

THE MOUNTAIN TOURIST OFFER AS A RELAUNCHING POINT OF THE ROMANIAN TOURISM IN THE POST-PANDEMIC PERIOD

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Abstract: *The mountain tourist destinations represent an important segment of the Romanian tourist offer. The Romanian mountain tourism has experienced a slow upward trend in the last 25 years, due to some complex economic, social and political reasons. However, in the last 5 years (2015-2019), there has been recorded a significant increase in the tourist offer of the Romanian mountain destinations, correlated with the demand. 2020 is the year of great changes, the tourism sector collapsing with the occurrence of COVID-19 pandemic. This paper analyzes the current situation of the Romanian mountain tourist offer and the possibility that sustainable tourism, especially nature tourism, ecotourism and adventure tourism will be preferred by tourists when deciding to practice tourism in such periods full of uncertainties. We focus on the significant mountain tourism potential as a possible future relaunch of Romanian post-pandemic mountain tourism.*

Key words: tourism; mountain tourist offer; Romanian mountain destinations; sustainable tourism; post-pandemic mountain tourism.

JEL Classification Codes: Z320, Z300, O140.

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to analyze, from a quantitative point of view, the evolution of the tourist offer for the Romanian mountain resorts, during the last 25 years, in order to draw pertinent conclusions on the future evolution trends. Although the evolution of tourism indicators is favorable, the problems Romanian tourism is facing with cannot be ignored. Improvement trends may be observed and they are also reflected in the monitored indicators.

The offer of the mountain tourist destinations represents an important segment of the Romanian tourist offer. The Romanian mountain tourism has experienced a slow upward trend in the last 25 years, due to some complex economic, social and political reasons.

The significant increase in tourism demand and tourist offer in recent times is the effect of implementing some coherent action plans, coordinated at the national level and supported by certain government measures to encourage the tourism industry. These involved both investments in tourism infrastructure and in the marketing and promotion of Romanian destinations. Continuing the development of tourist access infrastructure and facilities in areas with high tourist potential, as well as the rehabilitation of tourist attractions are strategic directions for action to continue this favorable trend (Toma & Mihai, 2020).

Other causes that stimulated the development of national tourism were: diversification of the offer of tourist services; increasing the role of promotional activity in tourism; improving national legislation to stimulate tourism; the involvement of the central and local political power in the development of the tourist activities; the national and local strategies and programs in the field of tourism; ensuring the permanent training of the staff employed in



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tourism; educating the population to consume tourist products and services (Milin, Fruja & Buzilă, 2005).

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this paper, we used the theoretical research, the analysis and the synthesis. The theoretical research consisted in the study of the specialized literature. The study was conducted based on the analysis, processing and interpretation of the most significant indicators of tourist offer (the number of accommodation units and their structure, the accommodation capacity and structure, the net indices of the accommodation capacity in use).

The research methodology was based on the analysis and interpretation of data provided by the National Institute of Statistics (tourism chapters from the Romanian Statistical Yearbooks, 1990-2020; Romanian Tourism. Statistical Brief, 1999-2020), using descriptive statistics.

Through the method of graphical modeling, we made suggestive diagrams for each indicator, using the application Microsoft Office Excel. The data tables were interpreted to conclude on the evolution and structure of the main indicators of tourist offer for the mountain destinations; in addition, we made comparisons with the existing situation at national level.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Romanian mountain tourism is based on the existence of the Carpathians; the variety of landscapes (alpine landscapes, ridges, cliffs, gorges, caves), other natural resources (mineral and thermal waters, forests, national and natural parks, moderate mountain climate, characterized by thermal comfort, few blizzards, low frequency of avalanches, persistence of snow cover up to 180-200 days yearly) and the possibility of practicing various tourist activities represent the strong points of attraction.

The anthropic tourist potential harmoniously completes the natural setting: archeological vestiges; feudal constructions; historical and religious art monuments; tourist objectives of technical-economic nature; museums and memorial houses; ethnographic and folkloric tourist attractions.

The mountain tourism for long stays (recreation, rest and leisure) is based on the existence of 58 tourist resorts, of which 23 mountain resorts of national interest, with strong tourist structures (Poiana Braşov, Pârâul Rece, Sinaia, Predeal, Braşov, Buşteni, Păltiniş, Muntele Mic etc.) and 35 resorts of local interest (Cheia, Poiana Mărului, Văliug, Trei Ape, Voineasa, Beliş-Fântânele, Izvoarele etc.).

