

OCNA ȘUGĂTAG - THE DYNAMICS OF A TOURIST RESORT BETWEEN BALNEAL AND WEEK-END ACTIVITIES

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Abstract: Ocna Șugătag resort is a local interest balneal destination in Maramureș County. The recent evolutions have had a role in shaping the dynamics of the village and its resort part. Salt water originating from well reaching the former salt mines is used as primary resource for the baths. The paper presents as case study, the importance of conditions and decision factors in animating and shifting the profile of a tourist destination. The results show the mechanism which oriented a part of the tourist flows for week-end activities and for winter diversified the services.

Key words: balneal tourism, week-end tourism, Ocna Șugătag, Maramureș

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INTRODUCTION

The present study examines the features of a balneal tourist resort in relation with the recent dynamics of tourist activities. To this objective, some questions have raised. How the resort is structured, mainly accommodation and balneal infrastructure spatial patterns and which are the main constraints? The village evolved in relation with this infrastructure. Therefore, the local development strategies have influenced the tourism development. Finally, we discuss the role of urban proximity in triggering week-end tourist activities.

The resort of Ocna Șugătag is situated in the homonymous village, in central Maramureș County. The origin of the resort is strongly linked to the former salt exploitations. Past and present names acknowledge this resource of its territory - *possessio Zlatina*, in XIVth Century AD (Mihaly de Apșa, 1900, p. 295). Located on a hill 490 m, with anticline structure - Mara - Cosău / Plateau of Șugătag, formed between Cosău and Mara Valleys, the village benefits from a great view and landscape. In the general rural network it has a broader area of influence, on both valleys above mentioned and beyond. This draws back in time, when the village was capital of Cosău Valley cnezship and an important salt mining centre.

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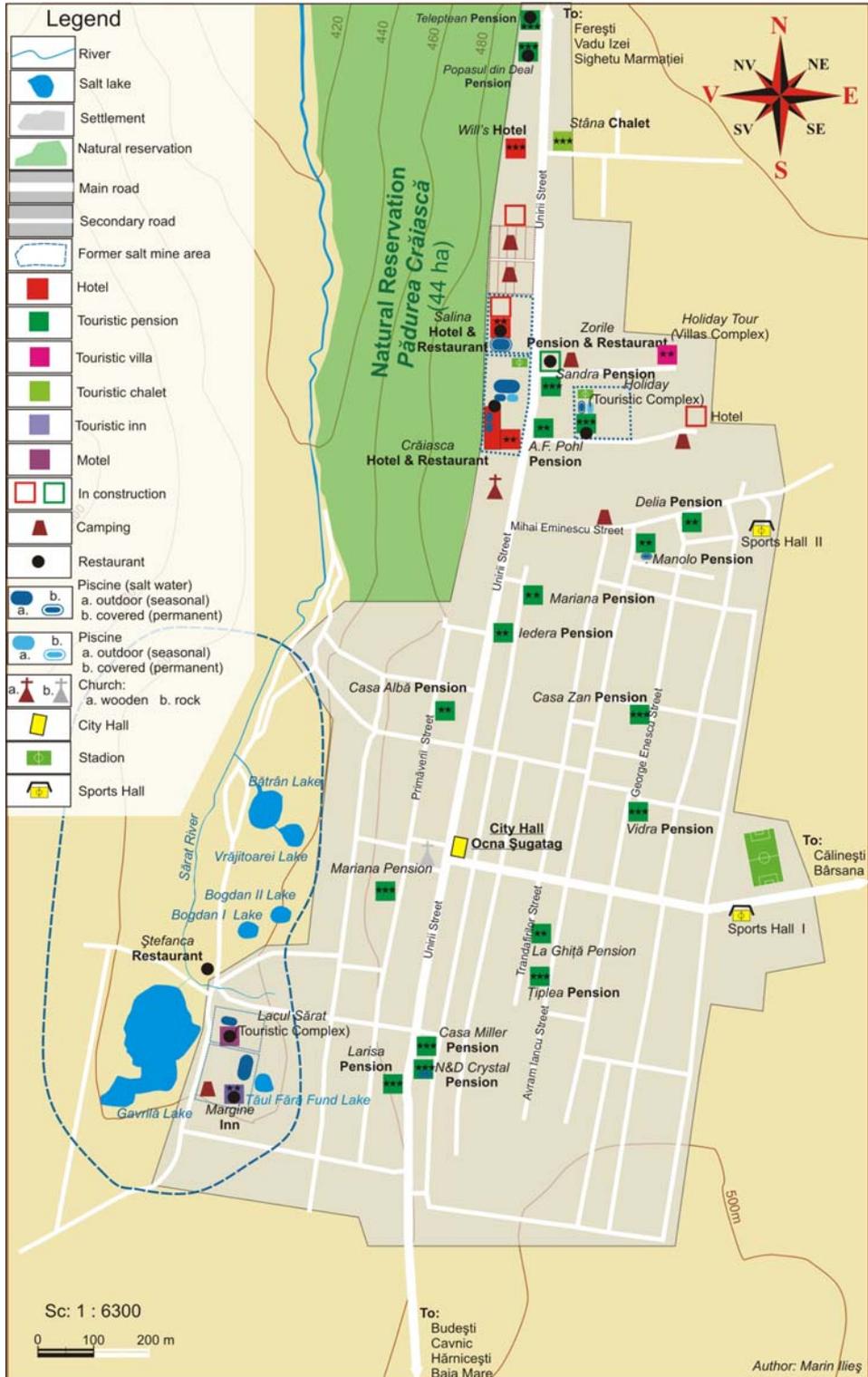


Figure 1. Ocna Șugătag Resort - Maramureș County
(Source: Marin ILIEȘ)

The salt water is considered the main resource for balneal tourist activities in Ocna Șugătag. It can be found in relation with the former salt mines and from springs related to the small river (called The Salty - Pârâul Sarat). In consequence data concerning the mines and the lakes is important for the study.

Geological origin of the salt is stated as Badenian and Sarmatian diapir, oriented NNW-SSE, several faults dictate also the shape of the hill. The top of the anticline is exploited by the small river called Paraul Sarat (the Salted River); it has created a 2 km long and 1km wide boutonniere (Șerban, 2008). Due to long historical salt mining, the overall relief is tormented.

The salt mining activities started in Antiquity, archeological discoveries were made in 1831, around the Sarata R. consisting in hammers, chisels, stone and bronze artifacts. In the Middle Ages, first mentions appear in documents from 1355 - 1396 (Mihaly de Așsa, 1900, p. 236). From the XIVth Century AD the exploitation of salt tends to be regular, first in bell-shape mines. In the XVIIIth Century AD Austrian administration re-organized the aboriginal salt mines, founded official offices in Ocna Șugătag and Ocna Slatina (now on Ukrainian territory) and switched to trapezoidal chambers. Water, the worst enemy of the salt mines, has affected the exploitation and in the spring of 1950 the inundation process was out of control. The mines have been closed. Dissolution lead to the collapse of the biggest galleries, salt lakes started to gain shape. In 1969 a number of 43 lakes were counted, 35 natural and 8 anthropogenic (Panzaru, 1969). In 2008 there were only 8 anthropo-saline lakes and 4 karsto-salines (Șerban, 2008). The most important lakes (figure 1) are: *L. Gavrilă*, *L. Bătrân*, *L. Tăul fără Fund*, *L. Vrajitoarei*, and *L. Roșu*. *L. Gavrilă* - the biggest anthropo-saline lake in Romania, 2.35 ha, is situated in SW part of the village; it is formed by the mines called Dragoș-Vodă and partly Mihai, in 1957 - 1961. Below the surface there is a depth of 141 m comprising 2 milion cubic meters of saltwater. *L. Bătrân* (the oldest lake) is situated in NW part of the lake complex, resulted from the colapse of the mine called Elisabeta, closed in 1858 and formed in 1915. *L. Tăul fără Fund* (the lake without a bottom) the deepest lake in the complex, 33 m, was formed from the mine Nepamuki Janos. *L. Vrajitoarei* (the Witches'lake) originated in 1956 from the mines Iuliana and Ana. *L. Rosu* (the Red Lake) is the least salted because of the sediments carried by flood waters since 1950 when Mines Petru and Pavel slowly caved-in.

