

TOURISM STRATEGY OF ALBANIA

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Abstract

Tourism has been identified as a major tool for the development of any country because it is a key role in developing it.

First, it is likely that tourism will be amongst the most important or valuable international business. Second, it is also likely that tourism be utilized as a means for attracting international development financial aid. Third, tourism promotional activities will be used as an instrument for improving a country's image.

Albania is recognized as a tourism destination at the Mediterranean coast and has a competitive position in the international tourism market.

In order to fulfill the mission for achieving the above-mentioned vision, the success of this strategy lies on the partnership of the main actors of tourism sector. The mission of the tourism partners is described as follows:

Welcome the guests and therefore understand hospitality and high quality of service as the most important elements within the tourism product

Protect and even develop actively the environment

Support the culture

On the paper below the stress will be on the tourism strategies because they are very important and the responsible institutions will have to do the needed policies.

Keywords: Tourism, destination, strategy, policy

Introduction

Albania, the Land of Discovery ", explains the present analysis of the tourism potentials of Albania and the strategies that Albania uses in order to use these potentials for the economic development. For this purpose, the directions put forward in this Strategy aim at assuring that Albania highly maximizes the sectors potential and grows tourism in a way that is sustainable: culturally, socially, environmentally and economically. The tourism strategy will therefore:

- assist the sector to manage growth in a way that ensures long-term sustainability
- provide ways manage conflicts between increasing tourism growth and environmental, social and cultural values that are important to Albania and its visitors
- provide the appropriate structure within which industry investment and profitability can be facilitated and maximized (clear responsibilities and cooperation)
- reduce overlaps and gaps within the sector
- secure commitment and funding to tourism from central and local government
- make it easier for operators and investors to do business in the sector
- provide cohesion to strategic directions and strategies

This paper provides you with information about the tourism strategies in Albania and the importance the strategies have for a very developed tourism.

Albania is a land to be loved. In this small Mediterranean country, virgin nature and cultural mysteries combine to create a unique sense of place. From the crisp white snow of the mountains to the red fields of spring poppies, Albania's landscape is ever-changing with

the seasons, offering visitors to enjoy a warm summer beach holiday or a challenging mountain trek in the fall.

In Albania, visitors are welcomed as guests as part of the country's rich cultural traditions and heritage. The warm hospitality of the Albanians will make everyone feel at home in this small wonderful land.

Main Text

Factors that Effect Competitive Advantage in Albania as a New Tourism Destination
Below, there is a list of the main factors that stand in the model of destination competitiveness developed by Dwyer and Kim (2003).

Cultural and Related Factors

From the literature on history, politics and culture comes a recognition that, just as the competitiveness of nations can be influenced by climate, morals, power of the state, cultural values and moral discipline, so too may destination competitiveness be influenced by such variables³⁶. Almost all the interviewees think that what Albania lacks is the communication of these factors while having the appropriate climate, natural recourses, cultural heritage, special environmental areas and the like.

Price Competitiveness

Studies by tourism researchers indicate the price sensitivity of travelers is high in certain markets³⁷. This is a factor that affects tourists' arrivals in Albania as well because of good price/performance trend of competitive destinations in the area like Turkey, Montenegro, and Greece etc. Central government actors think that it is not the trend in itself that affects tourist arrivals in Albania, but moreover the perception of international tourists about this trend. Empirical studies highlight the importance of many other factors influencing the price competitiveness of tourism firms, among which the levels of technology.

Firm-Specific Factors

The main idea is that the competitiveness of a nation stems from companies within that nation, so firm-specific factors that lead to competitiveness should be identified. In order to achieve competitive advantage, the focus should be on the 'development and maintenance of meaningful assets and skills, the selection of strategies and competitive arenas to exploit such assets and skills and neutralizing of competitors' assets and skills'³⁸. Some of these factors are analyzed below for the SMEs in the tourism sector, since they compose the greatest percentage of the industry. But analysis of in-depth interviews shows that marketing strategy of the firms related to the interaction with other actors' action are core to the firm engagement in the competitiveness of the destination. SMEs involved in tourism often rely on the strength and attractiveness of the destination brand for their business. The individual SME has little scope to manipulate or strengthen its brand due to the ownership structure of both tourism SMEs and the destination brand itself. Because the brand belongs to everyone at the destination, and because one SME has little managerial influence over the next one, destination brands often evolve only slowly and with tenuous connections between the brand marketed by the Regional Tourism Organization abroad and the conditions on the ground. So, the importance of networking of different SMESs with tour operators, agencies and regional tourism offices becomes greater especially in the situation of Albania.