The climatic mountain tourism is supported by the stimulating bioclimatic conditions, the variety and beauty of mountain landscapes, the presence of natural and anthropic lakes. Many of the mountain resorts are certified as balneoclimatic resorts, some being famous due to the existence of natural healing factors such as the mineral (carbonated) and thermomineral waters, or the therapeutic gases and muds that contribute to the development of (balneo)climatic and medical tourism (Vatra Dornei, Borsec, Băile Tuşnad, Covasna, Băile Herculane, Stâna de Vale, Moneasa etc.).

The mountain hiking tourism is based on the existence of special landscapes, various ecosystems, glacial karst, volcanic, structural and petrographic landforms, especially in the mountains Făgăraş, Retezat, Parâng, Rodnei, Bucegi, Piatra Craiului, Ceahlău, Rarău, Bihor, Anina, Mehedinţi. National and natural parks favorable to ecotourism have been established

in many of these mountains (12 national parks, of which two Biosphere Reserves – Retezat Mountains National Park and Rodnei Mountains National Park - and 10 natural parks).

The winter sports tourism is based on many ski areas developed in recent years, Romania currently offering 186 authorized ski slopes, with a total length of 162.48 km, spread over 21 counties.

We may also add other forms of mountain tourism: mountaineering (in the massifs with steep slopes and walls, sharp and high ridges, gorges), speotourism (in the limestone massifs with specific karst forms, especially caves and pits), paragliding, mountain biking, mountain tourism for sport hunting and fishing.

The mountain tourist destinations rank second in the top of the Romanian tourists' preferences and third for the foreign tourists. The number of tourists in mountain tourist destinations has increased 2.5 times in the last 26 years, from 924,000 in 1994 to 2,258,401 in 2019. Record figures above 2 million tourists have been registered since 2017 in the mountain tourist destinations (Toma & Mihai, 2020).

The significant increase of tourism demand and implicitly of tourist offer in the last 5 years (2015-2019) has resulted from several government measures and state efforts to encourage the tourism industry:

- reducing tourism taxation to 5% (the lowest in the EU);
- implementation of the Master Plan for tourism;
- investments of national importance through the contribution of the Ministry of Tourism for the development of the ski areas;
- reconsolidation of Romania's position in the field of tourism by acquiring the function of President of the Executive Council of the UNWTO, during 2017-2018;
- business tourism development; the budget for tourism increased significantly during this period, which led to long-term tourism development and Romania's increasing competitiveness;
- the development of local communities in areas with high tourist potential, by increasing public investment in tourism infrastructure;
- competitive development of tourism through identification, evaluation, prioritization by forms of tourism and efficient targeting of public investments;
- developing a network of internationally competitive tourist destinations;
- sustainable capitalization of local specificities and elements of national identity through tourism and promotion of an integrated approach to tourism policy in the regions, through the sustainable development of tourism (www.insse.ro, Press Release No. 116 of 5 May 2020: Tourism in March 2020, National Institute of Statistics).

Overall the analyzed period (1994-2019), the **number of tourist accommodation units** in the Romanian mountain resorts experienced an upward evolution, increasing 4 times, from 608 units (in 1994) to 2,342 units (in 2019).

The average multiannual growth rate (4.55%) of this indicator is slightly below the national average (5.74%) - Table 1.

The fluctuations of this indicator are directly correlated with the tourist demand (arrivals and overnight stays) throughout the analyzed period, as well as with other causes in certain periods (Figure 1, Table 1).

The slow increase in the number of accommodation units from 1994-2002 (from 608 to 723 units) was due to the sharp decrease in arrivals in the mountain area with over 300,000 tourists (determined in turn by the declining standard of living of the resident population, tourist services, declining quality of tourist services in many Romanian resorts, political

instability, insufficient promotion on foreign markets, inadequate coordination of tourism at the national level – according to Țigu, 2001; Țigu & Simoni, 2015), the removal from the tourist circuit of some accommodation units for various reasons (restitution of buildings to former owners - especially tourist villas in the mountains; change the destination especially in case of hotels, into offices or business centers; deactivation due to an advanced wear of some buildings).

Yet the trend continued to grow slowly during the analyzed period, due to the entry into operation of some new structures, especially rural and urban boarding houses. The increase in the number of tourist boarding houses resulted from the opportunities of accessing some European funds (Phare, Sapard, structural funds) and the shorter recovery time for investments in such accommodation units.

