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**THE GEOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS  
OF RURAL TOURISM  
IN THE GREAT HUNGARIAN PLAIN**

PhD Thesis Summary

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Szeged

2016



# I. Introduction

Tourism has now become a highly dynamic leading business in the world. With its connections to multiple sectors, it interacts with all elements of the natural environment. Its massive spread has raised the interest of not only geographers but also professionals in a number of other disciplines (economics, sociology, history, law, psychology, etc.). While it is primarily an urban phenomenon by nature, it has gained ground in the changing rural areas over the past few decades. By today rural areas have reached the postmodern stage of development so the production of raw materials for the food industry is no longer their only job. They take a growing share of new rural functions and increasingly serve residence, landscape conservation, and tourism purposes. In a number of developed countries, tourism based on the sustainable exploitation of local inner resources has become a powerful sector of “rural economy” and a key factor of rural development. After World War II, the countries of Eastern Europe came under Soviet rule and became different from the West in terms of their development model. Hungary’s economic recession in the 1990s badly hit the Great Hungarian Plain and the country has been unable to find an effective solution ever since. A number of villages and sub-regions in the Great Hungarian Plain considered tourism as a relatively fast way out of the crisis. While tourism in the Great Hungarian Plain has made considerable progress concerning both quantity and quality in the last period of more than two decades, it is struggling with a number of problems that could only be solved by planning and development built on thorough research. Despite the relevance of the subject, the past decades have witnessed relatively little geographically oriented scholarly research on tourism in the Great Hungarian Plain. The most significant and comprehensive projects were completed back in the 1990s as part of the Great Hungarian Plain research programs managed by László Csordás. Another major milestone was Árpád Hanusz’s research into rural tourism, tourism in the County of Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg, and the operation of Tourist Destination Management Organizations.

It seems reasonable, then, to analyse tourism in the Great Hungarian Plain from the perspective of regional and tourism geography in a new, systematic and comprehensive way, to explore the various relationships between attractions and guest turnover, and to survey the opportunities of tourism regarding the various aspects of geography and rural economy. My personal motivation for choosing the subject was that I, just like many

other people including poets and researchers, have strong emotional ties to the Great Hungarian Plain. Also, I saw this project as a way to use my practical experience in tourism of more than one decade for people in the region that are interested in the subject.

## **II. Theoretical Framework**

### **Thesis Structure, Research Time Span**

This thesis attempts to present its subject with a review of the relevant European literature, proceeding from the general to the individual. To this end, it first quotes the international and Hungarian definitions of “rural area” and the latest findings of rural research in Hungary. The thesis then explores the main characteristics of the multiple connections between rural geography and tourism geography, and the various European and Hungarian approaches to tourism in rural areas. These theoretical considerations are followed by my own conception of rural tourism. Using the relevant international and Hungarian literature, I interpret the terms *inner resources* and *tourism resources* from the perspective of rural areas and rural economy. Then the thesis presents tourism supply in the Great Hungarian Plain and its special geographic elements that are characteristic of the region. My secondary research used the existing tourism databases to analyse the main data and the temporal and spatial processes of tourism in the region. My primary research included a targeted online questionnaire to survey the opinions and approaches of tourism professionals in the Great Hungarian Plain, as well as the main geographic characteristics of their appearance on the Internet and their tourism supply.

The time span of my research mostly covers the period from World War II to the present day with respect to the concept and characteristics of rural areas, rural economy, and the typical tourism processes in the Great Hungarian Plain. The analysis of the current tourism geography of the Great Hungarian Plain covers a shorter period, only the past 15 years.

## Scope of Research, Thesis Objectives, Main Questions

The specific analyses in this thesis cover all six counties of the Great Hungarian Plain (Bács-Kiskun, Békés, Csongrád, Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok, Hajdú-Bihar and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg) with another 11 administrative subunits in the Great Hungarian Plain (the Districts of Cegléd, Dabas, Monor, Nagykáta, Nagykőrös, and Ráckeve in the County of Pest; the Districts of Füzesabony and Heves in the County of Heves; and the Districts of Mezőcsát, Mezőkövesd and Tiszaújváros in the County of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén), a total of 70 districts. In other words, this thesis is about the natural geographic plain that can be described by administrative limits and is the basis of rural tourism supply in the region.

