

The rurAllure network contributing to the renaissance of pilgrimage culture in Europe – A case of the Way of Mary

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Abstract

The paper discusses the possibilities of using religious tourism to achieve several objectives related to the field of tourism in Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia on the Central European Way of Mary. Content analysis was used to explore the following features of the rurAllure project: highlighting the cultural and natural heritage along the pilgrimage road and contributing to the development of regional business; offering various thematic routes to the pilgrims, and fostering slow tourism. The research showed how unified, as well as diverse, the individual paths of the Way of Mary in the three European countries are. The variety of geographical and cultural specificities is underlined by the attractiveness of slow tourism along the Way of Mary in Hungary, Transylvania and Slovakia.

Keywords:

pilgrimage tourism ,rural development ,stakeholder networks ,Way of Mary ,rurAllure platform ,sustainability

Introduction

Not only pilgrimage as a spiritual and religious phenomenon has a long tradition, but we are witnesses to an increasing number of people visiting religious locations. Thousands of people set out each year to travel along pilgrimage routes such as the Way of Saint James or the Ways of Mary in Central Europe (López-Nores et al., 2022). We are witnessing an increasing number of people who travel for leisure or sport, as a retreat from modern life, or for cultural enlightenment (López-Nores et al., 2022).

There is a need to distinguish between pilgrimage, religious and spiritual tourism.

Pilgrimage is one of the most common phenomena found in religious culture linked to a specific religious tradition and activities are strictly associated with religion (Reader & Walter, 1993; Sirirat, 2019). The primary purpose of tourism is to relax, have mental peace, and visit interesting places. **Religious tourism** is a new tourism product where the religious motivation is focused on visiting religious attractions and engaging in cultural and natural tourism around religious centres with their religious beliefs (González-González & Fernández-Álvarez, 2022; Sirirat, 2019). People are not only keen on visiting religious monuments to appreciate architecture, but also on knowing more about history, rituals, and traditions as well as about other places around the religious spots. The main goal of religious tourism i.e to deepen the spiritual life and the individual relationship with God is currently expanding. According to Rappaport (1999) the true origin of religion is rooted in the human need to create rituals which help them to create a balance between themselves and the environment.

Spirituality as a way of finding out the meaning and purpose of life has a positive impact on a person's well-being and quality of life (Kumar et al., 2022; Vitorino et al., 2018). **Spiritual tourism** is mainly focused on exploring life's meaning, and self-development without religion (Sirirat, 2019). A probe is needed to distinguish pilgrimage tourism from spiritual tourism. In some cases, both forms of tourism overlap. We could see it during the pandemic era linked with the spread of Covid 19, which intensely affected the lives of individuals, families, various social groups and society. It limited their work, interests, mobility and opportunities for socialization and forced society to seek new forms of relaxation, spiritual space and contact with nature. People

began to look for opportunities that would help them replace the absent components of their normal functioning.

The rurAllure project

The European Union started to look for tools that could improve the long-standing, unsustainable and unwanted impact of tourism and this was a key factor in approving the rurAllure project *'Promoting rural museums, monuments and cultural heritage sites near European pilgrimage routes'* under the Horizon 2020. The project rurAllure ("RurAllure", 2021) focuses on the attraction and promotion of lesser-known, but all the more interesting points of the cultural, natural and ethnographic richness of the countries. Some of the points have significant economic and policy benefits, while others, with the support of regional, national and European institutions, have the potential for significant growth (López-Nores et al., 2022).

The project goals align well with sustainable tourism focused on natural and cultural destinations (Sirirat, 2019; UNWTO, 2017). According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization one of the most important goals of tourism is sustainability focused on: 1- people (healthy environment), 2- planet (sustainable consumption and production), 3- prosperity (fulfilling human technology in harmony with nature), 4- peace (no sustainable development without peace), and 5- partnership (with the participation of all countries, stakeholders and people) (UNWTO, 2017). Part of sustainable tourism is slow tourism. It is characterized by exploring the local region (culture, nature, history etc.), prolonging time, reducing mobility, and supporting the environment and local area (Oh et al., 2016).

