

THE DEFINING ELEMENTS OF VRANCEA TOURISM IN THE SOUTH-EASTERN DEVELOPMENT REGION

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Abstract. The main idea of this article is to present the tourist resources of Land of Vrancea, part of the South-East development region of Romania. Land of Vrancea benefits from a large number of tourist attractions that allowed local people to take various tourist initiatives. The mountainous part of the studied area has the highest territorial concentration of tourist attractions and it is also the place where many ancient traditions and customs were kept till nowadays. Due to its geographical position, this small region is unique and impresses with its cultural richness and it is also one of the eight authentic ethnographic poles of Romania.

Keywords: *South-East development region, Vrancea county, tourist resources, ethnographic pole, authenticity*

1. Introduction

The Romanian tourism is one of the main factors of national economic growth, as it introduces in the international tourist circuits many tourist resources. Tourism helps and contributes, directly and indirectly, to the development of the economy of different localities or regions and has the capacity to reduce economic disparities.

The South - Eastern region of Romania has a distinct tourist behavior as it concentrates the largest accommodation capacity (47%) of the whole country at the seaside (Dumitrescu D., 2008). But tourist activities also developed in the mountainous areas of the region as the north-west part of it is occupied by the Curvature Carpathians. Both Buzău and Vrancea county benefits of the presence of the mountains but only Vrancea indeed invested in tourism. Vrancea Mountains attract with their virgin nature, an abundant wildlife and more than that, this area is one of the most important ethnographic centers of the country. The notoriety of Vrancea Mountains was also given by some localities that highlighted a part of these tourist resources such as Lepșa and Greșu villages and Soveja climatic resort.

2. Localisation and accessibility

Vrancea County is located in the eastern part of the country, at the external curvature of the Carpathian Mountains, in the lower basin of Siret river. The county is part of the South-East development region and is bordered by six other counties: Bacău in the north, Vaslui in the north-east, Galați in the east, Brăila in south-east, Buzău in south-west and Covasna in west (fig. 1). Vrancea county has a favorable geographical position along the major national roads and railways, linking the south of the country, more exactly the capital with the north of Moldavia. Some of the national roads and railways are connected to major European roads (E85), which links the south-east part of Europe with the north-western part of it.

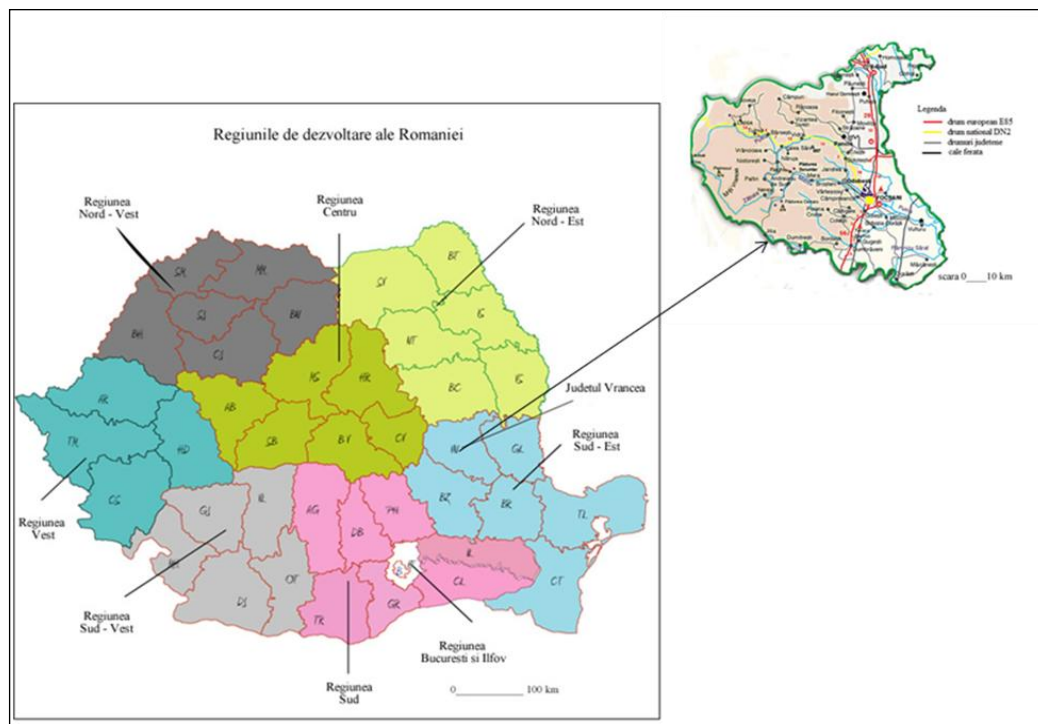


Figure 1 The geographical position of Vrancea county in Romania and the accessibility