³⁶ Franke et al., 1991; World Economic Forum, 2001

³⁷ Lee et al., 1996

³⁸ Aaker, 1989: 105

Perspectives on Destination Competitiveness

Destination competitiveness would appear to be linked to the ability of a destination to deliver goods and services that perform better than other destinations on those aspects of the tourism experience considered to be important by tourists. But, not all the influences on competitiveness are objectively quantifiable. In the tourism context an important distinction will involve the reality of the situation, as indicated in objective measures of competitiveness (e.g. measures of price competitiveness, crime statistics involving tourists as victims), and traveler's perception (e.g. perceptions of relative price levels, perceptions of safety\ security, views about comfort levels and the aesthetic appeal of different types of tourism resources). Indeed, the importance of tourists' perception is such as to warrant separate recognition in a model of destination competitiveness.

From the first interviews of different actors of the tourism industry in Albania and some international tourists we have found that this second group of factors is influencing negatively because of missing knowledge about this country or even worse bad perceptions that exist because of not appropriate available information.

If we have to analyze these key principles for Albania, the first two are related more to strategy and governmental politics about tourism. Albanian government has strengthened the stress on tourism as a leading sector especially in certain areas which have great potentials from the natural and cultural point of view. While the distribution channels and the dynamism of the private sector depends more on the private initiatives although the role of special institutions is not to be neglected. In this globalization era the role of technology and networking is the priority to create the proper networks and distribution channels which can also affect the traveler perceptions about Albania.

General Assessment³⁹

Albania is a beautiful and fascinating country. It has a wide range of historic, cultural and natural attractions that are of great interest to international tourists. The country is safe, and its people are welcoming and friendly. Most importantly, the country is still "authentic." It remains largely unspoiled by foreign influence.

Albania is not an easy tourism destination for international markets to understand. It offers the potential for dozens of distinct tourism activities in dozens of destinations. Individually, all are interesting, but few are unique or sufficiently compelling by themselves to draw international tourists.

The understanding and appreciation – through the "discovery" of Albania – is how the country realizes its maximum tourism potential. Experiences that unlock new discoveries for visitors are the most valuable tourism products in the world.

"Discovery" is of interest primarily to educated, relatively affluent international tourists⁴⁰. This demographic segment spends considerably more for tourism products and their spending patterns are highly favorable for development, as they prefer to interact directly in the communities they visit (shops, restaurants, and other local businesses).

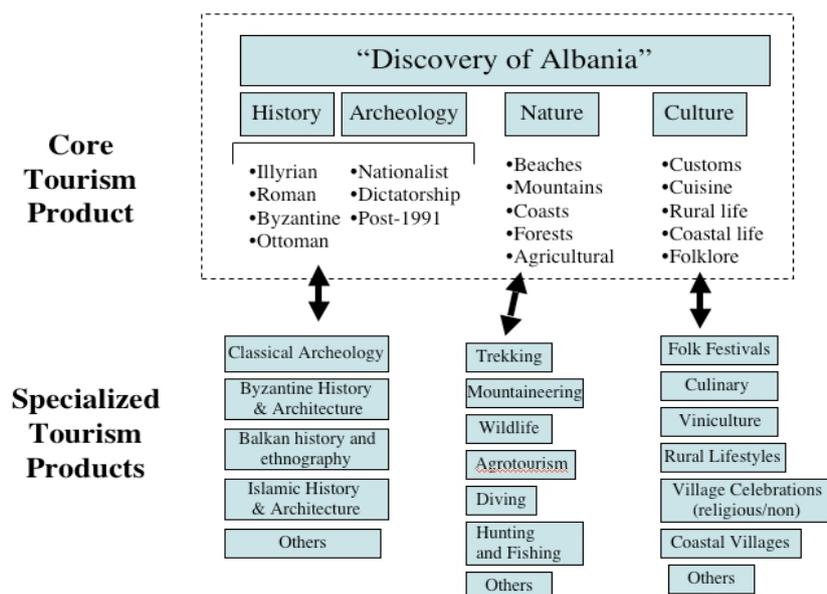
This segment does not make a strong distinction between cultural, natural and other tourism products. Visitors in this segment tend to combine many different activities during their visit, and usually see the various natural and cultural activities as part of the process of discovering the destination.

Albania's core (primary) tourism product must be a general one that encourages visitors to discover the many facets of Albania's culture and nature. Specialized tourism

³⁹ Based on the review of existing tour books, extensive documentation provided by the Ministry, U NDP, ngos and a number of other stakeholders, and site visits to Durres, Vlor a, Llogaraja, Himara, Saranda, Butrint, Gyrokaster, and Berat.

⁴⁰ In most countries, but particularly in wealthy western countries and Japan, there is a direct correlation between level of education and income.

products can and should be developed under the general umbrella, broadening the diversity of products for the core tourism market and specialty markets. Graphic one presents a simple schematic.



Graphic 1: Core and Specialized Tourism Products

Strategic Positioning of Albania Tourism Sector

“Albania is a safe, high-value tourism destination featuring an unparalleled variety of world-class natural and cultural attractions in a small geographic area, managed in an environmentally and socially responsible manner, easily accessible to European tourism markets”⁴¹.

Albania will seek to position itself as an attractive destination for tourists seeking a unique experience featuring high quality cultural sites and nature destinations presented in a truly “authentic” way.

Albania’s central product will be the “discovery” of Albania. The product is a presentation of a broad cross-section of Albania’s history, nature, archaeology, living culture, cuisine and hospitality. Visitors participating in this discovery will leave with a lasting impression of the diversity, complexity and beauty of the culture and the land.

Albania will specialize in attracting educated, independent travelers and specialized group travelers. The principal target markets will be upper-middle income individuals from Europe (primarily northern Europe and the United Kingdom) and North America. This segment represents the demographic segment with the highest willingness to pay for Albania’s unique products, and whose spending patterns will most contribute to advancing development goals.

Albania’s strength will be in creating value for tourists in a wide variety of geographic locations. This approach opens more of the country to “discovery”, which:

- creates spaces for the diverse local culture to express itself, in particular the customs and traditions of the various regions of the country.
- allows more provincial and rural communities to participate in, and benefit from, tourism visitation and development.

In keeping with the concept of authenticity, lodging, dining and other hospitality elements will be developed wherever possible in small to medium-scale, locally-owned

⁴¹ “Toward a Strategy for Culture Tourism and Ecotourism Development.” Ministry of Tourism, Culture, Youth and Sport. November 2005.

businesses. This approach reinforces visitor connections with the cities and sites and creates greater income generation in the communities.

Ensuring repeat visits and achieving “word of mouth” recommendations will be the key to sustainable tourism development. This ultimately will depend on the long-term quality of cultural sites and nature destinations and the overall experience of visitors based on the knowledge and interpretation of their guides.

Justification

Albania has excellent tourism development potential. Many cultural and natural resource attractions are of very high quality and would likely receive high levels of visitation if they were more widely publicized within target populations.⁴²

Albania can position itself successfully upon its impressive comparative advantages of high quality sites in a close geographic area, and create an identifiable position in the international market place based on the discovery of the country.

More important for Albania, however, are the trends in tourism preferences. Culture, adventure and “ecotourism”⁴³ are considered to be the fastest growing tourism markets worldwide. “Theme” travels centered on special-interest activities such as discovery and adventure, sports, and education are increasingly popular.

The experience tourists seek is increasingly valued not only on the quality of destinations or activities, but also on the conformity of the lodging facilities and management practices with environmental guidelines.

Albania appears to be ideally situated to meet the shifting demands of an increasingly nature and culture oriented tourism market.

Challenges

The development of Albania’s tourism sector presents a number of challenges. There are general tourism development that all countries face as they enter international markets, and specific challenges related to establishing a successful nature and culture-based destination. Three however, are particularly critical.

- Large-scale sun and sand tourism presented in all-inclusive packages in isolated tourism complexes will likely do great harm to the country’s efforts to build a high-value sector. The massive sun and sand tourism is a highly competitive segment that attracts primarily discount-oriented travelers. The arrival of large numbers of this tourism segment tends to make destinations much less attractive to higher-end tourists. A similar effect has been observed with the arrival of large cruise ships.

- Tourism growth can be slow in the early years. If successful, the sector will begin small, but grow rapidly as it gains a positive international reputation. While it will be possible to observe progress and measure advances with meaningful indicators, the tangible benefits critical for ongoing political support and commitment will be observed in the medium term.

- The concept of sustainability is built into the strategic position by necessity. Without aggressive efforts to ensure the sustainability of the natural and cultural resources, Albania cannot reasonably expect to maintain a market position capable of attracting international tourists. Without involving the local communities and providing real opportunities to participate in and benefit from the development process, the attractions will continue to be degraded, or converted to other economic uses – nearly all of which offer much less long-term development potential than tourism.

⁴² Albania: Guide to its Natural Treasures, ECAT-Tirana, Tirana 20 00.

⁴³ The International Ecotourism Society (TIES, at www.ecotourism.org) defined ecotourism as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people.”

Action Plan

This section presents a plan for the country to advance its tourism sector and tackle its principle challenges within the context of the strategy presented above and the existing policy, legal and institutional structure.

In operational terms, the country is ready to move forward with its tourism sector.

“The country has the capacity today to receive substantially more overnight international tourists than it is currently receiving. Although the country is not ready for aggressive marketing to broad international markets, it is absolutely ready to receive tens of thousands of additional adventurous, “pioneering” tourists who are willing to be flexible and “forgiving” in exchange for being among the first to experience a unique new destination”⁴⁴.

The numerous challenges that Albania faces must be addressed, but most need not be solved prior to beginning tourism promotion. However, due to the interrelated nature of the identified challenges, the country must begin work immediately in a number of areas in order for tourism to grow effectively.

The specific items of the Action Plan are presented as priorities in six different areas.

- Awareness and Marketing
- Product Development
- Investments in Nature Areas to Strengthen the Tourism Sector
- Investments in Culture to Strengthen the Tourism Sector
- Human Resources
- Enhancement of Tourist Experience

Awareness and Marketing

Albania must work at multiple levels to: increase awareness of the country, increase positive associations with Albania, consolidate a unifying theme to link the country’s tourism product with international markets, convince market opinion-leaders that the country is worth visiting, increase contact between specialized outbound travel companies in target markets and local tourism companies (inbound operators, outfitters, hotels, etc), establish a credible internet-based presence, and establish a sustainable structure for continued marketing efforts.

Awareness and Positive Association

This must be a diplomatic and political effort. Coverage in the international press continues to be neutral to negative. Albania has not managed this aspect of its public image very successfully. Tourism, nature and culture provide excellent opportunities for senior officials to communicate positive messages. Every time the Prime Minister or other senior officials visit a target market country (particularly Germany, UK, US and northern Italy), he or she should set aside time to promote tourism to select audiences and to the media.

Action Item 1.1 Development of a national tourism press kit and stand, with printed materials, video, scripts and other materials to permit easy presentation of the country in any priority location.

Action Item 1.2 Increase positive media coverage in target markets. Albania must be more aggressive in communicating positive messages in target markets. Positive news on natural and cultural issues should provide substantial benefits.

Action Item 1.3 Work closely with Albanian Diaspora. It is very important that Albanians abroad feel proud and willing to visit Albania with relatives and friends.

Consolidate a Unifying Theme to Link the Country’s Tourism Product with International Markets

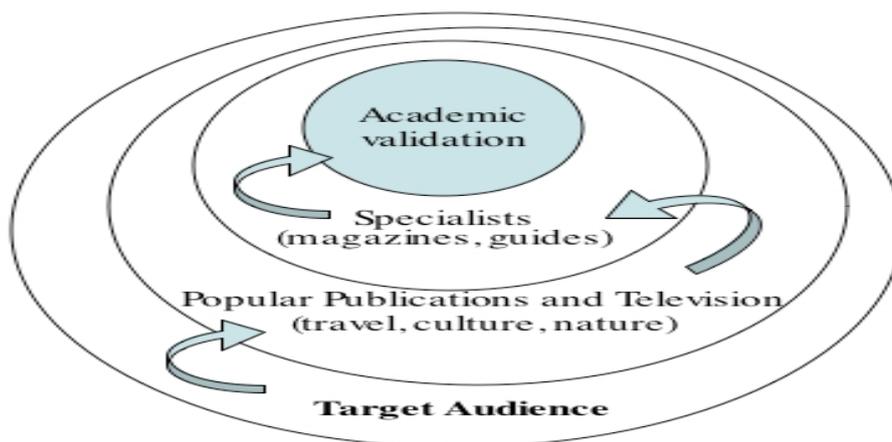
⁴⁴ “Albania: Integrated Coastal Management and clean-up Program: site management framework” SIM-Spa and iMed for World Bank 2005.

Today Albania is using a number of different themes to present itself – two can be found on the official tourism website and others in different promotional materials. This takes away focus and could eventually create confusion. The country needs professional assistance in selecting and designing a theme that reflects the national cultural and environmental strategy, and the image the country wishes to portray to the world, and connects these with a message that finds a proven resonance within the target market group that the country is seeking to attract.

Action Item 1.4 Hire an international public relations firm with experience in the strategic positioning of tourism destinations. This is imperative. There are decades of experience, knowledge, science and art behind the design of market positioning. The process includes creative design process, analysis of potential opens, testing of the concept in various target markets and other steps to guarantee the strength and clarity of the message.

Convince Market Opinion-Leaders that the Country is Worth Visiting

Specialized products are only successful in the tourism market if their qualities are “validated” by respected opinion leaders. For a destination such as Albania, the most important opinion-leaders are frequently writers and publishers of articles, journals, and guidebooks oriented toward nature, culture and travel. Occasionally they are travel companies known for “discovering” new destinations. The model of validation can be depicted as concentric circles (see Graphic 2), with each ring looking to the next inner ring for advice and recommendations.



Graphic 2: Concentric circles of information marketing Action⁴⁵

Action Item 1.5 Engage in an aggressive effort to increase Albania’s visibility in opinion-leader publications.

Sub-item 1.5.1 Albania must conduct a study, in conjunction with the public relations firm identified above; to determine which publications and information sources the desired target market uses to make decisions to travel to a destination. Since much of early-stage tourism development is by “word of mouth”, a secondary objective is to identify the decision processes of the “pioneering visitors.”

Sub-item 1.5.2 Increase coverage and currency of Albania in tour guidebooks directed at independent “adventurous” travelers.

Increase Contact between Specialized Outbound Travel Companies in Target Markets and Local Tourism Companies

Action Item 1.6 Increase presence at major fairs where nature, culture adventure and “alternative” tourism destinations are featured. Trade fairs are considered by most country-

⁴⁵ Albania: The Bradt Travel Guide (Bradt Travel Guides Ltd), 20 05

promoters as a “necessary evil.” Albania’s participation in these fairs must be coordinated under the unifying national theme to maintain focus on the message and with clear objectives to achieve as a country, not just individual organizations.

Action Item 1.7 Establish an International Tourism Fair in Albania. The best place to show Albania is Albania. International expertise on tourism fair organization should be secured.

Credible Internet-Based Presence.

Action Item 1.8 Strengthen Albania’s presence on the internet. The National Tourism Organization’s web site (<http://www.albaniantourism.com>) is a good initial effort to ensure ensuring that potential visitors can find basic information on the country.

Establish a Sustainable Structure for Continued Marketing Efforts

Action Item 1.9 Establish a permanent financial structure that ensures a consistent marketing budget each year and allocation of that budget toward nationally agreed-upon marketing priorities.

Product Development

The general tourism strategy establishes the overall framework for tourism centered on the discovery of Albania through its nature and culture.

Action Item 2.1. Establish mechanisms to support local efforts to bring culture and nature products to market. The first step of this process is to identify the needs of the tourism sector, local government and civil society sector in each region. The second step will be to design a support plan to assist the local actors in whatever way resources permit.

Action Item 2.2 Establish and publish recommended tourism routes and activities for each city-region. With the assistance of the national government, the private sector and NGOs, each tourism center must articulate recommended tourism itineraries for visitors – designed in blocks of half days, full days, two days, etc. The routes will be presented with detailed information, photographs and other materials in electronic and printed form, and distributed on the web and in print format to visitors. The recently published compact disk “Albania Nature Monuments,” produced by the Ministry of Environment with support from the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) Small Grants Program is an outstanding contribution to this effort.

Investments in Nature Areas to Strengthen the Tourism Sector

Albania has a long tradition in protected areas management, with substantial legislation and technical expertise. Budget constraints have led to institutional limitations that threaten the legitimacy of the system, and perhaps even its viability. Nature areas (in particular protected areas) are one of the three “jewels in the crown” of Albanian tourism.

Action Item 3.1 Establish long-term financial mechanisms. New mechanisms and structures must be established to ensure increased funding for nature areas’ protection and tourism development.

Action Item 3.2 Accelerate the development and approval of tourism plans for nature areas. Albania must establish an accelerated process for establishing tourism plans in a number of identified priority nature areas with tourism relevance (due to the attraction itself and its proximity to tourism centers).