The project rurAllure ("RurAllure", 2021) represents an example of good practice of how a platform and an application, created in cooperation among the European countries involved, can support a specific objective. The IT platform and the app promoting pilgrimage routes in Europe offer the possibility to join the pilgrimage, religious, spiritual and sustainable tours by providing with visitor's information and route planning capability for places of interest in their vicinity, including the services on offer. During the planning phase, users can specify several options and preferences in relation to a

number of factors (e.g., group size, use of transport, preference for hiking, choice of Points of Interest types, etc.). In relation to the situations like pandemics, it offers the possibility to disperse the masses of pilgrims, tourists and visitors in space, reduce their concentration on the most attractive tourist and pilgrimage points and open up space for the user to modify the chosen route according to their own priorities and interests. One of the important aims of the project is to enrich the pilgrims' on-site experience to create narratives about the lesser-known cultural, literary, thermal, and natural heritage sites (Lopéz-Salas, 2021). New technologies and the increasing interest in culture can be excellent examples of the personalised service of cultural tourism, a leisure activity for people. The cultural consumption experience is based on intangible cultural heritage projects linked with local characteristics, emphasising intangible cultural heritage content (Meng & Liu, 2021).

Recently, there has been a noticeable increase in the attractiveness of digital stories (Oppegaard & Grigar, 2014). That is why the digital platform rurAllure ("RurAllure", 2021) has to offer thematic narratives. Narratives offer visitors information connected with emotions but also with facts and history. Museums, cultural and natural heritage sites are important places for how narrations are situated within present social interests (Hanna et al., 2019; Rudokas & Čižaitė-Rudokienė, 2022). When narratives are created for mobile technology, there is a need to keep the balance of media forms along with a rapid change in digital technology which raises the question of sustainability of quality (Oppegaard & Grigar, 2014).

The Central European Way of Mary - an overview

Roman Catholic Christianity has an active tradition of pilgrimage which is centred on saints of the Virgin Mary (Reader & Walter, 1993). The Way of Mary is a network of 2200 kms of pilgrimage route in Central Europe connecting shrines dedicated to the worship of the Virgin Mary (Mária Út, 2020). It is East-West axis runs from Mariazell in Austria to Csíksomlyó (Șumuleu Ciuc) in Romania while its North-South route expands from Częstochowa in Poland to Međugorje in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Thus, we get a cross that spans Austria, Hungary, Romania, Poland, Slovakia, Croatia, and Bosnia and

Herzegovina (“Romanian Via Mariae”, n.d.). The paper is especially focused on showing selected best practices from the three countries represented in the ‘Ways to Csíksomlyó’ pilot: Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania (Figure 1).



Figure 1. - The map of the Way of Mary (Austria, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia) (Mária Út, 2020)

From a historical perspective, we can say that the Way of Mary has had significant cultural, religious and economic importance since the Middle Ages. Medieval Central European kings made it a priority to join the network of pilgrimage routes, especially those leading to Jerusalem and the ones reaching Rome without crossing the Alps (Barna, G. et al., 2020). Consequently, the dangerous marine routes were soon replaced by the land trails leading through the middle of Europe, Germans, Hungarians, Czechs, Poles and Croats also took on these journeys themselves, going to Aachen, Cologne and Mariázell. Mariázell has been attracting pilgrims since the 12th century and it is, therefore, one of the most important shrines in Central Europe. Approximately 1 million pilgrims visit it annually (“Basilika Mariázell”, n.d.).

The burial places of saintly kings and queens, often canonized soon after their death gained importance, and the thriving cult of relics also created new pilgrimage centres where pilgrims could enjoy the hospitality of religious orders. The cult of the Virgin Mary gained popularity starting in the 14th century (Knapp & Tüskés, 2002). There are many places of worship along and near the Way of Mary. Most of them are associated with legends, tales and fabulous stories, which most often tell us about Virgin Mary’s

miraculous healings, and how she helped people escape from the enemy (“Bartók”, n.d.). These stories give us an insight about the lives and beliefs of people in that era, and at the same time, they confirm our striving to be close to nature seeking contact with divine power.

The Way of Mary pilgrimage route in Hungary

The total Hungarian network comprises approximately 1500 kms. The main route in Hungary is part of the M01 route connecting Mariazell with Csíksomlyó. From its 1300 kms length, approximately 780 kms traverse Hungary (Mária Út, 2020). The route enters at Kőszeg. The route has been designed to reach the best-known Mary shrines in the area.

