

## THE TOURISM POTENTIAL AND EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF RURAL HERITAGE ASSETS THROUGH THEME ROUTES\*

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### Abstract

*Hungary's rich rural heritage values include traditional local products, handicrafts, terroir products, "Hungaricums". However, these products are not only about preserving values and exploiting them for economic purposes, but also about adding high intellectual capital, community collaboration or environmental awareness raising, social responsibility or even education for sustainability. These key issues can be further enhanced by theme routes based on local heritage values. The development of heritage in tourism is also increasingly becoming an economic interest. The past, which cannot be erased from human memory, is also a resource that is constantly renewed. The development of tourism is one of the dimensions of better exploitation of the natural, historical, cultural, architectural, economic and agricultural heritage accumulated in the Carpathian Basin, as well as of the economic capacity to produce local products. The development of theme routes is a good practice which has proved successful in several places. In recent years, the process of value creation has involved, and in many cases coordinated, the activities of local communities. Experience both at home and abroad has shown that the exploitation of local values in the community and in tourism has led to a number of good practices, regeneration of communities, and development of the local economy.*

**Keywords:** rural heritage, theme routes, local products

**JEL:** Z31, Z32

### 1. Introduction

Nowadays tourism has become the most important socio-economic sector in the world. It is also important to note that one in eleven jobs is linked to tourism. If we take the UNWTO forecast for 2030 of 1.8 billion international arrivals, we can see that the growth of tourism is a seemingly inexorable process, driven by human needs.

However, most of this development is not the result of spontaneous processes but of conscious planning and development. Only through these can the impact of tourism be optimised (Gonda, 2022).

Within the potential areas for tourism development, the focus is constantly changing, in line with demand expectations and current trends in tourism. From the point of view of our subject, it is fortunate that the focus is nowadays on linking up smaller, scattered attractions, developing them into theme routes and thus creating more powerful attractions. In addition to the traditional mass tourism destinations, there is a growing potential for integrating rural areas into the tourism supply. The transparency coming from globalisation and technological progress (Internet) is making it possible to compare prices and quality in tourism worldwide.

Today's people expect high quality with stable or even decreasing prices, so considering high quality services tailored to the customer in tourism product development is an incentive to increase the number of new guests and helps to retain regular customers. In the analysis of tourism motivations, there are several classifications, but almost all of them include gastronomy in some form, or in other words, culinary delights, which are becoming increasingly important for theme routes, whether they are the main purpose of the trip or just a pleasant side effect (Piskóti & Nagy, 2011). Locally produced food, consumed in a traditional way and in an authentic environment, meets the expectations of a sustainable food culture. The expectations of tourists visiting gastronomic theme routes include the possibility of experiencing the product in person, presence of the producer or farmer, personal participation in a stage of the product's life cycle (harvest,

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cooking classes, tasting), consumption of visual experiences, experience of fresh flavours, or even the reliving of tastes reminiscent of childhood (Piskóti et al., 2023). In the present study, we will also discuss the importance of theme routes based on gastronomic heritage in Germany.

## 2. Developing a real attraction out of multiple points of interest

There are a number of factors that influence tourism, which local authorities need to be aware of when making tourism plans. A fundamental trend is that more and more tourists want to experience recreation or sports, to learn more about the history, culture, heritage, and natural environment of the area they visit (Csapó et al., 2022). There is a growing focus on local products and traditional local gastronomy (Csóka & Angler, 2021).

Ecotourism, with its focus on sustainability, has become hugely popular. Many tourists are looking for new destinations and new types of tourism products. More and more people are becoming sensitive to the environment and want to visit places that are well designed and where tourism is not an environmental or social problem. Modern and conscious tourism development must take these aspects into account. Making them work is not always easy or straightforward. Consider the development of theme parks, which attract millions of visitors, which have huge energy requirements and generate a very significant volume of motorised traffic. Today's tourists, on the other hand, have an unprecedented wealth of choice. The main aim of attraction development and the creation of new attractions is therefore to cross the stimulation threshold of potential consumers and to act as a real tourist attraction. This objective can be well achieved by developing theme routes.

### 2.1 Theme routes

Theme routes actually date back to antiquity, with the development of early tourism giving rise to several "cultural theme routes". Among them, the pilgrimage routes stand out and were the most important theme routes in the Middle Ages. In the 17th and 18th century, it became common for the nobility, and later the bourgeoisie, to visit the famous destinations of

Western Europe as part of a cultural tour (the Grand Tour). In the first half of the last century, with the popularisation of active tourism, hiking tours were set up throughout Europe (e.g., the Blue Hiking Trail in Hungary). Wine routes were also created in the first half of the 20th century, first in Germany and then in more and more European countries. They have been present in Hungary since 1995.

The best-known theme routes are also the initiators of a number of tourism and marketing innovations (Máté & Bayerle, 2021). The first officially recognised cultural route was the Route of St James of Santiago de Compostela, which was declared a theme route by the Council of Europe in 1987 (when the European Institute of Cultural Routes was also created in Luxembourg). The theme routes, which are now considered the most popular, were established in the 1990s, but their attendance has only been growing rapidly since the early 2000s. Popular among these are film tourism routes (the first was Sex and the City in 1999, but the locations of the Lord of the Rings films also attract many tourists), cultural routes (for example, the Loire Chateaux Trail) and geotourism routes (the Geopark network was created in 1997). There are also routes based on local gastronomy (Gonda et al., 2021a). In addition to wine routes, there are theme routes based on traditional local products: asparagus route, plum route, cheese route, or route to the Transylvanian mineral water springs. The ethnographically oriented routes presenting specific ethnic groups (such as the Palóc Route, created in 2005) too are based on rural cultural heritage values. In addition to routes that trace the life stories of famous people (the Liszt Ferenc theme route), routes that showcase traditional crafts (Deutsche Fachwerk Straße) are also very popular and have a positive impact on creative tourism in rural areas (Lőrincz et al., 2023; Lőrincz & Csapó, 2023).

The theme routes link tourist destinations, which can be natural or artificial attractions, newly invented products or relaunch products, or physically or "only" mentally existing elements, which, once strung together on a thread and drawn on a map, become visible as a "theme route" product. There are several definitions for "theme route", each of which

defines its meaning in different ways. According to Puczkó & Rátz, “The theme routes are a series of natural and man-made attractions around a theme, accessible by different forms of transport.

The itineraries offer a combination of learning, entertainment and recreation, while respecting the principles of sustainability.” (Puczkó & Rátz, 2000). For Silbergh “Theme routes are integrated, environmentally sensitive, sustainable and relevant interpretations of a theme, offered through the development of services and marketing activities, taking into account visitor and local needs and environmental aspects, with positive economic, social and cultural impacts.” (Silbergh et al.1994).

In 1996, the ADAC (German Automobile Club) and the DTV (German Tourist Association) jointly formulated the meaning of a German theme route, “A tourist route is a permanently and precisely defined section of road on the national and regional roads of the Federation and the Land which offers the traveller special attractions that can be thematically defined. It serves, among other things, to make the circumscribed route more marketable to tourists.” (DTV 1996).

The theme route aims to create a chain of experiences by connecting existing point values. In designing the development, special attention should be paid to consumer expectations and to the different possibilities for social innovation (Nagy, 2021). Whatever the theme route is based on, it will build on locally produced traditional food products (Csóka & Gonda, 2023) and local products with gastro-cultural heritage values (Gonda et al., 2022b) in order to ensure authenticity and uniqueness.

## 2.2. Focused attraction development versus theme route development

We believe that the development of theme routes is better suited to the principles of modern, sustainable and responsible tourism. The two different types of development are assessed on the basis of ten criteria (Table 1).

Table 1: Comparison of the overall impacts of concentrated attraction development and theme routes

Environmental impacts		
	Concentrated attraction development	Theme route
1. Transport	It generates a large concentrated traffic.	Diverts traffic, seeks alternative solutions (e.g., Greenway).
2. Energy demand	Significant new capacity is used.	No new capacity is needed.
3. Capital demand	Significant. Requires external funding.	Not significant, local people can also get involved.
Economic impacts		
1. Tourism indicators (e.g., guest nights)	Significant impact, mostly new accommodation capacity is also built.	The impact is significant but difficult to measure because tourists are dispersed throughout the space.
2. Local population	It does not have a big impact. Investors benefit. Decision-making positions are outside the region.	The economic benefits are realised by local residents. Decisions are made locally.
3. Involving local products and services	Not typical. Sourced from a globalised market.	Typical. They can sell local products and services at good prices.
4. Employment impact	Jobs for local people, but many “guest workers”.	It fully supports the retention of local jobs and generates the new ones.
Social impacts		
1. Value creation, value preservation	No. If it goes out of fashion, it could even become an environmental problem.	It makes a significant contribution to the identification, conservation and development of rural heritage assets.
2. Social cohesion	No such effect.	It strengthens social cohesion, and in many cases formalised civil society organisations are created. It

