

AGROTOURISM RECREATION CENTER – AUTHENTIC NATURE EXPERIENCE

Valentin - Petru COPĂCIAN¹, Florena Andrada PASCAR¹, Andrea BĂLIBAN¹, Alina Emilia GHERDAN¹

¹ University of Oradea, Faculty of Environmental Protection, Gen. Magheru street, no. 26, Oradea, Romania

REVIEW, RESEARCH ARTICLE

Abstract

The development of recreational infrastructure represents a strategic direction for diversifying rural economies and increasing the competitiveness of tourist destinations. Bihor County benefits from valuable natural, cultural, and spa resources that support the development of integrated tourism products based on authentic and sustainable experiences. The aim of this study was to analyze the existing recreational infrastructure and to develop the conceptual framework of an Agritourism Recreation Center entitled “Authentic Nature Experience”, designed to promote the integrated valorization of the rural heritage of Bihor County.

The research methodology included a documentary analysis of the scientific literature, statistical data processing regarding tourism activity during the period 2020–2025, territorial analysis of the main recreational facilities, benchmarking of best-practice models, and SWOT analysis. Based on the obtained results, a conceptual model was developed, integrating recreation and leisure activities, an educational farm, local gastronomy, nature-based wellness, tourism animation, and heritage conservation.

The findings reveal a significant potential for the development of a multifunctional recreation center located along the tourism corridor connecting Oradea, Băile Felix, and the Apuseni Mountains. Economic estimates indicate a capacity of approximately 35,000 visitors annually, annual revenues of around EUR 450,000, an operational profit of approximately EUR 170,000 per year, and the creation of 18–25 direct jobs. The SWOT analysis highlighted the diversity of recreational resources and the strategic location of Bihor County within the main tourism flows of western Romania as the project’s major strengths.

The study concludes that the “Authentic Nature Experience” model can contribute to the sustainable development of rural areas through tourism diversification, promotion of local products, enhancement of destination attractiveness, and stimulation of local economic growth.

Keywords: agritourism recreation center; sustainable rural development; experiential tourism; recreation infrastructure; rural heritage; Bihor County.

#Corresponding author alinagherdan@uoradea.ro

Introduction

Contemporary tourism is increasingly oriented toward authentic, personalized, and sustainable experiences, reflecting the transition from traditional tourism products to the experience economy. Modern tourists seek direct interaction with nature, local culture, and host communities, generating demand for innovative tourism products that combine recreation, education, and cultural immersion (13, 14).

In this context, recreation centers have become important components of tourism infrastructure, contributing to destination attractiveness, product diversification, and the extension of tourists’ length of stay. Such facilities integrate leisure, educational, cultural, wellness, and outdoor activities, responding to the needs of diverse tourist segments while generating positive economic and social effects for local communities (1, 2, 15).

The development of agritourism recreation centers is particularly relevant in rural areas, where natural and cultural

resources can be sustainably utilized through tourism activities. The integration of recreational services into agritourism establishments creates additional income opportunities for rural communities, supports local entrepreneurship, and promotes authentic visitor experiences based on agriculture, gastronomy, traditions, and environmental education (3, 6, 16).

Bihor County represents one of the most attractive tourism regions in north-western Romania due to the diversity of its natural, cultural, and spa resources. The county benefits from internationally recognized spa resorts such as Băile Felix and Băile 1 Mai, remarkable karst landscapes within the Apuseni Mountains, and a growing agritourism sector supported by numerous rural accommodation facilities (17, 18). Recent investments in tourism infrastructure, destination promotion, and transport accessibility have strengthened Bihor’s position as a competitive tourism destination

at both national and international levels (20, 21).

Against this background, the development of an Agritourism Recreation Center entitled “Authentic Nature Experience” represents an opportunity for the integrated valorization of local resources through recreation, environmental education, local gastronomy, wellness activities, and the promotion of rural heritage. The concept aims to create a multifunctional tourism product capable of contributing to sustainable rural development, destination competitiveness, and local economic growth.

Therefore, the main objective of this study is to evaluate the opportunities for developing the “Authentic Nature Experience” Agritourism Recreation Center by analyzing the existing recreational infrastructure of Bihor County and assessing its potential for supporting an integrated and sustainable tourism model.

