

DOI: 10.24818/CTS/7/2025/2.01

## TOURISM BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE AND TERRITORY: THE SAPANCA LESSON

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From November 5 to 7, 2025, I had the opportunity to participate in the 4th International Congress of New Generations and New Trends in Tourism (INGANT), an event impeccably organized by Sakarya University of Applied Sciences through its Faculty of Tourism. The congress was held in Sapanca, a town of remarkable beauty that remains little known outside Turkey.

My participation had a dual dimension: as a representative of the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies, an institutional partner of the congress, and as editor-in-chief of CACTUS Tourism Journal, a partner journal of the event. Additionally, serving as session chair in one of the parallel sections gave me the opportunity to observe firsthand the diversity of ideas and concerns among the participating researchers. This combination of academic engagement and territorial context led me to a natural reflection: a tourism congress sometimes becomes, even without explicit intention, a tool for promoting its host location.

Sapanca is a perfect example. Situated between the calm lake and the green hills that seem to protect it from the outside world, the area has all the elements of an emerging destination: nature, accessibility, developing infrastructure, and a local community interested in innovation. Yet, without sustained international exposure, these assets remain in the background. In this sense, INGANT played a broader role than initially stated. Without the organizers explicitly proposing it, the congress became a space for authentic visibility, offering participants - researchers, teachers, and industry professionals - a direct experience with the destination.

This direct experience is also an essential element for tourism promotion today. Traditional advertising, no matter how sophisticated, cannot replace direct contact with a place. Academic events thus become catalysts for tourism reputation: they attract opinion leaders, produce authentic impressions, and generate organic narratives. These narratives – from simple observations to comparative analyses – then circulate in professional circles, the media, academia, and, inevitably, real tourism.

In the case of Sapanca, the congress served as a "visibility portal." The speeches at INGANT addressed themes such as digitalization, sustainability, cultural experiences, and proximity tourism, all highly relevant for the development of a destination still seeking its international position. Beyond the theoretical content, participants intuitively sensed the area's immense potential. In every interaction – whether during coffee breaks or evening walks along the lakeshore – the same idea emerged: the quality of a place is often revealed through the lens of the learning community it hosts.

Here is an important lesson: congresses can become strategic tools for promoting emerging destinations, serving as true territorial branding platforms - not through artificiality, but through authenticity; not through slogans, but through experiences. Sapanca did not "promote" itself directly; it presented itself, allowed itself to be discovered, and this simplicity proved more powerful than any formal campaign. If speeches can build understanding, experiences build attachment. Modern tourism needs exactly this combination: knowledge and lived experience.

For journalists, researchers, and tourism professionals, the Sapanca experience raises a relevant question for the entire industry: how can we better capitalize on the connection between profile events and territorial marketing? And, perhaps more importantly, how can destinations not yet on the global

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radar attract attention through such initiatives? INGANT 2025 demonstrated once again that when knowledge meets an authentic territory, the result is a visibility that no classic marketing program can reproduce. For those of us involved in tourism research and promotion, this lesson should become part of a new way of viewing the relationship between science and destinations. For a few days, Sapanca was the perfect setting where academic tourism and experiential tourism naturally engaged in dialogue. Thus, INGANT was not only a contribution to academic discourse, but also an encounter with a territory that deserves to be known.

In conclusion, participation in INGANT was not only a successful academic event, but also a reminder that great tourism discoveries often emerge during conferences where, beyond slides and sessions, a discreet territory is revealed. Sapanca deserves this discovery, and international tourism deserves places that, like it, combine natural tranquility with intellectual vibrancy.

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