A period of moderate growth came next (2003-2008), correlated with the increase of incomes and implicitly to the arrivals of tourists and a short period of relative stagnation due to the effects of the economic crisis (2009-2010).

Table 1. The evolution of tourist accommodation units (number of units, annual growth rate) in the Romanian mountain resorts, compared to the existing situation at national level, in the last 25 years (1994-2019)

Year	Mountain destinations			Total Romania	
	Number of accommodation units	Share of total Romania (%)	Annual growth rate (%)	Number of accommodation units	Annual growth rate (%)
1994	608	21.41	-	2,840	-
1995	641	22.07	5.43	2,905	2.29
1996	693	23.37	8.11	2,965	2.07
1997	668	21.91	-3.61	3,049	2.83
1998	693	22.16	3.74	3,127	2.56
1999	691	21.26	-0.29	3,250	3.93
2000	702	22.49	1.59	3,121	-3.97
2001	725	22.20	3.28	3,266	4.65
2002	723	21.66	-0.28	3,338	2.20
2003	787	22.05	8.85	3,569	6.92
2004	850	21.79	8.01	3,900	9.27
2005	828	19.59	-2.59	4,226	8.36
2006	973	20.66	17.51	4,710	11.45
2007	978	20.84	0.51	4,694	-0.34
2008	1,010	20.87	3.27	4,840	3.11
2009	1,052	20.65	4.16	5,095	5.27
2010	1,038	19.88	-1.33	5,222	2.49
2011	1,154	23.07	11.18	5,003	-4.19
2012	1,376	23.64	19.24	5,821	16.35
2013	1,497	24.91	8.79	6,009	3.23
2014	1,609	26.25	7.48	6,130	2.01
2015	1,822	26.71	11.27	6,821	11.27
2016	1,878	27.04	1.83	6,946	1.83
2017	2,270	28.72	13.81	7,905	13.81
2018	2,374	28.08	6.93	8,453	6.93
2019	2,342	27.87	-0.60	8,402	-0.60

Source: data taken and processed from the Statistical Yearbooks of Romania 1990-2020 and Tourism of Romania. Statistical Briefing, 1999-2020, INS, www.insse.ro

A period of strong revival started in 2011 and continued until 2019, due to the increase in tourist arrivals. The maximum of 2,374 accommodation units in the mountain area was recorded in 2018 and an average growth rate record of 9.67% (maximum 19.24% in the period 2011-2012).

This high demand for the mountain destinations was due to the promotion of winter sports in recent years, which led to a revival of the preference or interest of Romanians to practice them; in parallel, a series of ski areas in many traditional “white” mountain resorts (Poiana Braşov, Sinaia, Predeal, Busteni, Păltiniş) were arranged, redesigned or modernized, through investments carried out under the coordination of the Ministry of Tourism, with the appearance or relaunch of many smaller resorts for practicing winter sports (Râncă, Vidra, Arieşeni, Şuitor, Parâng, Straja, etc.). There are currently 180 authorized ski slopes throughout the country. Rural tourism in mountain areas also developed during this period: more tourist villages and rural pensions and more European funds granted for rural development. Investments were also made and many of the mountain spas were revived, some of which had declined sharply after 1990. Investments were also made in the transport infrastructure, as some transcarpathian axes were modernized (Toma & Mihai, 2020).

In 2019, the accommodation units in the mountain destinations had a significant share of the total accommodation units in Romania: from values of approximately 21% in the early 90's (the average value of the period 1994-2014 being 22%) to increasing values starting with 2011 of approximately 28% (the maximum value of 28.72% was recorded in 2017). Compared to other tourist destinations, the accommodation units in the mountain resorts are more numerous, but the accommodation capacity is lower, because these are units with a smaller number of beds (boarding houses, villas, chalets).