		strengthens local identity.
3. Training, educational, cultural impact	No or weak.	It promotes the preservation of traditional knowledge, skills and traditions.

Source: own editing

It is clear from the above comparative analysis that, both in terms of the implementation of sustainable development principles and the achievement of rural development objectives, the development of a theme route is considered a more effective tool than the development of a concentrated tourist attraction.

### 2.3 The impact of major tourism trends on the development of theme routes

Local authorities, the organisations responsible for developments, need to be aware of key international tourism trends so that their tourism development plans meet the current and future expectations of tourists and can serve the sustainability of tourism.

Among the important quality trends, we highlight the following:

- More and more tourists are looking for fun, sport and adventure, wanting to know more about the history, nature and wildlife of the area they are visiting. Today, tourists are more active physically and mentally than ever before. The need for mental and physical activity must therefore be taken into account when designing theme routes.
- More and more tourists are looking to satisfy their special interest, to practice their hobbies. There are many types of special interest tourism, based on nature and wildlife, historical sites, cultural models, economic activities and, professional interests. When developing theme routes, it is logical to consider opening up to possible large hobby groups (e.g., hiking tourists, birdwatchers, nature photographers, cyclists, anglers, gastronomy enthusiasts, etc.).
- In many places, “back to the roots” motivated and nostalgia tourism, where tourists visit their ancestral homeland, is becoming important.

- Religious tourism by visitors to holy sites remains significant. In addition to the more popular pilgrimage sites that generate mass tourism, there is a growing demand for newly developed, less popular pilgrimage routes. Pilgrimage routes should also integrate local cultural values to create a more complex thematic itinerary.

- More and more tourists are looking for new destinations and new tourism products. This offers many opportunities to develop new tourist areas and to include areas that have been neglected by tourism so far.

- More and more tourists are trying to maintain and improve their health, and there is a big development in spas and baths. Traditional hotels and resorts are also installing exercise equipment. There is renewed interest in traditional therapies. In this context, the value of a healthy, clean environment and areas free of allergenic plants is increasing.

- Many tourists go on holiday several times a year, but for shorter periods. This allows for the development of more tourist destinations and for destinations to offer services and activities to tourists in all seasons. For this reason, theme routes should also be designed in terms of four seasons.

- As life expectancy increases, more and more elderly but active people, including many wealthy pensioners, are travelling. Disabled people are also travelling in greater numbers as tourists, and many services and facilities are designed for them.

- Tourists are becoming more sophisticated and demanding in their travel habits, looking for good quality attractions, accommodation and services for their money, and value for money.

- There is an increasing number of environmentally and socially sensitive tourists who are seeking well-designed and less polluted destinations, avoiding poorly designed destinations that are struggling with environmental and social problems. They do not want to increase their ecological footprint during their stay, either, and are happy to see the local population benefit from the tourism they generate.

- With the increasing share of the elderly in the population, the demand for accessible tourism is growing (Farkas-Raffay 2023). Therefore, accessibility is playing an

increasingly important role in the development efforts of destinations (Farkas et al. 2023).

- More and more tourist destinations are embracing a planned and managed approach to tourism development, aiming to develop high quality tourism that does not create environmental and economic problems and optimises economic benefits. Theme route development is an obvious tool to achieve this.

It has become an important trend that the development of tourism in a given area also serves to preserve the natural environment, historical sites and cultural traditions. In many places, ecotourism (controlled nature tourism) and cultural tourism are being developed with the aim of promoting the conservation of values. This is particularly important in areas with limited resources for conservation programmes. It is also an international trend that, while the commercial services of tourism are provided by the private sector, governments at all levels remain responsible for the overall management of tourism. In this way they can achieve national, regional and local environmental and socio-economic objectives.