Action Item 3.3 Instill a culture of “National Park” among Albanians, beginning with Dajti. This effort will focus on three particular aspects of Dajti to begin to educate Albanians on the importance of “enjoying and caring for parks.” De-militarization, reinvestment of entrance fees and waste management should be the program priorities.

Investments in Culture to Enhance Tourism Development

Albania has a long tradition in cultural preservation, with substantial legislation and technical expertise. The needs for cultural preservation in a country with such a rich history will always exceed its ability to protect and restore.

Action Item 4.1 Establish long-term financial mechanisms. New mechanisms and structures must be established to ensure increased funding for cultural site protection and tourism development.

Action Item 4.2 Improved cultural access in museums. The most common weakness cited by Albanian and foreign visitors to the country's museums is the lack of meaningful interpretive information. There are three complementary strategies to be explored as printed material for individual galleries, trained guides, and new electronic guiding systems.

Sub-item 4.3.1 Begin a pilot project in the National Historical Museum to implement an electronic guiding system.

Action Item 4.3 Support, enhance and publicize cultural events and folk festivals. Living culture is a highly sought-after tourism product. A great number of tourists seek to plan their travels to coincide with important folk events (dance and music competitions, religious events, feast days, local town celebrations, important dance and music performances, etc).

Sub-item 4.4.1 Publicize existing events. Albania has a great number of these events that should be, at a minimum, well documented and placed in an "official national calendar of cultural events." This information should be published on the national tourism website, and include history of the event, descriptions of the activities, photographs and sound-bites, and links to tourism companies capable of providing services.

Sub-item 4.4.2 Develop a long-term plan to direct government and private sector support to priority cultural events of interest to foreign visitors.

Human Resources

Albania must invest in several critical human resources for the tourism sector to develop effectively.

Action Item 5.1 Establishment of an "Elite" Tourism Guide Corps. Ensuring repeat visits and achieving "word of mouth" recommendations will be the key to sustainable tourism development. Because of the complexity of Albania, the knowledge and interpretation provided by the country's best tour guides will be perhaps the single most important factor for successful tourism development.

Action Item 5.2 Train hospitality professionals and staff. Albania will require many more well-trained individuals in order to support an international tourism sector.

Action Item 5.3 Enhance language skills. Albania is a remarkably multilingual society. Additional effort needs to be directed at ensuring that tourism industry personnel, particularly those in provincial and rural areas possess the basic foreign language skills to needed to effectively conduct their jobs.

Enhancement of Tourist Experience

Action Item 8.1 Prevent Physical Risk to Visitors.

Albania must avoid the death or severe illness of tourists at all costs. While tourists understand that there is some risk in all travel, they expect a country to take reasonable provisions for their safety.

The four greatest concerns identified by international visitors, tour guidebook authors and a number of local experts are:

Sub-item 8.1.1 Improve safety on roads.

Sub-item 8.1.2 Increase disease prevention awareness.

Sub-item 8.1.3 Improve food safety practices through education campaigns in the hospitality sector and vocational schools. Priority areas should include 1) personal hygiene, 2) application of best practices in the handling of meat, poultry, fish and shellfish, 3) water temperature and cleaning techniques.

Sub-item 8.1.4 Emergency medical attention. Albania must put in place a national system for treating visitors who become seriously ill or injured.

Action Item 8.2 De-militarization of tourism destinations. The heavy police presence on roads, in coastal areas and mountain destinations is a strongly negative factor. This presence sends a message of insecurity to foreign visitors in a country that is remarkably free of crime, violence, or political problems. "Visits always give pleasure; if not the arrival, the departure"

Conclusion

In our tourism development strategy, the objectives definition aims to achieve as follows:

Objective 1: To promote Albania as a touristic destination in order to attract attention of the touristic operators from the goal markets on their strategic level, giving opportunity to: - areas with natural and cultural inheritance, and - touristic products and images creation.

Objective 2: To continue the process of Albania promotion as a touristic destination by publication of promotional materials and notably of display advertising in all the media that attracts tourists.

Objective 3: The execution of politics for the promotion of preemptively tourism development areas. The purpose is to attract Albanian and foreign investments in these areas.

References:

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“Toward a Strategy for Culture Tourism and Ecotourism Development.” Ministry of Tourism, Culture, Youth and Sport. November 2005

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