The main objective of this thesis was to look at, primarily renewing the criteria of traditional geography and adopting a European perspective, the connections between rural areas, rural economy and tourism in the Great Hungarian Plain. I wanted to explore the spatial processes of tourism in the region and its changes over the past 15 years. Furthermore, I wanted to offer a detailed picture of the status of tourism in the Great Hungarian Plain, in conjunction with the rurality of the landscape, about its special features and problems. My analysis lays special emphasis on the landscapes in the Great Hungarian Plain, the “rural areas” with measurable and significant tourism processes. The thesis concludes with a handful of proposals for practical purposes to promote the future development of tourism in the Great Hungarian Plain.

This research project sought answers to the following questions:

- How did the role of tourism change in the economies of Europe’s developed rural areas after World War II?
- Is it possible to adapt the rural tourism approaches and models of such areas to the Great Hungarian Plain? Is it possible to create a rural tourism model for the Great Hungarian Plain?
- What are the key individual and rural elements of tourism supply in the Great Hungarian Plain? How has tourism changed in the Great Hungarian Plain over the past 15 years? What are the key nuclear areas of tourism?
- What are the most important local and inner resources of the Great Hungarian Plain? Does the region have the social and human resources that are vital for the future development of its tourism?

- What are the key characteristics of the Internet appearance of the tourism sector in the Great Hungarian Plain? Is it possible to identify in them the specific features of rural tourism, the special services of the Great Hungarian Plain and rurality? If so, how?

### **III. Methodology**

This PhD thesis reports on both primary and secondary research.

My primary research consisted of an online questionnaire based on non-probability sampling, sent out to tourism professionals in the Great Hungarian Plain (rural landlords, other landlords, commercial accommodations, tourism service providers, tourism organisations, and LEADER Local Action Groups). I prepared the questionnaires specifically for these target groups as Google forms and emailed them to approximately 2,500 professionals as listed above. The responses were recorded by the Google app in the form of a table. I exported the responses in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and used SPSS software for their arrangement and evaluation.

My research relied on the method of content analysis to look at the websites of tourism professionals in the Great Hungarian Plain. I reviewed the websites of a total of 294 tourism service providers in the Great Hungarian Plain (accommodations, spas, equestrian farms, catering facilities, event managers) and analysed the Internet appearance of the 70 districts at a regional level to identify the unique, rural and “Plain” components of their service offer, and to evaluate their cooperation with other professionals, together with their outer appearance, complexity, arrangement, and geographic content. I used these criteria to rank the websites on a scale of 1–10, then I summarised the scores by facility and type of service provider. The evaluation was based on Microsoft Excel and SPSS Statistics 22 software.

My secondary research included a review of the relevant Hungarian and international literature with the methods of source assessment and comparative analysis. In addition, I used Microsoft Excel 2007 and SPSS Statistics 22 software to analyse the regional and local databases available in the official statistical publications with the methods of mathematical statistics (correlation ratio, cross tabulation analysis).

For a more graphic presentation of elementary and calculated data, I prepared thematic maps with geoinformatic methods, using the ArcGIS/ArcMAP 10.2 software. I set category limits and performed classifications with NaturalBreaks (Jenks) and quantile distributions, and with the manual setting of class intervals.

To select data by regional level, I used the “Interactive Analyser” app of the National Regional Development and Spatial Planning Information System (TeIR).

The tourism data gathered by the Central Statistical Office (CSO) posed multiple challenges during my project. One of them was that the CSO does not disclose the guest turnover data of commercial and other accommodations from any region where their number is below three. This problem typically affected local level data but also the district data of “Other non-commercial accommodations”. An obstacle to spelling out my subject was that the CSO does not gather data about rural tourism so its performance can only be determined approximately, calculated from the existing data.