The development of the local economy, in particular the promotion of the production and sale of local products and services, is an essential element of almost all projects, as is marketing for this activity. Many projects pay particular attention to promoting entrepreneurship and the acquisition of entrepreneurial skills. Tourism, recreation and various active pastimes in rural areas offer opportunities for economic diversification. Agricultural work, traditional festivals and events provide opportunities to participate in various active and passive tourism activities. The forms of tourism most to be promoted are those that alleviate the seasonality that exists in many places. Learning and training is a priority activity in a significant part of the projects, either in a traditional form, enhancing the knowledge of pupils and students in 12-class school education, but more often using traditional or newer, more innovative forms of training for specific target groups (local entrepreneurs, communities).

The survival of rural areas in a globalising world often depends on the preservation of local identities, their maintenance and, where

possible, strengthening, which is an essential element of many projects. This can be achieved through joint thinking, by setting and implementing common goals, and can ensure the quality of life and competitiveness of rural areas in the longer term, by creating a new quality of life and a new model of life in an increasingly globalised and urbanised world. The key to this process is networking, i.e., a series of actions by different actors – local authorities, businesses, NGOs, individuals – working together towards common objectives. In a multicultural environment, the integration of different cultures can be a source of development, but the dichotomy between modernity and tradition that can be found in some places, especially near metropolitan agglomerations, can also be a particular strength.

#### 2.4. *The role of rural heritage values in the development of theme routes in Germany*

Over the past two years, according to our survey 151 theme routes have been studied using website analysis and qualitative observation based on personal visits. The survey was complemented by personal interviews with experts. The theme routes identified were classified according to the date of their creation and their themes. It can be observed that most of them came into being between 1990 and 2010. The oldest of these is the Deutsche Alpenstraße (German Alpine Road), which was established in 1927 and has been developing steadily ever since. Unfortunately, the exact year of establishment of several routes is not known or there is conflicting information. Several of them are known to have been slowly established in the public consciousness as “what has always been there, existed”, and then, at some point, became institutionalised.

According to their typology, tourism theory has several groupings, but almost all of them devote a separate category to gastronomic or Lucullus feast pleasures:

FREYER (2015) divided theme routes into four groups, based on their main attraction:

1. Landscape,
2. Culture and history,
3. Lucullus feasts,

4. Other.

The Tourism Barometer (Tourism Sentiment Report) used the following three groupings in its 2008 annual report:

1. Landscape experience,
2. Culture and history,
3. Culinary experiences.

Twenty-nine active gastronomic theme routes were selected from the German theme routes. In addition to the culinary theme, there are of course other attractions on offer, so travellers can decide whether they want to devote their trip exclusively to culinary delights or visit other attractions in the destination with less or more intensity.

Table 2. *Thematic gastronomic itineraries examined in our survey*

Ahr-Rotweinstraße	Niedersächs.
Aischgründer	Spargelstr.
Bierstraße	Oberfränkische
Allgäuer Käsestraße	Bierstraße
Badische	Obstmarschenweg
Spargelstraße	Route der Genüsse
Badische Weinstraße	Römische
Beelitzer	Weinstraße
Spargelstraße e. V.	Ruwer-Riesling-
Bier- und	Weinstraße
Burgenstraße	Saar-Riesling-
Bocksbeutelstraße	Straße
Deutsche	Sächsische
Hopfenstraße	Weinstraße
Deutsche Kohlstraße	Schwäbische
Deutsche Weinstraße	Weinstraße
Käsestraße Schleswig	Spargelstraße NRW
Holstein e.V.	Weinstraße
Moselweinstraße	Kraichgau-
Naheweinstraße	Stromberg
Niedersächsische	Weinstraße Saale-
Milchstraße	Unstrut
	Weinstraße
	Taubertal
	Württembergischer
	Weinstraße

