

Development of Tourism in Albania During the Last Decade: Case Study of the Vlora Peninsula

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Abstract

Tourism in Albania is one of the fields that developed later, in line with the other states in the region. In the last decade, tourism in Albania has undergone a transformative and irreversible journey, bringing economic and social development throughout the country. In 2023, Albania ranked 4th globally for the highest increase in the percentage of international tourist arrivals, marking a 56% increase compared to 2019. This research paper aims to examine changes in tourism in Albania, using the Vlora peninsula as a case study. The work will reflect the significant improvements in infrastructure and services, promotion and diversification of tourist offerings, marketing, and other key aspects of tourism development. The current strategy of the Ministry of Tourism for 2024-2030 will be seen as a picture of the current situation and the projection of the Albanian state for sustainable tourism, today also referred to as the Goals of Sustainable Development. INSTAT data show that the number of visitors to Albania in the last 3 years has increased significantly compared to previous years. Interest in tourism in Albania has brought citizens of many European countries who have previously been indifferent to Albanian tourism. Tourist operators registered in the Municipality of Vlora in the last

decade indicate the growth of structures and services for the reception of the high number of foreign tourists in Vlora.

Keywords: Tourism, Vlora Peninsula, National Strategy of Albania

Introduction

Albania is a country with great historical and cultural wealth, thanks to its coastline, which covers nearly half its surface area, and has led to significant growth in coastal tourism. In the last decade, the development of tourism has attracted the attention of public and private actors. Albania, washed by the waters of the Adriatic and the Ionian Sea, has undergone significant economic and social progress, which has marked a new era in its history, especially in infrastructure and environmental sustainability. Albania is characterized by natural and cultural diversity; its heritage and history have positioned it as a new tourism destination for tourists from distant countries. In 2023, Albania was ranked 4th globally for the largest increase in the percentage of international tourist arrivals, marking an increase of 56% compared to 2019, as presented in the National Strategy for the Development of Tourism in Albania. The development of tourism in Albania requires both legal and financial support from the Albanian state. The Albanian government has, in the last decade, compiled several development strategies for the sustainable development of tourism in Albania, and has approximated the Albanian national legislation with EU law in order to achieve the level of tourism within the framework of other EU countries.

For the study related to their contribution to tourism revenues, tourism products can be divided into three main categories. This categorization is also accepted by experts in the formation and preparation of the strategic tourism development plan referred to in the final plan of the Albanian government 2024-2030. These categories consist of those forms of tourism development that play a significant role in the contribution of the sector to the total economy, grouping them into coastal tourism, natural tourism, and thematic tourism.

Coastal tourism includes coastal tourism, which refers to activities that take place on the seashore, and marine tourism, which refers to activities that take place at sea. This type of tourism is the most important in tourism, and we will discuss its importance in this article and its importance on the coast of Vlora.

Natural tourism is another category of tourist product offered by Albania to foreign visitors. Albania is valued for its beautiful nature and landscapes in the realization of the development of rural, mountain tourism, ecotourism, and outdoor activities such as rafting, skydiving, mountain biking, fishing, trekking, mountain climbing, nature walking, etc. Mountain tourism

is developed in the mountainous relief of Albania in Theth, Vermosh-Lepushë, Valbona and Tropoja, in the Albanian Alps, Dibër and the Bulqiza area, the mountainous area of Tirana, the mountainous area of Elbasan and Librazhd, the mountainous area of Korça, Mount Tomor, Llogara and Karaburun, etc. Llogara and Karaburun, as part of the mountain tourism of the city of Vlora, will have a certain attention in this article, given the fact that they are considered environmentally protected areas of national importance, natural parks.

Thematic tourism is the third category of tourism based on the tourist product, which includes special and specific forms such as agrotourism, event and business tourism, cultural tourism including heritage, history, and faith, as well as food and wine tourism and health tourism, which encompasses thermal, wellness, and medical tourism. During the visit of tourists to Albania, archaeology, heritage, and culture are often identified as their favorite spots. The visited places that offer this thematic tourism are Shkodra, Lezha, Kruja, Durrës, Tirana, Fier, Berat, Elbasan, Korça, Përmeti, Gjirokastra, Saranda, and Vlora.

A special form of thematic tourism is also business tourism. Located in a favorable position in the regional Balkan market and several important European markets, with developed technology and expertise in several medical sectors such as dental care, plastic surgery, cardiovascular surgery, neurosurgery, fertility treatment, and other specialized fields, Albania benefits from natural resources and favorable climatic conditions that support the development of various segments such as thalassotherapy, thermal water therapy, and competitive pricing. These factors have contributed to positive developments in the health and wellness tourism sector, as outlined in the 2019-2023 tourism development strategy.