Mátraverebély-Szentkút, with visitors over 200 000 yearly, owns its name to the sacred well (‘szent kút’) located there. The wonders and legends associated with the place spread rapidly even in the Middle Ages, a church was built in the village to serve the growing number of pilgrims. In the caves on the hillside, hermits had lived since the 13th century. Since 1772 the Franciscans have been the inhabitants of the Szentkút monastery, but their final settlement took place only in the 19th century. In 2006, Cardinal Primate Péter Erdő declared this pilgrimage site a National Shrine (“Mátraverebély-Szentkút”, n.d.)

The reputation of **Máriapócs** was brought about by the repeated tears of the holy image of the Virgin Mary in the basilica in the 18th century. Basilian monks settled in the locality in 1749 and built a convent. The monastery became the centre of Greek Catholic culture and education. A memorable day of the settlement is 18 August 1991, the pilgrimage of Pope John Paul II to Máriapócs. Since 3 December 2005, Máriapócs (“Máriapócs Nemzeti Kegyhely”, n.d.) has been a National Shrine. In the sanctuary of the Máriaremete Church the centuries-old oak tree and the holy image of Mary the Hermit in a gilded frame on it can still be seen today. The miraculous image was brought by the great admirer of Mary of Einsiedel, Katalin Thalwieser moving to Pesthidegkút from Switzerland in the 18th century (“Máriaremete”, n.d.). Bodajk

("Bodajk Calvary", n.d.) is the oldest Hungarian pilgrimage site (Figure 2), its church walls rest on the stones of the chapel of King St. Stephen. The first Hungarian holy family played a decisive role in its history: its chapel was built by St. Stephen, and its miraculous holy image was given to the church 600 years later by the town of the Blessed Gizella, Passau.



Figure 2. - Pilgrims descending to the church at Bodajk, Hungary

The main route of the North-South axis M02 enters from Šahy in Slovakia, its Hungarian section covers approximately 600 kms. The first important Mary shrine in the North is located at Márianosztra, then the route crosses Esztergom, the main residence of the Archbishop (Prímás). It touches several points of interest in Budapest, then continues to Alsószentiván, shrine to the Virgin Mary of Fatima. The Episcopal Castle and Catholic Church of Püspökszentlászló, located in the Eastern-Mecsek hills is also an important pilgrimage stop. In the city of Pécs the Cathedral with the Mary chapel, depicting the legends of Hungarian Saints and the early Christian tombs in the former Roman settlement of Sopianae are worth a visit ("Kirándulás Tippek", 2022). ("Máriagyüd", n.d.), the Southernmost Hungarian Mary shrine has been a significant pilgrimage site since the 18th century. Several legends are attributed to the Virgin Mary statue erected there originally in the 11th century, 'the White Lady of the Tenkes Hill' The basilica

belonging to the Franciscan order incorporates parts of the original 14th church, it was completed in the 18th century. The M02 route continues towards its destinations in Međugorje.

Another important route section, still under development is M04, it offers an alternative to reach Csíksomlyó (Șumuleu Ciuc) from Zalaegerszeg via Máriagyüd-Temesvár (Timișoara). The maintenance of the existing routes and the exploration of new sections are performed by the extended volunteer network of the Way of Mary Public Benefit Association (MUTKE) and its stakeholders. Strong cooperation exists with the Hungarian Hiking Association (Magyar Természetjáró Szövetség) at the parallel pilgrimage routes.

The Way of Mary pilgrimage route in Transylvania/Romania

Leaving Hungary at Bátorliget, Piricse M01 route of the Way of Mary continues its way in Transylvania, Romania, offering pilgrimages and tours of various lengths, difficulty levels and types to individual visitors, couples, families, but also to student groups, young people, groups of friends, to company retreats and teambuilding participants (Figure 3).



Figure 3. - Pilgrim group taking a rest near Szentegyháza (Vlăhița), Transylvania,

Romania

The Way of Mary in Romania has 12 different routes which creates a network of 1246 kms, crossing 10 counties. The implementation of the way is coordinated by the Romanian Way of Mary Association, which was founded in 2012, together with other partner organisations, such as the Caritas Alba Iulia and the Transylvanian Carpathians Association (“Romanian Via Mariae”, n.d.)

The main route of the Way of Mary leads to Csíksomlyó, one of the main national shrines of Hungarian Roman Catholics. It has been a popular destination for pilgrims since the middle of the 15th century (Mohay, 2006). Even today hundreds of thousands of people visit it annually, for this reason, the main pilgrimage event takes place at Pentecost. In 2019, the Holy Father also visited Csíksomlyó presenting it with the most valuable papal honour, the Golden Rose.

The Way of Mary pilgrimage route in Slovakia

The pilgrimage route Way of Mary (Via Mariae in Slovakia) crosses the country from the south (Šahy) to the north (Trstená) and takes the visitor through flat stretches of fields and vineyards, sites associated with mining, folk and historic urban architecture, as well as mountain areas, valleys, forests and viewpoints. The pilgrimage route is approximately 250 km long and according to NGO (Via Mariae, 2022) is divided into 10 stages and a pilgrim walks an average of 25 km a day. The southern stages are flat, but from approximately the middle of the way, the terrain changes and visitors pass through the more rugged territory of Banská Štiavnica, Kremnica and Staré Hory through Great Fatra, Choč Hills to the extreme tip of Upper Orava. The city Banská Štiavnica is an important point where the Via Mariae crosses the St. James’s Way ‘Camino de Santiago’ from the east part of the country to Santiago de Compostela. The northern part of the route ‘Via Mariae’ offers beautiful views of the surrounding mountains and national parks. Due to the mountainous terrain, it is more convenient to make the pilgrimage in the warmer summer and autumn months.

Aim of the research

Along the selected routes a network of stakeholders is built including municipalities, small museums and local service providers. These two key project activities are expected to contribute to the future increase in the number of visitors in lesser-known regions, also individuals and smaller groups and to support local tourism development. The current study focuses on the creation network with stakeholders as a journey of contribution to the renaissance of pilgrimage culture in Europe than on the IT application.

The aim of our research was to find out how rural areas along pilgrimage routes can benefit more from the flow of pilgrims by building local stakeholder networks, cultural heritage networks, and awareness of pilgrimage tourism in a modern style. The Way of Mary has a significant potential for slow tourism, but the problem is that the app, list of POI and narratives, and network of stakeholders are missing. Serious research is needed to fill this gap significantly since Covid-19 has changed the established patterns in both tourism and religious rituals with a focus on sustainability.

In order to meet the objective following research questions were framed:

Q1: How does the rurAllure project highlight this pilgrimage route's cultural and natural heritage and potential for regional and local business development?

Q2: How can the featured trips and narratives of the rurAllure platform offer thematic routes pilgrims can choose from or combine?

Q3: How to stimulate slow tourism contributing to the renaissance of pilgrimage?

Methods

A qualitative research design was used to accomplish the aim and answer the research questions.

Content analysis with a nomothetic approach was used for collecting points of interest for Via Mariae in Slovakia (Neuendorf, 2017). The material for content analysis came from websites, books (travel guides, maps), and internal materials from stakeholders and municipalities. After the open-coded procedure it was possible to set

the main types of Via Mariae Points of Interest (POI, N=260) for pilgrims and tourists. The recommendations of Adler and his colleagues (2017) were used for working with narratives. The first step in coding was maintaining a high inter-rater reliability standard. Three coders read through a sub-set of POI individually and then together. After discussion, coders continued until they reached a consensus about the process. The coding system was refined during this phase, and the POIs were re-read. The next step was determining what dominant topics/categories/domains emerged from the collected materials.

In Hungary the information about the basic Points of Interest, such as the pilgrimage site itself and the surrounding infrastructure originated from the pilgrimage experience of the Hungarian Association ("Maria Út", n.d.). Since the project focus has been on natural heritage in the vicinity of the pilgrimage routes additional site visits have taken place and recommendations by the Hungarian Hiking Association ("Természetjáró", n.d.) have also been considered. In 2021 the Common Strategies and Market Analysis' Working group of rurAllure (RurAllure, 2021) prepared a comparative analysis of narrative models and previous works on Cultural Heritage Storytelling (Lopéz-Salas, 2021). Narratives are common on guided museum tours, but provide a unique experience on the pilgrimage tour planning. Narratives may be collected in oral or written formats (Adler et al., 2017). Both forms were used.

While selecting the most suitable model, evaluation of the effect was studied on various pilgrim groups because the narrative, representing a sequence of events had to be understandable and meaningful for the target audience (Elliott, 2005).

Findings based on the project experience

Comparing the project achievements in the three neighbouring countries in Hungary, Slovakia and Romania it can be concluded that they have common traits with some overlapping activities, however, they are also divergent based on the maturity of the pilgrimage route and the support received from some key stakeholders.

Thematic routes by narratives in Hungary

The pilgrimage survey conducted in 2021 showed that the 'typical' Way of Mary pilgrim in Hungary was middle-aged, physically active, with a strong Catholic faith and in most cases interested in hiking, culture and history. However, to make pilgrimage 'sustainable' on this route new groups are needed to be involved. While preparing the narratives and featured trips consideration of young people and families as potential target groups is needed. Podcast of storytelling were mainly created, but an intension is required to highlight the cultural aspects of a particular route section by excerpts from poems and musical pieces. Drawing interest in visual arts was made by video slideshows. Narratives may be used both for cultural heritage and spiritual contents. The following (Table 1) depicts the narratives created so far. They are intended for use through the app still under development.

Most rurAllure narratives have been prepared by the historian team member, who is specialised in medieval studies. Her sources have been from on-site visits, materials from visitor centres, and local newspapers, sometimes written by local historians or reporting an event and the related historical background and curiosities. The thematic issues of the Journal of the Hungarian Geographical Society (Földgömb) relate well to the subjects. She also subscribed to the *Hikers' journal*, (*Természetjáró*) a monthly paper which gives thematic/regional reportages with incredibly rich material; quite some high-quality blogs written by hikers, and local nature enthusiasts; the monthly journal of the Forestry; the homepage and wonderful printed booklets of the National Parks. The National Blue Route (a hiking trail that crosses all Hungary) has an official homepage and several amateur bloggers write about it. It does not coincide with the pilgrim route but often passes by natural heritage sites shared by both. National Park books like *'Ipolytarnóctól Füzérradványig - Észak-Magyarország természeti értékei'* (Rakonczay, 1989) provide practical information. One can get a good insight into the operation of national parks during special events (birdwatching, caving, guided study tours in the forest) sometimes accessing highly protected areas. Modern technology, like videos of drone photography, are used by archaeologists and landscape experts. A historian can always turn to books and biblical sources, archaeological and geography monographs related to regions. The researcher being a historian of the Central

European cult of saints hold a collection of scholarly literature on the topics addressed in the narratives (Table 1).

Table 1. Description of the narratives developed until summer 2022

Narrative title	Recommended for route sections	Type
History of mining in the Vértes-Gerecse area	Tatabánya and Csókakő	audio
Religious orders in the Gerecse Hills	Mór-Csókakő-Majk-Pélföldszentkereszt	audio
Poems and music about the Mátra Hills (by Sándor Sík and Zoltán Kodály	Kodály Chapel, Galyatető	audio
In the footsteps of saintly kings in the Mátra Hills	Mátraszentimre-Mátraszentistván-Tar-Mátraverebély Szentkút	audio
Grape and wine	Gyöngyöspata-Gyöngyöstarján-Farkasmály-Abasár-Pálosvörösmart	audio
Crystal and water: Glassmaking, crystal carving and all sorts of waters in the Parád valley	Parádsasvár-Parád-Ilona Valley-Parádfürdő	audio/ video
Landscape as inspiration: artists in the Danube Bend - the Danube Bend in art	Nagymaros-Zebegény-Márianosztra	video

Water as a symbol in the Bible	Pilgrimage by canoe on the Danube	'waterproof' text (laminated)
Hidden treasures along the Danube (between Karva and Esztergom)	Pilgrimage by canoe on the Danube between Kravany nad Dunajom (Karva) and Esztergom	'waterproof' text (laminated) and audio
The river as border – a historic perspective	various places along the Danube	audio and video

Stakeholders' involvement in Hungary

Stakeholders can shape rurAllure either by joining the sample pilgrimages actively or participate in the separately organised partner events. Municipalities and other stakeholders along the pilgrimage route sections have been offered the possibility to include the relevant cultural or natural heritage sites in their vicinities. It resulted very beneficial for municipalities, like Tata and Gyöngyöspata that are not on the Way of Mary itself and have been looking for a similar opportunity for some time. During the sample pilgrimage by bike in September 2021, the tour starting from Tatabánya made an extra detour to include Tata, where the mayor welcomed the pilgrims in the church with the local choir singing, accompanied them for a while and invited the local press, as well. This event has been repeated in 2022, too. In Gyöngyöspata rural development of the Mátra region and the related challenges were in focus since this sample pilgrimage was prepared for students from the rural development faculty of the Szent István University in Gyöngyös. In general, successful sample, pilgrimages are used for the creation of featured trips in the rurAllure platform, although several variations may exist of a particular route.

The Gerecse Naturpark Visitor Centre, operated by the Salesians of Don Bosco at Péliföldszentkereszt hosted the first rurAllure partner meeting. The event was also connected to a one-day sample pilgrimage in the area. Péliföldszentkereszt is a well-

known spiritual retreat, with decent infrastructure, but not easy to reach. The 'Creation Protection Exhibition' of the Visitor Centre provides added value for rurAllure. It is a well-balanced mix of nature conservation and the protection of life and creation, as seen by the arranging Salesian Community. During the stakeholder meeting, the idea of the rurAllure international network was presented for the first time. Representatives of the Salesian Community, parallel pilgrimage routes, the local Forestry, and the Travel Agency of the Esztergom Archdiocese reflected on the idea and contributed actively to shaping it. A new attraction, the Via Lucis (The Way of Joy) has been created at Péliföldszentkereszt by famous sculptor Péter Párkányi Raab. It is a series of sculptures inviting pilgrims to follow and remember the events related to Jesus Christ after his resurrection until the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

The partner event of the Mátra region is hosted in Abasár, with its neighbouring Sár Hill. It is considered the most significant village of viticulture in the area, it even has the Way of Mary going through one of its wine cellars. The event is hosted by the municipality with full cooperation among the villages in the area (Figure 4). Local folk traditions emerged as possible topics for narratives where the participants offered the contribution to narrative materials. A key motivation for this settlement is to promote the continuation of the archaeological excavation of the supposed tomb of King Sámuel Aba from the 11th century on the site of the former monastery (Abasari-feltaras-hu, n.d.). Guests are also invited to visit the archaeological site.



Figure 4. - the rurAllure Hungarian team with the Mayor of Abasár at the Archeological Site

Via Mariae in Slovakia as part of the Central European Way of Mary

The Via Mariae has not been marked yet. There are more popular ways in Slovakia to cross the country from west to east. First of all, a content analysis of available materials was done to collect points of interest on and along the route. After collecting 260 points of interest (from websites, books, travel guides, maps, and internal materials from stakeholders and municipalities) through thematic analysis, 4 basic categories emerged: 1-Pilgrimage sites; 2-Natural heritage sites; 3- Ethnographic and cultural attractions; and 4- Experiential tourist spots.

1- **Pilgrimage sites** are locations with churches, cultural heritages, and calvaries (i.e., in the cities Trstená, Ludrová, Staré Hory, Banská Štiavnica, Hontianske Nemce). They are significant, unique architectural buildings of churches near the routes such as, the Gothic Church of All Saints in Tvrdošín, a national cultural monument, which was awarded by Europa Nostra and included in the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2008. It

dates from the second half of the 15th century and was modified in the 17th century and supplemented with Renaissance elements. Its dominant feature is the Baroque altar with the image of All Saints (“Tvrdošín”, n.d.). The wooden Articular Church in Hronsek is inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2008. The atmosphere of the courtyard is completed by a wooden bell tower and 4 massive linden trees, 2 of which date from the same period as the church (UNESCO, 2020). The articular church in Svätý Kríž is the largest sacral wooden building in Central Europe with over 6,000 seats. The church was built in 1774 to the model of Scandinavian sacral buildings in just one year without the use of iron nails and the master carpenter could neither read nor write.

2- **Natural heritage sites** are typically mineral springs, natural parks, hills, botanical gardens, caves, and primal forests. It includes a 400-year-old, 22-metre-high oak tree in the Krupina district. Majer’s Rock (an altitude of 1283 m) in the Great Fatra Mountains is also a unique natural creation surrounded by many different species of rare plants and protected animals.

In the limestone and dolomite layers on the north route of Via Mariae (n.d.) in the Liptov region, a natural monument was created by the erosion of the water -Breakthrough of the Teplý Potok (Warm Creek). In this protected area of the canyon-like section of Teplý Potok is also the lower waterfall with a height of 2.4 m he national natural monument, Waterfalls in Lúčky (Ružomberok district, Liptov region in the north of the country), is situated in the middle of the village. It is a 12-metre-high cascading waterfall falling into small lakes from the upper edge of the travertine terrace. Close to Waterfalls in Lúčky visitors can bathe in Kalamena Thermal Spring with 33 degrees Celsius temperature of healing water (“Medokýš”, 2022).

Regional biocentres and the most important natural heritage are concentrated in national parks and reserves such as Low Tatras, Great Fatra, Low Fatra, High Orava, and Štiavnica Hills, where visitors can admire the richness of flora and fauna, mostly protected by law. South of the Great Fatra Mountain Harmanecká Cave, a stalactite cave, with a high abundance of moonmilk and 10 bat species have been identified so far.

3- **Ethnographic and cultural attractions** (folk architecture sanctuaries, open-air museums, castles, chateaux, rock dwellings, museums, mint, folklore festivals,

traditional pottery art)

Slovakia and its regions are linked to shepherding, winemaking, and lace-making. For example, shepherding has influenced all manifestations of folklore, not only milk processing and local food products, but also the production of exquisitely carved bowls. Song and music folklore, musical instruments, fur processing, influence on the form of buildings with northern timber log architecture. The southern areas are associated with wine production which has famous wine cellars in the villages Stará Hora and Mladá Hora. Špania Dolina (Špania Valley) is typical not only for its architecture but also for the so-called “miners’ lace”, which is actually a kind of very specific and popular bobbin lace. A set of miner houses built of wood and stones spread in the central Slovakian commune Špania Dolina is an open-air museum. The mining houses are included in the list of monuments of folk architecture (Figure 5). A unique jewel of Slovakia is placed in Brhlovce, Rock Dwellings (“Brhlovce”, n.d.). It is a complex of 45 rock dwellings carved into taffs rocks and awarded the Europa Nostra prize. In the past, these rock dwellings served as a protection against the Turks, nowadays some of them are still inhabited or used as wine cellars because they are cool in summer and warm in winter (“Brhlovce”, n.d.). The rich pottery tradition in Slovakia dates back to the 15th century. The pottery guild in Trstená was established in 1870 and brings a combination of a brown glaze with white designs-(Fig. 6).



Figure 5. - The mining houses in Špania Dolina (Špania Valley, Slovakia)



Figure 6. - The traditional pottery in Tvrdošín, Slovakia

4-Experiential tourist spots are connected with the tasting of traditional local gastronomy, horse riding, harvesting, animal care, and walking through a fairy-tale paradise. Shepherding and the production of traditional products also enjoy popularity. As mentioned before, Via Mariae has not been marked along the route in the touristic map. Therefore, the goal was to increase awareness of the route. One way to promote Via Mariae in the media was to engage the citizens in the process of creating visibility, dissemination and branding of the Via Mariae pilgrimage route. Competition called 'Wander with heart and body' was set up to collect pictures of points of interest along the pilgrimage route. It was important for feeding the app of rurAllure for promotional purpose. After two months (December 2021-February 2022) 168 valid photos taken by pilgrims/tourists who had travelled the route or part of it were collected. At the end of the competition, the jury awarded 3 of the most beautiful photos along the Via Mariae route and its surroundings. Information about the competition was shared by posters, social networks, websites, direct e-mails, and Word of mouth. It enabled the creation of promotional material with unique photos from the competition.

The Way of Mary in Transylvania as part of the Central

European network

The Transylvanian section of the Way of Mary rurAllure contributes in several ways in increasing the number of visitors to the pilgrimage route and to the development of local businesses.

Network building being one of the main objectives of the project, rurAllure offers local and regional service providers and businesses the opportunity to introduce themselves and build relationships (e.g., by organising stakeholder meetings and round table discussions). Through the exchange of experience service providers can learn and debate how to improve the quality of their services (e.g., pieces of training for developing the competencies of the staff), they also have the chance to get to know the needs of the group of pilgrims and tourists even better.

The development in the framework of the project affects not only to those coming from abroad, but also the locals. The aim of the project and the Romanian Way of Mary Association is to appeal to local people who feel the Way of Mary as their own, urge them to make pilgrimage tour individually or with their families and understand various natural, cultural and religious values. In this way use of local services will be enhanced contributing to the development of the regional economy

The Transylvanian pilot section selected as part of the project is the **Târgu Mureş (Marosvásárhely)**-Ghimeş Făget (Gyimesbükk) section, a route about 200 kms, offers countless featured trips and narrative opportunities that can be built on the lesser-known natural, cultural and religious heritage of this region. Such featured trips and narrative themes that can be developed during the project are : Folk architecture, folk dance and music, medical plants and herbs, mofettes, Legends, folk crafts, handicrafts, Gastronomy and mountain meadows.

Transylvania has everything you need for slow tourism: beautiful nature, rich cultural and natural heritage, national and religious diversity, hospitable local people and communities, and diverse programme offer and activities. The infrastructure that meets the needs of pilgrims and tourists is developing, and serious steps are being taken in

order to improve the safety on the road.

Conclusion

The research showed how unified, as well as diverse individual paths of the Way of Mary in the three European countries. The variety of geographical and cultural specificities are highlighted along the Way of Mary route in Hungary, Transylvania, and Slovakia along with the potential for regional and local business development.

Stakeholders' activities of the projects and events related to the Way of Mary lead to the construction and coordination which became visible among the local municipalities, institutions, and service providers along the road. All of this is done primarily through the project's own communication channels (website and mailing list) and through social media, as well as through articles appearing in the local, regional, national, and international media. The dissemination of events organised within rurAllure (e.g., family day and stakeholder meeting) organised in Szentegyháza, Harghita County, Romania in June 2022 have significantly increased the visibility. The project thus provides an opportunity to increase awareness of the cultural and natural heritage of the region to both the national and international audiences through showcasing the traditional local gastronomy, food production, crafts, national parks and national heritage sites.

The platform being created as part of rurAllure project and the featured trips and narratives in it will offer several interesting and interactive opportunities for pilgrims. In this way, anyone who is interested can visit thematic routes that have probably not been known before, or not from this perspective. The material for the narratives and featured trips is created by the research of cultural heritage experts, as well as with the contribution of local experts, organisations, and institutions. Perhaps the biggest advantage of choosing a thematic route is that they guide pilgrims along the Way of Mary and its surroundings based on professionally founded and well-documented, up-to-date information. The platform also offers users the opportunity to interact, as it will be possible to share travel plans, contact people on the same road, or even meet with each other.

For slow tourism to truly contribute to the renaissance of pilgrimage on the Central

European Way of Mary, the development of the following areas is necessary:

Active institutional network

It's important to promote cooperation between local and county governments, NGOs, institutions (e.g., rural museums) which are affected by the various sections of the Way of Mary. Formulation and implementation of specific tasks is needed with the involvement of stakeholders present at the local and regional level.

The visibility of the program options

One of the cornerstones of effective slow tourism depends much on the offered programs and activities which must be communicated widely to the target market to increase the number of tourists and pilgrims. It will be helpful for the effectiveness of the work of those stakeholders running and organising the programs and activities. Such programs can include visits to local producers and artisans, product tastings, interactive sessions (e.g., baking horn cakes (kürtőskalács), museum pedagogical activities, guided tours, etc.

Client-focused perspective and improvement of services

The success of fostering slow tourism depends on getting to know the target group and developing services according to their needs by using and showing local values and talents. That is why the institutional network mentioned above and created within the rurAllure project is important since the local stakeholders (service providers, tour guides, tourist offices, etc.) can learn from each other, get to know the gap between good and less effective practices, and at the same time catch up with the modern trends dictated by slow tourism.

Spirituality

One of the special features of the Way of Mary is its uniqueness, national and religious diversity and heritage in Hungary, Transylvania, and Slovakia. This can be an added value that should be included in the framework of pilgrimage tourism and slow tourism.

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Notes

No notes.

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