Source: www.vrancea.com.ro

3. Results and discussions

3.1 Tourist resources of Vrancea county - The natural tourist resources

Vrancea county has a huge natural tourist potential given by the varied landscape, favorable climatic conditions, rich river system and rich wildlife (fig. 2). All of this makes Vrancea, especially the mountainous part of it, the perfect place for practicing different tourist activities connected to ecotourism or adventure tourism.

The area with the highest concentration of natural tourism resources is represented by Vrancea Mountains, especially by the so-called “Land of Vrancea”. The rest of the county does not have any other major natural attractions excepting Panciu, Odobesti and Cotești vineyards (Grumăzescu H., 1970). This is the reason why, we decided for this article, to present the tourist potential of the Land of Vrancea, as it is the most important tourist area of the county.

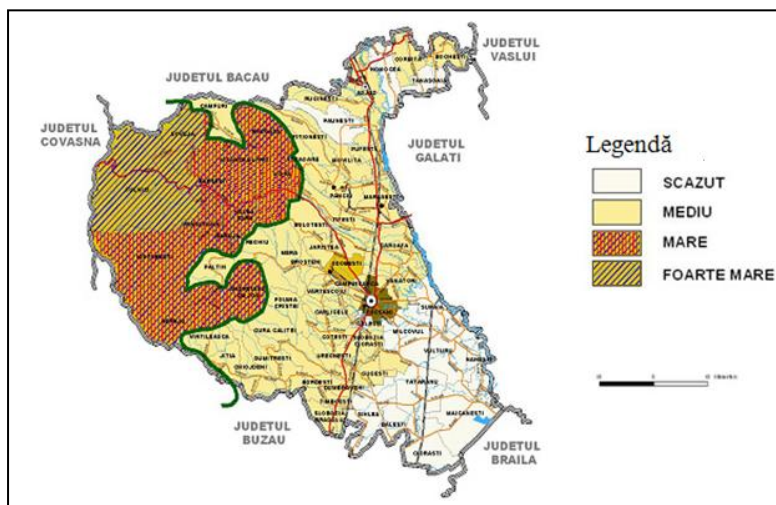


Figure 2 Territorial concentration of natural tourism resources

Source: www.mdlpl.ro

3.1.1 - The relief

The Land of Vrancea has a very attractive relief, being characterized by wooded mountains and hills and deep valleys (Mihăilescu N.Șt, Mihăilescu Șt.N, Macovei V., 1970). Specific to this region are the so-called “măguri”, rounded hills with no more than 1000 meters high, perfect for practicing short and relaxing trips in the woods. The region is dominated by Vrancea Mountains (Giurgea E., 1977), offering tourists many hiking routes of different degrees of difficulty though, there are some routes that require greater caution. The highest peak of Vrancea Mountains is Goru (1785 m) but more visited is Lăcăuți Peak with its meteorological station. For alpinism lovers there are few places where they can practice their climbing skills such as Piatra Ciutei (The Deer Stone) or Turnurile Lepșei (Lepșa's Towers). Also, for those that are keen on mountain biking, Vrancea Mountains represent the perfect place, offering a huge number of routes and also a great number of attractions.

Vrancea Mountains provide a picturesque landscape, the characteristic features being isolation and wilderness (Roman F., 1989). The region impresses with extraordinary landscapes of deep forests, sunny pastures and meadows, scattered haystacks and sheepfolds, rush clear springs and wonderful panoramic views. Almost all the hiking routes are accessible during winter time but tourists need to be very well equipped. Some of these routes are (Roman F., 1989):

1. Tulnici locality (480 m) – Coza mountain (Șaua Geamăna, 1496 m) – Black Hill (1548 m) – Păișele Pietrosul Peak (1676 m) - Zboina Frumoasa (1657 m) – Lapoșul Peak – Nereju locality (540 m);
2. Vetrești village – Herăstrău (500 m) – Bălosul River - Golul Pietrosului (1315 m) – „Giurgiu” Huts (1100 m) – Zăbala Valley - Mirdanul (1520 m) – Lăcăuți Peak (1777 m);
3. Waterfall Putna hut (550 m) – Tișita Valley – Little Cristian River – Șaua Geamăna (1496 m).

