

The impact of cultural tourism in the development of Gjirokastra - the UNESCO town

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Abstract

Cultural heritage, constitutes a valuable part of the resources of a nation. It is a part which, by its complicated nature, is non-renewable and, thus constant effort should be made to protect and appreciate it in order to guarantee its enduring appeal and values as well as continuous operating profits. Towns like Gjirokastra belong here; they have always been among the most privileged when it comes to art and culture observers and preservers. This is the reason why , in 2005, Gjirokastra became part of the World Cultural Heritage under the protection of UNESCO. The objective of this paper is the economic impact of this fact , focused mainly on the cultural and architectural aspect of tourist development. Cultural tourism has its direct impact on the economic and social life of the community, considering aspects like employment, the value of cultural activities and their contribution in establishing healthy social relations, regional identity and urban development. The unique architectural values that Gjirokastra represents should be in the focus of all the factors involved in the preservation and development of these values such as local and central authorities and without forgetting the major role of the local community. The paper concludes with recommendations for a good management of cultural heritage to all the abovementioned social factors.

Gjirokastra – the UNESCO town.

Gjirokastra is one of the most fascinating cities of Albania, unique in its rare architectural, historical and cultural values. It is a remarkable and impressive city admired by all the visitors. Gjirokastra is well-known for its unique architecture, the hundreds year old architectural ensemble surrounding its summit, the imposing castle, in circles descending the slope mountain foot to the valley below. It's rare for medieval towns like Gjirokastra to inherit their characteristics through ages and live up for us to appreciate. Gjirokastra is also the birthplace of many important figures of the past and the present days of whom we proudly recall the great Albanian linguist Eqrem Çabej and the great man of Albanian letters Ismail Kadare. Many come to visit the stone-town as the birthplace of Enver Hoxha the Stalinist leader.

Gjirokastra is a complex museum city dominated by the castle or citadel, its greatest work of art construction, which seems as if it conquers the city from the sky; built on a rocky massive, shaped like a fish back in a prolonged irregular structure. Among other interesting constructions inside the citadel, there is a remarkable system of galleries in arched roofs or vaults constructed in the central part of the fortress. The presence of considerable volumes of walls built during the pre-ottoman period, as well as earthenware produced in the citadel in pre-ottoman periods, found during the archeological excavations in 1982-1983, dates the citadel as the first dwelling place in Gjirokastra at 4th-3rd century B C. Later-on considerable volumes of big stone walls and important fortifications were built which date back to the 4th century. In the centuries to come the fortress would undergo a lot of changes.

In 1417 Gjirokastra and its citadel were seized by the ottomans and with the passing of years it became a residence for both the military and civilian alike. When the city fell into the hands of Ali Pasha of Tepelena in 1811-1812 several fortification works took place in the southeastern wing of the castle. In the same year, a 10km long aqueduct, which brought water supply from the Sopot Mountain, was built. The aqueduct called "Ali Pasha Bridge" a masterpiece of rare architectural values was pulled down in 1932 for fear of collapsing. In 1929 part of citadel was transformed into the notorious

prison of the castle, functional even during the communist regime. Inside the castle are housed the National Museum of Arms “ Gjin Zenebishi”, a Gallery of Arts and the circular stage of the National Folklore Festival which is held every four years.

The characteristic old Bazaar with rug looking cobble streets, skillfully paved by the so-called “golden hands” stonemasons, the old quarters with their typical dwelling houses surrounded by high walls reminiscent of a fortress, are all attractions inviting one to visit the stone city. When visiting Gjirokastra you cannot help sharing Ismail Kadare’s findings and impressions in his novel “Chronicle in stone”. “It was a strange town, and seemed to have been cast up in the valley one winter’s night like some prehistoric creature that was now clawing its way up the mountain side”. The monumental dwelling houses of the Zekas, Angonatis, Kabilatis, Skendulis, Ficajs, Kikinos, Topullis etc with their symmetric constructions, built like towers, with their loopholes built one above the other, big rooms or “odat e mëdha”, with wooden carved ceilings, magnificent fireplaces, and mural paintings, all reflect a rich cultural heritage coming down to us through centuries.

In 1961 Gjirokastra was declared a “Museum City” by the Government, in order to preserve the unique architectural and cultural heritage of the city. During the regime and up to 1990, Gjirokastras ensemble of traditional houses and monuments were restored and maintained by the government, but were never seen as an asset to the development of tourism. The 90’s found the characteristic dwelling houses of Gjirokastra inhabited by different families “under the same roof” sharing the same house (Because of their grandeur, being multi storey houses, during the regime, homeless families were accommodated in them by the government, who were not their legitimate owners in most of the cases). After 1990 the political social and economical changes coupled with ownership problems and lack of traditional construction materials rendered the maintaining of ancient traditional values and the renovation of old houses almost impossible. The presence of many owners sharing the same museum dwelling house, renders it difficult for the foreign investors to restore and maintain them.

Actually 90% of the dwelling houses and monuments in the museum quarters of the city are private property. In the last 20 years of transition the city has suffered considerable damages concerning the historical sites and cultural heritage monuments. Like the rest of Albania Gjirokastra as well has suffered the negative effects of migration and emigration and the lack of investments in its unique architecture of international reputation.

Gjirokastra is now the biggest administrative center of Albania, with a regional administration; it is a center of education and culture with its University offering different fields of study and a modern Banking system. It is the city of National and International Folk Festivals museums, historical values and legends, it has 56 monuments of culture of the first category and 550 of second category. All these monuments of culture are of a rare kind presenting sophisticated interwoven Albanian and Ottoman building tradition. Gjirokastra houses, 200 churches and monasteries, 3 Bektashi tekkes and one mosque of Islamic architectural heritage. Gjirokastra cultural tourism is increasing by the growing interest in the tremendous natural and cultural heritage, rare archeological sites in the Drino Valley where excavations are in progress and the architecture ensembles offering impressive sights. The most visited sites are: the ancient city of Antigone, the Hadrianapolis Amphitheater, the Antique graves of Jorgucat, Shanisha's Castle in Libohove (the sister of Ali Pasha), the house of Myfit Bey of Libohove , the church of Labove e Kryqit, The Tekke of Melan which are now easier to reach because of the improvements in infrastructure, restorations and better exposition.

The vicinity to the ancient city of Antigone, to the National Park of Buthros, the archeological centre of Finiq and the Castle of Ali Pasha of Tepelena, make Gjirokastra a favourite tourist attraction of growing interest. Because of these values the museum city of Gjirokastra was inscribed to the World Heritage List in 23 July 2005 under the protection of UNESCO .

Cultural tourism attractions in Gjirokastra

Gjirokastra has all the necessary potentials for the development of the cultural tourism. There is an abundance of rare information visitors can share in the historical and archeological values of Gjirokastra. We have listed some of the most outstanding assets of the stone city and its suburbs to the development of cultural tourism.

- The fortress built in the second half of the XIIIth century AD, is one of the biggest in Balkans.
- The characteristic Old Bazaar, dating back to the XVIIth century AD, paved with cobblestones in the central part of the museum city.
- Religious objects: Gjirokastras Mosque(1754), The Hamam and the Seven Springs of the Bath, the Church of Saint Michael the Archangel (1756), Tekke of Zall(1600-1700), etc.
- The Obelisk to Education, dedicated to the first Albanian school in Gjirokaster, built on the historic hill, offers a wonderful view of the city.
- Characteristic Houses: The Zekatis' Museum House (1812), The Angonatis' Museum House (1838) the best representative of the tower-like built dwelling houses.
- The Communist Tunnel goes under the foundations of the citadel and was built by the communist regime as a shelter from possible air and nuclear strikes. It was built in the early 70's to accommodate the local political leaders of the time in case of sudden air strikes, housing furnished offices, conference rooms even independent electrical power station and potable water, so that they could live normally inside the shut tunnel. Now days it is lighted, restored and open to public.
- The National Museum of Arms built in the citadel, houses a whole arsenal of weaponry used in different periods of history.
- The Ethnographic Museum, placed inside the house of Enver Hoxha, built in XIX-XX century, exhibits folk costumes, artisan works and traditional wooden or metallic house wares of Gjirokastra.
- The National Archeological Park of Antigone located 14km far from Gjirokastra. The City of Antigone was established by the King Pyrro of Epirus in 297BC.

- The Ancient Amphitheater of Hadrianopolis, close to the village Sofratike, built in 2nd century BC by the Great Emperor Adrian. In its time the Amphitheater could sit 3500 people.
- The Castle of Libohove, dedicated to Ali Pashe Tepelenas' sister Shanisha.

The National Folklore Festival is held in Gjirokastra Castle since 1968, every four years. It displays the Albanian folk culture and traditional folk costumes of different Albanian regions which render the festival very interesting. It is one of the centers of polyphonic songs accredited by UNESCO for its international importance. The International Folk Festival is held every year in Gjirokastra with the participation of different Balkans Countries. A growing interest on the artisan works is revived recently. They can be found in the Old Bazar souvenir shops such as women folk costumes embroidered by hand or machine, waistcoats as well as wood or stone handmade souvenirs. Of great importance are the stonemason's works and their rare gifts inherited through generations. The Ministry of Public Affairs together with different NGOs have offered training courses for the young stonemasons to help preserve the tradition. They count on them for the restoration of monuments of culture.

An important asset to the historic and cultural tourism in Gjirokastra is the traditional art of cooking, with an abundance of products and cooking techniques. To mention some: qifqi (balls made of rice and spices baked in stove), Pie of Zagori, Pie of Lunxheri, skewered meat, pashaqofte, figs hoshaf (a dessert made of dried figs), qahi, rolled grapevine leaves filled with rice, etc. Recently the visitors are showing a greater interest for the local dairy products naturally produced according the traditional ways. If you add to the above mentioned characteristics the Gjirokastras hospitality you have won a wonderful city to visit and enjoy in every season.

The economical effects of the cultural tourism in Gjirokastra

Tourism is undoubtedly one of the economy sectors which stimulate a sustainable growth. The relations tourism has with other sectors of the economy makes the studying of the ways to stimulate its development a necessity. The prognoses for a sustainable economical growth in Albania has for many years now included the development of tourism. Because of the favorable geographical position, the unexploited natural resources, the mild Mediterranean climate and not these only, Albania must enjoy the profits of a well planned and seriously developed tourism.

In fact the tourism sector is considered as one of the most important potentials to foster economic growth in the long run. If we take in consideration Gjirokastra and the South Region of Albania, we strongly believe that the development of the cultural tourism would be an important source of growth for the whole South Region of Albania. The inclusion of Gjirokastra in the World Heritage List and in the latest tourist guides as well as a growing role of the Albanian government and the foreign donators have significantly increased the number of tourists visiting this remarkable city. The purpose of this study is to emphasize the impact of the cultural tourism in Gjirokastra.

During the above mentioned study we met several difficulties, such as:

- Tourism statistics are very poor. The published data is scarce; it has national and not regional indicators/indices.
- There is a deficiency in tourism statistics, in their quality as well as in quantity.
- The high level of the informality in our economy allows even the licensed accommodating tourist centers to report a lesser number of tourists than they really host.
- There is no data on the activity of Tourist Travel Agencies.

The number of tourists visiting Gjirokastra has significantly increased recently. According to the Tourist Informing Office, there has been a growth in visitors numbers from the year 2000 up to 2009 (chart no 1).

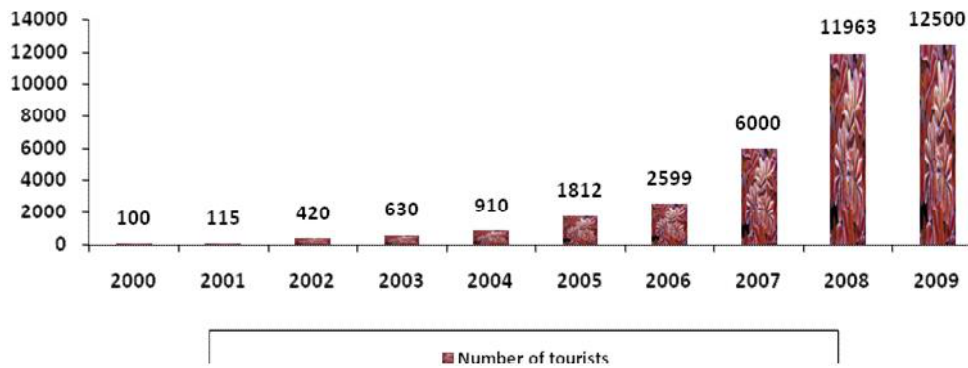


Chart no 1. The number of tourists visiting Gjirokastra during the years.

If we consider the number of tourists visiting Gjirokastra in different months, most of the visitors come in May, August and September. Some of those visiting Gjirokastra in August are on their way to or from summer holidays destinations. In September most of the tourists come in Gjirokastra to visit the Artisanal Fair and the International Folklore Festival. These facts should serve as incentives to organize these activities periodically.

The Government has played a more active role in promoting development in Gjirokastra, since when it was inscribed in July 2005 on the World Heritage List under the protection of UNESCO, by increasing the public investments on the restoration of the monuments of culture. The public investments in the period 2001-2009 are presented in the chart below:

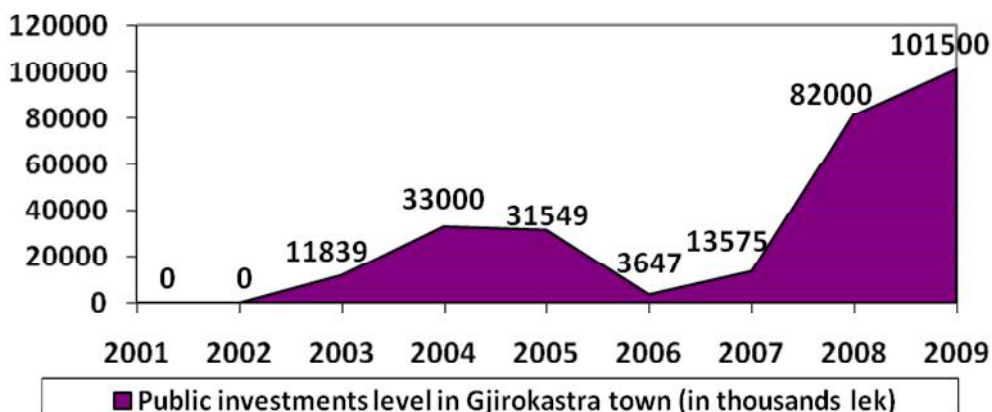


Chart no 2. Public investments in Gjirokastra (in thousand Lek) Source: Regional Directorate of the National Culture, Gjirokastra.

Measuring the impact of the cultural tourism in Gjirokastra is rather difficult because of the above mentioned reasons. Nevertheless the growth in

the number of tourists to visit Gjirokastra would bring a new life to The Old Bazaar (increase the number of local activities in the traditional buildings, increase the number of: restaurants serving traditional Gjirokastras dishes, fast food shops, artisanal and souvenir shops, characteristic houses lending rooms, travel agencies, etc).

Based on the information provided by the Tourism Office at the City Hall of Gjirokastra , during the last two years the private investments in the museum zone have increased with a faster pace than the public ones mentioned above. The reconstruction of two hotels of considerable capacity is over, three new shops trading artisanal works, in metal, wood and stone, produced by local craftsman as well as handmade souvenirs by Gjirokastras women such as knitwear, women folk costumes embroidered by hand or machine, waistcoats, rugs and wall-hangings, are opened. We are informed by the owners of these specialized shops that 30 artisan women supply them with their products. The possible growth of visitors will bring a growing interest and demand for these products.

In order to enrich the scarce data provided by the local administrate and the Tourist Informing Center placed in The Old Bazaar we formulated a questionnaire to help us asses the willingness of investors and businessmen to invest in the museum zone of the city. Some of the most interesting results are shown below:

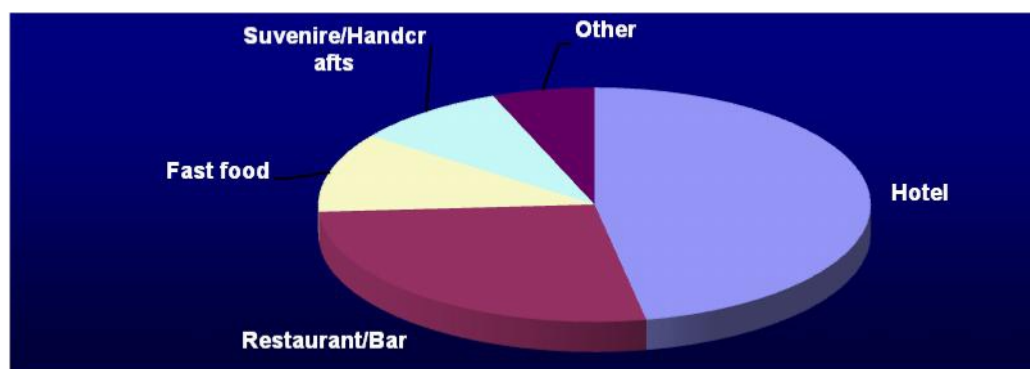
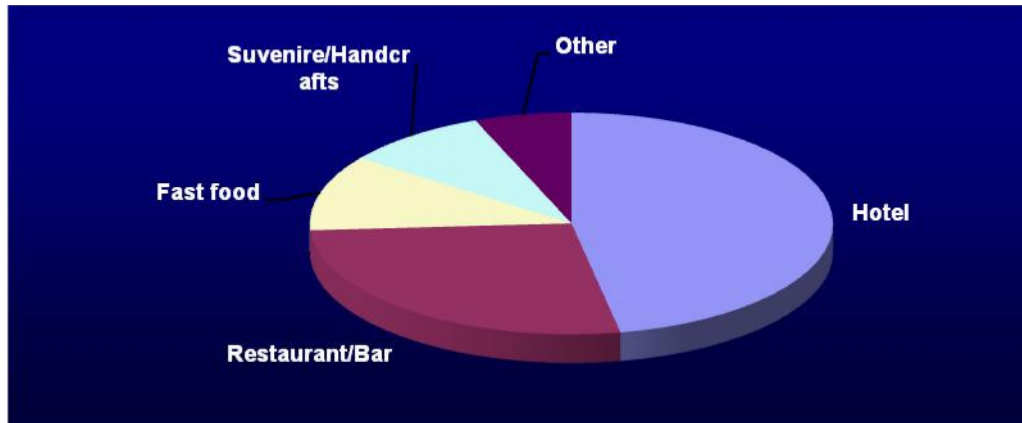


Chart no 3: Some of questionnaires results. Source: author's survey.

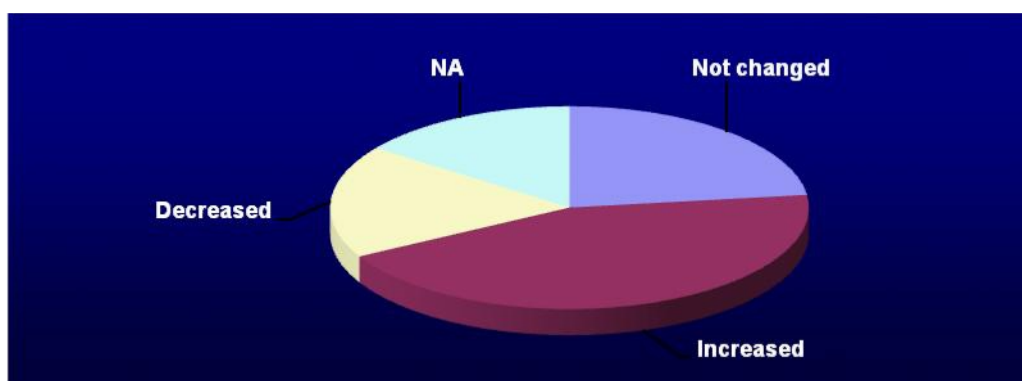
50 businessmen gave their opinion in the questionnaire. 65% of them answered positively to the question “Are you interested in investing in the museum zone of the town”. The kind of businesses they wanted to exercise in that zone is as follows:



54% of those who answered negatively to the question, were worried about the owning or property related problems, 10% were disturbed by lack of the possibility to change the façade, 16% the high construction cost in such objects, 20% see better profits in other zones of the town.

The interviewed people responded negatively as a result of lack of desire to invest in the museum part: 65% of them have ticked the problems related to the property of the buildings in this area, 10% of them the impossibility to change the facades of these buildings, 16% of them the high construction cost in these kind of buildings, 20% were looking for greater profits in the other part of the town.

The interviewed businessmen that have invested in the museum part, answered to the question on “What has happened with the incomes of your business in the last five years” as below:



In the analyses done to the businesses that declared to have had an increase in their incomes, the greatest part of them are businesses that sell

souvenirs and artisans works (68%), fast foods (20%) and the rest are the restaurants and hotels. This is related to the nature of the tourists that visit the stone city. In general, the tourists are daily tourists; they arrive in the city in the morning and leave in the afternoon.

The businesses which actually operate in the museum part answered to the question on “The premises in which you develop your business is your property or is it rented? As below: 76% of them are carrying out their business in rented premises and the rest in their own property. This is a serious problem in two directions:

1. Increase the cost of offering the products and services.
2. Decrease of the possibility of investments in the function of improving the quality.

To the question “have you employed seasonal supportive staff in the last year”, almost all the interviewed people have positively answered to it. From May up to September, a period which corresponds to the peak of tourism in Gjirokastra) all the businesses which are directly connected with the tourism employ seasonal personnel.

Conclusions and recommendations

The aim of this work was to measure the economic impact of the cultural tourism in Gjirokastra. Even though, there was a lack of data from the central and local administration we managed to show that the development of tourism in this town have started to give its positive effects in the economic and social life of the town. The increase of the public and private investments in the museum part of the town, the increase of the number of the employed people in the actual businesses and the opening of the new businesses in this area show very well the impact of the development of cultural tourism. There are of great importance the results of the questionnaire related to the desire to invest in the museum part. The increased interest of the business to invest in tourism is for sure the best measurement of the impact that the development of the cultural business may have. The business invests there where the tendencies of the development are positive and this makes us think that the

first results of the development of the cultural tourism of Gjirokastra are visible and touchable.

We think that Gjirokastra must not be focused in the attraction of the massive tourism but the elite one. The town is still visited for its beautiful landscape and a little for its inside parts. Despite the special architecture and the grandeur view the town conveys rare historic values which are still unexploited. Based on a questionnaire organized by GCDO (Gjirokastra Conservation and Development Organization), where the interviewed people were tourists that visited the stone town they answered to the question on "Would you like to visit a museum focused on the history of the Gjirokastra town?" 78% of them have given a positive answer. This has to stimulate the competent bodies to concept the development of the cultural tourism in the town in a new dimension.

Generally, the tourists come and visit the town for only some hours. In order the tourism to not last few hours but some days and perhaps some weeks, there has to be fulfilled the tourist entertainment infrastructure with additional elements such as the setting up a system of libraries, cinema and theatre, shopping malls, discothèques etc which actually do not exist in the town.

Recommendations:

The culture of service has to be improved to justify the attraction of the elite tourism. The setting up of the vocational schools on this field will build the possibility to improve this indicator. Actually, there is only one professional school in the town which graduates tourism managers, who are not involved in the needs of the town.

There has to be completed the hotel infrastructure in order to extend the time the tourists stay in the town. