

TOURISM IN THE NEW NORMAL: SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES AND ADAPTATIONS POST-COVID IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally altered the landscape of global tourism, compelling the industry to adapt to unprecedented challenges. This paper explores the transformative impact of the pandemic on Romania's tourism sector and examines the sustainable practices and adaptive strategies that have emerged in response. Through a comprehensive analysis of statistical data, industry reports, and case studies, the paper identifies key shifts in tourist behavior, such as an increased preference for domestic travel and rural destinations and highlights the implementation of enhanced health and safety protocols. The study also investigates the role of government initiatives in supporting the sector's recovery and fostering sustainable tourism development. By evaluating the long-term implications of these adaptations, the paper provides insights into how Romania's tourism industry can build resilience and thrive in the post-pandemic era. This research contributes to the broader discourse on sustainable tourism, offering a roadmap for other regions facing similar challenges in the new normal.

Keywords: *Tourism, sustainability, COVID-19, new normal, adaptation, resilience, nature-based tourism, domestic travel, personalized experiences*

JEL Classification: L83, Q01, Q26, Z32

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, emerged in late 2019 and rapidly evolved into a global crisis, affecting virtually every aspect of human life and triggered an unprecedented economic downturn.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about unprecedented disruptions to the global tourism industry, profoundly affecting travel patterns, business operations, and economic stability. Romania, a country known for its rich cultural heritage and diverse landscapes, has experienced significant challenges as a result of the pandemic. The abrupt cessation of international travel, coupled with stringent lockdown measures, led to a sharp decline in tourist arrivals and revenue, exposing vulnerabilities within the tourism sector. The ramifications of these disruptions extend beyond immediate economic losses, prompting a reevaluation of tourism practices and the necessity for resilient and sustainable strategies. The pandemic has underscored the fragility of the tourism industry

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and highlighted the need for adaptive measures that can withstand similar crises in the future.

The objectives of this study are threefold: first, to analyze the immediate and ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Romania's tourism sector; second, to identify and evaluate the sustainable practices and adaptive measures that have been implemented during the post-pandemic recovery phase; and third, to provide insights and recommendations for fostering a more resilient and sustainable tourism industry in Romania moving forward. Understanding the shifts in tourist behavior, the implementation of new health and safety protocols, and the role of government and industry support measures is crucial for navigating the "new normal" in tourism. This paper contributes to the broader discourse on sustainable tourism by highlighting Romania's unique challenges and responses, offering a roadmap for other regions facing similar issues.

2. Literature review

The tourism industry has long been recognized as a significant economic driver (Volkman, 2021), contributing to employment (according to the World Travel & Tourism Council from 2014 to 2019, the travel and tourism industries accounted for a quarter of all newly generated jobs globally), income generation (10.3% of global economy Gross Domestic Product), and infrastructure development in many countries. However, the industry has also been criticized for its environmental footprint, social impacts, and contribution to unsustainable consumption patterns.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had profound economic and social repercussions on the global tourism industry (Seabra, 2022; Hanyuan, 2021), reshaping the landscape in unprecedented ways (Chang, 2021) and altering the essence of hospitality (Rivera, 2020). The sudden and widespread travel restrictions, lockdowns, and safety concerns (Orîndaru, 2021; Gu, 2021) led to a dramatic decline in international and domestic tourism (Iftimoaei, 2023), causing severe revenue losses for businesses across the sector. Travel restrictions, social distancing (Gagan, 2021), quarantine, border closures (Gössling et al., 2020), and public health concerns led to a significant drop in international tourist arrivals (Fong et al., 2020). The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) estimates that international tourist arrivals fell by over 75% in 2020, representing a loss of 1.4 billion tourists (Unwro.org, 2021). This decline had a devastating impact on the travel and hospitality industries, which rely heavily on tourism revenue. The impact of the pandemic was particularly severe in certain regions, such as Europe and Asia. In Europe, international tourist arrivals fell by 78% in 2020, while in Asia, they fell by 70%. These declines were due in part to the early spread of the virus in these regions.

