanian tourism infrastructure is perceived.

If we consider that currently the travel and tourism industry is, worldwide, one of the most dynamic sectors that creates vast economic growth, especially for poor countries, all efforts are justified and should become part of any strategic plan of developing our country. The wider travel and tourism industry now accounts for more than 10% of global gross domestic product (GDP) and creates more than 277 million jobs (World Travel&Tourism Council, 2016:3).

Unfortunately, Romania occupies a middle position in the world tourism. For example in 2011, Romania ranked 63rd out of 139 countries. The situation is much more unfavourable if we take into account only the classification for the Europe area, in which Romania ranks 34th out of 42 countries. Basically, in this ranking, Romania exceeds in the tourism competitiveness only Albania, Georgia, Macedonia, Serbia, Ukraine, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Moldavia (Moraru, 2011:9).

Furthermore, the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index 2015, developed by the World Economic Forum, puts Romania on the 66th place out of a total of 141 countries analysed, rather far down in comparison to our neighbours: Hungary (41) and Bulgaria (49).

"The biggest problems that the Romanian tourism is confronted with are: the lack of transparency in government decision-making, road infrastructure, positioning in government priorities, marketing efficiency, branding, quality services and poor access to improved drinking water. Thus, the tourism sector needs a restructuring, in order to articulate the valuable potential of the natural beauties with the tourists' needs and pretensions, in terms of comfort, relaxation, contentment with quality services, amusement. The studies on Romania's competitiveness show that if we managed to improve and sell better the image of our country, the tourism sector would become flourishing."(Gruescu, 2009:363)

The direct contribution of Travel & Tourism to the Romanian GDP in 2014 was RON10.7bn (1.6% of GDP). This is forecast to rise by 2.6% to RON10.9bn in 2015. This primarily reflects the economic activity generated by industries such as hotels, travel agents, airlines and other passenger transportation services (excluding commuter services). But it also includes, for example, the activities of the restaurant and leisure industries directly supported (World Travel& Tourism Council, 2016:7).

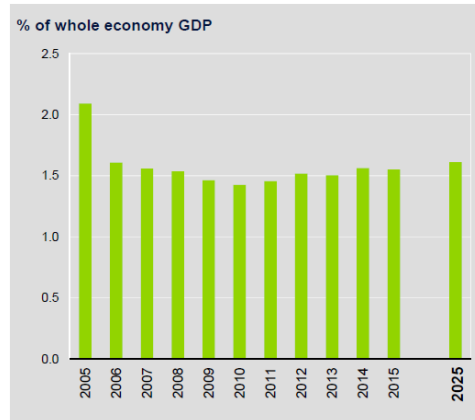


Figure 1. T&T contribution to whole economy GDP in Romania (2016:4)

The total contribution of Travel & Tourism to GDP, including wider effects from investment, the supply chain and induced income impacts, was RON33.1bn in 2014 (4.8% of GDP) and is expected to grow by 4.5% to RON34.6bn (4.9% of GDP) in 2015. It is forecast to rise by 3.8% pa to RON50.0bn by 2025 (5.1% of GDP).

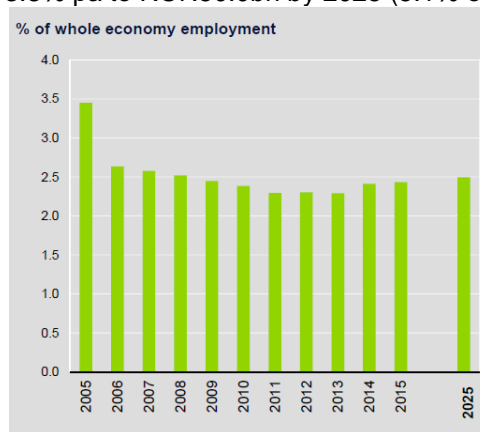


Figure 2. T&T % of whole economy employment (2016:4)

When trying to increase these numbers specialist take into account that Romania is vested with a rich and diverse tourism potential characterized by:

- The existence of accessible harmoniously combined landforms;
- A favorable climate for tourism throughout the year;
- Rich flora and fauna potential, with species and ecosystems unique in Europe;
- Cultural, artistic and architectural heritage internationally appreciated, which puts Romania among the attractive destinations in Europe and worldwide;

In relation to the existing potential in our country compared to other Central and Eastern European countries, Romania has modest results in terms of economic performance of the tourism industry. "Unlike countries such as Bulgaria (which recorded

a surplus of about 4 percent of GDP from international tourism) or Croatia (which recorded a surplus of over 6 percent of GDP) , Romania manages the counter-rare record annual deficit of 0.2-0.3 percent of GDP from international tourism." (Lazea, 2012).