Recent studies emphasize that tourism competitiveness is increasingly determined by the capacity of destinations to create integrated experiences rather than offering isolated services. Recreation infrastructure has evolved from a complementary element of tourism supply into a strategic component capable of generating added value, increasing visitor satisfaction, and encouraging repeat visitation. In rural destinations, the integration of recreational facilities with local heritage, gastronomy, environmental education, and wellness services contributes to the development of innovative tourism products that strengthen destination identity and improve regional competitiveness. Consequently, recreation centers are increasingly recognized as catalysts for sustainable local development and territorial cohesion (1, 8, 12).

At the same time, the principles of sustainable development and the European Green Deal encourage the implementation of tourism models that balance economic growth, environmental protection, and social inclusion. Multifunctional agritourism centers represent an effective instrument for achieving these objectives because they facilitate the diversification of rural economies, stimulate local entrepreneurship, promote short food supply chains, and support the conservation of cultural and natural heritage. Through their multifunctional character, such centers create opportunities for cooperation among farmers,

tourism operators, local authorities, and community organizations, generating positive multiplier effects throughout the local economy and contributing to the resilience of rural areas (3, 8, 17).

Materials and Methods

This research was conducted to evaluate the opportunities for developing an Agritourism Recreation Center entitled “Authentic Nature Experience” in Bihor County, Romania, through the integrated valorization of the region’s natural, recreational, and tourism resources. The study adopted an exploratory and applied research approach, aiming to assess the suitability of the county for the implementation of a multifunctional recreation center based on the principles of sustainable rural development and experiential tourism.

The research material consisted of statistical data regarding tourism activity in Bihor County, information on tourism accommodation establishments and recreational facilities, strategic development documents, institutional reports, and scientific literature related to rural tourism, agritourism, recreation management, and sustainable development. Secondary data were collected from the databases of the Romanian National Institute of Statistics (INSSE), Bihor County Directorate of Statistics, the Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship and Tourism, Eurostat, and UN Tourism reports.

The methodological framework combined quantitative and qualitative research methods. In the first stage, a documentary analysis of scientific literature was conducted in order to establish the theoretical background regarding recreation centers, experiential tourism, agritourism, and sustainable tourism development. This stage enabled the identification of the main factors influencing the success and competitiveness of integrated recreation facilities in rural areas.

The second stage involved the statistical analysis of tourism indicators relevant to Bihor County during the period 2020–2025. The analyzed indicators included the number of accommodation establishments, accommodation capacity, tourist arrivals, overnight stays, occupancy rates, and the territorial distribution of tourism and recreational infrastructure. Descriptive statistical methods and comparative analysis were used to identify recent tourism trends

and evaluate the evolution of visitor flows within the county.

To assess the recreational potential of the study area, territorial analysis and direct observation methods were applied. Major tourism and recreation resources were inventoried, including the spa resorts of Băile Felix and Băile 1 Mai, the Apuseni Mountains area, Padiș Plateau, Crișul Repede Gorge, Vadu Crișului, Valea Iadului, and other representative attractions. Particular attention was given to existing facilities supporting recreational, educational, wellness, and outdoor activities.

A SWOT analysis was conducted to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with the implementation of the proposed recreation center. This method facilitated the evaluation of both internal and external factors influencing the feasibility and sustainability of the project and supported the formulation of strategic development directions.

In addition, the benchmarking method was employed through the comparative analysis of successful agritourism and recreation centers from Romania and other European countries. The objective was to identify innovative elements and best practices that could enhance the attractiveness, functionality, and competitiveness of the proposed "Authentic Nature Experience" concept.

Based on the collected information, a conceptual model of the recreation center was developed, integrating several functional components, including an educational farm, outdoor recreation areas, thematic nature trails, wellness facilities, local gastronomy services, and tourism entertainment and experiential activities. The potential economic impact of the project was estimated through the analysis of visitor capacity, expected revenues, operating costs, employment generation, and investment recovery potential.

The collected data were processed using descriptive, comparative, and analytical methods, and the results were presented through tables, figures, and conceptual models. The adopted methodological approach provides a comprehensive basis for evaluating the feasibility of the proposed Agritourism Recreation Center and its contribution to the sustainable development of tourism and rural communities in Bihor County.

