

GEOGRAPHICAL FEATURES AND AUTHENTIC CULTURE AS ATTRACTIONS OF VISCRI COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM IN ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT

This article aims at presenting a discussion on Viscri tourist attractions in Romania which could add to the existing discourse on Viscri community-based tourism (CBT) and could become an input for the community members and other stakeholders of the CBT site. Using the cultural and natural heritage provides Viscri CBT site with a strong base for its tourist attractions. Nonetheless, using authentic culture as tourist attraction creates a paradox; the community-based tourism site is expected to keep its originality while development is the aim to be achieved by the tourism development project. This issue needs to be tackled by Viscri management for the sustainability of Viscri as a community and tourist site. Some efforts have been undertaken in terms of physical structures, which could be followed by other members of the community. A more comprehensive and well-planned step is required and it should be communicated to the people on how the paradox is resolved.

Keywords: nature, culture, heritage, community-based tourism, tourist-attractions.

INTRODUCTION

Community-based tourism (CBT) could use culture or nature as attractions. As a whole, Romania is rich with natural heritage; spectacular tourist attractions: the forests, the hills and the valleys that offer stunning views, unaltered by the sign of modern civilization (Voda, 2013; Voda, Moldovan, Torpan and Henning, 2014; Voda and Negru, 2015; Voda, Torpan, and Moldovan, 2017; Ernawati, Torpan and Voda, 2018). So as Viscri, which is located in Brasov county, part of Transylvania, a significant community based tourism site in Romania. The place is patronized by Prince Charles of Wales who owns an 18th century house that has been restored and turned into a tourists' accommodation. This makes the village more attractive and raises tourists' curiosity (Romania Insider, 2018). There were 35,000 tourists visiting Viscri in 2016 (Romania

Insider, 2016); and 40,000 in 2017. They came from Europe (e.g. French, Swedish), United States, Australia, Canada, and Thailand (Romania Insider, 2018).

Prince Charles contribution to Viscri's tourism development was fundamental. Through Mihai Eminescu Trust (MEC) the local inhabitants were taught the basics of community based tourism (MET, 2018). Prince Charles's name facilitated the necessary funds raising and gathered specialists in traditional manufacturing of bricks, lumber, roof tiles and iron. Various courses were organized for the peasants and the international network was activated to bring the tourists in Viscri. Most of the houses facades and the fortified church were restored. People started to provide accommodation and rebuilt the interiors as well. The village is self-sustainable now.

Besides its outstanding view, this place is endowed with cultural heritage of the Saxon who have left the place (RTS-Web, 2014). People in Viscri earn their living from growing crops and raising animals. Thus, tourism becomes an additional economic activity (RTS-Web, 2014). Nowadays, people living in Viscri are Germans and Romans in majority, who live in the houses abandoned by the Saxon. Viscri is a preserved medieval civilization in Europe that attract visitors for which effort has been made for the village to remain authentic for its sustainability and tourism (RTS-Web, 2014; Romania Insider, 2016).

Authenticity for an indigenous community is a life support that ensures the wellbeing of its members (Cohen, 2012; Ernawati, Murni, and Jendra, 2017). Similarly, authenticity is also required in Viscri for the community members and the sustainability of tourism in the area. Nonetheless, to remain having medieval life style means to have a hard way of life, which most modern people dislike; as Bitesize (n.d) describes; the village life during that time were mostly miseries. Even though Singman (1999) argues that nowadays some people in some ways miss the Medieval era, and start to romanticize and claim that life was simple during the middle age, which he discusses in depth throughout his book on the truth of the claim.

The pro and con regarding keeping authentic for the sustainability of an indigenous community and tourism is intensified. Many suggest preserving authenticity (Cohen, 1979; Steiner and Reisinger, 2006; Cohen, 2012); whilst Butcher (1997) argues keeping a community to stay authentic means applying a double standard for people.

While the world is free to experience modern civilization and technology which is sometimes identical with ease of life; on the other hand, for Viscri to become a medieval tourist attraction, it needs to keep its authenticity.

METHODS

This article discusses and explores tourist attractions of Viscri which is developed based on data collected during observation and interviews conducted with the community members of Viscri, which is also supplemented by data gathered through examining academic records and publications on Viscri CBT.

DISCUSSION

Community-based tourism is a form of alternative tourism which aims for the conservation of indigenous culture or natural environment, the development of the local community whilst delivering quality tourist experiences; CBT is managed and operated by locals that uses nature and culture as tourist attractions (Ernawati, Sanders, and Dowling, 2017). Viscri is attractive to visitors from developed country who want to visit the history, the Medieval age; as Singman (1999) argues that nowadays some people for some reasons miss some aspects of the Mediaeval era. Viscri is a preserved medieval village and it is located just close by. Apart from the heritage, Viscri also has an outstanding landscape, an authentic countryside.