3.1.2 - The climate of Land of Vrancea is specific to depression areas being characterized by milder winters with warm temperatures and the absence of strong air currents. The climate is temperate, without extreme temperature variations, ideal for practicing various forms of tourism all over the year.

3.1.3 - The hydrography. Land of Vrancea's relief was strongly modeled by Putna river and its main tributaries Zăbala, Ramnic and Coza that created extraordinary gorges and waterfalls. Putna river remarks with its beautiful 7 kilometers long defile and also with its famous waterfall, one of the main attractions of the region. Truly amazing are the gorges of Năruja, Zăbala, Coza, Tișița and Mișina rivers, gorges that impresses with their wild beauty. Năruja and Mișina rivers also have wonderful waterfalls. In 1977 there was a strong landslide that blocked the path of Zăbala river and that formed the largest natural dam lake of Vrancea known today as the Nameless Lake (Roman F., 1989).

3.1.4 - The vegetation. The Land of Vrancea impresses with its dense forests of oak, beech and pine that offer wonderful landscapes and possibilities for practicing hiking. Also, there are many plants that are protected by law like: lady slipper (Lepșa-Zboina reserve), edelweiss (Tișița Gorges), tisa (The Great Tișița Valley), mountain bulbuci, dew of heaven etc. These plants are catalogued as monuments of nature and they are the main attraction of many protected areas of the region. This is the reason why, the Land of Vrancea is perfect for ecotourism and green tourism.

3.1.5 - The fauna of the Land of Vrancea is very diverse and rich and can sustain a veritable hunting tourism. Among the most common animals that can be found here are: wolves, foxes, martens, hedgehogs, weasels, hares and squirrels and also the grouse (Tetrao urogallus), the lynx (*Lynx lynx*), the deer (*Cervus elaphus*) the brown bear (*Ursus arctos*), the boar (*Sus scrofa*), the wildcat (*Felis silvestris*) and in the mountain part of Putna river's path there is a small community of chamois (*rupicapra rupicapra*). Vrancea Mountains represent the 2nd most important area of Romania populated by large carnivores, hosting approximately 6.5% of the total bear population, 5.5% of the lynx population and 3.7% of the wolf population.

There is also a huge number of birds such as grey-headed, jay, blackbird, wood pigeon, goshawk, owl and bald eagle. Also, the fresh waters of the rivers are populated with various fish species like the trout (*Salmo trutta frio*), zglăvoacele (*Cottus gobio*), chișcarul (*Eudontomyzon danfordi*), boișteanul (*Phoxinus phoxinus*), moioaga (*Barbus meridionalis petenyi*), the pig mountain (*Gobio uranoscopus*) and mihalțul (*Lota lota*).

3.1.6 - The protected areas. The western part of Vrancea presents a large scientific and educational interest. In order to protect the outstanding characteristics of fauna and flora of this region and to preserve them for future generations there have been established a number of natural protected areas. Thus were identified and delineated so far a total of 20 protected areas, with a surface of 5609.10 ha, representing 37% of the total protected areas in South East region (excluding the Danube Delta Biosphere Reservation), (Horeanu C., 1981) (fig. 3). The most important protected areas are: the Forest of Lepșa-Zboina, Tișița Gorges, Putna Waterfall, Goru Peak, the Alive Fire, Strâmtura Coza, Căldările Zăbalei, Black Lake, Nameless Lake and Mișina Waterfall.

