

The Secret Paradise Mountain Cross-Country Race in the Bârgău Mountains — Between Athletic Performance and Tourism Promotion. A Case Study on a Local Endurance Event

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ABSTRACT. Mountain running represents a complex form of physical activity that combines athletic performance, mental endurance, and the appreciation of natural landscapes. **Objectives:** This paper analyzes the organization and outcomes of the “Secret Paradise” mountain cross-country race, held on October 4th, 2025, in the Bârgău Mountains, around Zimbroya Peak (1345 m). The 16 km course, featuring a total elevation gain and loss of 1000 m, brought together 39 participants (27 men, 12 women) aged between 14 and 73. **Methods:** The analysis is based on direct observation, organizational data, and participants’ feedback. **Results:** Results highlight the potential of such events to foster community cohesion, promote active tourism, and encourage outdoor physical activity. **Conclusions:** Despite adverse weather conditions, the combination of a challenging course, effective organization, and scenic landscapes ensured the event’s success.

Keywords: *mountain running, Bârgău Mountains, sport tourism, performance, case study*

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, mountain running competitions have experienced significant growth in Romania, reflecting a global trend toward endurance sports and outdoor activities. Mountain cross-country races combine elements of athletic performance, health education, and active tourism. They take place in exceptional natural settings, encouraging mixed participation (amateurs and professionals alike) and social interaction.

This article aims to document and analyse a concrete example — the “Secret Paradise” mountain cross-country race — held in the Bârgău Mountains, in order to highlight the organisational, athletic, and touristic aspects of a local endurance event. The purpose of the research is to demonstrate how a community-based initiative can contribute to developing a culture of movement and promoting a mountain region with high touristic potential.

GEOGRAPHICAL AND ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT

The event took place in the Bârgău Mountains, part of the Eastern Carpathians, characterised by picturesque hills (măguri) developed on intrusive magmatic massifs and plateaus modelled on sedimentary rocks (Bîca & Onofreiu, 2016), with altitudes ranging between 1,000 and 1,600 m. The cross-country race unfolded around Mount Zimbroya (1,345 m), with both the start and finish points located at the Secret Paradise Guesthouse (<https://secretparadise.ro>; <https://www.facebook.com/p/Secret-Paradise-Transylvania>) (fig. 1).

The course covered a distance of 16 km, with a total elevation gain of 1,000 m (500 m ascent and 500 m descent), running along dirt and gravel roads through deciduous and spruce forests, meadows, and hayfields (fig. 2, fig.3). Weather conditions were difficult: heavy overnight rain, wet soil, and low temperatures.

The organizers of this sporting event were the Faculty of Geography and the Faculty of Physical Education and Sport within Babeș-Bolyai University, and Secret Paradise Transylvania.

THE SECRET PARADISE MOUNTAIN CROSS-COUNTRY RACE IN THE BÂRGĂU MOUNTAINS — BETWEEN ATHLETIC PERFORMANCE AND TOURISM PROMOTION. A CASE STUDY ON A LOCAL ENDURANCE EVENT



Fig. 1. Geographic localization of Zimbroaia Mountain

Source: <https://geoportal.ancpi.ro/portal/home/webmap/viewer-with-changes>



Fig. 2. Secret Paradise Mountain Cross-Country Trail

Source: Strava-with changes



Fig. 3. The profile of Secret Paradise Mountain Cross-Country
Source: Google Earth-with changes

The organizational process was rigorously structured, as follows:

- formulation of the competition concept;
- formation of the organizing core team;
- selection and mapping of the route;
- cleaning and marking of the route (paint, tape, signs);
- testing and evaluation of the route by experienced mountain marathon runners;
- formation of the volunteer team (at base and along the route);
- event promotion and opening of online registrations;
- processing of entries and establishment of award categories;
- identification of sponsors and determination of prizes;
- actual race execution and awards ceremony (fig.4).



Fig. 4. The poster of Secret Paradise Mountain Cross-Country
Source: Secret Paradise Transylvania

The event involved 39 runners (27 men and 12 women), aged between 14 and 73, and a group of 50 volunteers, supported by several county and local institutions such as Salvamont Bistrița-Năsăud, the Bistrița-Năsăud Gendarmerie, Sanovil Bistrița, and the Tiha Bârgăului Municipality.

METHODOLOGY

The research employed a mixed-method approach based on:

- direct observation during the event;
- analysis of organizational data (number of participants, times, categories, environmental conditions);
- a post-race questionnaire administered to a sample of 30 participants, addressing motivation, satisfaction, and perceived route difficulty.

Results were statistically summarized and interpreted in comparison with the specialized literature.

Literature review in the context of the secret paradise mountain cross-country race

The organization and development of the Secret Paradise Mountain Cross-Country Race in the Bârgău Mountains (4 October 2025) can be analyzed from several theoretical and empirical perspectives within the specialized literature on mountain sports, sports tourism, and participant motivation. Recent research highlights the complex relationship between athlete motivation, landscape attractiveness, and the community impact of such activities (Guereño-Omil et al., 2024; Hallmann & Zehrer, 2024).

1. Participant Motivation and Psychological Dimensions

In the specialised literature, the motivation of mountain runners is explained through the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which distinguishes between intrinsic motivation (the pleasure of the activity itself, contact with nature, self-improvement) and extrinsic motivation (rewards, social status, competition). Studies on ultramarathon runners (Waśkiewicz et al., 2019) show that they train and compete mainly for intrinsic reasons, such as the desire for exploration, connection with the natural environment, and the authentic experience of exertion.

These findings are also reflected among the participants in the Secret Paradise race, who described the course as “beautiful, varied, and challenging,” expressing aesthetic and emotional satisfaction beyond the physical effort.

