

## The Villages with Fortified Churches in the South of Transylvania - Tourism and Economic Potential

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### *Abstract*

*Seven of the villages with fortified churches in Transylvania have been declared UNESCO sites, thus becoming protected areas.*

*Being inhabited by Romanians, Saxons, Hungarians and Szeklers, these settlements represent a charming and picturesque model of stability and prosperity in the area. This study analyzes the economic and tourism impact of the declaration of these areas as UNESCO sites and an analysis of the objectives to be achieved in order to ensure a long-term economic tourism based development of the entire area. This is where the villages with fortified churches in southern Transylvania are located.*

*Keywords: UNESCO World Heritage, tourism, economic potential, villages with fortified churches*

*JEL Classification: Z32, R11, R22*

### **Introduction**

The area containing Saxon villages in southern Transylvania is one of the last medieval landscapes of Europe. The area covers about 300,000 hectares and has about 100,000 inhabitants, and is organized around 150 villages. Inhabited by Romanians, Saxons, Hungarians and Szeklers, these settlements represent a charming and picturesque model of stability and prosperity.

This article will analyze the tourism and economic potential of this area, focusing on the villages with fortified churches that have been declared UNESCO World Heritage sites.

A brief history of these settlements is presented in the first part, describing the arrangement and way of organizing households that have been preserved since the Middle Ages, in which the fortified churches dominate.

The study continues with the description of the economic and tourist impact of the declaration of seven UNESCO sites that made them protected sites. It uses a qualitative method to reach conclusions regarding the risks and opportunities regarding the evolution of the area.

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### **1. The Villages with Fortified Churches in Southern Transylvania: History and Description**

At the invitation of the King of Hungary to defend the eastern borders of Christian Europe against invasions from the east, the Saxons, a population of German origin, arrived on the "royal lands" of south-eastern Transylvania in the 12th - 13th centuries. This is the current area of Sibiu counties, Braşov and a small part of Mureş county. They were founded along the Carpathian arch, comprising seven main fortified city/cities and about 250 villages. Whence the German name of Transylvania - Siebenbürgen. The houses were built in the style characteristic of the 12th and 13th centuries of Western Europe. Each house has high walls and a large gate, large enough to allow a hay cart to pass. Hidden from view, each household has a cobbled inner courtyard with a house for living on one side, or sometimes on both sides, followed, in line, by shelters for cattle and pigs. At the end of the yard, at right angles to the area, exists a large barn for hay. Behind the barn is a small plot of land used for the vegetable garden (about 0.5 ha), followed by an orchard of about 1 ha. This is usually also the boundary of the land belonging to the house, often marked by a series of walnut trees, after which communal ice or arable land begins. The spiritual and defensive center of each village was represented by the fortified church. During some attacks, the Saxons retreated, along with their animals, between the walls of the church, where they kept food and even had a water fountain, to increase their chances of survival in the event of an assault. In fact, every family, even during peace time, kept their smoked ham and bacon in spaces specially arranged individually in the walls of the church. Every Sunday, the villagers cut pieces of bacon or bacon as long as they could for a week, and the rest remained in the coolness between the thick walls of the church. This habit has remained alive in some villages until now.

The Saxon dialect is not a written language. It resembles Dutch and German dialects in the Luxembourg area, with each village having its own dialect. This enables villagers to easily recognize where the speaker comes from. The Saxons had managed their cities, villages and landscape for almost 1000 years continuing to speak their original dialects. This is truly a cultural treasure. There remained eight centuries in these lands until one of the greatest migrations during peacetime occurred, namely in the twentieth century, when more than a quarter of a million Saxons left the houses, churches and cities that they had built and defended. The Saxon villages in the south of Transylvania are now an area with wonderful landscapes with pastures rich in wild flowers surviving thanks to the strong economic, social and cultural links with the village settlements. Breaking these links would mean losing these grasslands. A typical village in the area is populated by about 200 families, most of whom keep 2-3 cows and 10-20 sheep. Cows are

full of milk in the morning and evening; part of the milk being used mainly for domestic consumption, with the rest marketed/sold. The money from this activity is often the only source of income. The sheep are raised for milk, used exclusively for cheese production, and for their meat. Almost all the locals are involved in agriculture.