Source: own editing

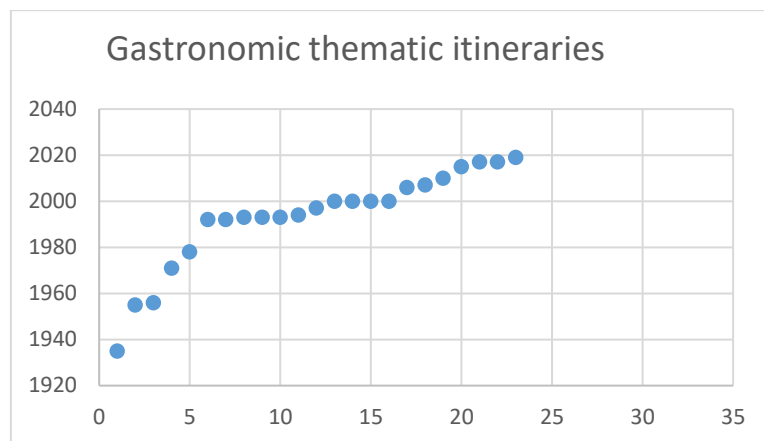


Figure 1. *The twenty-nine gastronomic theme routes grouped by year of creation*  
Source: own editing, n=29 (no data on year of foundation in 7 cases)

The growth of gastronomy-theme routes has accelerated since the 1990s (Figure 1). Of the 29 gastronomy-theme routes, seven were created between 1930 and 1989, with a significant number of them made between 1990 and 2019. No change was observed in the “wine routes” category, the most significant of which were created before 1990. The municipalities included in the wine routes have a significant development potential and create opportunities for networked, area-wide tourism development: cycle paths, ecotourism routes, and nature walks.

3. Conclusion

Tourists visit a rural area for its attractions. Attractions need to be carefully planned, implemented and managed if they are to succeed. Creative presentation that is informative and interesting and, where possible, novel for visitors is particularly important. The emphasis is deliberately placed on creativity. This does not equate to expensive installations or large-scale investments. After all, in many cases, the revival and tourist exploitation of a forgotten heritage (whether gastronomic or handicraft) can be a pleasant experience for tourists (Minorics, 2013). Most types of rural attractions are now designed to preserve and present the environmental and cultural heritage of the area, for both locals and tourists (Máté – Angler, 2021). The design of heritage and natural attractions (natural parks, archaeological and historical sites, cultural

traditions) for tourism is a profession in its own right, requiring great creativity and a holistic vision. It requires a well-developed culture of cooperation and trust (Domoszlai et al., 2023). However, there are general approaches and principles that apply to most of them. Analysing the good practices identified during the project, the following recommendations are made:

- Creating coherence between developments. This involves taking into account all residential and other developments in the area that may be even indirectly linked to tourism and considering their relationship with the planned theme route. In doing so, it should seek to involve local residents and ensure that they are given a share from the benefits of tourism.
- Determining the proportion of development and conservation objectives, taking into account national, regional and local policies for the conservation of nature and monuments and other tourism-related strategies.
- An environmental analysis is required, including any special surveys to be carried out, such as those of fauna, vulnerable ecosystems and archaeological or historic monuments, and the identification of special environmental areas and sites to be preserved and, in some cases, developed or restored.
- Theme routes should be designed with a strong emphasis on the preservation of environmental values, the protection of biodiversity and the promotion of environmental education. Particular care should be taken to protect and conserve flora and fauna and archaeological and historical sites.
- It is important to establish the carrying capacity, based on assumptions about the types of visitor use and effective visitor organisation and flow models.
- It is necessary to formulate an attraction plan, including the preparation and evaluation of alternative plans, the selection of the final, optimal plan, and the timing of the proposed development. As much attention as possible should be paid to the principles of environmental design and conservation measures, and to the choice of the right interpretive tools (these should not be expensive and complicated, but practical and creative).

- Even after the creation of the theme route, a final analysis of the environmental, including social impacts, is necessary, and the necessary modifications to the plan should be made.

- The most appropriate organisational form for managing the attraction needs to be identified, including the necessary training of future staff.

- Economic and financial analysis needs to be made, with estimates of development and operating costs and projected revenues. Particular attention should be paid to the benefits for local residents, labour requirements, local income, development of small tourism businesses and the social benefits of the project.

- A marketing plan must be made. Community marketing (municipality, TDM, district, etc.) can be used to continuously increase the visibility of the theme route.

- It is proposed to organise regular training sessions for local residents in connection with a theme route. This will strengthen their attachment to tourism and broaden the social embeddedness of the project, and the training could also help them to become involved as service providers in the expansion of the offer.

We are convinced that the above principles can be followed in the development of a theme route to optimise its tourism and rural and regional development benefits, and to use rural heritage values effectively for tourism development.

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