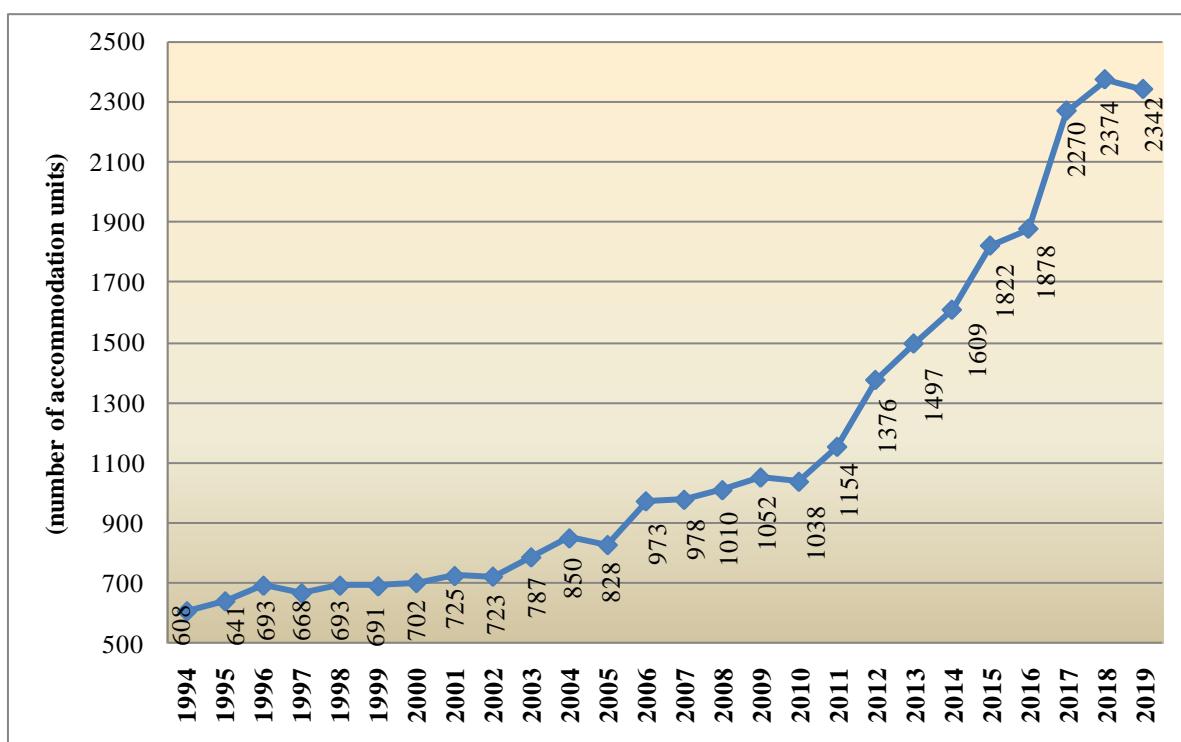


Figure 1. The evolution of the accommodation units in the Romanian mountain resorts, in the last 25 years (1994-2019)

Source: data taken and processed from the Statistical Yearbooks of Romania 1990-2020 and Tourism of Romania. Statistical Briefing, 1999-2020, INS, www.insse.ro

In the case of the **existing accommodation capacity**, the mountain tourist destinations rank third, with 18.16% of Romania's total accommodation capacity in 2019, after seaside and urban destinations, due to the preponderance of accommodation units of lower capacity. The share of the accommodation capacity in use in mountain resorts is higher than in other tourist destinations (such as the seaside resorts or spas), due to the existence of several permanent accommodation units (Țigu, 2001).

Although the number of accommodation units in the mountain area has increased, in the case of existing and operational capacity, there has been a long-term downward trend (1994-2007, from 37,321 to 31,448 beds), a slight return until 2009, followed by another shorter period of decline (2009-2010, effect of the economic crisis).

As in the case of arrivals and the number of accommodation units, starting with 2011 and until now (2019) there has been a strong increase in the accommodation capacity in operation in the mountain destinations, from 11-12% (during 1994-2010) up to almost 19% of the national capacity in recent years (2016-2019), due to the increase in the number of accommodation units, directly correlated with the growing demand for the mountain area (revitalization of Romanians' preference for winter sports, better promotion of mountain areas and specific activities, the emergence, relaunch or redevelopment of many smaller centers for winter sports, ecotourism and rural tourism). Therefore, in 2019, the 2,342 accommodation units in the Romanian mountain resorts totaled 64,767 beds, respectively 18.16% of the accommodation capacity of our country (Figure 2).

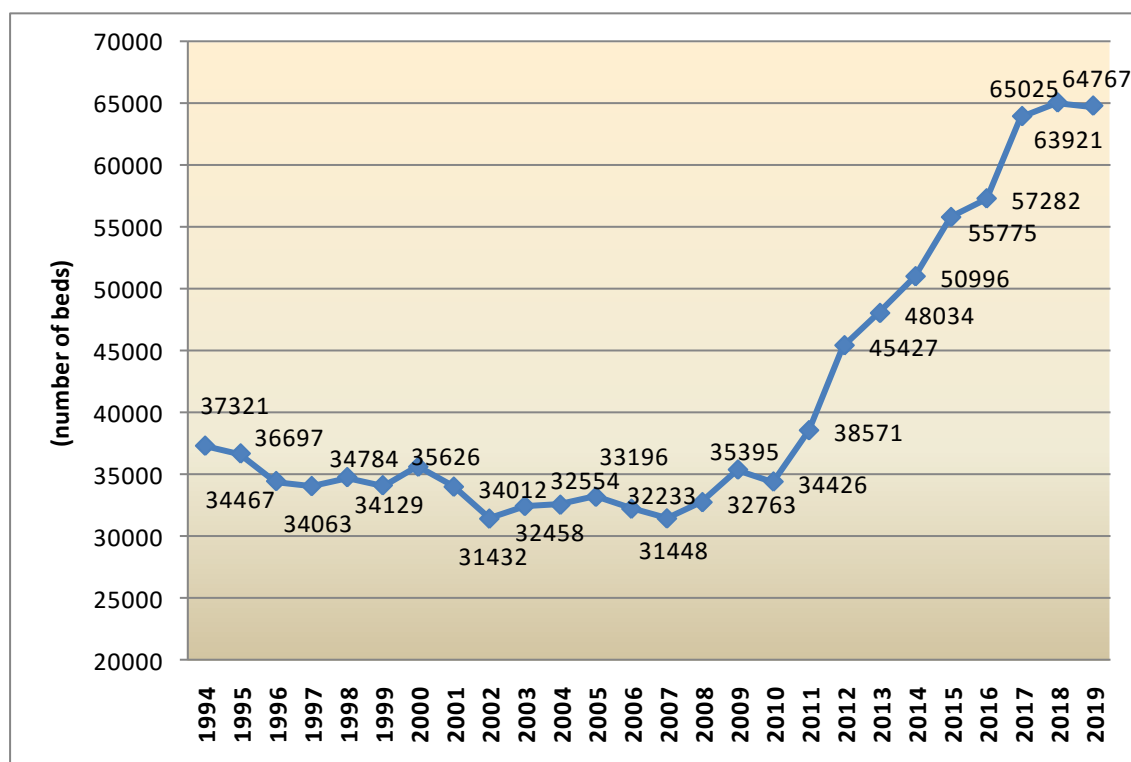


Figure 2. *The evolution of the existing accommodation capacity (number of beds) in the Romanian mountain tourist destinations, in the period 1994-2019*

Source: data taken and processed from the Statistical Yearbooks of Romania 1990-2020 and Tourism of Romania. Statistical Briefing, 1999-2020, INS, www.insse.ro

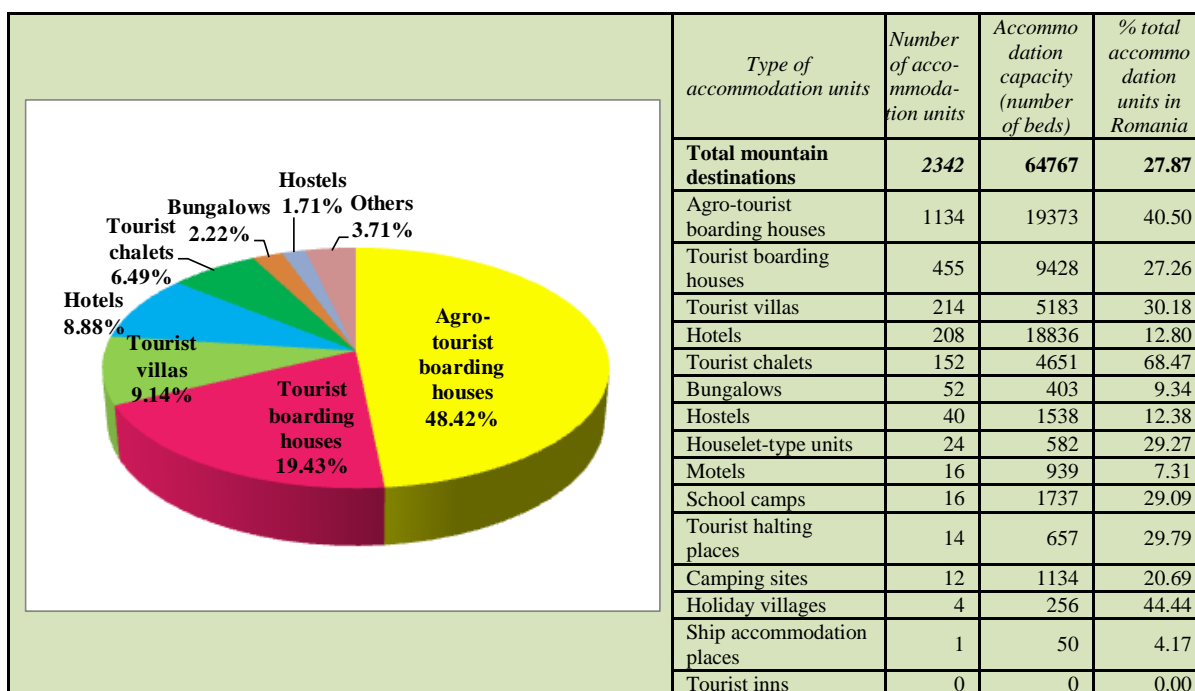
Currently (2019), the **structure of accommodation capacity by type of units** (Table 2) is characterized by the overwhelming share of agro-tourist boarding houses (48.42%, 1,134 units with 19,373 beds), tourist boarding houses (43%, 455 units with 9,428 beds).

