

**VALORIZATION OF THE CULTURAL AND NATURAL HERITAGE OF GORJ
COUNTY: TOURISM POTENTIAL AND SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGES**

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Abstract

Located at the foothills of the Parâng and Vâlcan Mountains, Gorj County represents a key hub for tourism in southwestern Romania, offering a unique symbiosis of cultural heritage, spirituality, and the wild landscapes of the Carpathians.

The region is renowned for Constantin Brâncuși's masterpieces in Târgu Jiu – The Endless Column, The Gate of the Kiss, and The Table of Silence – iconic works that transform the city into an open-air museum and a symbol of universal modern art.

The tourist importance of Gorj is amplified by its diversity: from the Lainici Monastery, an Orthodox sanctuary with a historical role in times of crisis, to the Jiu Gorge, a dramatic landscape sculpted by water, fundamental for connecting Transylvania with Oltenia. The Transalpina, the highest road in the country, attracts adventure lovers and panoramic photography, while the Muierii and Polovragi Caves, with their legends and millennial formations, offer an incursion into the underground world of Dacian myths.

Tourism in Gorj plays a crucial role in promoting local identity and supporting the economy of rural communities, through agro-tourism guesthouses and heritage valorization projects.

With untapped potential compared to other regions, the county remains an authentic destination, ideal for tourists seeking experiences away from the urban hustle and bustle.

Thus, Gorj is not just a gateway to the Retezat Mountains or Oltenia, but a destination in itself, where history, art and nature merge into a memorable story.

Keywords: *ecotourism, traditional gastronomy, sustainable, authentic destination.*

1. Introduction

Gorj County, located in the heart of Oltenia, at the base of the Parâng and Vâlcan Mountains, represents a microcosm of Romanian tourist diversity, where art, spirituality and nature meet in remarkable harmony.

With a rich history, linked to the Geto-Dacian civilization and the struggles for national unity, this territory preserves both vestiges of the past and spectacular natural landscapes, which recommend it as an essential destination for understanding Romania's cultural and ecological identity (Sanda, 2014).

Gorj has a remarkable tourist importance, especially due to the sculptural ensemble created by Constantin Brâncuși from Târgu Jiu.

His works, considered masterpieces of modern art, attract visitors from all over the world and transform the city into a cultural symbol of international proportions (Enea & Enea, 2011).

Gorj thus brings together art, spirituality and nature, offering a diverse tourist experience (<https://www.clubantreprenor.ro>).

These masterpieces, along with the Lainici Monastery (an Orthodox sanctuary with a political and spiritual role in the 19th century), underline the cultural and spiritual dimension of the county.

On the other hand, the imposing nature of Gorj, marked by the Jiu Gorge – a geological corridor that played a strategic role in history – and the Transalpina, the mountain road that reaches altitudes of over 2,000 meters, attest to the area's potential for adventure tourism and ecotourism.

The Muierii and Polovragi Caves, incorporated into local mythology, as well as the Olteț and Sohodol Gorges, with unique ecosystems, complete the picture of a landscape that remains largely unexplored (<https://de.scribd.com/document>).

This paper aims to analyze the role of Gorj County in Romanian tourism, highlighting how its cultural, natural and gastronomic heritage, being a true "living museum" of traditional Romanian cuisine, with its Oltenia specificity, contributes to building a sustainable tourist identity (Enea C & others, 2012).

Through interdisciplinary approaches, we will explore how this region can become a model for responsible resource utilization, simultaneously supporting the local economy and environmental conservation (Hall, 2023).

In a context where Romanian tourism tends to focus on mainstream destinations, Gorj stands out as an authentic space, where history and nature offer untold stories (Throsby, 2017). Gorj can be considered a true open-air museum, where art, spirituality and nature intertwine in a unique way.

2. Cultural and Artistic Heritage

Brâncuși's Works in Târgu Jiu Târgu Jiu, the administrative center of the county, hosts the "Path of Heroes" sculptural complex created by Constantin Brâncuși.

The three emblematic works – the Infinite Column (symbol of eternity), the Kissing Gate (metaphor of the transition between life and death) and the Table of Silence (place of meditation) – transform the city into a cultural pilgrimage point.

These masterpieces not only attract tourists, but also serve as tools for artistic education, putting Gorj on the map of universal modern art.