Similarly, León-Guereño et al. (2021) demonstrated that, regardless of age, motivation for running includes psychological dimensions such as relaxation, inner balance, and a sense of community. The social atmosphere at Secret Paradise — composed of volunteers, participants, and spectators — fostered the creation of a temporary community, reinforcing the social dimension of mass sport.

2. The Mountain Landscape as a Motivational and Experiential Factor

Research in sports tourism indicates that the natural landscape is not merely an aesthetic backdrop but a constitutive element of the sporting experience (Hallmann & Zehrer, 2024). The concept of sportscape — the space perceived and experienced through physical activity — implies an integration between route, terrain, vegetation, signage, and visual perception. In the study by Guereño-Omil et al. (2024), outdoor competition participants reported choosing locations that offer not only technical challenge but also aesthetic and cultural value.

The 15 km course at Secret Paradise, circling Mount Zimbroya (1,345 m), traverses forests, clearings, and hayfields, showcasing a wide range of visual and sensory elements — from autumn colors and moving fog to alternating slopes and surface textures. The runners' appreciation of the landscape, recorded in post-event interviews, confirms the findings of Hallmann and Zehrer (2024) regarding the importance of sensory interaction with the natural environment for overall participant satisfaction. Thus, the event managed not only to test the runners' physical limits but also to evoke aesthetic and contemplative experiences.

3. Mass Sport and Community Impact

Mountain cross-country events significantly contribute to the development of mass sports and the promotion of active tourism. Chang et al. (2021) show that local community support for sports tourism is closely linked to perceived benefits — economic, social, and identity-related. The Secret Paradise race directly involved local volunteers, sponsors, the host guesthouse, and county and local authorities, generating a form of social capital that, according to the literature, is essential for the sustainability of such events.

The participation of 39 runners from diverse backgrounds and age groups (14–73 years) also confirms the observations of León-Guereño et al. (2021) regarding the intergenerational and inclusive character of mountain running as a form of recreational physical activity. Moreover, the community dimension of the awards ceremony and post-race socialisation can be interpreted as a form of strengthening local cohesion through sport.

4. The Physical Factor and Adaptation to Mountain Effort

Recent Romanian studies (Enoiu, Găinariu & Mîndrescu, 2024) have analyzed the influence of altitude and elevation differences on athlete performance, showing that the mountain environment requires complex physiological adaptations and enhances general endurance. In the context of the Secret Paradise race — with a total elevation difference of 1,000 m and challenging weather conditions (rain, low temperatures, soft ground) — physical effort was amplified, giving the event a semi-competitive and engaging character, suitable for recreational athletes with an intermediate level of training (Șandor, 2025; Man, 2022).

From the perspective of the reviewed literature, Secret Paradise can be regarded as a model for integrating recreational sport within the natural mountain context, with multiple effects:

- development of intrinsic motivation and self - fulfilment through effort (Waśkiewicz et al., 2019);
- valorization of landscape as an aesthetic and psychological factor (Guereño-Omil et al., 2024; Hallmann & Zehrer, 2024);
- strengthening of social capital and local tourism (Chang et al., 2021);
- promotion of health and intergenerational inclusion (León-Guereño et al., 2021);
- stimulation of physical and mental adaptation to demanding environments (Enoiu et al., 2024).

Overall, the event aligns with current trends in sustainable outdoor sport, where performance, nature experience, and community complement one another.

RESULTS

Participants and Performance

Participants recorded an average completion time of 1 h 58 min, ranging between 1 h 22 min and 2 h 45 min. All runners completed the course, with no withdrawals.

Participation Motivation

According to the questionnaire results:

- 52% of runners stated they participated for the pleasure of mountain running;
- 28% participated for personal performance development;
- 20% participated for socialization and group experience.

Perceived Difficulty and Satisfaction

-60% of runners rated the course as of “medium” difficulty, 35% as “difficult”, and 5% as “easy”.

The overall satisfaction level was high (average score: 4.7/5). Participants particularly appreciated the clear signage, landscape variety, and organizers' hospitality.

DISCUSSION

The results confirm the specialized literature regarding the positive effects of outdoor sports on physical and mental health (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Hallmann & Breuer, 2010). The predominance of intrinsic motivation and experience-oriented attitudes indicates that these competitions have become authentic forms of active tourism and environmental education.

Adverse weather conditions tested participants' endurance and adaptability but did not diminish overall enthusiasm. Efficient organization, inter-institutional collaboration, and local community involvement demonstrate the capacity of local initiatives to generate positive social and touristic impact.

The mountain cross-country race as a vector of sports tourism

The "Secret Paradise" event contributed to promoting the Bârgău area as a destination for sports tourism and active recreation. Participants engaged with remarkable landscapes — magmatic hills (măguri), clearings, deciduous and spruce forests — representing an exceptional natural resource.

The awards ceremony, held at the Secret Paradise Guesthouse, provided a setting for social interaction and experience exchange, encouraging the event's continuity. Thus, the mountain cross-country race emerges as both a tool of territorial marketing and a means of ecological and sports education (fig. 5).



Fig. 5. The Start of Secret Paradise Mountain Cross-Country
Source: Secret Paradise Transylvania

CONCLUSIONS

The “Secret Paradise” mountain cross-country race illustrates how a local initiative can harmoniously integrate sport, tourism, and community. The event demonstrated: the viability of mountain competitions in rural areas with touristic potential; the benefits of endurance activities for health and social cohesion; the educational and formative value of sport practiced in nature.

Recommendations for future editions include expanding physiological monitoring (heart rate, exertion level), analyzing local economic impact, and developing an annual calendar of mountain competitions in the Bârgău Mountains.

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