Economically, countries heavily dependent on tourism faced significant challenges as revenue streams dwindled. Small businesses that rely on tourist spending suffered, impacting local economies (Alves, 2020; Dobrescu, 2020). Governments implemented various measures to support the industry, including financial aid packages and stimulus programs, yet the road to recovery remained uncertain. Also, millions of jobs were affected (Breisinger, 2020; Yan, 2021; Woyo, 2022), particularly in travel agencies, hotels, airlines, and related services, exacerbating unemployment rates, but also in tourism-related industries (Assaf, 2020). Moreover, the reduced tourism activity had a ripple effect on related sectors such as agriculture, retail, and entertainment, further compounding the economic challenges. The decline in tourism also affected public revenues, as taxes and fees associated with travel and hospitality diminished, putting additional strain on public services and infrastructure projects.

Socially, the pandemic significantly disrupted traditional tourism patterns, prompting individuals to reevaluate their travel behaviors due to heightened health and safety concerns (Ronki, 2021). The pervasive sense of uncertainty surrounding the virus catalyzed a shift towards local and nature-based tourism (Gonçalves et al., 2023; Buckley, 2022), as travelers increasingly sought destinations perceived as safer and less crowded, often in the countryside (Candia, 2022). This trend towards local exploration and an appreciation for natural environments reflects a broader movement towards sustainable travel practices.

As people prioritize destinations that offer open spaces and outdoor activities, the tourism industry is witnessing a transformation that could lead to long-term changes. Businesses within the sector are adapting by emphasizing hygiene measures, flexible booking policies, and sustainable practices to meet the evolving demands of cautious travelers. This shift is fostering a more sustainable and resilient tourism model (Galvani, 2020), one that balances economic recovery with environmental stewardship and community well-being.

Furthermore, the pandemic has accelerated the adoption of digital technologies in tourism, from virtual tours to contactless services, enhancing the overall travel experience while ensuring safety. These technological advancements, combined with the growing preference for eco-friendly and local travel, suggest that the changes in consumer behavior may have lasting implications, potentially redefining the future landscape of the tourism industry.

From a tourism perspective, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the environment. The sharp decline in travel, especially air travel, led to a substantial reduction in carbon emissions, offering a glimpse into the environmental benefits of decreased tourism activity. With fewer tourists visiting natural sites, many ecosystems experienced a period of recovery, allowing wildlife to thrive in less disturbed habitats and resulting in increased

sightings of various species in previously crowded areas. Additionally, reduced tourism activity led to a decrease in pollution and waste generation in popular destinations, leading to improvements in cleanliness and overall environmental health.

The pandemic also prompted the tourism industry to reevaluate its environmental impact and adopt more sustainable practices, emphasizing eco-friendly travel, responsible tourism, and conservation efforts. However, the drop in tourism revenue posed challenges for conservation programs that relied on tourist fees for funding, affecting the ability of protected areas and wildlife reserves to maintain conservation activities. Despite these challenges, the pandemic raised awareness about the environmental impact of tourism and the importance of sustainable travel, with many travelers becoming more conscious of their ecological footprint and seeking more sustainable travel options. Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic offered an opportunity to pause, reorient, and rethink and highlighted the need for a more sustainable and responsible approach to tourism moving forward (Lew at al., 2020).

3. The influence of Covid Pandemic over the tourism industry in Romania

The impact of COVID-19 on Romania has been profound, affecting various aspects of life from healthcare to the economy and social dynamics. Since the pandemic's onset in early 2020, Romania, like many countries worldwide, faced significant challenges and transformations. The impact of COVID-19 on Romania has been profound, particularly in healthcare and the economy. As of the latest reports, Romania has reported over 3.5 million confirmed cases and more than 68,000 deaths due to the virus, highlighting the significant toll on public health infrastructure and resources (Ministerul Sănătății, 2024). The healthcare system faced unprecedented challenges, with hospitals operating at near-capacity, and healthcare workers under immense strain.

Economically, Romania experienced a contraction of 3.9% in GDP in 2020, rebounding to a growth of 7.1% in 2021, albeit unevenly across sectors. Industries like tourism and hospitality, which contribute significantly to the economy, suffered drastic declines due to travel restrictions and reduced consumer spending. The unemployment rate rose to 5.2% in 2021 from 3.9% in 2019, reflecting job losses and economic instability exacerbated by the pandemic. The abrupt and extensive imposition of travel restrictions, lockdowns, and health-related concerns have significantly disrupted tourism dynamics, affecting both inbound and domestic travel. This scientific analysis elucidates the multifaceted effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Romania's tourism industry by examining key indicators and trends during the pandemic and subsequent recovery phases.