In the old salt mines there are huge volumes of saltwater, blocked in Terezia, Bogdan, Mihai and Dragoș-Vodă area. Therefore, the territory is included in high risk zone, new lakes may appear. Besides the anthropogenic lakes, in Ocna Șugătag there are several natural salt lakes, formed in sinkholes from infiltration - *Mihai*, *Vorsing*, *Pipiriga*, or from suffosion - *Fântâna de Slatina*, the main source of salt water for the locals (Panzaru, 1969 in Serban, 2008).

The second resource for the tourist resort is the climatic factor linked to the landscape's features. Situated at 490 m altitude, in a sheltered position, climatic elements are mild all year. Bioclimatic stress index is low (30 - 40), average annual temperature 8°C, precipitations 800 mm/an. In Ocna Șugătag a protected area Padurea Crăiasca, category IV UICN, shelters species of oak (*Quercus petraea*) and larix (*Larix decidua*) contributing to the negative ionization of the air in the nearby.

OCNA ȘUGĂTAG RESORT

Evolution of the resort

Ocna Șugătag was first documented as a resort in the 1950's, when a national investment project was started in the area called „*Băile Vechi*” - the Old Baths, near Lake Gavrilă. The infrastructure was formed by 17 cabins with 28 bathtubs for hot baths, an 800 sqm pool for cold baths and a sunbath patio and pool (Ștefănescu, 1967, p. 157). They were treating the locomotors apparatus but qualified personnel were scarce, occupied with the cleaning of the wooden tubs and with the water heating. Tourist flows were important on week-ends, on religious holydays, and since accommodation was not available, the locals rented rooms. This triggered the early process of accommodation infrastructure development. In 1970 the state started the „*new*” baths construction, near the natural reserve of Padurea Crăiasca, in the northern part of the village. Due

to this new location, the flows were redirected and the Old Baths were abandoned in 1980, only to be reconsidered after 1990. The new baths have had until 1990 only two hotels (Crăiasca and Salina), the balneal infrastructure with hot tubs and a pool complex, a bigger restaurant. The flows increased since the syndicates started to fill these hotels. Alongside, the bed-and-breakfast pensions flourished. In 2008, according to the communality, there were 31 accommodation units, 839 installed places, 30 firms with tourism activity profile and other 17 with services.

Entrepreneurship

In order to assess the features of economic environment, semistructured interviews were carried-out in 2009. The treatment of these can be summarized as follows. In Ocna Şugătag there are only two big firms, counting over 20 employees (Hotel Craiasca and Salina). 41.7% of employed population works in tourism, mostly in small units, under three workers. Family relationships dominate the spectrum of employees in these cases. The majority of units were established after 2002, with a peak in 2007 - 2009. Ownership is formed by local residents (80%), Romanian citizens from other regions (Baia Mare, Sighetu Marmăţiei, Cavnic, Târgu Lăpuş, Vişeu de Jos, Vadu Izei and Sarasău) and only one case of union confederation. Private investors and second residence buyers from nearby cities have contributed to the real estate market growth. This was in accordance with the general Romanian situation; developer projects never entered Sighetu Marmăţiei because of the very good investment opportunities in Ocna Şugătag, situated at 20 km. The local council started a large concession scheme for private investors, small parcels of 500 - 600 sqm for tourism and for young fam. Ilieş. They also extended the limit of intravilan/inside plot. In 2007 47 construction authorizations, 91 urbanism certificates, 165 plots for youth were granted (Local development strategy, 2008).

90% of the management staff for the accommodation units has had their special education for tourism at the moment of classification. B&B employees benefitted from programs implemented by different associations. The remaining percentage has at least one form of license/higher education in tourism. Motivations for tourism activities' development are diverse, from economic - additional income for family, long-term investment to passion/hobby, retirement activity, a house too big for simple usage. The gender structure of the management is formed by 90% male and 10% female, as working personnel is the reverse.

Tourism networks were very popular in the first stage; affiliations to MTMM or ANTREC were highly regarded. After 2008, figures indicate a shift towards tourism agencies and individual management of the tourist flows, by independent channels.

Local community and sustainable programming

Ocna Şugătag commune has an unusual form of administrative organization in respect with other communes in Maramureş Land. It has four villages: Ocna Şugătag (the center), Breb, Hoteni and Sat-Şugătag, 3753 inhabitants, from which 33% in the village of Ocna Şugătag (RPL, 2011 on www.recensamantromania.ro). The evolution was slightly ascendant until 2008, but the prognoses have been beaten by the 2011 census, with a decrease of 18% in 10 years. Geo-demographic structure has a particular aspect; the village is feminized, with a complex ethnic and confessional mix. This feature is given by the specificity of mining areas, real melting-pots with workers originating from several regions. Therefore, in Ocna Şugătag the population is formed by 87% Romanians, 10% Hungarians, 2% Romas, 1% Ukrainians; confessional structure shows 72% orthodoxies, 10% roman-catholic, 11% greek-catholic, protestants and others.

Economic structure of the population recorded two major shifts in the last century, 1900, 1960 and 2008 can be considered milestones. Public utilities place Ocna Şugătag at supracommunal level, also with highschool, CDI center, APIA facilities, medical cabinets and child protection institutions.

Connection with neighboring communities is good, Ocna Şugătag is located on county road DJ 109F, a ramification of national road DN18. The management of the road transport is shared

between three firms which operate 16 journeys to Sighetu Marmatiei (20 km, 30 min), Baia-Mare (50 km, 60 min), Barsana, Budești and Borșa.

Local development strategy is part of the sustainable programming. The documents are adopted for 2008 - 2013 in accordance with the national sustainable development - horizon 2030. Five chapters are tackled as directions (table 1), committed by the local council (LDS, 2008).

Table 1. Areas of interest in local development strategy
(Data source: LDS, 2008)

| Direction | National strategy | Local strategy objectives | Tourism sector involvement |
|---|--|--|---|
| Sustainable growth-structural transformations and macroeconomic balance | Long-term sustainability of energy consumption according to carrying capacity of the territory | Gas-pipeline, energy efficient illumination, public solid waste management | Basic tourism services (HORECA), Swimming pools, Connected services (on public space) |
| | Employment | Consultancy, training, qualifications | Human resource better qualified |
| | Investments | Support for SME's | SME's in tourism services |
| Regional development and specific rural problems | Regional development | Activating resources, Developing the recreation area, upgrading infrastructures | Tourism resources valorized |
| | Rural economy | Support for organizations of local producers | GAL also with tourism projects |
| Territorial planning | Sustainable spatial planning | Development of production zones, residential zones, IT platform for planning, transport improvement, focus on centre | Planning for tourism zonification, linking with the residential and central zones |
| Cultural issues | Cultural dimensions of sustainable development | Social inclusion, accessibility of cultural products, encouraging cultural production | Massification of tourist products, showcasing traditions, publications |
| Public services | Quality of administration | Efficient governance, innovative team, civic input | Transparent informations, secure environment for tourists |

TOURIST INFRASTRUCTURE

Basic tourist infrastructure is conceived around the two main natural resources: the salt waters and the shelter climate, to which very good access is added. Starting from these strengths, the resort was classified as „*of local interest*”.

Tourist investments were made along several decades, starting the years 1950s: accommodation units, restaurants, treatment, and recreational.

Accommodation units are important indicators of the capacity of a resort. In 2010 specialized statistics (field research, 2010) showed 898 installed places, 32% in hotels, 39% in BBs, 26% in camping, the rest in villas, motels and inns.

The comfort level is rather low, 70% of the units are classified at two stars, 30 at three stars; in comparison with the capacity - 77% of total installed capacity at two stars and respective 23% at three stars (table 2).

Table 2. Accommodation indicators for Ocna Șugătag
(Data source: Field research, august 2010)