The Institute of Statistics of the Republic of Albania (INSTAT) publishes every year the annual report of the "Tourism Survey "Holidays and Travels" which, after our research, shows that the number of tourists coming to Albania has experienced a significant increase during the last decade, which evidences that the demand is distributed almost throughout the territory of the Republic of Albania. The article will analyze the tourism development strategy in Albania, aiming for state policies to move towards sustainable tourism development. INSTAT data will be presented in a tableau to present the development of tourism in Albania, and in particular in the Vlora Peninsula, in the last decade. The data obtained from the Vlora Regional Tax Directorate and the Vlora Municipality will present the change in accommodation structures as a criterion for increasing the development of tourism and the economy in the Vlora Peninsula.

Case study- Vlora Peninsula

Vlora and its peninsula include a large coastal area that offers all-inclusive tourism. The Gulf of Vlora is located in the southwest of Albania and is the largest natural bay in the country. It lies between the Karaburun peninsula in the west and the coast of the city of Vlora in the east, encompassing a wide water area that opens into the Adriatic Sea and, through the Strait of Otranto, is connected to the Ionian Sea. In the south, it also includes the marine area near Orikum and the Karaburun–Sazan protected area. The only Karaburun-Sazan National Park is a wonder of Albanian nature. The "Karaburun – Sazan" aquatic/marine ecosystem, declared a "national marine park" (category II) by Decision of the Council of Ministers no. 59, dated 26.01.2022, is expanded from 12,428 ha to 12,437.7 ha. It extends over a sea area of 1 nautical mile, along the Karaburun Peninsula (from Cape St. Basil to the Langadha face) and around Sazan Island. The slopes of the Karaburun Peninsula are extremely steep on the western side, with high peaks in the central part. The Karaburun Peninsula is the most prominent place with Mediterranean qualities. It is characterized by a very low level of water turbidity. The medio-littoral environment is characterized by coral formations sometimes over one meter, composed of coral algae, a protected and very special type from a geo-morphological, biological, and tourist point of view, and which can appear with extremely amazing views.

Sazan Island (16km long and 3-5km wide), opposite Vlora and north of the Karaburun Peninsula, has an ellipsoidal shape in the north-northwest-southeast direction, with the highest peak at 345m, at the Devil's Throat. The western part is characterized by vertical rocky shores that are carved by deep canyons and that are expanded by caves that appear mainly underwater, as they do on the Karaburun Peninsula. This fascinating natural landscape offers tourists special landscapes and memories. A factor in the increase of tourism in this part of the country is precisely the provision of facilities to visit these parts of the territory.

The city of Vlora, as the main urban center, has about 130,000 inhabitants according to the 2011 Census and INSTAT projections until 2023. The area surrounding the city of Vlora includes settlements such as Orikum, Radhimë, Dukat, and Tragjas, which are more rural and seasonally populated during the summer, focusing on the development of tourism. The demographic structure is relatively young, with a high percentage of the population in working age (15–64 years), but with significant internal and external emigration. During the summer season, the population of the area triples due to tourism, including both domestic and foreign tourists.

In the last 10 years, tourism in the Gulf of Vlora has undergone a significant transformation. The development of tourism in Vlora has brought positive effects on the development of the country's economy. During the last

decade, the Vlora Peninsula has been defined as one of the most dynamic and rapidly growing tourist destinations in Albania. INSTAT reports clearly show that Vlora is one of the four favorite destinations to visit in Albania. The demand to visit Vlora is related to the possibility of easy access to an appropriate infrastructure, rich biodiversity, special beaches, clean water, and historical monuments. Several factors have been identified that have made it possible for tourism development to have these rapid increases in the last decade. These factors will be presented and are the focus of our work. The influencing factors are: tourist offers related to the places visited, infrastructure in service of tourism, the growth of tour operators, marketing of Vlora like never before, and offering a new gastronomy to visitors.

The tourist offers of the last decade include a variety of places to visit, offering coastal, cultural, and mountain tourism due to the geographical relief that characterizes Vlora. The opportunity for diverse tourism offers tourists to visit not only the coast and beach holidays, but also to visit cultural heritage sites and gastronomic offers. Inland villages such as Dukati, Tragjas, and Himara have become popular among visitors seeking authentic, rural Albanian experiences beyond the coastline. The average length of stay has increased from approximately 2.5 days in 2014 to around 4.8 days by 2024, a trend that reflects improvements in accommodation standards, tourist infrastructure, and the availability of various activities. Qosja (2022) argues that the tourism offer is still fragmented and focused only on the summer season, creating a lack of alternative products such as cultural, rural, or all-year tourism. For this reason, there is a need for more fruitful cooperation between public institutions and private tourism operators and more effective marketing for the development of all-year-round tourism.

Infrastructure development is another key factor in the development of tourism in the Vlora Peninsula over the last decade. Government policies for the development of infrastructure as a realization of strategic goals in successive years have not only facilitated easier access to the region, but have also increased the overall quality of the visitor experience. Among the road infrastructure, we mention the A2 Highway (Fier-Vlora), which was completed in 2018, significantly reducing the travel time between Tirana, the capital of Albania, near which is also the largest airport in Albania, and Vlora. Infrastructure that has also impacted tourism is the Llogara Tunnel, which opened in July 2024. The 6-kilometer Llogara Tunnel is a transformative project for the southern Albanian Riviera by creating facilities to reach the Palasa area. Urban and Coastal Infrastructure is occasionally subject to changes by local governments. They have invested in promenades, pedestrian paths, bicycle lanes, and public spaces in urban Vlora and coastal areas such as Radhima and Orikum. But from our perspective, although these are mentioned as investments in infrastructure in the service of tourism

development, on the other hand, the current port is in a bad state due to policies to change the construction site of the new port. The rumored Vlora Airport that would operate in the summer of 2025 has not opened yet, and it is thought that the day of offering international flights will be delayed. Brokaj (2014) argues that Local Government has a key role in the sustainable development of tourism through the presentation of appropriate policies for the development of the region where it exercises its authority. Local policies should include the community and address environmental conservation in addition to the objective of tourism development.

Digital Infrastructure has undergone significant improvements. Recognizing the importance of technology-enabled tourism, Vlora has seen improvements in internet connectivity, smart signage, and digital tourism platforms. These tools help travelers navigate the region, book local experiences, and engage with the cultural and natural heritage of the area in a more interactive way. Sika (2023) states that in the development of tourism in Vlora, the improvement of information technologies in tourism is needed because Innovation is not part of the Vlora municipality's strategy in a structured way. It is recommended to create innovation laboratories and use data for decision-making, education, and training of tourism staff.

The opportunity for Sustainable Development is also achieved in the Vlora Peninsula, but this requires the implementation of a model that not only generates economic benefits, but also protects the rich cultural and environmental assets of the region. The development of sustainable tourism in Vlora is achieved through the design and diversification of tourist offers, cultural revitalization and heritage tourism, job creation, and local entrepreneurship. Education and capacity building to create professional training programs in hospitality, ecotourism, environmental management, and foreign languages are essential for sustainable tourism, including innovation and digital technology in the service of tourism. Agaraj & Pulaj (2024) suggest better management of natural resources and digitalization of services, thus improving the tourist experience and ensuring the return of tourists to Vlora.

INSTAT in Albania has been publishing the tourism survey 'Vacations and Travels' for several years. In the surveys published from 2018 to 2023, data on the most preferred destinations for personal or business trips in Albania and trips outside Albania have been presented. In Vlora, the surveyed tourists have a % that is increasing with small increases from 2018 to 2021 and then decreases. Referring to the publications, it is worth noting that in Vlora this is the presentation: 2018 (11.1%), 2019 (11.6%), 2020 (16.1%), 2021 (16.3%), 2022 (15.2%), and 2023 (14.5%). The Family Tourism Survey, "Vacations and Travels" is a statistical survey carried out by the units of household economy and covers all individuals over 15 years of age with usual residence in Albania. These data, therefore, only show tourism in Vlora by

those residing within the territory of Albania and do not include data on tourists residing outside the territory of Albania.

Conclusions on Challenges and Risks for Tourism Sustainability in the Vlorë Peninsula

Despite the growing trend of tourism development, the Vlorë Peninsula faces a number of challenges that threaten the environmental, social, and legal integrity of the region. Sustainable development requires immediate interventions based on law, comprehensive planning, and effective institutional control. The construction of the International Airport near the Narta Lagoon, a protected area with RAMSAR status, poses a significant risk to biodiversity and violates international principles of the protection of sensitive ecosystems. Rigorous implementation of the Law on Environmental Protection and respect for international obligations for environmental impact assessment (EIA) are required, with mandatory involvement of interested communities. Seasonal congestion in areas such as Dhërmi, Jalë, and Palasa creates pressure on water supply, energy, waste management systems, and the road network.

In the absence of a carrying capacity analysis and functional regulation of land use, there is a risk of violating environmental and health norms. Urban planning should include provisions for managing visitor flows and building infrastructure resistant to seasonal loads. The tourism industry faces a significant shortage of trained personnel in hospitality, guidance, and multilingual communication. This constitutes an obstacle to quality standards and equality in employment, especially for women and young people in rural areas.

Public policies should promote vocational education and equal inclusion through legal and fiscal instruments. The concentration of investment in the tourist coast has left behind the interior areas of the region, reinforcing socio-economic divisions. Regional development policies should promote a fair distribution of resources and the integration of rural tourism, in line with the principles of territorial cohesion provided for by European law.

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