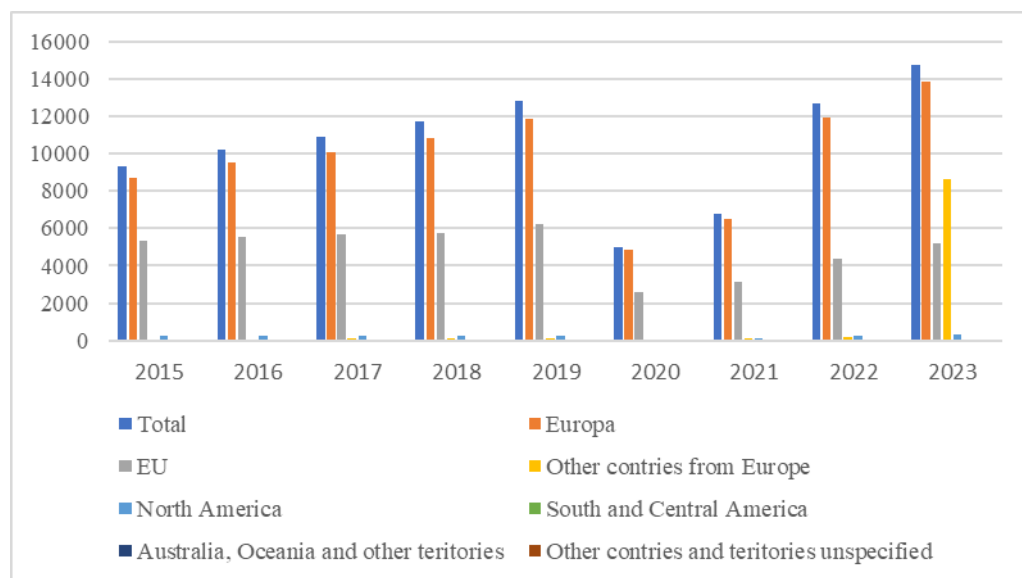
Immediate effects of the pandemic over the tourism were:

- *Decline in Tourist Arrivals and overnights*

The most immediate and observable impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Romania's tourism industry was a pronounced decline in tourist arrivals. Data from the National Institute of Statistics (INS) indicates a reduction of approximately 60% in the number of foreign tourists visiting Romania in 2020 compared to 2019 (figure 1). This drastic drop can be attributed to a combination of international travel restrictions, fear of virus transmission, and widespread uncertainty, which led to a significant decrease in global tourism.

Foreign tourism, which had been a substantial contributor to Romania's tourism revenue, saw one of the sharpest declines. Popular destinations such as Bucharest, Transylvania, and the Black Sea coast experienced a marked reduction in the number of visitors. Events, festivals, and conferences that typically attracted international tourists were either canceled or postponed, further exacerbating the decline. This downturn had a ripple effect on related sectors, including hospitality, transportation, and entertainment, leading to widespread economic challenges. Domestic tourism also faced significant challenges as national lockdowns and stringent travel restrictions curtailed mobility within the country.

Figure 1. Foreign arrivals in Romania between 2015-2023



Source: National Institute of Statistics, *insse.ro*, 2024

The INS reported substantial reductions in the movement of domestic tourists, with many opting to stay home due to health concerns and regulatory

limitations. Attractions that usually saw high footfall, such as historical sites, natural parks, and wellness resorts, experienced reduced visitor numbers.

- *Hotel Occupancy Rates*

The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated a significant decline in hotel occupancy rates across Romania, dramatically altering the landscape of the hospitality industry. According to National Institute of Statistics, the average occupancy rate for Romanian hotels plummeted from over 50% in 2019 to approximately 20% in 2020. This precipitous drop reflects not only the reduction in tourist numbers but also the operational challenges hotels faced, such as the necessity to comply with newly instituted health and safety regulations.

The drastic fall in hotel occupancy rates can be attributed primarily to the sharp decrease in both international and domestic tourist arrivals. With stringent travel restrictions and widespread apprehension about contracting the virus, many potential travelers opted to postpone or cancel their trips. Events that typically drew significant numbers of tourists, such as business conferences, cultural festivals, and sports events, were either canceled or held virtually, further reducing the demand for hotel accommodations.

In addition to the decline in demand, hotels faced a multitude of operational challenges. The implementation of health and safety regulations necessitated significant changes in how hotels operated. This included:

- **Enhanced Cleaning Protocols:** Hotels had to adopt rigorous cleaning and sanitization protocols to ensure the safety of guests and staff. This often-required additional staff, specialized training, and the purchase of new cleaning supplies and equipment, increasing operational costs.

- **Social Distancing Measures:** Common areas such as lobbies, restaurants, and conference rooms had to be reconfigured to adhere to social distancing guidelines. This reduced the capacity of these spaces, limiting the number of guests that could be accommodated at any given time.

- **Health Screenings:** Many hotels implemented health screenings, including temperature checks and health questionnaires for guests and staff, to mitigate the risk of virus transmission. This added an extra layer of complexity to hotel operations.

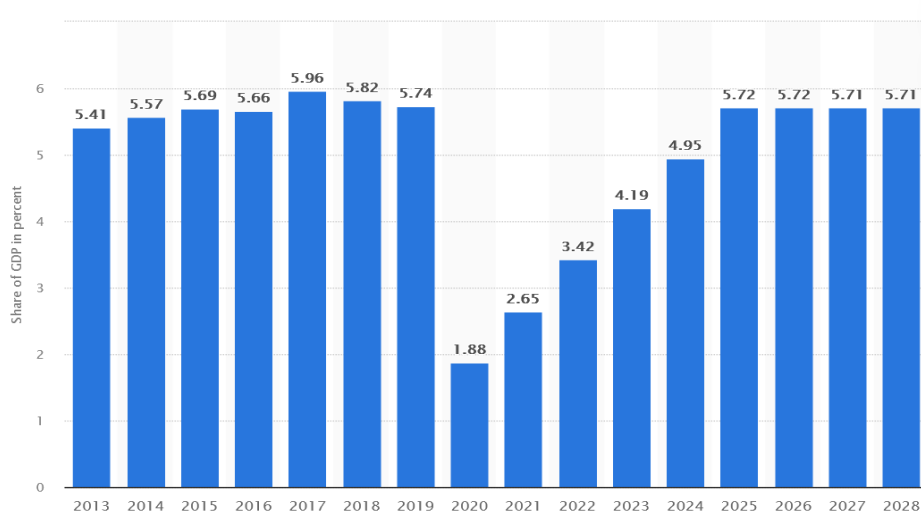
- **Quarantine Requirements:** Some hotels designated specific rooms or floors for guests needing to quarantine, further limiting the number of available rooms for general bookings.

- *Economic Losses*

The economic ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic for Romania's tourism sector were severe, leading to substantial revenue losses and a significant contraction in economic output. Prior to the pandemic, the Romanian tourism industry contributed approximately 2.5% to the national

GDP in 2019. However, the advent of COVID-19 brought about a dramatic decline in this economic contribution, as illustrated in the bellow figure.

Figure 2 Share of the GDP of the tourism sector in Romania from 2013 to 2028

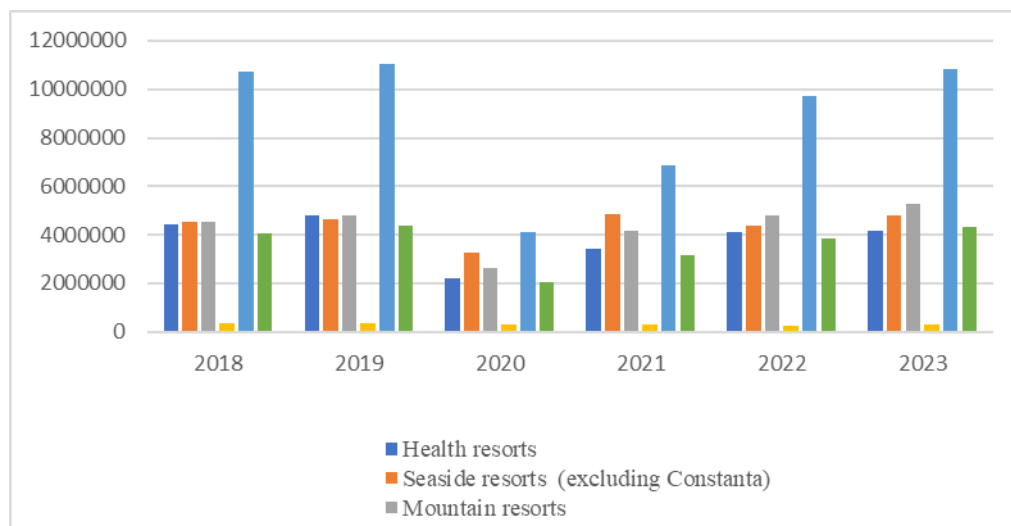


Source: Statista.com, 2024

Numerous businesses within the sector, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), faced financial distress, resulting in closures and layoffs. The sharp drop in tourist arrivals and overnight (figure 3) stays directly translated to a precipitous fall in tourism revenues. Hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, tour operators, and other related businesses experienced a severe downturn in income and thousands of people lost their jobs.