| Nr. Crt. | Tourist units with accommodation functions (type) | Clasification Stars/flowers | Rooms Number | Places installed Number | Percentage of places % | |
|------------------------------|---|-----------------------------|--------------|-------------------------|------------------------|------|
| Hotels | | | | | | |
| 1 | Hotel Will's | 3 | 24 | 36 | 32 % | |
| 2 | Hotel Salina | 2 | 38 | 79 | | |
| 3 | Hotel Crăisca | 2 | 75 | 173 | | |
| | Total / hotels | | 137 | 288 | | |
| Villas | | | | | | |
| 4 | Holiday Tour Complex | 2 | 15 | 30 | 4,2 % | |
| 5 | Vila Barlea | 2 | 4 | 8 | | |
| | Total / villas | | 19 | 38 | | |
| Motels | | | | | | |
| 6 | Complex Lacul Sărat | | 9 | 18 | 2 % | |
| | Total / moteluri | | 9 | 18 | | |
| Inns | | | | | | |
| 7 | Hanul Margine | 2 | 9 | 20 | 2,2 % | |
| | Total / inns | | 9 | 20 | | |
| Bungalows (13 groups) | | | | | | |
| 8 | Ocna Șugătag nord | | 98 | 194 | 26 % | |
| 9 | Hanul Margine | | 20 | 40 | | |
| | Total / bungalows | | 118 | 234 | | |
| Pensions (BBs) | | | | | | |
| 10 | Holiday | 3 | 11 | 28 | 29,6 % | |
| 11 | Teleptean | 3 | 13 | 25 | | |
| 12 | Popasul din Deal | 3 | 14 | 26 | | |
| 13 | Casa Miller | 3 | 6 | 12 | | |
| 14 | N&D Crystal | 3 | 13 | 29 | | |
| 15 | Larisa | 3 | 4 | 8 | | |
| 16 | Vidra | 3 | 6 | 12 | | |
| 17 | Sandra | 3 | 7 | 16 | | |
| 18 | Casa Zan | 2 | 4 | 7 | | |
| 19 | Mariana | 2 | 5 | 11 | | |
| 20 | Casa Albă | 2 | 4 | 14 | | |
| 21 | Iedera | 2 | 5 | 10 | | |
| 22 | Carla | 2 | 3 | 6 | | |
| 23 | I.F. Pohl | 2 | 5 | 10 | | |
| 24 | Delia | 2 | 4 | 8 | | |
| 25 | Manolo | 2 | 10 | 20 | | |
| 26 | La Ghiță | 2 | 5 | 10 | | |
| 27 | Țiplea | 2 | 4 | 8 | | |
| 28 | Denisa | 2 | 3 | 6 | | |
| | Total / pensions | | 121 | 266 | | |
| Cabans | | | | | | |
| 29 | Cabana Stâna | 3 | 7 | 14 | | 4 % |
| 30 | Cabana de Lemn | 2 | 4 | 12 | | |
| 31 | Cabana Buteanu | 2 | 3 | 8 | | |
| | Total / cabans | | 14 | 34 | | |
| | Total / resort | | 427 | 898 | | 100% |

Official statistic data have a slightly different features; because the methodology of database construction has a place number limit (they include only the units with more than five installed places) and tourist flows are calculated accordingly (table 3).

Table 3. Tourist flows in Ocna Șugătag, at units with over 5 bed-places
(Data source: INS-BDL Maramureș 2007)

| Structure (by type) | Units (no.) | Bed places (net no.) | Capacity in function (no. of places by operating days) | Arrivals (no.) | Overnights (no.) | Net rate of occupancy (%) | Average length of stay (days) |
|---------------------|-------------|----------------------|--|----------------|------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Hotel | 2 | 261 | 82813 | 4923 | 44458 | 53.6 | 9.03 |
| Pension (BBs) | 8 | 93 | 32754 | 1025 | 1932 | 5.9 | 1.88 |
| Total | 10 | 354 | 115567 | 5948 | 46390 | 40.1 | 7.79 |

Tourist flows in respect with accommodation indicators show a net rate of occupancy higher than the average for the county; the values for hotels and the total demonstrates the features of tourist products, highly lucrative. The average length of stay in the hotels supports these statements. A discussion is important for the type of BBs, with an average of 2 days. It demonstrates a week-end tourism feature.

Average length of stay suffered a significant change in the last decade, the packages are shorter, from 14 - 21 days (treatment, union financed) to a 7 to 10 days package for the hotels. This reflects the evolution of the balneal tourism market in Romania. After the year 2007, in Ocna Șugătag the new generation of pensions and BBs has appeared. The graphic shows a slight shift, shorter lengths demonstrate the week-end balneal tourism (figure 2a).

Arrivals maintain the average level, but there is a shift towards other forms of accommodation and tourism products. This is also correlated with the units which are endowed with exterior or interior pools, preferable salted water and indoor. This was initially to increase the peak-seasons length and ended by attracting week-end tourists from the neighboring towns (figure 2b and 2c).

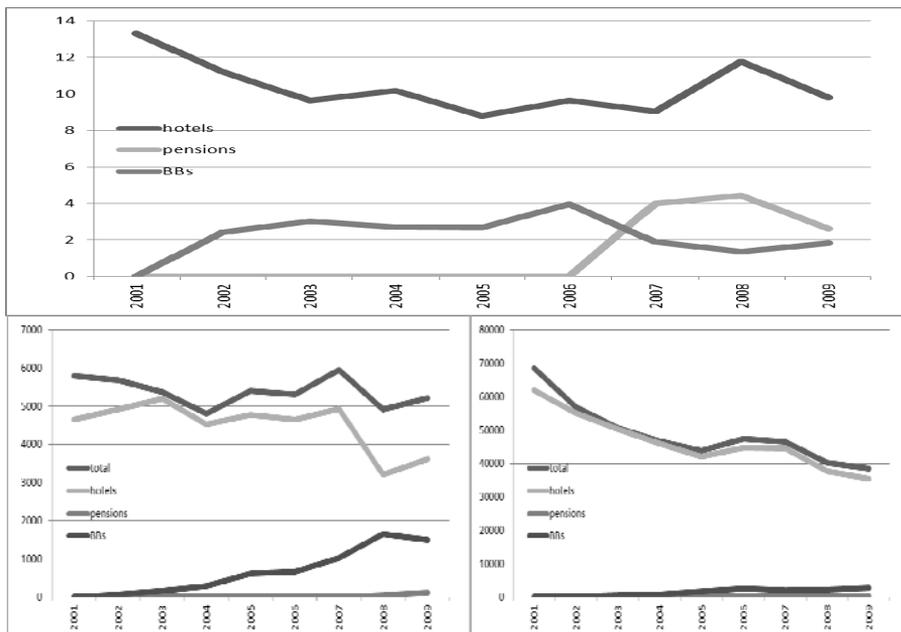


Figure 2. Main tourist flow indicators in Ocna Șugătag by the type of accommodation unit
a) Average length of stay; b) Arrivals; c) Overnights
(Source: INS-BDL MM, 2009)

Recreation and treatment facilities are focused on the salt water, transported through pipes from wells. Exterior pools count 10 units of approximately 1200 sqm; interior pools are counting 9 units of a total 515 sqm. Regulations stipulate a maximum of 2.5 sqm/person non-swimming in water depth under 1,20 m and 6.25 sqm for swimming persons. The recreation in salted waters is usually non-swimming; therefore the resort has 700 places per day. The balneal feature is supported by several facilities' grouping. According to the local strategy (LDS, 2008), the resort is visited by 25000 tourists per year, thus 60% are one-day visitors.

Spatial diffusion

Balneal and accommodation infrastructure is concentrated in three areas with a string historical background. Thus, evolution of the facilities oriented the grouping. The Old Baths area is located near the former salt mines, with several waterfronts (lakes mentioned above). Until 1978 there was also rail access, on the narrow gauge train, from Sighetu Marmatiei. The traditional way to reach this area is from the village center. After 1990 the closed and abandoned facilities were reactivated, the old swimming pool renovated, several accommodation, restaurants and water activities have been developed (figure 1).

The New Baths area is called the complex in the northern part of the village, managed by ROMSIND (a union confederation). It represents the most important group of tourist services and balneal infrastructure in number of bed-places, treatment procedures, and flows. The pensions and BBs are located in the hearth of the village. They were built in waves, mostly after 1995 and 2007, initially to discharge the flows to the treatment facilities or the big hotels in the peak-season. Finally they oriented a part of the tourist flows for week-end activities and for winter, diversified the services with sauna, massage, bike rental, event management etc.

CONCLUSION

Ocna Șugătag resort is structured in accordance with its main attractive resources: the salt water and the refreshing climatic features. Tourist activities evolved from a traditional balneal resort to a vibrant week-end destination. The complementarity of attractions have had a great role in shaping the flows, but the infrastructures for basic services (accommodation and baths) is the result of a long-term strategy which supported the development.

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