My research has repeatedly revealed that the CSO’s official data are in conflict with, at times even diametrically opposed to, other databases, including the records of professional organisations. A prime example is that certain districts did not register any rural accommodation or guest night according to the CSO’s 2014 data. By contrast, the given region had an accommodation with a sunflower “National Certification Brand” according to the data of the National Association of Rural Tourism.

The annexes to the thesis include a photo database that presents the key characteristics of tourism in the Great Hungarian Plain: the typical and lesser-known tourist sights and tourism service providers. Most pictures were taken by me and the rest was gathered from Hungarian Tourism Ltd., the network of Tourinform Offices of the Great Hungarian Plain, and from the websites of professionals.

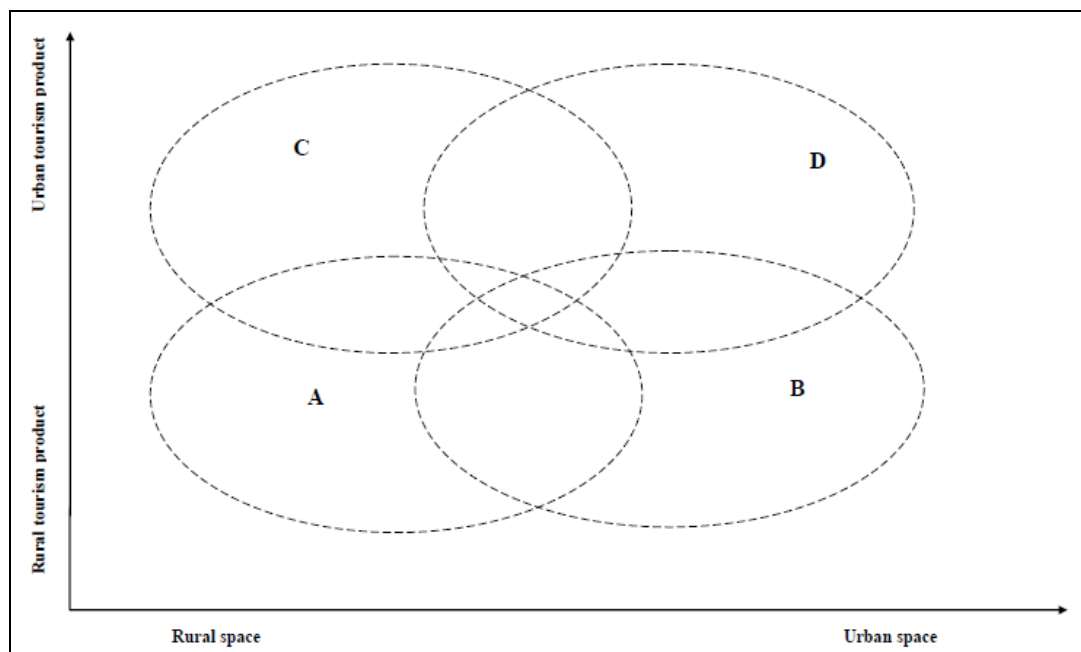
## IV. Research Findings

This thesis contains the following research findings:

- Based on Hungarian regional typology relying on international research findings, the Great Hungarian Plain is a typical Hungarian rural region. Except for the districts that include county towns and others with special conditions, its territory is almost completely rural and hence suitable for various types of social geographic research using the criteria of rural tourism.
- In Europe's developed rural regions, tourism has now become an integral part of rural economy. Indeed, tourism is now the foremost pillar of the economy in some regions. In Hungary this process started with some delay and is still in the initial stage.
- In the so-called mixed (endogenous/exogenous) models of regional development, the development of rural regions is determined by a close interaction between global forces and local processes.
- In recent decades, the value of inner resources, especially local knowledge, traditions and local culture, has grown almost everywhere.
- Bernard Lane views rural tourism as a complex and multi-faceted activity.
- In his theory, tourism in rural areas does not consist of purely rural elements. Instead, it is a mixture of rural and urban elements. Indeed, there is an "intermediate" category between the two main types.
- Lane's model was readily adaptable to tourism in the Great Hungarian Plain as the region exhibits the mixture that he proposed. The urban, intermediate and rural types of tourism are present together in each region, if with different intensity and shares, and they jointly constitute tourism supply in the given region or district as in this case.
- "Rural tourism" is a much broader and wider term than tourism in the country because a key component of the definition includes the geographic area where the types of tourism are available.
- Rurality, the typical rural character of the Great Hungarian Plain, greatly determines the principal features of tourism supply in the region.