Popular tourist destinations such as Bucharest, Transylvania, and the Black Sea coast saw their visitor numbers dwindle, leading to significant losses in tourist spending. The ripple effect of this decline was felt across the broader economy, impacting suppliers, service providers, and local communities dependent on tourism income. SMEs, which form the backbone of Romania's tourism industry, were particularly hard-hit. Many small businesses lacked the financial resilience to withstand prolonged periods of reduced demand.

The sudden loss of revenue forced numerous SMEs to either temporarily shut down or permanently close their doors. Layoffs and furloughs became widespread as businesses struggled to manage their payroll expenses. The lack of tourists also meant that many seasonal and part-time workers, who form a significant portion of the tourism workforce, found themselves unemployed.

Figure 3. Overnights evolutions between 2018-2023

Source: National Institute of Statistics, *insse.ro*, 2024

In terms of behavioral changes in tourism there was a shift to domestic tourism. As international travel became increasingly restricted, there was a notable shift towards domestic tourism. Romanians began to explore local destinations more frequently, often selecting rural and less populated areas to adhere to social distancing guidelines. This shift provided a temporary uplift to specific regions, although it was insufficient to offset the overall decline in tourist activity. The pandemic also led to changes in accommodation preferences. Tourists increasingly favored private rentals and smaller boutique hotels over larger hotel chains to minimize contact with others, underscoring heightened health and safety concerns during travel. Another trend is a greater focus on personalized experiences.

4. Post-Pandemic Recovery

Before COVID-19, Romania was steadily increasing its tourist numbers year by year. In 2019, Romania welcomed approximately 13.1 million international tourists, marking a significant rise from previous years. However, with the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020, international travel restrictions and lockdown measures severely impacted global tourism, including Romania. In 2020, tourist arrivals plummeted to around 4.3 million, a sharp decrease of about 67% compared to 2019. With the introduction of vaccines and the gradual easing of travel restrictions, Romania began to observe a return of tourists in late 2021 and 2022. Nevertheless, the recovery was uneven, with urban tourism rebounding more slowly compared to rural and nature-based tourism. In 2023

there were according to NIS, 13.9 million tourist arrivals, reaching the values before the pandemic.

The tourism industry had to rapidly adapt to new health and safety protocols, which included enhanced cleaning procedures, contactless services, and health certification for establishments. While these adaptations helped rebuild trust among tourists, they also increased operational costs for businesses.

Travelers are seeking more immersive and authentic experiences that allow them to connect with the destination and its culture. This is leading to a demand for smaller, more intimate accommodation, as well as unique and off-the-beaten-path experiences.

The tourism industry is also adapting to the new normal by embracing digital technologies. Online booking platforms, mobile apps, and virtual reality experiences are becoming increasingly popular, as they allow travelers to plan and experience their vacations more efficiently and safely.

The Romanian government introduced several support measures to facilitate the tourism sector's recovery. Here are some measures that could have been taken:

1. Financial Assistance Programs for Tourism Businesses: The government might have introduced financial aid packages to support tourism businesses, including grants, loans, or tax relief measures. These could have been aimed at helping businesses cover operational costs, retain employees, or invest in safety measures. Also, vacation vouchers were designed to incentivize domestic travel by providing financial support directly to citizens, thereby boosting spending in the tourism sector. This targeted approach aimed to support local businesses, particularly in tourism-dependent regions, and stimulate economic activity.

2. Marketing Campaigns to Promote Domestic and Sustainable Tourism: To stimulate demand and boost the local tourism industry, the government could have launched marketing campaigns encouraging domestic travel. These campaigns might have highlighted the beauty of Romania's natural landscapes, cultural heritage sites, and unique experiences. Moreover, there might have been a focus on sustainable tourism practices to ensure the long-term viability of the industry.

3. Policy Changes and Regulatory Support: The government may have implemented policy changes and regulatory adjustments to facilitate the recovery of the tourism sector. This could include streamlining permit processes, revising zoning regulations, or adjusting licensing requirements to make it easier for tourism businesses to operate.

