



HARGHITA COUNTY COUNCIL



Harghita County

strategic profile and institutional overview

VISIT HARGHITA!

INVEST IN HARGHITA!

GENERAL OVERVIEW

Harghita County is located in central Romania, forming the northeastern part of the Central Development Region. It is one of the most distinctive counties in Romania due to its cultural heritage, ethnic diversity, rich natural environment, and active local governance.

- **Surface area:** 6,639 km²
- **Population:** 291,761 (2023)
- **Urbanization:** 40.7% (lower than national average)
- **Ethnic composition:** 85.7% Hungarian, 12.4% Romanian, 1.8% Roma (2021)
- **Administrative divisions:** Harghita County comprises 9 urban administrative units, of which 4 are municipalities (Miercurea Ciuc - county seat), Odorheiu Secuiesc, Gheorgheni, Toplița) and 5 are towns (Băile Tușnad, Bălan, Borsec, Cristuru Secuiesc and Vlăhița), alongside 58 communes and 235 villages (which are subdivisions of the communes)
- **County capital:** Miercurea Ciuc

The region is defined by its mountainous terrain, including peaks like Harghita-Mădăraș at 1801 meters, and by its rich natural resources, such as forests, volcanic springs, mineral waters, construction stone, and geothermal energy sources.

ECONOMIC PROFILE AND INVESTMENT POTENTIAL

Harghita County has a **resilient and diversified economy**, combining traditional industries such as forestry, food processing, and crafts with emerging sectors like green energy, medical tourism, and rural innovation. Its structure reflects both the advantages of natural resources and targeted local development efforts.

According to the most recent data (2021), the **GDP per capita** in Harghita County reached **€17,230 PPS**, indicating moderate but consistent growth. The **economic structure** of the county is composed of:

- **Services (60.3%)**, which include tourism, trade, healthcare, education, and administrative services;
- **Industry (27.4%)**, driven by timber processing, furniture production, construction materials, and food manufacturing;
- **Construction (6.3%)**, a sector steadily expanding due to public investments in infrastructure;
- **Agriculture (6%)**, mainly small-scale farming, livestock breeding, and horticulture.

The **key sectors** of economic activity:

One of the county's traditional strengths is the **agro-food sector**, with a significant number of producers involved in dairy processing, meat products, and craft food. Harghita is well known for its high-quality milk and cheese, as well as meat products rooted in Szekler culinary traditions.

The **timber and furniture industry** continues to play an important role, supported by the county's extensive forest resources (over 35% of the territory is forested). Local businesses produce both raw and finished wood products, including furniture, building materials, and biomass fuel.

Harghita is also Romania's leader in **mineral water bottling**. Brands like **Borsec** — internationally recognized — and **Sâncrăieni** are bottled at source and exported both nationally and abroad. The region has over 200 natural springs, many of which are still underexploited.

In recent years, Harghita has been developing its **renewable energy sector, especially biomass-based heating systems and geothermal energy** in areas like Sânsimion. Local authorities promote clean energy solutions in public buildings and rural communities.

The **medical tourism and wellness sector** is expanding, with towns like Borsec, Băile Tușnad, Harghita Băi and Toplița offering therapeutic spa services, mofettas (CO₂-rich dry gas emissions used for vascular therapy), and mineral baths. These natural advantages are being paired with tourism infrastructure to attract long-term investments.

EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

The educational system of Harghita County is diverse and strongly connected to regional development needs. Vocational and technical education is well represented in both urban and rural areas. Schools provide training in sectors such as tourism and hospitality, IT and electronics, agro-food and environmental sciences, health and social care, mechanical services, forestry, and renewable energy technologies.

In terms of higher education, Harghita hosts the **Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania** in Miercurea Ciuc, which offers accredited bachelor and master programmes in **engineering, informatics, economics, agrotourism, and communication sciences**.

The **Babeş-Bolyai University** also operates satellite campuses in Gheorgheni and Odorheiu Secuiesc, providing specialized study fields in **geography, psychology, education, and social sciences**. **The vocational and secondary schools** are located in both urban (e.g., Miercurea Ciuc, Odorheiu Secuiesc, Gheorgheni) and rural areas (e.g., Ditrău, Joseni, Corbu, Zetea), offering specializations in:

- Tourism and Hospitality
- Health and Social Care
- Agricultural and Agro-food industries
- Environmental protection
- IT and Electronics
- Mechanics and Technical Services
- Forestry and Renewable Energies

It is important to mention that **over 74% of primary and secondary schools are in rural areas**, reflecting the dispersed settlement structure of the county.

RESEARCH & INNOVATION INFRASTRUCTURE

Harghita is gradually developing a knowledge-based economy through public-private partnerships, university-led research, and industry-led innovation and also supports the development of a knowledge-based economy through its growing research and innovation sector. Several **research centers** are affiliated with local universities and companies.