- The possible combinations of rural-urban regions and the different types of tourism in the Great Hungarian Plain can be included in four major groups: 1. Rural types of tourism in a rural area (A), 2. Rural types of tourism in an urban area (B), 3. Urban types of tourism in a rural area (C), 4. Urban types of tourism in an urban area (D).
- The broader concept of “rural tourism” in the Great Hungarian Plain, then, may cover all of the above categories except type 4, and they jointly constitute the essence of the highly diverse and complex tourism of the Great Hungarian Plain as a large region.



### **The interpretation of “rural tourism”**

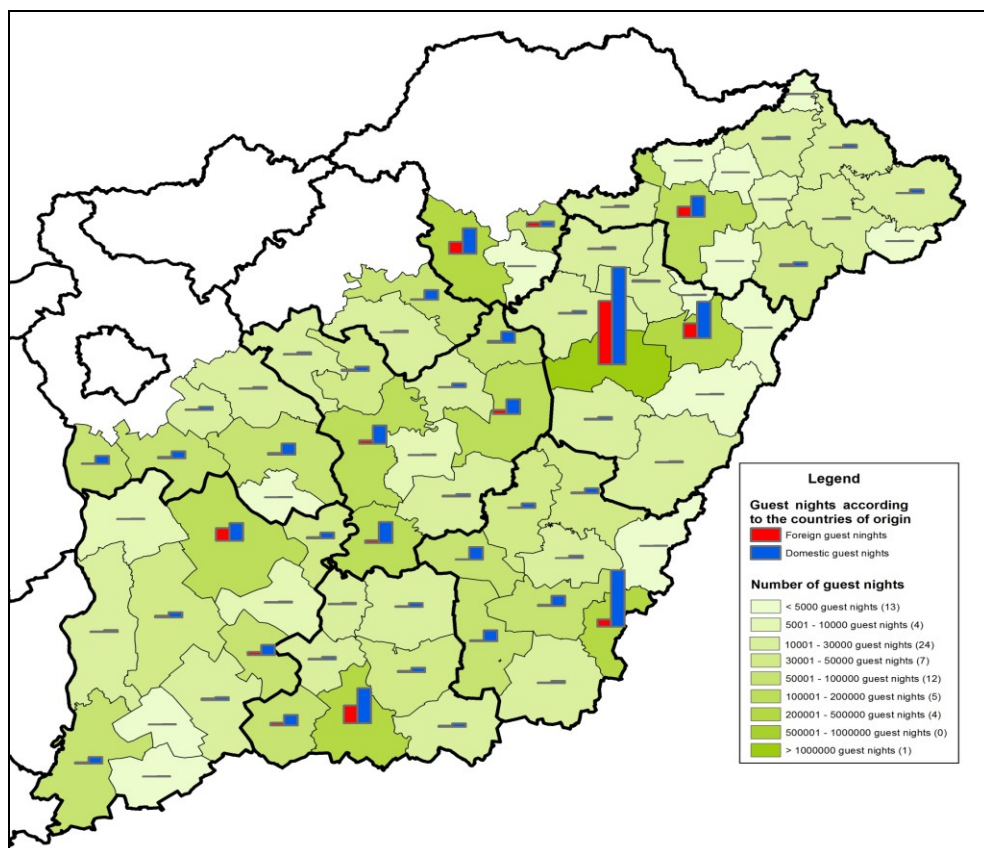
Source: the author’s own graph

- The inner (natural, landscape and social) resources of the Great Hungarian Plain are highly diverse and differ from each other from region to region. Most of them are also tourism resources (landscape image, flora, fauna, built heritage, traditions, and folk customs), and their unique combinations provide the basis of unique tourism attractions and products that are characteristic of the region.
- The natural geographic conditions and natural resources of the Great Hungarian Plain predominantly determine the image of each region and also affect the localities, their societies and traditions that have developed during centuries and hence tourism.