Bihor County benefits from one of the most diversified recreational infrastructures in Romania, supported by the presence of spa, mountain, karst, and rural tourism resources. The existing infrastructure can be grouped into five major categories: spa and wellness facilities, mountain and adventure recreation facilities, educational and youth recreation centers, agritourism facilities, and urban recreational infrastructure.

The spa resorts of Băile Felix and Băile 1 Mai represent the main recreational hub of the county. Their geothermal and hydro-mineral resources have supported the development of modern wellness and treatment facilities, including thermal pools, spa centers, saunas, and fitness areas. These investments have significantly enhanced destination attractiveness and strengthened the role of health and wellness tourism in the local economy.

Mountain recreation is concentrated in the Apuseni Mountains area, particularly in destinations such as Padiș, Șuncuiș, Vadu Crișului, Stâna de Vale, and Pietroasa. These areas offer favorable conditions for hiking, cycling, climbing, speleotourism, and nature-based recreation. However, infrastructure limitations related to accessibility and complementary tourism services continue to affect the full valorization of these resources.

Educational and recreational facilities, including the Remeți Recreation Center and Oradea Tourist Base, contribute to non-formal education, youth development, and outdoor activities. Their role extends beyond recreation by supporting environmental awareness, teamwork, and experiential learning.

Agritourism has become an increasingly important component of the county's recreational infrastructure. Numerous guesthouses and tourist farms have integrated recreational activities such as educational farming, local gastronomy experiences, thematic trails, and cultural events. These initiatives enhance the attractiveness of rural destinations while supporting local economic development and heritage preservation.

Overall, the recreational infrastructure of Bihor County demonstrates a high degree of diversity and adaptability. The combination of spa, mountain, educational, and rural tourism resources provides a strong foundation for the development of innovative tourism products and sustainable recreational projects.

Overall, the recreational infrastructure of Bihor County presents a high level of diversification and adaptability, being able to meet the requirements of different categories of tourists. The combination of spa, mountain, educational and rural resources gives the county an important competitive advantage on the regional and national tourism market.

Future development of recreational infrastructure must aim at modernizing existing facilities, improving accessibility and integrating the principles of sustainable development, so that the recreational potential of the county is exploited at a higher level.⁴ Conceptual map of the main leisure and recreation centers in Bihor County.

Table 1

The main recreational areas analyzed

Area	Main type of recreation	Category
Băile Felix	Wellness, spa, aquapark	Spa
Băile 1 Mai	Relaxation and treatment	Spa
Oradea	culture, events	Urban
Remeți	Youth camps and leisure	Educational
Stâna de Vale	Hiking and mountain leisure	Mountain
Padiș	Ecotourism and adventure	Mountain
Vadu Crișului	Speleotourism and outdoor activities	Adventure
Șuncuiș	Climbing and active tourism	Adventure
Pietroasa	Agrotourism and rural recreation	Rural
Valea Iadului	Ecotourism and leisure in nature	Nature
Peștera Urșilor	Visiting and tourist education	Speleology
Munții Apuseni (sector Bihor)	Multifunctional recreational activities complex	Multifunctional

Estimated results indicate that the proposed center could become a significant driver of local development, generating additional income for both tourism operators and local producers involved in supplying agri-food products and complementary services.

To evaluate the opportunities for implementing the “Authentic Nature Experience” Agritourism Recreation Center in Bihor County, a **SWOT analysis** was

The analysis of the territorial distribution of recreational infrastructure in Bihor County highlights a concentration of leisure facilities and activities around three main tourist poles, which function as development nuclei and attraction for visitor flows. This spatial organization reflects both the diversity of existing natural and anthropogenic resources, as well as the development directions of Bihor tourism in recent decades.

The first and most important recreational pole is represented by the Băile Felix – Băile 1 Mai spa area, which is the main tourist center of the county. This pole benefits from unique geothermal resources at national level, a developed infrastructure of accommodation and public catering and a diversified range of wellness, spa and treatment services. Most of the tourism

conducted. This method enables the identification of internal and external factors that may influence the success of the project and provides a framework for the formulation of sustainable development strategies. The analysis also supports the assessment of the center's potential contribution to the diversification of the local tourism offer and the strengthening of the regional economy.

investments made in the county are concentrated here, as well as the highest number of tourists and overnight stays. The continuous development of spa complexes, water parks and recreational facilities has transformed this area into a competitive destination both on the domestic and international markets. At the same time, the existence of modern conference and event centers allows the expansion of tourist activity throughout the year, contributing to the reduction of seasonal effects. The second recreational pole is located in the mountainous area of the Apuseni Mountains and includes areas such as Padiș, Șuncuiș, Vadu Crișului, Pietroasa, Stâna de Vale and Valea Iadului. This space has an exceptional natural heritage, characterized by spectacular karst landscapes, caves, gorges, waterfalls, forests and ecosystems with high biodiversity. The

recreational infrastructure is mainly oriented towards adventure activities and ecotourism, responding to the growing demand for authentic experiences in nature. In recent years, the development of specific services for active tourism has been observed, such as thematic trails, equipment rental centers, rafting and kayaking activities on the Crișul Repede, adventure parks and educational programs dedicated to the interpretation of natural heritage. However, compared to the spa area, this pole still has a lower degree of development of complementary tourist infrastructure, which limits the duration of stay and the level of expenses incurred by tourists.

The third pole is represented by the municipality of Oradea and the metropolitan area, which have experienced one of the most spectacular urban transformations in Romania in recent years. Investments made in the restoration of architectural heritage, the development of public spaces and the modernization of cultural and recreational infrastructure have contributed to increasing the city's tourist attractiveness. Oradea offers a wide range of leisure facilities, including urban parks, cultural centers, museums, event spaces, sports facilities and modern shopping areas. Also, the proximity to Băile Felix creates an integrated tourist system that allows the combination of urban tourism with spa and recreational tourism. The metropolitan area is also the main access center to the other tourist destinations of the county, benefiting from modernized road and airport infrastructure. The analysis of the territorial distribution highlights, however, the existence of insufficiently exploited spaces between these three major poles. Numerous rural localities have natural, cultural and gastronomic resources that can support the development of new forms of recreation and leisure. In this context, the opportunity is emerging to create multifunctional agrotourism centers of the "Authentic Nature Experience" type, designed as integrated structures that combine recreation, education, local gastronomy and authentic cultural experiences.

These centers could function as true rural development hubs, offering visitors the opportunity to participate in demonstrative agricultural activities, gastronomic workshops based on local products, ecological education programs, tourist animation activities, wellness experiences in nature and traditional cultural events. The concept responds to current trends

in international tourism, characterized by the orientation towards personalized, sustainable and authentic experiences, in which the tourist becomes an active participant and not just a passive consumer of services.

The development of such centers in the rural areas between Oradea, Băile Felix and the Apuseni Mountains could generate important economic and social effects. On the one hand, they would contribute to the diversification of the rural economy and the creation of new jobs, and on the other hand, they would facilitate the valorization of local agri-food products and the preservation of traditional cultural heritage. In addition, their integration into existing tourist circuits would allow for a more balanced distribution of tourist flows throughout the county, reducing pressure on the main destinations and favoring the development of less developed territories.

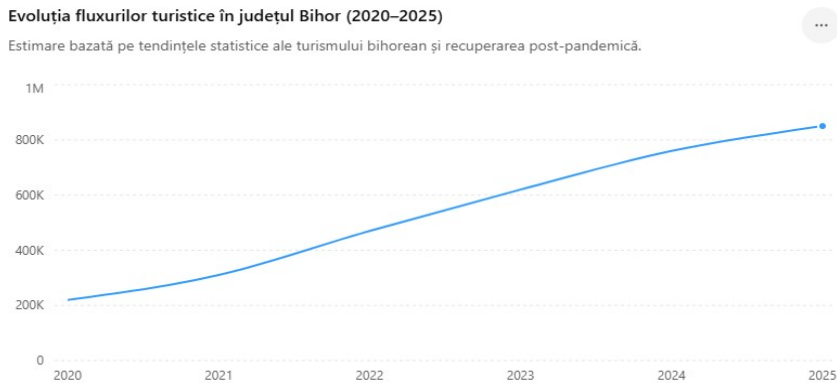
From the perspective of tourism competitiveness, the creation of a network of "Authentic Nature Experience" centers would allow the expansion of the recreational offer of Bihor County from the traditional model based on spa and transit tourism to an integrated experiential model. This approach would contribute to increasing the average length of stay, increasing tourist spending and reducing seasonality, as many of the proposed activities can be carried out throughout the year. At the same time, the integration of sustainable development principles and circular economy concepts could transform these centers into examples of good practice for the development of rural and recreational tourism at regional and national levels.

