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Submitted: 21/04/2023 - Accepted: 21/05/2023 - Published: 23/06/2023

Challenges of Winter Tourism in Albania: A Review

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Abstract

Albania is known for its unique and stunning natural beauty. Mountains and hills cover a large portion of the region, almost two-thirds of the total surface. The outstanding terrain, with its many cracks and microforms make this country an ideal setting for a variety of outdoor tourism activities, especially during the winter season attracting both domestic and foreign visitors. The current research aims at looking into some of the challenges that Albania's booming winter tourism industry is facing. The first concern identified is scarce and sometimes completely absent infrastructure in remote mountainous areas, which strongly impacts accessibility and guest accommodation. Even though in some areas snow cover is above 100 days, seasonality is still another aspect that highlights the importance of diversifying tourism offer to attract tourists all year. Environmental issues pose a threat for the delicate alpine ecosystems, thus making the implementation of eco-friendly practices and laws for sustainable tourism a must. In addition, the review underscores the vital role of sustainable development, which balances economic growth with environmental preservation. Albania can develop a robust and profitable winter tourism sector by tackling these difficulties through joint efforts and the implementation of evidence-based policies, which will in turn benefit the country's economy, biodiversity, and cultural heritage.

Keywords: outdoor activities, infrastructure, seasonality, sustainability

Introduction

Tourism has proved to be a critical component of global economic development and an important source of revenue for both developed and emerging economies, since it provides a variety of cultural, social, technical, experiential, and natural items for leisure and business. This is also the case with Albania which is experiencing a growth in tourism sector, despite being a small country with a vulnerable economy. According to the 2019-2023 National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development, the tourism sector is anticipated to contribute 9.3% of the GDP by 2028, a considerable increase in the sector's economic impact. As a result, it is predicted that by 2028, the direct and indirect effects of the tourist sector would account for around one-third of Albania's overall GDP (Republic of Albania, 2019). According to estimates from the World Tourism and Travel Council [WTTC], in 2019 travel and tourism served as a significant economic engine and job creator, contributing 20% to the Albanian economy and creating 244,000 jobs, or one in every five jobs in Albania (WTTC, 2022).

Albania's law system places a strong emphasis on preserving the nation's extensive natural and cultural heritage in order to capitalize on the potential for tourist expansion. The Republic of Albania (2015) defines steps to protect historical buildings, traditional architecture, and ecologically significant places in the Law on Tourism (No. 93/2015). This dedication to maintaining Albania's cultural identity and natural diversity guarantees that tourism development is carried out ethically, enabling travelers to immerse themselves in the country's true essence while preserving its distinctive history for future generations.

In addition, Albanian tourism legislation emphasizes the promotion of environmentally and socially responsible tourist strategies. The 2019 National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development outlines policies to strike a balance between economic development, environmental protection, and social well-being. Albania wants to develop a resilient and sustainable tourism business that benefits both visitors and host communities by sticking to this plan.

Albania's terrain may be most notable for its multiple succeeding mountain ranges, which have an average elevation of more than 700 meters. The majority of the mountains, including the Albanian Alps, are located to the west's lowlands' north, east, and south. The Korab Mountains, with peaks that may exceed 2,500 meters, dominate the east of the nation and stretch 40 kilometers along its eastern border. A rich biodiversity and mountainous terrain with glacial lakes, caves, river valleys with clear waters, and mountain saddles draw both domestic and international visitors who engage in ecotourism activities like hiking, mountaineering, biking, snow skiing, and snowshoeing, among others.

Given that the majority of the country is mountainous, it is not surprising that Albania's winter tourism industry has recently gained attention from both local and

foreign tourists. But like any expanding business sector, it confronts a number of difficulties that call for meticulous planning and thought. The main obstacles to winter tourism in Albania are examined in this scientific review, with an emphasis on infrastructural constraints, seasonality problems, environmental difficulties, and the need for sustainable growth. Albania can encourage a vibrant and robust winter tourist business by being aware of and addressing these issues.

Methodology

For the purpose of this study, we undertook a systematic and thorough investigation of the academic database, which included journals, academic articles, and pertinent government publications on tourism in Albania. The terms "Albania mountain tourism challenges," "Albania winter tourism issues," and others of a similar nature were used as keywords. The review's contributors chose the articles and papers based on how pertinent they were to the subject. Included sources were necessary to examine the issues and difficulties the Albanian winter tourism sector faced. The search included published works up to the present, with a focus on works from the previous two decades.

Key issues, trends, and insights relating to winter tourism in Albania were identified using information and data that was gathered from the sources included. Based on recurrent themes and issues, the data synthesis process involves categorizing and organizing findings. The value of each source was evaluated by taking into account elements like credibility, research methods (for empirical studies), and topical relevance. The analysis gave preference to credible, peer-reviewed sources. The findings extracted from the selected literature were subjected to a thematic analysis. Common problems and challenges faced by winter tourism in Albania were identified, and these findings were organized into structured sections for the review article. The analysis also considered potential solutions proposed in the literature.

As this review article is based solely on previously published literature, there are no ethical concerns related to human subjects. Proper citation and referencing practices are strictly followed to ensure academic integrity and give credit to the original authors.

While this review article aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the problems of winter tourism in Albania based on existing literature, it is important to acknowledge potential limitations. These limitations may include publication biases, changes in the tourism landscape beyond the literature review's cutoff date, and the quality of the available sources.

Infrastructure Limitations

One of the major obstacles for winter tourism in Albania is the lack of infrastructure in mountainous areas. The absence of effective transportation links and lodging amenities limits travelers' mobility and ease of access. 80% of the hotels are located

on the seaside area; 10% are in the capital; and just 10% are located in other parts of the country, including mountainous regions (Burlea-Schiopoiu & Ozuni, 2021).

One explanation for the modest number of hotels and guesthouses in the mountains might be that the profit margin on investment in expanding tourism in these places is relatively poor, despite the fact that agro-mountain tourism has become particularly appealing to visitors as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in 2012, there were 150 guesthouses in the country's most popular mountain areas (Thethi, Kelmendi, and Valbona in northern Albania, Dardha and Voskopoja in the southeast), and by the beginning of 2016, their number had increased by 13 units to 163 (Burlea-Schiopoiu & Ozuni, 2021). And even when these facilities exist, they are mostly family run businesses rather than large professionally managed groups, which in turn affects the quality of service.

What adds more to the limited infrastructure in these areas is the absence of specialized facilities needed to practice activities typical for the winter season, such as skiing or other snow based activities. There are just a few unequipped ski areas, and the first surface lift was completed in 2012. Skiing regions are not resorts, but rather communities in the mountains where one may go skiing, comparable to the Alps a century ago. There are just ten ski areas, although none have five or more lifts, according to the 2022 International Report on Snow & Mountain Tourism (Vanat, 2022). Albanian skiers are limited in number, and for many years, the local environment did not encourage the growth of this sport, even if it was not an unknown recreational activity. Albanians would rather fly to other countries, mostly neighboring ones, which have a far better situation as regards skiing facilities. Backcountry skiing as a winter pastime is mostly practiced by foreigners.

All of this emphasizes the significance of investing in modern infrastructure to improve accessibility to key winter destinations and boost accommodation capacity. Collaboration between the government, commercial sector, and local communities is critical to overcoming these constraints and improving the overall visitor experience.

Seasonality Issues

The high frequency of tourist visits at specific times of year has a significant impact on sustainability. In reality, it not only substantially decreases the sustainability of businesses and their ability to provide year-round employment, but it may also put a strain on communities and natural resources at times, leaving an oversupply of capacity at other times of the year (Selmanaj, Gorica & Murati, 2018).

According to INSTAT data, tourist nights in August are three or four times more than those in the winter season in Albania as a whole. Patterns differ from country to country, with coastal countries seeing more seasonality. Mountain resorts that provide winter activities often have two seasons, although both are fairly limited, and seasonality has a significant impact on sustainability.

Winter tourism in Albania is primarily reliant on the brief and frequently unpredictable winter season. Seasonality difficulties cause changes in visitor arrivals as well as economic insecurity for enterprises that rely on the winter tourism sector. The 2019-2023 National Tourism Strategy emphasizes the importance of diversifying tourist options to attract visitors all year. Creating additional activities during the shoulder seasons, such as winter festivals, cultural events, and nature-based experiences, might help to offset seasonality and lengthen the duration of visitor visits.

Environmental Concerns

It is part of the government's overall development strategy to ensure sensible use of the country's natural assets, as articulated in official relevant documents such as the General National Territorial Plan for Albania, 2015-2030, the National Draft-Strategy for Tourism 2014-2020, and Law No. 107/2014 "On Planning and Territorial Development," all of which prioritize the balance of natural, economic, and human needs, as well as public and private interests.

Despite the legal provisions and references to sustainable tourism, as well as a small number of initiatives undertaken by the government to initiate a discussion on sustainable tourism development in Albania, the Albanian government and tourism sector have limited notions of sustainable tourism development (Nientied, Porfido & Ciro, 2018).

The rapid growth of the tourism industry has also led to concerns about the preservation of Albania's natural and cultural heritage. There have been instances of overdevelopment in sensitive areas, as well as damage to historical and archaeological sites due to the influx of tourists (Ilollari & Kociaj, 2023). On the other hand, the fragile alpine ecosystems in Albania's mountain regions are vulnerable to the environmental impacts of winter tourism. Ski resort development, increased traffic, and improper waste management pose threats to the biodiversity and natural beauty of the areas.

Given the environmental risk that irresponsible tourism poses, particularly in vulnerable alpine locations, it is critical to apply eco-friendly practices and follow sustainable tourism principles. Enforcing legislation to protect sensitive regions, encouraging good tourist behavior, and supporting eco-certified hotels can help to maintain the environment and preserve the country's natural resources.

Need for Sustainable Development

Sustainability has long ago made its emergence in the tourism discourse. While it was not before the mid-1990s, that the concept of sustainability increasingly dominated the tourism sector (Weaver, 2011). However, on a global scale the debate about sustainability in tourism seems to disregard workforce considerations. Baum and colleagues (2016) consider this failure to include human resources in the debate as

counter-intuitive, given that social, cultural and community-focused considerations are prominent in some (but not all) analyses of this area. Education is vital in guaranteeing sustainability in tourism sector because as Deale and Barber (2012) point out it helps to produce graduates who have the knowledge of sustainability concepts, and their applications, to meet the challenges of the workplace.

In Albania, although the supply of human resources in tourism services is abundant, it lacks quality. This might be due to a lack of awareness on the importance of the services sector in tourism, as well as lack of training, contemporary curricula for tourism university system schools and university, as well as entrepreneurs or managers to maintain high level of services, to customer satisfaction and increase the value of the service (Prifti & Zenelaj, 2013).

Discussion

In Albania, nature based tourism as a recreational activity in the form of organized walks outside the cities have been known since the beginning of the XX century (Skëndo, 2021). For many years, the country has been regarded as a mainly summer destination, indicating that the Albanian tourism product is highly correlated to “sea, sand and sun”. Approximately 68% of annual international arrivals happen between May and September (UNDP, 2022), and this for several reasons, such as better road infrastructure, reception and accommodation service, access and service in short time.

Despite the popularity of the country during the summer months, winter tourism in Albania holds immense potential for economic growth and cultural exchange. However, it faces several challenges that require careful attention and proactive measures. As all studies have noted, rural areas have many socio-economic problems, and few development alternatives, bypassing the tourism as a development opportunity, and more as a sustainable alternative., the tradition to these cities, the lack of knowledge for rural areas, etc. Winter tourism in Albania faces several challenges that must be addressed for the industry's sustainable growth. First, the limited infrastructure in the mountainous regions hinders accessibility and convenience for tourists, requiring investment in modern transportation networks and lodging facilities. Second, the heavy reliance on the short and unpredictable winter season creates seasonality issues, leading to fluctuations in tourist arrivals and economic instability. Additionally, the fragile alpine ecosystems are susceptible to the environmental impacts of ski resort development and increased traffic, necessitating eco-friendly practices and proper waste management to preserve the natural beauty of the areas. Addressing infrastructure limitations, diversifying tourism offerings, tackling environmental concerns, and fostering sustainable development are crucial steps towards building a resilient winter tourism industry in Albania. Collaborative efforts among stakeholders, guided by scientific research and evidence-based policies, will pave the way for a sustainable and thriving winter tourism sector in this enchanting Balkan destination.

Conclusion

Winter tourism in Albania, is undoubtedly a promising industry that has the potential to attract both local and international travelers. In order to take full advantage of this growing sector and to ensure continuity of this business, it is critical to balance economic growth with environmental conservation. By addressing the challenges identified in this review through collaborative efforts and evidence-based policies, Albania can foster a resilient and thriving winter tourism sector, ensuring a positive impact on the country's economy, environment, and cultural heritage.

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