Valentin Lazea, Chief economist of the National Bank of Romania, also highlights 10 structural problems of Romanian tourism:

1. Lack of foreign investors;
2. There is no separation between "luxury" resorts and "popular" resorts;
3. The much to high stakes invested in coastal tourism led to the neglect of the infrastructure of other types of tourism such as spa tourism, cultural and religious tourism;
4. The lack of development of airports situated close to the main tourist areas and of roads connecting them to the respective monuments;
5. Confusion generated by the policy on taxation (normal VAT, reduced, zero);
6. Underpaid staff;
7. Lack of staff with knowledge of two foreign languages;
8. Pricing policy based on weekend tourism, when you exploit the tourist for two nights and over charge him/her;
9. Local travel agencies are focusing more on taking Romanians abroad and too little on bringing foreigners to Romania;
10. The leadership of this sector was carried out by people with businesses in the sector, which had no interest to "revolutionize the system."

Regarding balneal tourism, we would like to point out the opinion of the president of the Organization of Employers for Spa Tourism in Romania (OPTBR):

"Spa tourism is an important segment of the tourism industry which is based on three basic elements: the existence of natural resources with healing effects of which Romania has plentiful, typical infrastructure, that is accommodation and treatment facilities, and, not least, the existence of qualified healthcare professionals, thanks to some very good universities, recognized for the quality of specialists they prepare" (Radulescu, 2014).

As mentioned above, the lack of a coherent marketing strategy has been counterproductive. Each government, especially after the year 2000, has come up with a different plan of promoting the tourism offer. The third variant of the "tourism brand Romania" is operational. The logo which has a leaf in the center has been largely debated. Furthermore, many Romanians do not feel represented by the slogan "Explore the Carpathian garden", message which is aimed at attracting foreigners, but which again neglects the domestic market.

Geoagiu-Bai Resort

This work aims to analyse the current state of Geoagiu-Bai resort, to highlight projects undertaken to put the spa back on the map, and to suggest means of promoting the well-known tourist resort. For this we have studied various materials, tourist guides, webpages of town halls and county councils, in order to see the information a prospective tourist can find about the spa. We have also interviewed three managers from the resort and we have organised a focus group where we met with tourists and stakeholders. We

would like to mention the fact that the field research has been done with the help of Andrada Igna, as empirical work for her undergraduate paper.

Geoagiu-Bai is a small spa village hidden in the heart of the historical region of Transylvania. The locals call the resort the 'gift of the mountains', referring to the mineral richness of the soils and the curative properties of the thermal springs. A former popular resort in Hunedoara county, which used to thrive and which is now faced with finding solutions to boost the tourist flows. One important step taken towards improvement was participation in 2010 at the EDEN project. In 2006, the European Commission through the General Directorate for Enterprise and Industry, Tourism Unit, launched the EDEN Project - European Destinations of Excellence. For 2010 the theme was "aquatic tourism", Romania, participating for the third time within the project, through the Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism. The destination designated as the European Destination of Excellence (European Commission, 2010) in Romania was Geoagiu-Bai.

The qualitative research conducted began with the series of interviews. The questions asked have sought to find out the current state of the resort, as seen by three important stakeholders. Aside from strengths and weaknesses, we tried to find out the benefits which the organization had as a result of the project implemented by the City of Geoagiu in 2012 and to encourage the interviewees to share their suggestions for better promoting the resort. The project mentioned above was a very important one, and with money from the EU, tried to solve especially the marketing problems of the area. The following persons were interviewed:

1. Traian Gherghel, manager of "A dream place" Inn. The residence opened in 2012 and operates during the summer season.
2. Bogdan Tudor, manager of Villa Montana, a two star villa located in the center of Geoagiu-Bai, less than 20 meters from the Daco-Roman Baths. The villa has been opened since 2010.
3. Iosif Pasca, manager of Pasca Leisure Ltd, a famous restaurant in the area, where you can organize different events, from birthdays to weddings, etc.

Question	Answer		
	Interviewee 1	Interviewee 2	Interviewee 3
There was a project in 2010 aimed at promoting Geoagiu city. What benefits did you have afterwards?	15-20% more clients	Few	5-10% more clients
What activities do you think could be held in the resort? (For all ages)	Indoor swimming Fun nights Club Ping-pong tables Pool room	Sport activities Bike circuits Minigolf Archery Quad rides	Cultural and sport activities Trips Swimming contests Children's camp
Which are the strengths of the resort, in your opinion?	The swimming pool Clocota waterfall The thermal waters The treatment centers	The thermal waters The treatment centers Clocota waterfall Clean environment	The thermal waters Clean air The view The Roman's Hill The swimming pool Clocota waterfall
What about the weaknesses?	Lack of promotion;	Lack of unity and vision;	No landscaping of Romans Hill or of the

	Lack of planning for Outlaws Grotto; Lack of amusement park, signs, ATM, high standard camping.	Lack of a travel agency; No cinema, no ballroom; Lack of a sports field.	water springs; Lack of club antiphonation; Lack of a tourist guide, of 24/7 opened shops.
What do you think differentiates Geoagiu-Bai from other resorts?	Thermal waters, fresh air and oxygen, woodland, wildlife, ionized park, cared for areas, springs' healing properties.	Fantastic natural resources, clean area; The historical, cultural, spiritual landmarks that can be found within a 50 Km radius.	Thermal waters, location, attractions, the resort's reputation, the treatment centers, the existence of medicinal plants, flora, fauna.
How do you think clients could be attracted in off-season?	Making an AquaLand park, building a rink, music bands on the terraces, Transylvanian evenings, building a camping, quad bikes & bike rides; Opening a rental center.	Covering of pools; Support, at national level, for the attraction of European funds for new constructions and developments; Advertisement.	Covering of pools, investing in baths, building a sports center; Organizing tours for tourists; Making an amusement park on the Roman road, developing the area leading to the Roman road; Providing the Roman roads with facilities such as: sewage, electricity, water.
Could you suggest some ways to better promote the resort?	Tourism fairs, media and television.	Tourism fairs, a site of the resort.	Former sports center rehabilitation; Building of marked trails for nature walks in the forest, their signaling and arrangement; Opening a market for organic products; Support for young entrepreneurs for building hostels and villas; Including the resort on Google Earth; Building a camping with modern facilities.

Table 1. Main ideas expressed in the interviews

The focus group was conducted with the aim of checking the accuracy of the information obtained through interviews. The second qualitative method used also inquired about the strengths and weaknesses of the resort, but from the tourist/

consumer perspective; activities that could be carried out in season and off-season; needs of tourists and consumers who come to the resort; ways they envision the resort in 5 years.

The 6 persons present at the focus group underlined the following **strengths**:

- Location – great area
- Fresh air
- Treatment facilities;
- Clocota Falls;
- Landmarks;
- Surroundings;
- Club;
- The Bath;
- Thermal pools;
- Good Serving;
- Accommodation;
- Children's park;
- Church;
- Germisara Hotel, Ceres Hotel, Flora Hotel;
- Opening of a new treatment center with physicians. This facility is very important because for a long period of time there was none working.

The participants named **weaknesses** such as:

- Very expensive entrance to the Bath;
- Unsatisfactory serving (especially inside the Bath);
- High prices inside the Bath;
- Lack of means of transportation;
- Lack of an ATM;
- No 24/7 pharmacies;
- Lack of parking spaces;
- Need of a rental point for various games: rummy, chess;
- Lack of music bands in restaurants;
- Need of a sports center, as once existed;
- Lack of preoccupation for making a rink inside the swimming pool, during winter;
- The state of the road that leads to the waterfall;
- Lack of a tourist information office and a guide to organize tours in the area;
- The appearance of attraction points.

As highlighted in the beginning, many balneal resorts from Romania face a similar fate. Even international renowned spas like Herculane or Borsec have been deserted and left out of a strategic conservation and development plan. Therefore, any efforts of reviving Geoagiu-Bai should start by identifying elements which would make the resort more competitive. That is why we asked the 6 participants to name aspects that **differentiate** Geoagiu-Bai from other spas. The following were mentioned:

- The types of treatment with thermal waters
- Location – the resort is surrounded by a wonderful forest;
- Fresh air;
- Irreproachable services – very good serving, overall affordable prices;
- The sights on a small radius, which can be visited by tourists who come to the resort;
- Flora and fauna, with much greater emphasis on flora.

Another aspect crucial to fulfilling the idea of having a busy resort throughout the year has to do with possible activities that can be organised in Geoagiu-Bai. In the participants' opinion, some **activities** would be:

1. For children: swimming lessons; playground with supervision personnel, for parents that come to the resort with children; trips (both for children and for other age groups);
2. For all ages: renting point for quads, bicycles, roller skates; renovating the park for children with slides, roundabouts etc.; camps at Hotel Flora (where a few years ago camps were organized, for sports teams – football, tennis, handball etc.; building trails and routes to visit the area surrounding the resort; organization of folk music performances.

The last topic of the focus group regarded **promotion** suggestions. We extracted the main ideas suggested by those present:

- Developing the town's hall webpage with an area dedicated to promotion;
- Inviting televisions to broadcast from Geoagiu-Bai;
- Advertising on TV, radio;
- Participating at national and international tourism fairs;
- Helping managers to participate at various fairs to be able to present their offer;
- Making and spreading flyers;
- Word of mouth advertising;
- Precise mentioning of the name as there are other towns in Romania with similar names, e.g. Geoagiu de Sus;
- Placing posters on vehicles.

3. Conclusion

Taking into consideration all aspects revealed by our qualitative research, we have put together a set of recommendations for the all in all development of the resort. Even if our main research interest was in evaluating the state of marketing and PR efforts, the research undertaken has clearly underlined a series of intertwined problems and therefore our suggestions are grouped in three main categories: institutional measures, infrastructure and marketing, as we consider it handier in case steps will be taken towards strategic tourism development.

Institutional measures:

- Starting a local travel agency – organization financed from the local budget, with an information point in the resort to ensure a unified vision regarding the promotion;
- Increasing, improving and updating a web page dedicated to tourism;
- Extending the local government website with a section on tourism;
- Developing a comprehensive database on tourism;
- Writing projects to attract European funds for the rehabilitation of the Romans' Road with facilities such as sewerage, water, electricity;
- Supporting young entrepreneurs in building and setting attractions/sights on the Romans Road;
- Improving the partnerships between the public and private sectors in order to develop and promote Geoagiu-Bai resort.

Infrastructure:

- Creating a parking lot outside the resort, tolled by SMS or at entering the resort;
- Rehabilitation of the I.B. Deleanu memorial house;
- The creation, modernization and diversification of leisure infrastructure:
 1. Amusement Park
 2. Folk / culture;
 3. Landscaping Nățău lake for the organization of fishing competitions;
 4. Swimming lessons at the Bath;
 5. Organising picnic spaces, library, auditorium, cinema.
- Bringing to life additional attractions as reasons for visiting, i.e. sports and exercise:
 1. Renovating the sports center and equipping it for playing ping-pong, bowling, electronic games, football, basketball, tennis, volleyball, etc.;
 2. Establishing marked trails for outdoor strolls, quad or bike rides, sledding, etc.;
 3. Creating a rental point for quads and bikes.
- Developing a system for marking of sights.

Marketing:

- Participation at fairs, ethnographic exhibitions and cultural events, at national and international level – with the help of local institutions or local businesses;
- Underlining the variety of nearby sights: Aurel Vlaicu memorial house, Costești, Blidaru, Sarmisegetuza, Hunyadi Castle, Simeria Arboretum, Deva Citadel, Prislop Monastery, Unirea Alba Iulia Union Fortress, museums, churches, etc. ;
- Including the resort in special programs run by the National Association of Travel Agencies in Romania such as: "Balneal Decade" or "Come to the Baths!"
- Creating a presentation catalog and using it in advertising campaigns;
- Establishing cooperation agreements with other travel agencies at home and abroad;
- Upgrading street advertising with help of twin cities;
- Highlighting the gastronomic resources typical for the region;
- Designing maps of the Geoagiu-Bai resort that contain QR codes (quick response code) with reference to key monuments. When scanned information about the sights of the resort should appear. These maps can be placed on billboards, notebooks, T-shirts, posters, flyers, and, if possible, on vehicles, after negotiating with their owners, on the Internet;
- Staging of thematic events/parties (Halloween, Christmas, Valentine, Easter) and offering videos to participants as reminders.

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