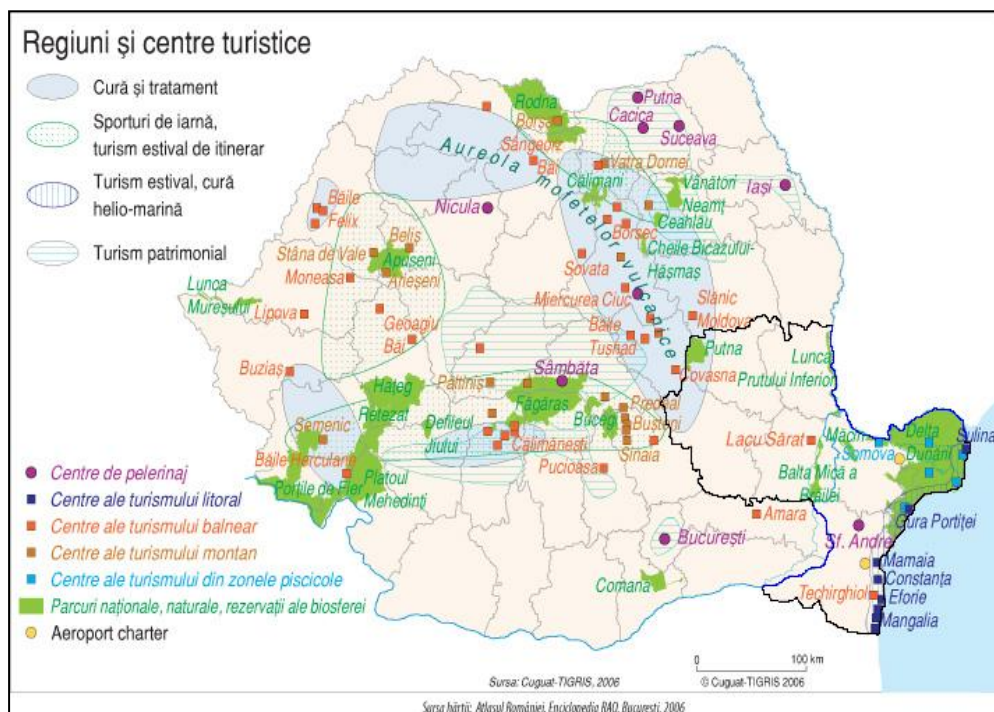


Figure 3 Natural reserves of the South-East development region

Source: www.mdpl.ro

3.2 The human tourist resources

The historical conditions combined with a unique geographical settlement gave this area, known as the “Land of Vrancea”, a rich cultural heritage expressed through the presence of historical monuments, with a very special architecture. The ancient population of farmers and shepherds that settled here hundreds of years ago, created in time an art in close connection with nature and their specific dailies activities.

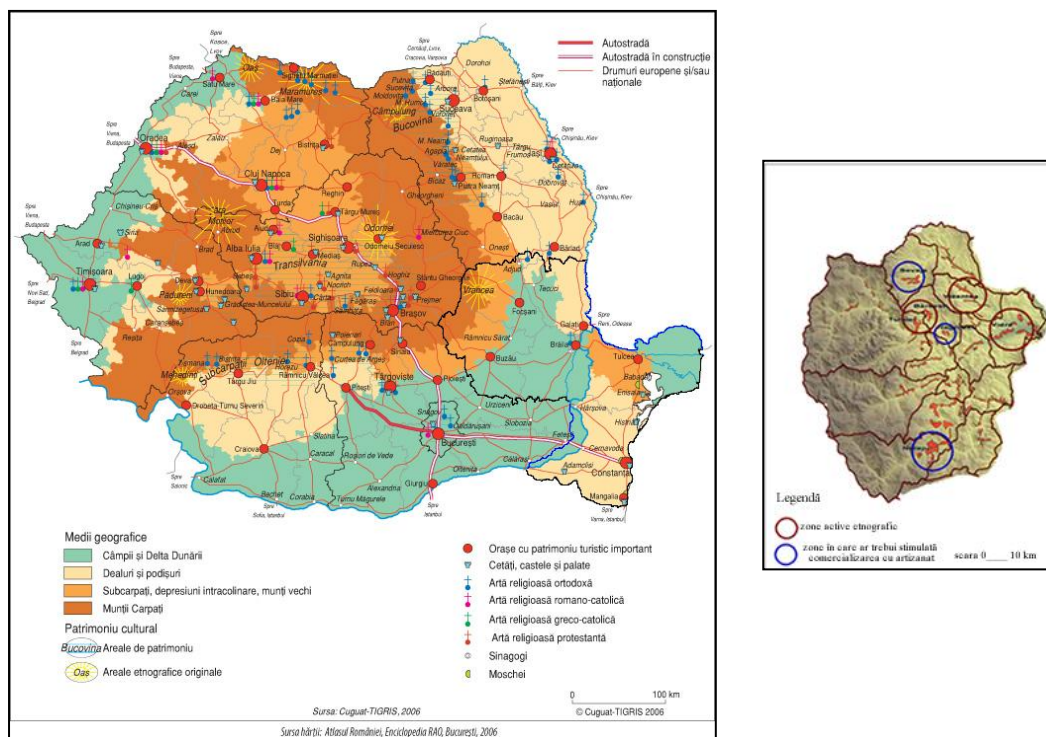


Figure 4 Ethnographic centers map for the South-East region and for the Land of Vrancea

Source: www.mdlpl.ro

In the Land of Vrancea there are some important ethnographic centers (fig. 4) among which we remind the villages of Nereju, Soveja, Vidra and Vizantea (Bănățeanu T., Stoica G., 1988). These ethnographic centers, true polls of ancient folk customs, impress with their holydays traditions where tourists can admire the traditional masks, can hear the mysterious sounds of ancient wooden musical instruments and can taste the outstanding culinary specialities, all of this in an authentic “vrâncean” atmosphere.