Stunning landscape is an essential characteristic of Romanian land, the country is rich in picturesque views of hills and valleys. Tourists can freely walk in the woods and cross the natural meadows without being disturbed by anyone. Mountain bike trails were developed in the region for the nature amateurs. The network is interconnecting former Saxon villages to help the local tourism development. Viscri also has this outstanding natural heritage (Figure 1) with old forest and beautiful slopes. Visitors could explore the countryside on horse or simply hiking through the hills and the valleys.

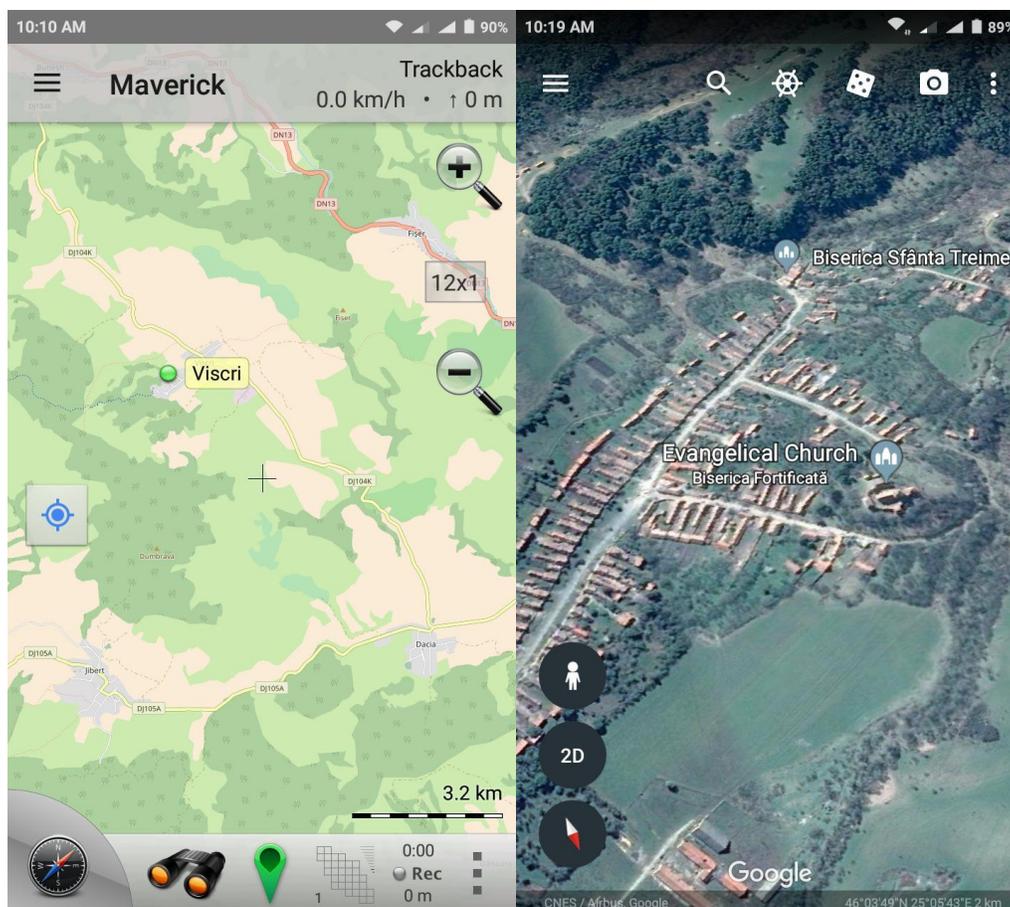


Figure 1
Landscapes that offer stunning view In Viscri
(Maverick, Google Earth, 2018).

Viscrist is also supported by the most fundamental requirement of a tourist place. That is, the friendliness and the hospitality of the people. Assistance of the local people is there, sincerely offered coffee out of their closed coffee-shop in the middle of cold snowy winter, and a photo back ground of their horse cart, fulfilled a request of showing their unique medieval style house, and patiently served the picky tourists selecting souvenirs for Viscrist memory. People in general who have direct encounters with visitors are responsive of the needs of visitors who are often not familiar with the customs and habits of the place.