The Sapientia University hosts multiple institutes, such as the **BIBIRC – Biochemistry and Biotechnology Research Centre and STIALIM – Food Science Research Centre**, as well as centers focusing on informatics, intercultural studies, and economics. **The Corax Bioner CEU SA institute** in Miercurea Ciuc conducts applied research in **biomedical and agricultural biotechnology**. Meanwhile, **ROSEAL SA**, based in Odorheiu Secuiesc, specializes in **materials research, working with magnetic nanoparticles, advanced polymers, and nano-coatings**.

Harghita County's educational system supports regional development, including networks of vocational schools, universities, and research institutions.

Tourism is one of Harghita County's most promising sectors, combining unspoiled natural landscapes with rich cultural traditions. The county is known for its **volcanic and mountainous attractions**, such as **Lake Sfânta Ana** – Romania's only volcanic crater lake – as well as the Red Lake and the Bicz Gorges. Harghita Băi, Băile Tuşnad, Borsec, and Toplița are all **renowned spa resorts offering balneotherapy, mofettas, and mineral springs**.

Harghita County has been awarded the prestigious title of **European Region of Gastronomy 2027** by the International Institute of Gastronomy, Culture, Arts and Tourism (IGCAT), recognizing the region's outstanding commitment to local gastronomy, cultural heritage, and sustainable tourism. This international distinction highlights **Harghita's strong local food systems, traditions, and the collaboration between producers, chefs, tourism professionals, and communities**.

As a future European Region of Gastronomy, Harghita will organize a year-long program of festivals, culinary events, professional conferences, and cultural initiatives celebrating its distinctive flavours and traditions. The initiative also promotes sustainable tourism, biodiversity, and the preservation of authentic local products. Through this achievement, Harghita County positions itself as an **emerging gastronomic destination in Europe**, showcasing its rich culinary heritage and community-driven development.

Cultural tourism is also thriving, thanks to the annual **Pentecost pilgrimage in Șumuleu Ciuc** – the largest Catholic gathering in Central Europe – and heritage sites like the **UNESCO-listed fortified church in Dârjiu** and the **medieval Lăzarea Castle**. Visitors are also drawn to the crafts village of Corund, famous for its pottery and folk art.

In 2023, Harghita County offered a total of **10,457 tourist accommodation places** across 545 lodging units, of which 380 were classified as tourist or agrotourism guesthouses. Informations can be found on the county tourism portal: www.visitharghita.com

HARGHITA COUNTY COUNCIL – STRATEGIC ROLES

Harghita County Council is the main local public administration in the region, composed of a **President, two Vice Presidents, and 30 County Councillors**. The institution manages regional strategic development and ensures the delivery of essential public services. Its responsibilities cover **infrastructure, urban planning, rural and mountain development, culture, youth policy, civil society engagement, health services, education, emergency coordination, tourism development, and environmental sustainability**. The Council plays a key role in accessing and managing EU funds and implementing structural investment projects at county level.

Main responsibilities:

- Public infrastructure and investment
- Culture, youth, civil society, religious diversity
- Rural development and mountain area planning
- Emergency services (e.g., mountain rescue)
- Urbanism and environmental sustainability
- EU-funded projects and international partnerships

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Harghita County Council is member of the **Assembly of European Regions** (AER), participating in policy networks and interregional cooperation. Since 2023, the Council has also been a member of ALDA – the **European Association for Local Democracy** – enabling project partnerships in democratic governance and community development.

The Council maintains **representation in Brussels** to build dialogue with EU institutions, attract funding opportunities, and promote the county's interests in European consultations. It also cooperates with twin counties and regions, therefore maintains **twin county relationships with 13**

counties in Hungary, 2 in Italy, 1 in Poland, 1 in China, 1 in Armenia, 1 in the Republic of Moldova, and 1 in Ukraine.

International projects supported by the Council focus on youth policy, dual and vocational education, rural innovation, tourism infrastructure, sustainable development, green transitions, and digitalization. The Council manages several key institutions, therefore the **subordinate institutions of Harghita County Council** are:

- Psychiatric Hospital in Tulgheș
- Harghita Publishing House
- Special School in Ocland
- Harghita County School of Arts and Folk Arts
- Harghita County Personal Records Directorate
- Harghita County Council's Public Service for the Protection and Guarding of County-owned Facilities
- Harghita County Educational Counseling and Resource Center
- Harghita Népe Newspaper Publisher
- Kájoni János County Library
- Harghita County Mountain Rescue Service
- Saint Anna Special School in Șumuleu Ciuc
- Cultural and Arts Center in Lăzarea
- Harghita County Tradition Preservation Resource Center
- Harghita County Cultural Center
- Special School in Bilbor
- Harghita County Directorate of Social and Child Protection
- Harghita County Emergency Hospital

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