3.2.1. Architecture, art and historical monuments, museums, mausoleums

The houses of this spectacular region have special architecture. The main components of these peasant houses are the porch, the pavilion and the “chiler” (a small room for preserving aliments). Some villages such as Negrilești, Paltin, Nereju, Vizantea, Nistorești still have today traditional houses (Vrancea-monografie, 1981), though there are partially modernized.

Other elements that are specific to vrâncean peasant architecture are the oak monuments built on stone foundation using some very old techniques. Such monuments of beauty and great value can be found in the villages of the Valley of Salt, Nistorești, Bârsești, Lepșa (dating from the 17th - 18th century) (fig. 5). One of the most impressive monuments is the one built in 1904, in the honor of Stephen the Great, one of the most famous and loved Moldavian voievods.

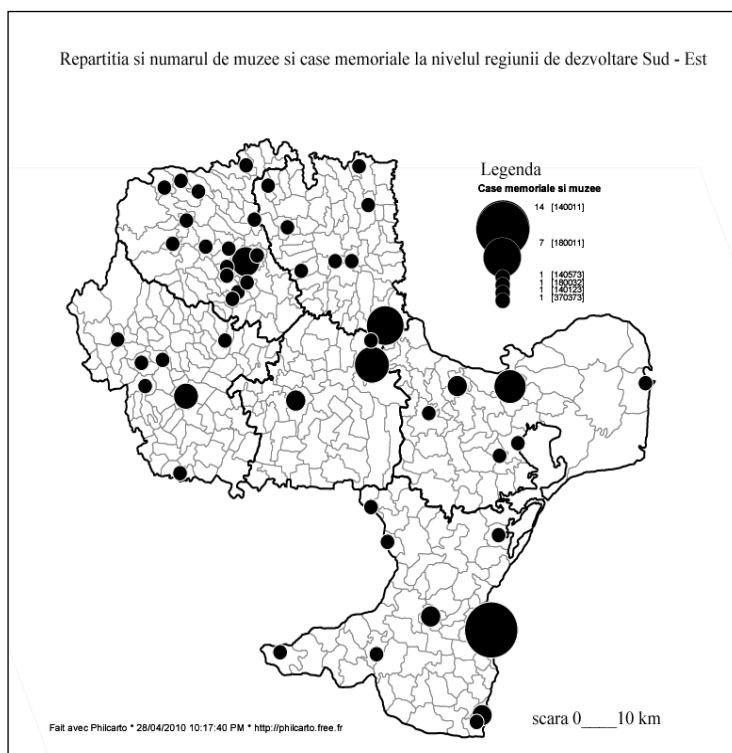


Figure 5 Museums and memorial houses distribution map for the South-East region

Source: www.cimec.ro

In the "Land of Vrancea" there are several museums that exhibit old traditional objects such as carpets and clothes, furniture and different objects that people used in daily activities. Most of them are handcrafted in wood and were transmitted from generation to another. In Câmpuri village there is the memorial house of Moș Ioan Roată, Ad-hoc member of the Divan of Moldavia and one of the most important Moldavian peasants that struggled for the union of Romanian principalities in 1859. Moș Ioan Roată is also one of the most loved historical characters as there are many stories about him that reveals the atmosphere of those times.

In Soveja resort there is a commemorative stone monument built in 1927 in the memory of the fallen heroes of the First World War. Near the mausoleum is a museum which houses weapons and items that belonged to the soldiers that were killed there during the battles from 1917. All the mausoleums from Vrancea (Focșani, Mărăști, Soveja, Mărășești) are included in a tourist project called The Glory Road of Heroes (<http://www.ziaruldevrancea.ro/index.php?articol=42805>).