- Thermal waters in the Great Hungarian Plain are outstanding attractions and have created self-contained destinations. With the excellent geothermic conditions of Hungary, this is the world's fifth richest area in thermal and medicinal waters.
- The Great Hungarian Plain is home to more than half of the country's 236 medicinal springs with over 80 spas built upon them, including 11 awarded with the "National Spa Certification Brand".
- The localities with a spa in the Great Hungarian Plain have an outstanding capacity to attract and receive visitors and they manage a high tourist turnover. Such localities are home to 71% of all commercial accommodations, 78% of other accommodations, and represent 93% of all guest nights spent in the Great Hungarian Plain.
- The Great Hungarian Plain boasts of considerable natural assets. Specifically, the first two national parks of Hungary were founded in this region (the Hortobágy National Park in 1973 and the Kiskunság National Park in 1975). Today there are four of them and they have managed investment projects generating considerable tourism (e.g. visitor centres) in the past two decades.
- The region offers remarkable man-made attractions built on cultural values and traditions, especially traditions related to agriculture, food production, and gastronomy (including monuments, regional peasant houses, local foods, Hungaricums, etc.).
- Local foods and gastronomy are characteristic elements of tourism supply in the Great Hungarian Plain. The region is home to 2/3 of agricultural and food Hungaricums and nearly half of the products awarded with the brand "Traditions, Flavours & Regions".
- Equestrian traditions are an attraction that is unique to the Great Hungarian Plain.
- Most equestrian farms in the Great Hungarian Plain are situated in the suburban regions of large cities.
- The accommodations in the Great Hungarian Plain show a highly uneven geographic distribution and striking differences in capacity. Some of the districts offer fewer than 50 beds whereas there is one (Hajdúszoboszló) with a number above 17,000.
- This research has demonstrated the high territorial concentration of tourism in the region. Almost 50% of guest nights are spent in five districts (Hajdúszoboszló,

Debrecen, Gyula, Mezőkövesd, and Szeged). This reveals the dominance of tourism built on medicinal waters except for two regional centres (although they also manage such tourism).

- Concentration is also typical of localities. Those with the top 20 guest nights represent 3/4 of the overall guest turnover and the top 10 represent nearly 60% of guest nights.
- Since the political changeover, the region has experienced a steady decrease in the turnover of foreign visitors. Specifically, Hungarian clients now account for 3/4 of the guest nights spent in the Great Hungarian Plain.
- Foreign visitors almost invariably opt for the region's large cities and spas.
- Also, the economic and financial crisis that started in 2008 has greatly restructured the countries of origin with an increasing share of close and neighbouring countries (Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine, and Serbia).
- Tourism typically generates such a big turnover and source of income in spas, large cities and county towns that it can produce a considerable and perceptible effect.



**Number of guest nights in commercial and other accommodations in the Great Hungarian Plain's districts (2014)**

Source: CSO TSTAR, edited by the author

- As the statutory and statistical concept of rural tourism underwent an apparently undue change in 2009, half of the landlords were excluded from this category also in the Great Hungarian Plain and they are now carrying on their business not as rural but as “other” landlords. This problem is a major obstacle to a realistic professional and scholarly analysis of the subject.
- Statistics show that tourism regions with a predominantly rural supply manage a much lower guest turnover in the Great Hungarian Plain than areas providing more intensive and urban services.
- In 2014 the number of registered guest nights in rural tourism, using its definition in force from 2010, was negligible, slightly more than 1.6% of all guest nights spent in the Great Hungarian Plain.
- The areas that are attractive in terms of rural tourism are most concentrated in Szatmár and Bereg, where this activity has evolved in the most complete and authentic way.
- Further regional foci are scattered across Hortobágy (the village of Hortobágy), near Lake Tisza (Tiszabábolna, Tiszadorogma, Tiszavalk), Hajdúság (Ebes, Derecske, Hajdúszovát), in the region of Nagy-Sárrét (Báránd, Sárrétudvardi), along the Danube (Harta, Dunafalva), and in the Duna–Tisza Interfluve (Akasztó, Bugac, Csólyospálos, Felsőlajos, Jászszentlászló, Ópusztaszer, Pusztaszer, Üllés).
- The quantifiable performance of rural tourism as a broader concept is not directly included in the CSO’s data and can only be inferred from other statistical data.
- Taken in its sense used in this thesis, rural tourism accounts for 70% of the guest nights spent in the Great Hungarian Plain owing to a high proportion of rural areas.
- Performed by asking tourism professionals in the Great Hungarian Plain, the primary research confirmed my hypothesis that the most important inner resources are natural factors. These received the qualification “Rather significant” or “Highly significant” from more than half of the respondents.
- Of the man-made resources, the respondents primarily identified those related to agriculture (e.g. the traditions of local food production) and cultural heritage. Nearly half of them (40-50%) found these factors rather significant or highly significant.