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The Brâncuși Ensemble in Targu Jiu:

- The Infinity Column (1938) - An iconic 29.35m-high sculpture made of 15 galvanized cast-iron modules, symbolizing the connection between earth and sky, eternity and regeneration.

- Kissing Gate (1938) - A monumental arch representing the popular tradition of kissing under the vault, but also a portal to the spiritual world.

- The Table of Silence (1938) - A circular table surrounded by 12 chairs, inspired by Dacian funeral rites and the Last Supper.

Other tourist attractions in Gorj:

- Tismana Monastery (the oldest monastery in Walla Wallachia)
- Defileul Jiului National Park (spectacular landscapes, mountain trails)
- Babaciu Rock and Oltețului Gorges (unique natural forms)
- Gorj County Museum (local history and ethnography)
- Lainici Monastery

Situated on the banks of the River Ji, Lainici Monastery (built in 1817) is a pillar of Orthodox spirituality. Its frescoes and its historical role (Nicolae Balcescu took refuge here in 1848) recommend it as a key point for understanding the evolution of Romanian society in the 19th century.

3. Natural heritage and ecotourism potentia

The Jiu Gorge and the Transalpina:

The Defile of the Jiu, a natural corridor carved by the Jiu river, played a strategic role in history, facilitating the link between Transylvania and Oltenia.

Today, its steep cliffs and spectacular tunnels are attractions for lovers of photography and history.

Transalpina (DN67C), the highest road in Romania (2,145m), offers access to breathtaking alpine scenery and is the starting point for hiking to the peaks of Parâng.

Caves and Gorges: Muierii Cave, Polovragi and Oltețului Gorges.

- Muierii Cave - associated with legends of women persecuted in the Middle Ages - fascinates with its underground lakes and unique formations.

- Polovragi Cave, linked to the cult of the Thraco-Dacian god Zamolxe, is home to bear fossils and a crystalline lake hall.

- The Oltețului Gorges and Sohodol Gorges, with rock walls over 100m high, are eco-tourists' paradises, offering signposted trails and secluded waterfalls.

Impact of tourism in local communities:

Gastronomy - A gateway to tradition

Context and relevance:

Gorj is emerging as a distinct cultural space in the Romanian landscape, where gastronomic heritage - represented by emblematic dishes such as bulzul with burduf cheese and *ciorba de lobodă* (loboda soup) - plays a key role in structuring an integrated tourism offer.

These culinary species are not only elements of tradition, but also economic resources that support the sustainable development of the area through: Valorization of local agri-food products (e.g.: kneaded cheese, recognized as DOP - Institute of Speleology "Emil Racoviță", 2021);

Increased demand for rural and experiential tourism;

Strengthening the local value chain (producers - accommodation - restaurants).

Tourism-economic impact:

The case studies show that the inclusion of these dishes in the menus of tourist accommodation establishments has led to:

- 20-30% increase in sales of traditional products (ANTREC data, 2023 - <https://www.clubantreprenor.ro/2023>);

- Prolonging the tourist season thanks to thematic events (the Feast of the Cheese of Burduf, Gorj Days);

- Competitive differentiation from other destinations through authenticity.

The integration of culinary heritage in the territorial marketing strategy of Gorj can be optimized through:

- Themed tourist packages (e.g. Brâncuși Circuits + tastings);

- Collaboration with agri-food research institutes to standardize recipes;

Policies to promote the "Taste of Gorj" brand in international platforms (e.g. Slow Food – Throsby, 2017).

Rural tourism and sustainability:

The agritourism guesthouses in the villages of Runcu and Polovragi show that tourism can be a driving force for sustainable development.

Projects such as the "Cultural Path" (rehabilitation of mountain trails) or workshops on traditional crafts (weaving, pottery) contribute to the preservation of intangible heritage.

4. Recommended routes

Day 1: Art, spirituality and wilderness

Târgu Jiu - the city of Brâncuși

- Tismana Monastery - About 20 km from Târgu-Jiu, this 14th century monastery is an important religious and cultural center

- Constantin Brâncuși Memorial House - Located in Hobița, the sculptor's native village, about 50 km from the city.

- Sohodolului Gorges, accessible on foot with paths through forests, Unique rock formations with small waterfalls.

- Gorj County Museum - Here you can discover exhibitions about the history, art and culture of the Gorj area, including local artworks and artifacts.

- Calea Eroilor - A collection of sculptural monuments by Constantin Brâncuși, dedicated to the fallen heroes of the First World War. It includes the famous "Endless Column", "Gate of the Kiss" and "Table of Silence".

- Constantin Brâncuși Sculptural Complex - In addition to the Way of the Heroes, you can also visit other works by the great sculptor in the city or nearby.

- Central Park ("Infinite Column" Park) - A pleasant area for relaxing, with green spaces and statues, ideal for walks.

- Tip: Visit the Gorj County Museum to understand the history of the area.

- Fascinating legends about women who hid here in the Middle Ages.

- Unique formations: stalactites, stalagmites and an underground lake.

- Recommendation: With guide and protective equipment.

Accommodation: Târgu Jiu (local hotels or hostels).

Day 2: Adventure in the gorges

■ Jiului gorge

- Travel the stretch between Bumbești-Jiu and Târgu Jiu.

- Sights: steep cliffs, spectacular tunnels and wild landscapes.

- Photo stop: At Vâlcele, where the Jiul makes a dramatic bend.

■ Lainici Monastery was built between 1812 and 1847 by local boyars on a hill overlooking the Jiu Valley.

Inside, there are splendid frescoes dating from 1860 and an iconostasis of Byzantine-style icons.

■ Transalpina (DN67C)

- The highest road in Romania (2,145 m), with panoramic views of the Parâng and Vâlcan Mountains.

- Activities: Hiking on marked trails or stop at Obârșia Lotrului (crystalline spring).

Accommodation: Huts or hostels in the Rânca area (popular in winter for skiing).

Day 3: Caves and wild gorges

■ The Muierilor Cave (or Muierii Cave) is located in Baia de Fier, Gorj County, at the entrance of Cheile Galbenului.

The name of the cave derives from its role as a historical refuge during periods of armed conflict, it served as a shelter for women and children, while men were mobilized on the front lines. Muierilor

Cave has a remarkable historical and speological value, being the first cave in Romania that benefited from electric lighting for tourism purposes.

■ Polovragi Cave is located 60 kilometers from Targu Jiu, in the village of Polovragi. It is known for its impressive attractions, such as the Sala cu Lac, where visitors can admire the beautiful underground water.

Also in the cave is the Bear Hall, where fossils of these ancient animals are on display for tourists to admire.

An important legend related to the Polovragi Cave speaks of Zamolxe, the Thraco-Dacian god, who is considered the protector of the area and the sacred places in the cave.

▪ Oltețului Gorges

- Near the Polovragi Cave, on the Olteț river.

- Route: Signposted paths between cliffs over 100 m high.

- Highest point: Oltețului waterfall (accessible after a short hike).

▪ Polovragi Monastery is located at the foot of Piatra Polovragilor mountain, on the outskirts of Polovragi in Gorj County.

Gorj county is a hidden treasure, combining the art of Brâncuși with the wildness of the Carpathians. Enjoy the adventure!

5. Conclusions

Although Gorje has exceptional resources, its tourism is faced with:

- Limited infrastructure: Secondary roads need modernization.

- Poor promotion: Lack of national campaigns means the region remains underappreciated.

- Environmental pressure: Caves and gorges require strict regulations to avoid degradation.

Recommendations:

- Public-private partnerships to fund infrastructure.

- Integrate Gorj into the European cultural circuit (e.g. Brâncuși route).

- Educating tourists on environmental protection.

The tourist route of Gorj County is not just a succession of objectives, but a symbolic journey through the history, art and nature of Romania.

Through the responsible use of resources, the region can become a model of sustainable tourism, where local communities thrive and heritage remains alive for future generations.

Gorj County is one of the richest counties in the country in terms of cultural, historical and natural treasures.

The Parang Mountains stretch to the north, towering over the surroundings from impressive heights.

The monuments of Brancusi, the father of modern sculpture, still stand as testimonies of Romanian genius.

Transalpina, the road between the clouds, awaits its travelers for years. Tourists thirsty for adventure, for peace and beauty, find wonderful adventures in Gorj.

Daily routes can become wonderful challenges.

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