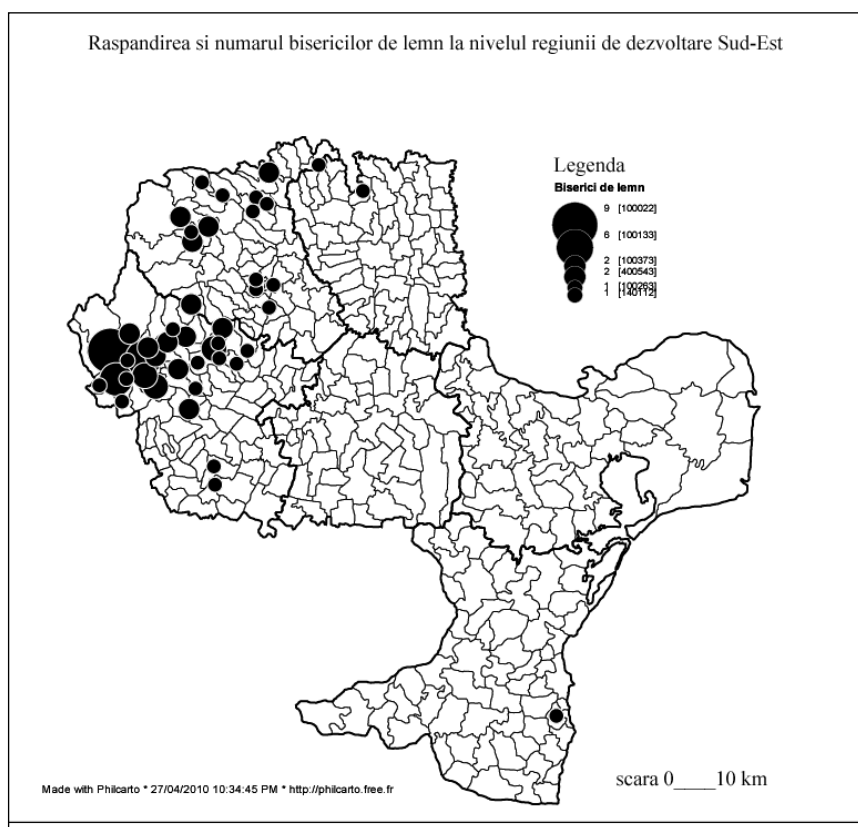


Figure 6 Wood churches distribution map of the South-East region

Source: www.cimec.ro

3.2.2 - Churches and monasteries

Another representative tourist attraction are the old churches and monasteries, especially the wooden churches (fig. 6). In Vrancea there are over 20 wooden churches that impress not only with their unique architecture but also with their extraordinary paintings and embroideries (Cherciu I., 2004).

In Vizantea Mănăstirească village there is a monastery which was founded, according to some documents, during the 16th century, including a church in oak beams and a fortified enclosure. In time, this church collapsed and a new one made of stone was erected in 1850. The monastery was devoted to Athos Holy Mountain, but in 1863 it became only a village church. There was a rumor about a secret treasure buried by Greek monks that made many people to dig after it and that led to the discovery of the ancient church ruins.

Near Lepșa village there is Lepșa monastery built in 1789 by the local people and here in the past there was a school for the rich children. In Vrâncioaia village there is a similar oak church built in 1783 that kept the traditional architecture. Also, in Prisaca village there is an old wooden church called the Church of Vrancea, built in oak beams

during 14th – 15th century. The main attraction of this church is an old Russian icon painted around 1431.

3.2.3 - Ethnographic and folkloric aspects

For tourists, is quite remarkable to see live how local craftsmen create interesting and useful objects using various materials like wood, leather, wool or stone. Famous for their beauty are the timber vessels, the whistles, the shepherd stitches and the traditional masks.

Very impressive is also the art pottery, well preserved in Ivești village were the potters kept the Dacian shape of the vessels. Each year, in April, takes place in Vidra village the Fair of Vrancea Craftsmen, where people can admire and buy different traditional objects, including pottery or clothing.

In the past, the local people gave a great importance to the way they decorated the interior of their homes. In order to create a more comfortable and pleasant atmosphere, the inner walls were decorated with hand-made colorful wool carpets which had dual role, both aesthetic and functional by keeping heat in the room.

Also, the women used to weave and embroider even the kitchen towels, the tablecloths, the blankets, the bed linens and the clothes and they used different fabrics as hemp, flax, cotton and sometimes silk. The traditional costumes are truly amazing and they were a very important part of the dowry that the bride and groom had to have before the wedding. These traditional costumes kept many elements from the Dacian costumes, as the images of the Dacians immortalized on Traian's Columns demonstrate. Today, these costumes are used only during the most important holydays of the calendar.