Each spring, the shepherds are chosen to take care of the sheep of the village, depending on their reputation and the amount of cheese offered to the owners in exchange for the sheep. The animals are kept at one or two temporary summer sheepfolds, often at a significant distance from the village. In the area there are wolves and bears and every summer, a few sheep and sometimes a donkey fall prey to them.

The milk of the sheep is obtained and prepared manually as is the cheese also prepared manually from the summer sheep. The unique richness of the meadow flora gives a special character to the cheeses. The products are transported to the village using donkeys or horse carts once or twice a week.

During the summer, families in the area can often be found on their pastures with shears or rakes in their hands gathering hay for feeding cattle and sheep. Wood stoves are used for heating in winter and for cooking. Beech and hornbeam forests also provide the raw material for many of the agricultural and household tools. These are still produced in villages even today. In this way, the life of the villagers is related to the surrounding landscape, both in summer and in winter.

Seven of the villages with fortified churches in Transylvania were declared UNESCO sites (1993 and 1999 respectively), thus becoming protected areas. These are Biertan, Călnic, Dârjiu, Prejmer, Saschiz, Viscri and Valea Viilor.

Built in 1225 on one of the village's hills, the impressive church in Viscri, Braşov county, is a Gothic-style building, whose fortifications appeared two centuries later amidst the Ottoman sieges that forced the Saxons to surround the church with walls. These included buildings, bastions and defense towers.

The main attraction of the church is the little church carved in the stone of a Romanesque capital of the XII th century. It is said that this would come from the chapel Alba Ecclesia, the first church of the village Viscri (11th century). Also, inside there is a 300 year old organ and an interesting painted altar. In the rooms of the fortification there is, at present, a small museum where you can admire various traditional objects and tools from the daily life of the Saxons.

**Figure 1. Village Sites with Transylvania Fortified Churches Declared UNESCO Sites**



*Sursa:* [www.cimec.ro/Monumente/unesco/UNESCOro](http://www.cimec.ro/Monumente/unesco/UNESCOro)

In Sibiu county, between wooded hills and orchards, is the Biertan village, one of the first German settlements in Ardeal. Being included in the "Two Chairs" (Mediaș and Șeica) in the Andreean Diploma (Andreaneum), given by King Andrei of the 2th of Hungary (1175-1235), from 1224.

In 1397 Biertan is certified as a fortress. Like any Saxon settlement, it had an urbanistic structure. Also of note are the French style of the rows of houses arranged around a central market, above which stands the imposing church-fortress, which harmoniously combines the Gothic style with that of the Renaissance. These are protected by three enclosure walls with medieval towers and bastions. The first enclosure of the fortress is attributed to the XII century, when probably the first church was built (St. Mary). The present church was built in 1486-1524, in the late Gothic style.

For 300 years, between 1572 and 1867, Biertan was the seat of the Saxon episcopate, favoring the construction of one of the most powerful peasant cities in Transylvania, all built around the fortified church.

The locality of Călnic is located in the south of Alba county, in the western part of the Apollon Depression, in a hilly area crossed by the valley of Călnic stream. It is

an assembled type settlement, formed on the lower terraces of the homonymous stream, the altitude in the center of the village being 328 m. The Călnic fortress is one of the most interesting architectural monuments in Romania, occupying a special place among the fortifications erected by the Transylvanian Saxons. The specificity of the monument consists of a combination of the noble residence, having as a symbol a dungeon, and the fortification of the free village community, whose constructive intervention is marked by the chambers attached to the enclosure wall. The two contributions (of the noble family and the village community) were successive in time during the medieval era.

The historical value of the architectural ensemble, to which is added the good state of preservation, were important reasons for its inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage list. The fortified church in Dârjiu, Harghita County, was built in 1270 in Romanesque style, and at the beginning of the 16th century it had Gothic arches added. Against the backdrop of the Ottoman attacks, it was fortified in the 16th century with massive stone walls, bastions and a 38-meter-high tower.

What makes it special are the wall paintings from the fifteenth century and the fact that, at the time, the fortress was the place of keeping food of the locals. This was why it was named "Fortress of the Bacon". In the bastion rooms - each family had one or more nails for keeping the bacon, their number also representing the welfare state of the family. Cereals, brandy, and other valuable goods were also stored here.

From 1662 a solar clock mounted on the southwest tower of the fortification continuously measures the passage of time.

Found in the middle of a strong community, the state of preservation of the fortified church in Dârjiu is very good. With the local people keeping intact the secular customs of the community and permanently contributing to its renovation. It is worth noting that the fortified church in Dârjiu is the only Hungarian church in Romania that was included in the UNESCO World Heritage list.

Prejmer Fortress (Braşov County), or known on tourist maps as the Prejmer Fortified Church, is the largest fortification of its kind in southeastern Europe. The central church, built in the 13th century, was surrounded by high walls. 272 rooms are arranged on it, arranged asymmetrically on 4 levels (in the form of honeycombs). The positioning of the fort was strategic. Located in eastern Transylvania, it had to be the main defense point from Buzau Pass. The fortress of Prejmer has the most heavily fortified walls, of all the cities and churches in Transylvania - they have a height of between 12 and 14 meters, and their thickness reaches 6 meters.

The church in Saschiz (Mures County) is a small Gothic-style building with a nave, built between 1493 and 1525, replacing a Romanesque basilica. It was fortified in the 15th century, with a 9 m high exterior wall. The internal furniture is mainly baroque, except for the pronaos, richly decorated with sculptures. On the outside walls were kept various texts. The tower of the church resembles the Clock Tower in the fortress of Sighisoara, being decorated with 12 skylights and colored glazed tiles.

Today's church in Valea Viilor (Sibiu County) was built in the 14th century, in Gothic style. Later, to deal with the ongoing invasions, the church was surrounded by walls and defense towers. Today there are still 4 towers and 6-7 m high walls, provided with ramparts. In the church there are numerous particularly valuable objects such as the stelae from 1528, the altar from 1779, the organ from 1807 and the canopy of the pulpit dated to 1746. Another important element of this church is the ridge, located above the northern portal, which has remained intact since 1525.

Also, as "an exceptional example of a type of building, ensemble or architectural or technological landscape that illustrates a significant stage in the history of humanity" - criterion IV of the ten selection criteria giving "universal value". Other villages must be mentioned with fortified churches: Apold, Archita, Bunești, Cloașterf, Criș, Daia, Laslea, Mălâncrav, Meendorf, Richiș, Roadeș, Sighișoara and Șaes.

## **2. Tourism and Economic Potential**

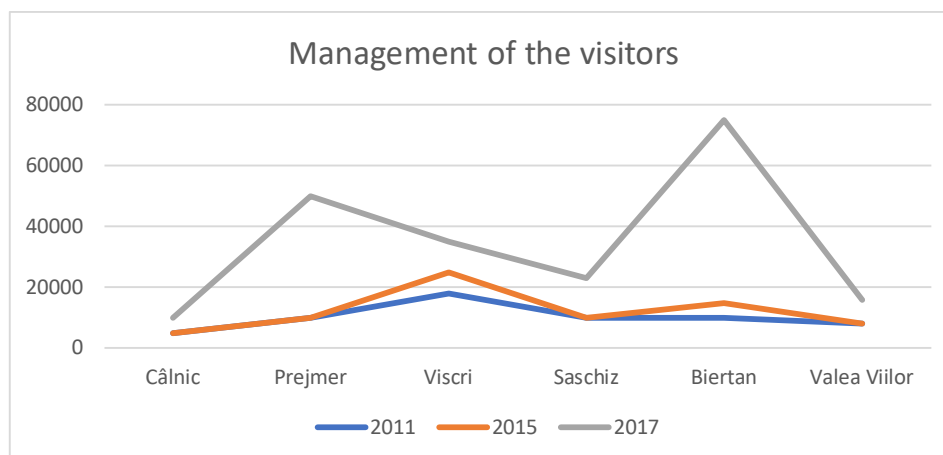
The renown of the beauty of these places, the authenticity of old customs and traditions kept alive to the present day, organic farming, have exceeded the borders of Romania and have increased the economic potential of the whole area. Sylvie Bigar, an author known in the world for her chronicles related to tourism and gastronomy, recommends, for example, Viscri village in the top 25 villages in the world where it is worth spending a weekend.

Viscri, a UNESCO site, was to become known throughout Europe after Prince Charles bought a house here in 1996 and spoke in many interviews about the beauties of the Transylvanian village.

The economic potential of the village has increased enormously in recent years. At present the locality, with a population of only 403 inhabitants, is being visited by about 35 000-40 000 (in 2019) tourists per year, more than half being foreigners.

Also, the other villages with fortified churches declared as UNESCO sites have experienced a significant annual increase in the number of tourists.

**Figure 2. Evolution of the Number of Tourists in the Fortified Villages Declared UNESCO Sites**



Note: The figures are approximate and result from the number of tickets sold at the centers of tourist interest of the villages

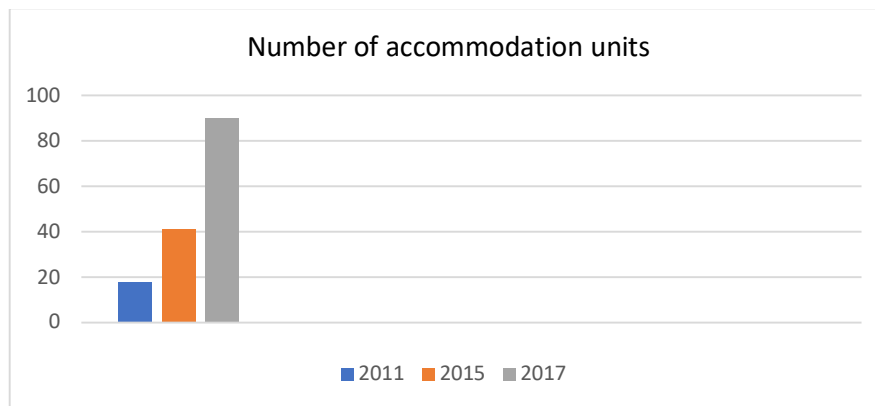
The value of the properties increased from an average of 15,000 euros / location (1996-2000), to 60-80,000 euros nowadays, the houses being restored in time and transformed into tourist pensions, the quality of the services offered by the owners being at the level 4-star hotels in Tuscany or Provence and these are, at least from May to October, occupied to the maximum capacity.

Why are tourists attracted here? Gastronomy, beauty of the place, activities and manufacturing; for example, through out the community woollen socks are woven and sold for many euros; 50 years ago, crocheted socks from old wooll sweaters were given in exchange for food (sugar, oil or bread). Now, the peasants knit about 10,000 pairs of socks, gloves, hats, sweaters or felt slippers, most of which are exported. They are taken to Naumburg in Germany, from where they are sold through out the country. "Dulceața de Viscrist" is the most expensive confectionery in Romania, selling for 365 euros / jar, abroad. The appeal is enhanced by the sweetness of the berries, along with a luxurious presentation of jars wrapped in a silver fabric. Accompanied by a teaspoon, also of silver; The sweetness was launched in Paris in 2012; also from Viscrist, the longest bicycle route starts in nature (Viscrist-Bunești-Meșendorf -Criș-Sighișoara-Aurel Vlaicu-Viscrist), over 100 km, attracting many Romanians, Germans, Norwegians and British; also in Viscrist, the black smith and carpenter of the village kept their trades and conduct demonstrations for tourists, with a nail or horseshoe turned in to



souvenirs. The wagonride is a lively, income-inducing attraction, as well as forest trips after flowers and butterflies. The meals served at the pensions and in the restaurants (still few) are based on locally made products, the families of the locals getting to help each other, service against service. Every one has a job, and the mayor's office has "drawn up" a few rules that help keep the "air" of the old community. Here, for example, the carpentry joinery is not accepted and, even in the near future, it is desired to prohibit road traffic in the village.

**Figure 3. Evolution of Accommodation Capacity in Viscri Village**



*Source:* Created by the author according to the data found on <https://www.primariaibunesti.ro/actualizare-strategia-de-development-local-2009-2020/>

In Biertan, listed as one of the most beautiful rural settlements in Romania you can visit traditional fabrics and embroidery workshops and a forage mill. During the tourist season, artisans and beekeepers exhibit their creations and products for sale in the center of the village in front of the entrance to the fortress. The fortress sitting beside the impressive altar the imposing organ, also presents a legend. It is said that the disputed spouses before divorce were imprisoned here for two weeks and had to endure, with a single spoon, a fork, a table, a bed, a chair, they did not have a knife. As a result over a period of 300 years, Biertan, had only one divorce.

Starting with the summer of 2015, a new tourist route was launched. The route crosses the western hill of the village, formerly cultivated with vines, and which still retains its terraced appearance (as proof of the richness of the vineyards of other times), the panorama over the village offered to the hiker being one of the most beautiful.

For the tourists who want to stay in the area, the pension owners have arranged rooms according to the specific area.



There is accommodation in Călnic. Wine tasting and sightseeing tours can be taken. The Fortress of Călnic is somewhat isolated from its sisters around Sibiu or Sighișoara, but it is among the most interesting to visit.

At Dârjiu tourists can go on the streets of the village, to admire the beautifully colored houses and to observe the daily life of the locals.

### 3. SWOT Analyze

#### Strengths Weaknesses

Complex tourist potential - natural and anthropic, with possibilities for use in all seasons	Tourist accessibility: lack of airports/highways
Accommodation capacity	Insufficiency of tourism promotion materials
Rural tourism	The absence of a database with the number of tourists/accommodation unit
High weight of foreign tourists from all tourists	The absence of tourist information centers
Preservation of cultural and gastronomic traditions	The absence of parking
The existence of a bicycle route connecting the villages Viscri, Criș, Bunești	The absence of an online platform to promote tourism in the area
Existence of a 40 km mountain bike route between the villages with fortified churches in the Târnava Mare area	The absence of a calendar of events for each tourist area

#### Opportunities Threats

Ecotourism development	Tourist agglomeration
Development of cultural, rural and agrotourism tourism	Exodus of laborforce/Aging of local population
Development of a tourism promotion system	Blocking road and pedestrian traffic through the increased number of cars used for tourist trips and lack of parking
Attracting investments and developing jobs	Destroying the charm of the villages generated by mass tourism
Improving the quality of tourism services	
Increased revenue	

## Conclusions

The promotion of tourism in these villages with fortified churches in the south of Transylvania will lead to the general economic growth of the area. Adaptation of the infrastructure, improvement and protection of the environment, renovation of buildings, promotion of local traditions and customs, promotion of gastronomy, external recognition, will lead to the generation of income sources for the inhabitants here, but also for society.

In order to strike a balance between the well-being of the inhabitants, the tourists, the environment and the competitiveness of the destinations, it is necessary to achieve objectives, such as: creating a tourism that is accessible to all, maintaining unaltered natural and cultural landscapes, combating the impact that transport has on the environment, reducing the seasonal character of tourism demand, increasing employment in tourism, guaranteeing safety and satisfaction of tourists. Properly exploiting the tourism and economic potential of the fortified churches villages in southern Transylvania will bring long-term positive results.

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