- Of the inner resources, tourism professionals in the Great Hungarian Plain considered the condition of human factors as one of the most unfavourable. More than one-third found them weak or poor and only one-fifth rated them as rather significant or highly significant. This could chart the main courses of future development for tourism in the region.
- While collaboration with the professionals of tourism and others related to the sector provide a solid basis for operating the sector, efficiency could be multiplied by a higher level of and more intense cooperation between stakeholders (landlords, event managers, local producers, tourism organisations, and local governments) as opposed to what most respondents found mediocre.
- The Internet appearance of tourism professionals in the Great Hungarian Plain is below the national average in every service provider and landlord category.
- As is reflected by the websites of service providers operating tourism in the Great Hungarian Plain and of the regions that partly cover them, tourism has conspicuous rural features in the case of nearly each type of locality and service provider.
- Collaboration between tourism professionals in the Great Hungarian Plain and the territorial (regional) level offering a broader supply is below expectations in terms of intensity and should be enhanced. On average 50–60% of the websites refer to each other's supply.
- An efficient way to develop the future of tourism in the Great Hungarian Plain could be the LEADER model based on the involvement of inner resources and on close cooperation between the public and the private sectors, and even the new CLLD collaboration, which encourages cooperation between cities and their rural areas.
- Further new possibilities could be offered for tourism in the Great Hungarian Plain and even in the whole of Hungary by Saxena-Ilbery's Integrated Rural Tourism (IRT) Model.

## V. Publications in the Subject of the Thesis

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- Gulyás, Péter: A Dél-Alföld turizmusának főbb jellemzői. In: *Kárpát-medence régiói – Dél-Alföld.* pp. 263–273. Dialóg Campus Kiadó, Pécs, 2010. [Key Characteristics of Tourism in the Southern Great Plain. In: *Regions of the Carpathian Basin – Southern Great Plain.* pp. 263–273. Dialóg Campus Publisher, Pécs, 2010]
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- Gulyás, Péter: Helyzetkép az Alföld falusi turizmusáról. In: *A falusi turizmus múltja, jelene és jövője. Falusi Turizmus Tájékoztató 2015/1*. Falusi és Agroturizmus Országos Szövetsége. pp. 20–21. [State of the Art of Rural Tourism in the Great Hungarian Plain. In: *Past, Present and Future of Rural Tourism. Guide of Rural Tourism 2015/1. National Association of Rural and Agricultural Tourism*, pp. 20–21]
- Gulyas, Peter: The Development of Tourist Relations during the Economic Crisis Through the Example of the Southern Great Plain Region and Serbia. *Romanian Review of Regional Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, June 2016. Centre for Regional Geography. Babes-Bolyai University Faculty of Geography. (in preparation)
- Gulyás, Péter: A vidékturizmus alföldi sajátosságainak megjelenése turisztikai témájú weboldalakon. *A Falu XXXI*. évf. 3. sz. 2016/ősz. (megjelenés alatt) [The Appearance of the Characteristics of Rural Tourism in the Great Hungarian Plain on Websites. *A Falu XXXI/3*, autumn 2016 (in preparation)]