There are some ancient traditions that were preserved only in this part of the country, especially concerning wedding and funerals rituals. The 'vrâncean' wedding is a moment of truly joy and happiness, sprinkled with many customs for the new formed family in order to bring them good luck and prosperity. A very strange pre-Christian custom regards the funerals when the dead person is "guarded" three days before the burial. During this time it takes place the so-called "dances of the dead", moment of joy as Dacian people did not considered death as an end but as a new better beginning, so death was a moment of happiness.

4. Accommodation capacity

Analyzing the map of guesthouses distribution of the South-East region (fig. 7) it can be easily observed that in Vrancea county, Tulnici holds the largest number of guesthouses. This rural locality (especially Lepșa and Greșu villages) registered in the last past years a quick tourism development, nowadays being one of the most known tourist destination of the county.

In the last 15 years, in this new-born tourist area of Greșu and Lepșa villages were built over 600 holiday houses, boarding houses and agro units. Also, the number of tourist accredited households increased each year and now the region can offer accommodation to a larger number of tourists. The next chart presents the evolution of holiday houses for Tulnici locality (fig.no.8).

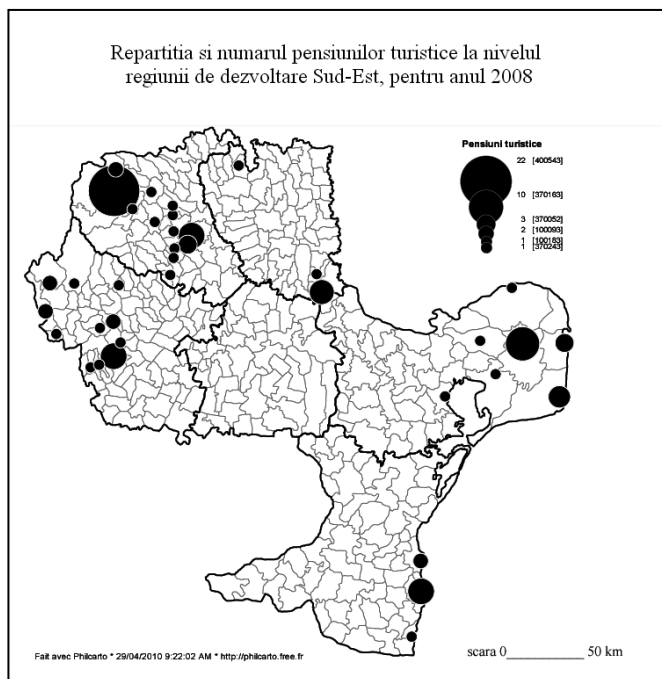


Figure 7 Guesthouses distribution map of the South-East region

Sursa datelor: www.antrec.ro

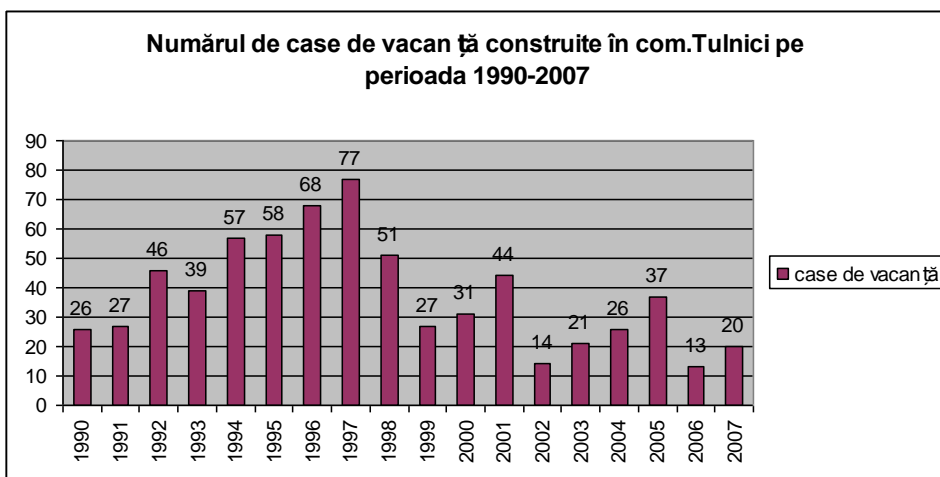


Figure 8 Holiday houses evolution map for Tulnici locality

Source: Annual Register of Building Authorizations

The data obtained from the Annual Register of Building Authorizations shows that the people who mostly invested in building holidays houses were those from the

neighboring counties of the region especially from Galați, Brăila, Focșani and less from Constanța or Tulnici (fig. 9)