These two types of accommodation units represent 64.76% of the total accommodation units operating in the Romanian mountain resorts, offering 28,801 beds (67.76% of the total existing places in the pensions in Romania - therefore 2/3 of the capacity of tourist boarding houses are installed in the mountain destinations).

The hotel units, numbering 208 at present (compared to 71 in 1994), represent 8.88% of the total accommodation units in the mountain area and 12.8% of total hotels in Romania, offering tourists almost a third (29.08%) of the capacity existing in the mountain area and 9.42% of the existing accommodation capacity in Romania.

Other accommodation units specific to the mountain area have significant shares of the total accommodation capacity in Romania: tourist villas (214 units with 5,183 beds, meaning 30.18% of the existing capacity in villas in the country), tourist chalets (152 units with 4,651 places, meaning 68.47% of the existing capacity in chalets in the country), hostels and school camps (Table 2).

Table 2. The structure and share of the accommodation units in the Romanian mountain resorts by type of accommodation units, in 2019



Source: data taken and processed from Tourism of Romania. Statistical Briefing, 1999-2020, INS, www.insse.ro

Regarding the **existing and operating accommodation capacity**, the situation is as follows: the agro-tourist boarding houses have the highest accommodation offer in the mountain resorts (19,373 beds, meaning 32.84% of the total units and 29.91% of the accommodation capacity in the mountain destinations).

These are followed by hotels (29.08% of the existing capacity in mountain resorts), tourist boarding houses (14.56%), tourist villas (8%), tourist chalets (7.18%) and school camps (2.68%).

The evolution analysis of the tourist offer of the mountain destinations is completed by an indicator of the demand-supply relationship, which refers to the degree of occupancy (Stănciulescu & Micu, 2009).

The **net indices of the accommodation capacity in use** express the economic efficiency of the mountain tourism (Țigu, 2001) and registered a decreasing trend with stagnant periods in the period 1994-2014 (Figure 3): from 51.4 in 1992, to values of 40 in 1993-1996, followed by another decline and stagnation around 22-23 in 2000-2006, a slight increase to 24 in 2008-2009, after which it stagnated at around 18 until 2014.

That decrease was the effect of reducing the tourist demand until 2003, but after this period (when the tourist demand for the mountain area increased) the causes were multiple: changes in the organization of resorts or companies involved, poor management and evasion from tourism.

There has been a constant growth trend of this indicator since 2015, up to a maximum of 26.7 in 2019.