Viscrist indigenous culture is built upon farm life style, and the place is the representation of medieval era, frozen in time. These are expressed in the building style including the people's houses (Figure 2) and the church (Figure 3). The ambiance of the

village brings visitors to the medieval era which is expressed through the building style of the whole village including the well-preserved church. The typical medieval farmer's house wherein the heating is placed in the room where all household activities take place (Singman, 1999; Bitesize, n.d.). It is mainly the kitchen, dining place, living room and bedroom are centered in one room with the traditional heating system of log-wood fuel. Viscri in Romania could become a center of culture and learning of the medieval village life in the cradle of modern civilization in Europe.



Figure 2
The authentic medieval style of house and kitchen.

Heritage is a vital component of culture, which needs preservation. The use of technology causes change in the methods of doing something in daily-life; which subsequently brings about alteration in life-style and in a broader sphere, would be a change in culture (Ernawati, *et al*, 2017). The use of technology, machinery and automation makes life a lot easier. Nonetheless, the essence of modern life style is characterized by the ease of life, which enable people to have more free time that people strive for. However, authenticity is the essence of heritage and a vital part of the local community life which affects their survival and wellbeing. Authenticity is also an important element in cultural tourism, it could become the main source of tourist attractions. Cohen (1979) argues that travelers search for authenticity to pursue meaning in life, it is further described that contemporary society becomes more inauthentic, thus modern people search again for 'the authentic'. The Viscri village's daily life activities could be transformed into real tourist experiences, where visitors participate and contribute. Feeding the household animals such as chickens, goose, goats and pigs, milking the

cows, walking the horses, manually cutting and collecting the hay, working and wetting the vegetable garden can transform a standard rural leisure time into a unique Transylvanian experience. Even the poorest households can accommodate tourists during summer time, offering original beds in the hay barns. Small investments are needed to arrange the basic restroom conditions with clean and hot water.



Figure 3
Viscri heritage – the fortified church.

Paradoxically, tourism development is aimed at bringing prosperity to the place. Tourism promotes the drive towards development for the people of Viscri, to change and to have a better life without losing its authenticity and tourism. People might need to think of the way how to be developed and prosperous, whilst staying medieval. The limited condition for some people in Viscri, a family has only 1 room with everything in it: kitchen, dining place, living room, and bedroom. If this situation is expected to stay the same and authentic, and not encouraged to be developed it will really be applying a double standard for the citizen of the world (Butcher, 1997). A compromise needs to be made, a solution for the situation which does not limit the drive to change for a better living now or in future without losing the authenticity of the mediaeval heritage. Some pilot project has been initiated, this for example include some houses that have been restored and converted

into guest houses incorporating artistic style, yet Gothic. Figure 4 presents a modern style Saxon house with a stylish exterior.



Figure 4
Saxon House - restored style
(Source: RTS-Web, 2014).

External network plays very important role for the success of CBT (Lorio and Corsale, 2014). In Viscri for example, the efforts to conserve the medieval heritage is piloted by Prince Charles of Wales and; some other houses have been renovated while keeping the atmosphere of Medieval. The house is restored, turned into a stylish Gothic tourist accommodation and decorated with Pennsylvania style interior. A local Medieval House near the church has been restored and traditionally decorated as tourist restaurant and accommodation (Figure 5).



Figure 5
A stylish medieval tourist household.

The Saxon fortified church proximity creates development opportunities for other houses to offer their traditional food products and accommodation. The Airbnb system is helping some other families to earn extra money from tourists. They conducted renovation and accommodate Romanian and foreign guests (Figure 6).



Figure 6
Local Saxon Fortified Church interior and Viscri view.

CONCLUSION

Viscri has a strong tourist attraction theme, and supported by a well-established networking, further development is required to reach the evenly distributed economic benefits. A more detailed program elaborating exactly how maintaining authenticity while expecting development in the CBT community is required and should be disseminated to the people of Viscri.

Our study also revealed the necessity of more courses on new technological advancements opportunities. Basic smartphone application user skills need to be acquired by the local inhabitants in order to manage online bookings.

The essential characteristic of CBT is; it should only be used as a supplement to the existing traditional economic activities as the tourist attraction is based on the local culture; whilst the formation of culture itself is heavily affected by people's occupation. Thus, traditional economic activities need to be strengthened and built, supported by the professional human resource of the respective industrial field. In terms of physical buildings and architectures, few people have piloted the endeavor, to beautify and introduce the authentic Gothic Style within the interior and exterior of the structures, a model to strive for by the people of Viscri.

Further research is required to determine the local population structural changes after the tourism development started. Considerable number of youngsters returned to their families to extend the household accommodation possibilities and participate in the tourism business.

Viscra village stands out as a model of good practice in terms of community based tourism development. Without the international know-how input, nothing would have been ever started there, a remotely located Transylvanian village, abandoned by the Saxons, with poor Romanian and Gypsy inhabitants.

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