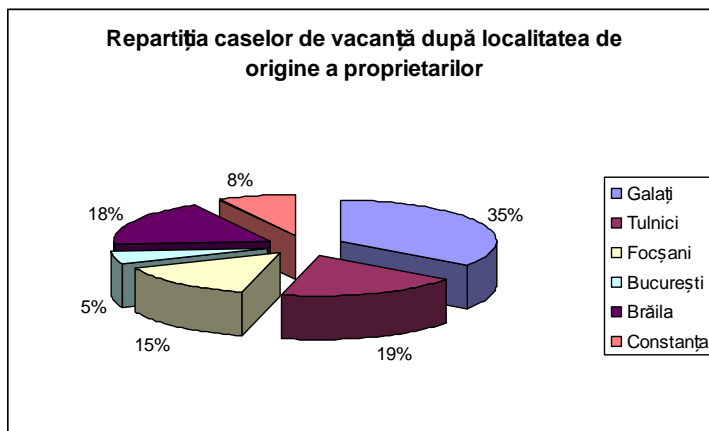


Figure 9 Holiday houses distribution map for Tulnici locality considering the residence of the owners

Source: Annual Register of Building Authorizations

One of the main reasons why people from the neighboring counties preferred to build their holiday houses in Vrancea is the presence of the mountain region. Vrancea and Buzău county are the only ones in the South-East region that have mountainous areas, but Vrancea is more attractive because of its huge tourist resources. As a result, Lepșa village transformed from a small rural settlement into a tourist village recording also a significant economic growth.

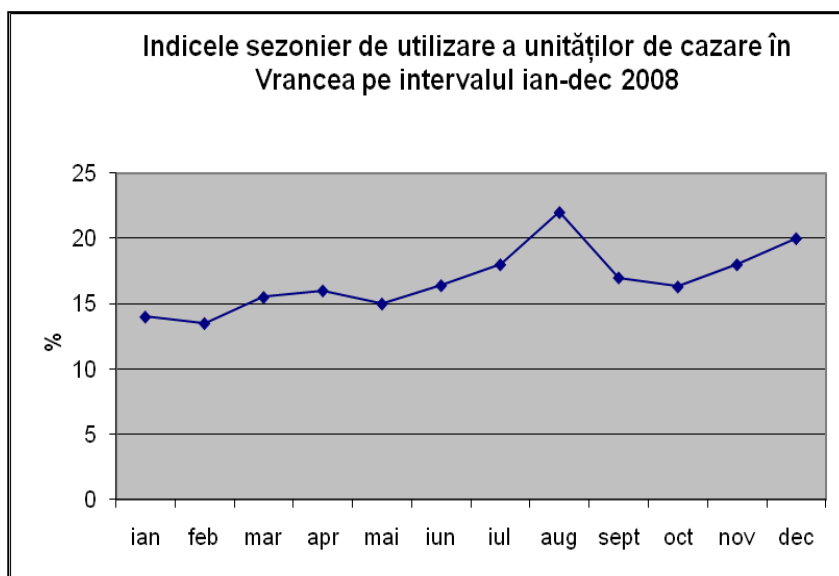


Figure 10 The seasonal use of the accommodation unit index for Vrancea county (January – December 2008)

Source: www.vrancea.INSSE.ro

The chart above (fig. 10) presents the values of the seasonal use of the accommodation unit index and it can be easily observed that there are two moments of the year when this index registers the higher values. First of all, there is the period of winter holidays, when people come to spend Christmas and New Year and a summer period between June and August when people come to relax and enjoy the tranquility of the mountains. More than that, this area is one of the most used links between Moldavia and Muntenia regions.

5. Conclusions

This article aimed to present the most important and unique tourist resources of Vrancea County and how these resources influence the local economy. Inside the South-East region, Vrancea County represents an important attractive center for all the inhabitants of the region as many of them come here to build either holiday houses or tourist accommodation units.

The most attractive part of the county is undoubtedly, The Land of Vrancea but the human pressure grew very much in the last years and that disturbed and modified the authenticity of many places. Along the years there were erected many buildings that did not respect the local architecture and that modified the local identity.

However, this region is still one of the most known and appreciated tourist destinations that impresses with its natural beauties and ancient well preserved traditions.

Aknowledgements

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