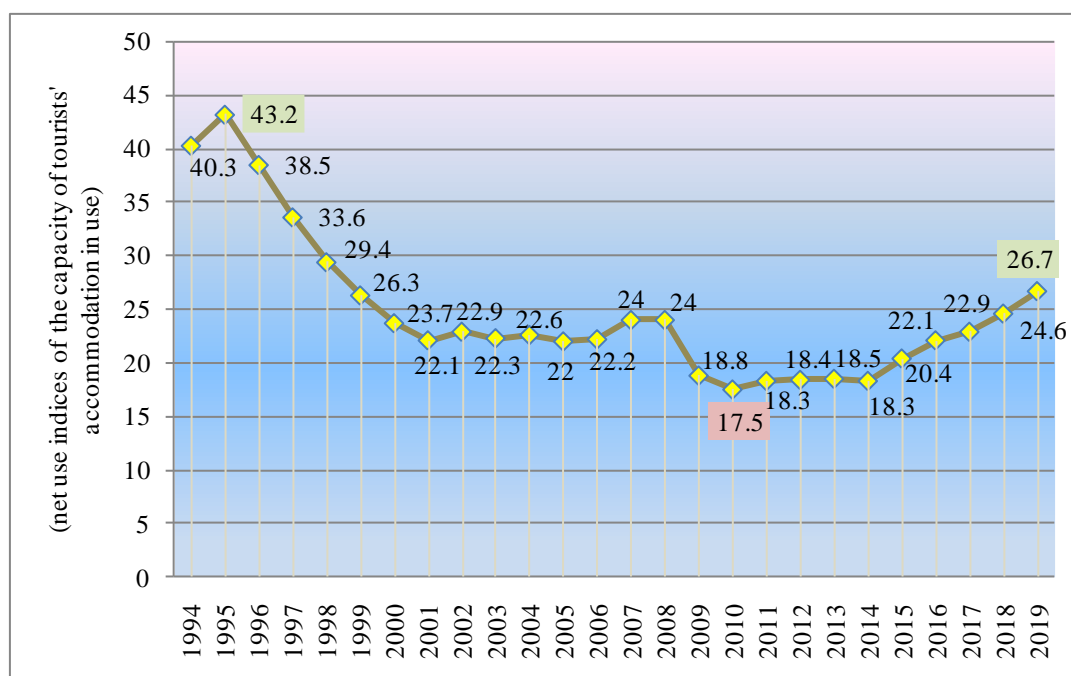


Figure 3. The evolution of the net indices of the accommodation capacity in use in the mountain destinations, in the last 25 years

Source: data taken and processed from the Statistical Yearbooks of Romania 1990-2020, INS, www.insse.ro

4. CONCLUSIONS

The tourist potential of the Romanian Carpathians is particularly rich and varied: great landscape, geomorphological, hydrological diversity; climate with therapeutic effects; natural healing factors (mineral and thermomineral waters, therapeutic mud and gases); a rich flora and fauna; national parks and nature reserves; anthropic tourist potential resulting from the sum of archaeological vestiges and ethnographic and cultural-historical heritage.

The mountain tourist destinations represent an important segment of the Romanian tourist offer. Mountain tourism has experienced a slow upward trend in the last 25 years, due to complex causes.

However, in the last 5 years (2015-2019), there has been recorded a significant increase in the tourist offer of the Romanian mountain destinations, correlated with the demand. This is due to a better involvement of the Ministry of Tourism in initiating and enforcing laws and reforms in the field of tourism, a better promotion of Romanian tourism, considerable investments in the tourism infrastructure, as well as a diversified offer of the tourism operators.

The tourist offer of the Romanian mountain resorts has been analyzed quantitatively and evolutionarily (for the last 25 years) based on the processing, graphic processing and interpretation of specific indicators. The fluctuations registered by the indicators of the mountain tourist offer have complex causes, of economic, social and political nature.

The number of tourist accommodation units in the Romanian mountain resorts has experienced a significant increase, especially in the last 8 years. The 2,342 accommodation units in the mountain destinations represent 28% of the total accommodation units in Romania, while the 64,767 beds represent 18% of our country's accommodation capacity.

The structure of the accommodation capacity by type of units is characterized by the overwhelming share of agro-tourist boarding houses.

The 208 hotels offer tourists a third of the existing capacity of the mountain resorts and 9% of the existing accommodation capacity in Romania. The net indices of the accommodation capacity in use registered a decreasing trend with stagnant periods, increasing slightly in the last 5 years to 26.7.

Tourism, one of the most dynamic sectors of the world economy, has been and continues to be subjected to a difficult test, since the COVID-19 pandemic occurred. As fear is replaced by hope and trust, sustainable tourism (in all its forms - ecotourism, rural tourism, hiking and adventure tourism, etc.) will become the main motivation for travel, offering tourists safety through social distancing and avoidance of areas with increased passenger traffic.

Therefore the Romanian mountain tourist destinations, through their varied and rich offer, represent the rebirth form of the Romanian post-pandemic tourism.

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