Thus, the complementarity between the spa pole, the mountain pole and the urban pole offers Bihor County favorable premises for the development of an integrated recreational system, capable of meeting the current demands of the tourism market and consolidating the county's position as one of the most attractive tourist destinations in western Romania. From a strategic perspective, connecting these poles through thematic tourism products and through the development of multifunctional agrotourism centers can represent one of the essential directions for the sustainable growth of Bihor tourism in the coming years.

The analysis of the spatial distribution of the main tourist attractions in Bihor county highlights the existence of a tourist corridor located between the municipality of Oradea,

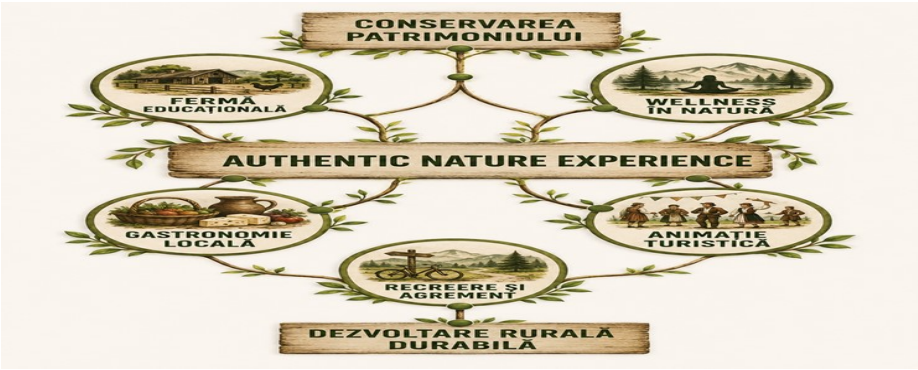
the resorts of Băile Felix – Băile 1 Mai and the mountain area of the Apuseni Mountains. The location of an “Authentic Nature Experience” Agrotourism Recreation Center in the central area of this corridor would allow the connection of the main existing tourist flows and would contribute to a more balanced

Figure no. 1 Evolution of tourist flows in Bihor County (2020–2025)



The evolution of tourist flows highlights a significant upward trend after the period affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of tourists has increased steadily between 2021 and 2025, due to investments made in tourism infrastructure, the development of the Oradea–Băile Felix destination and the diversification of tourism products offered at the county level. The increase in demand for authentic experiences, ecotourism and recreational activities in nature

Figure 2. The “Authentic Nature Experience” conceptual model



distribution of tourist circulation at the county level. Rural localities located in the vicinity of the Oradea – Băile Felix – Pietroasa – Padiș axis offer favorable conditions for the development of such a project due to their high accessibility, available natural resources and proximity to the main tourist attractions of the county.

is a favorable factor for the development of a multifunctional agrotourism center. The positive market trend suggests the existence of a solid base of potential beneficiaries of the “Authentic Nature Experience” concept, contributing to justifying the investment opportunity.

The proposed conceptual model integrates the main components that contribute to the development of an authentic and sustainable tourism experience.

Table 2

Estimation of the economic impact of the project

Indicator	Estimate value
Required	area 8–10 ha
Initial investment	1,200,000 euros
Maximum visitor c	capacity/day 300 people
Estimated number of visitors/year	35,000 people
Estimated annual income	450,000 euros

Estimated annual expenses	280,000 euros
Estimated operating profit	170,000 euros
Direct jobs	Created 18–25
Indirect jobs	30–40
Estimated investment recovery period	7–8 years

Estimates indicate that the center can become a driver of local development, generating additional income for both tourism operators and local producers involved in the supply of products. A swot analysis was conducted to assess the opportunities for implementing the “authentic nature experience”

agrotourism recreation center in bihor county. This allows the identification of internal and external factors that may influence the success of the project and provides support for the formulation of sustainable development strategies. Agri-food and complementary services.

Table 3

Swot analysis of the “authentic nature experience” agrotourism recreation center

Strengths	Weaknesses
Location in a well-established tourist destination	Need for high initial investments
Diversity of natural and cultural resources	Limited road infrastructure in some rural areas
Proximity to Oradea and Băile Felix	Lack of specialized staff in tourist animation
Possibility of carrying out activities throughout the year	Limited promotion of the concept of rural recreation
Integration of local products and traditions	Dependence on the seasonality of some outdoor activities
Opportunities	Threats
Increasing demand for experiential tourism	Competition from other agrotourism destinations
European funding for rural development	Economic instability and inflation
Development of sustainable tourism	Climate change with impact on outdoor activities
Increasing interest in local products	Changing tourists' consumption behavior
Development of regional infrastructure	Increasing operating costs
Strengths	Weaknesses

The results of the swot analysis highlight the existence of favorable premises for the implementation of the project, the main advantages being represented by the diversity of recreational resources and the strategic positioning of bihor county among the main tourist flows in western Romania.

Conclusions

This paper has highlighted the importance of developing an integrated tourism model based on the “authentic nature experience” concept, which sustainably capitalizes on the natural, cultural and economic heritage of the rural space. The analysis demonstrates that current trends in the tourism industry are increasingly oriented towards authentic,

personalized and environmentally responsible experiences, which offers the rural environment significant development opportunities.

A first important aspect highlighted by the research is the role of heritage conservation in creating a distinctive tourist identity. Cultural, architectural and natural heritage represents one of the most valuable resources of rural communities. Its protection and promotion not only contributes to preserving local values for future generations, but also to increasing the tourist attractiveness of the destination. Thus, heritage becomes both an element of cultural identity and a driving factor for economic development.

The educational farm represents an innovative component of the analyzed model, having the capacity to create direct links

between visitors and the authentic rural environment. The educational activities carried out within the farm contribute to increasing awareness of sustainable agriculture, environmental protection and the importance of healthy eating. At the same time, they offer opportunities for diversifying economic activities for farmers and local communities.

The concept of wellness in nature responds to an increasingly accentuated need of modern society to reconnect with the natural environment and to improve physical and mental health. Studies in the field of tourism demonstrate that experiences carried out in nature contribute to reducing stress, increasing the level of satisfaction and improving the quality of life. By integrating wellness activities into the rural tourism offer, the destination can expand its market segment and attract diverse categories of tourists.

Local gastronomy is an essential element of the authenticity of the tourist experience. Traditional products, specific recipes and the use of local ingredients contribute to promoting cultural identity and stimulating the local economy. The development of short supply chains and collaboration between producers and tourism operators generate direct economic benefits for the community and support the principles of sustainable development.

Tourism animation has the role of transforming the simple visit to a destination into a memorable and participatory experience. The organization of cultural events, thematic workshops, festivals, craft demonstrations and interactive activities contribute to increasing the level of tourist involvement and promoting local traditions. These activities favor cultural exchange and strengthen relations between visitors and the host community.

Recreation and leisure activities complete the tourist offer and allow the responsible use of available natural resources. Hiking, cycling, biodiversity observation, equestrian activities or other forms of active tourism contribute to diversifying the tourist experience and increasing the duration of the stay. At the same time, they encourage the adoption of a healthy lifestyle and respect for nature.

The analysis of all these components demonstrates that they work in an interdependent relationship, resulting in the creation of an authentic and complex experience for the tourist. The "authentic nature experience" concept is not just a tourist offer,

but a development model that focuses on authenticity, sustainability and the involvement of the local community.

The economic impact of such a model can be observed through the creation of new jobs, the stimulation of local entrepreneurship, the diversification of income sources and the attraction of investments in the rural area. From a social point of view, the project contributes to reducing the migration of the young population, strengthening community cohesion and preserving local traditions. From an ecological perspective, the promotion of responsible practices contributes to the protection of biodiversity and the sustainable use of natural resources.

The development of a tourist center based on the "Authentic Nature Experience" concept represents a viable solution for the revitalization of rural areas and for the implementation of the principles of sustainable development. The success of this model depends on the cooperation between the authorities, the private sector, local organizations and the community, as well as on the ability to maintain a balance between the economic valorization of resources and the conservation of natural and cultural heritage. Through the proposed integrated approach, the rural environment can become a competitive, attractive and sustainable space, capable of meeting the demands of contemporary tourism.

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