4. Collaboration Between Public and Private Sectors: Close collaboration between the public and private sectors is essential for the recovery of the tourism industry. Public-private partnerships might have been formed to

develop and implement recovery strategies, share resources, and coordinate efforts. These partnerships could involve tourism associations, local businesses, government agencies, and non-profit organizations working together to address common challenges and capitalize on opportunities.

The pandemic has likely precipitated long-term changes within the tourism industry. There is an increased preference for domestic travel, heightened awareness regarding health and safety, and a shift towards digital and contactless services. Furthermore, the industry is increasingly exploring sustainable tourism practices in response to a growing demand for responsible travel options.

5. Long-term Implications and Future Trend

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Romania's tourism industry has undergone significant transformations, with a notable shift towards sustainable practices and adaptations. As the world navigates the complexities of recovery, Romania has embraced a forward-looking approach that not only prioritizes economic revival but also underscores the importance of environmental conservation, community engagement, and responsible tourism. Here are some of the sustainable practices and adaptations that have emerged in Romania's tourism sector post-COVID, also shown in figure 4:

1. ***Emphasis on Nature-Based Tourism:*** With travelers increasingly seeking open spaces and natural environments, Romania has placed a renewed focus on its abundant natural assets. From the majestic Carpathian Mountains to the pristine Danube Delta, the country offers a wealth of opportunities for nature-based tourism. Post-COVID, there has been a concerted effort to promote activities such as hiking, birdwatching, and eco-tours that allow visitors to connect with nature while minimizing their environmental footprint.

2. ***Support for Local Communities:*** Recognizing the vital role that local communities play in the tourism ecosystem; Romania has sought to empower and support them through sustainable tourism initiatives. Community-based tourism projects, homestays, and cultural exchanges have gained prominence, providing visitors with authentic experiences while generating income for rural and marginalized communities. By involving locals in the tourism value chain, Romania fosters social inclusion and ensures that tourism benefits are equitably distributed.

3. ***Conservation and Environmental Stewardship:*** As stewards of some of Europe's most valuable natural habitats, Romania has redoubled its commitment to conservation in the post-COVID era. Sustainable tourism practices prioritize the protection of biodiversity, preservation of ecosystems, and reduction of carbon emissions. Ecotourism certifications, wildlife monitoring programs, and habitat restoration initiatives are just some of the

strategies employed to safeguard Romania's natural heritage for future generations.

Figure 4. Sustainable practices in Romania's post-COVID tourism (author' processing)



4. Promotion of Slow Travel and Cultural Experiences: In a departure from mass tourism models, Romania has embraced the concept of slow travel, encouraging visitors to immerse themselves in local culture, traditions, and way of life. Cultural heritage sites, traditional crafts, and culinary experiences take center stage, offering travelers meaningful encounters and a deeper appreciation for Romania's rich cultural tapestry. By promoting slow travel, Romania fosters a more sustainable and authentic tourism experience that benefits both visitors and host communities.

5. Investment in Green Infrastructure and Technology: To support sustainable tourism practices, Romania has made investments in green infrastructure and technology. From eco-friendly accommodation options and renewable energy installations to waste management systems and sustainable transportation initiatives, these investments help reduce the environmental impact of tourism while enhancing the overall visitor experience. By harnessing innovation and technology, Romania strives to build a more resilient and sustainable tourism industry in the post-COVID era.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented an unprecedented opportunity to reshape the trajectory of global tourism, steering it towards sustainability and resilience. By integrating sustainable practices and responding to evolving traveler preferences, the tourism industry stands poised to emerge from the

crisis stronger and more dedicated to fostering positive change. A reimagined tourism sector, rooted in principles of sustainability and social responsibility, has the potential to foster a future that is more equitable, environmentally conscious, and dynamic for destinations and travelers alike.

Romania's post-COVID approach exemplifies a steadfast commitment to cultivating a tourism sector that is resilient, inclusive, and environmentally responsible. Through prioritizing initiatives such as nature conservation, community engagement, preservation of cultural authenticity, and harnessing technological innovation, Romania is laying the groundwork for a future where tourism harmonizes with the natural environment and enriches local communities.

By embracing sustainable practices, Romania not only enhances its attractiveness as a destination but also sets a precedent for global tourism to follow. This transformation not only safeguards natural and cultural heritage but also fosters economic prosperity and social well-being. As Romania and other nations continue to navigate the aftermath of the pandemic, the shift towards sustainable tourism practices promises a future where tourism serves as a catalyst for positive societal and environmental impact, contributing to a more resilient and vibrant global community.

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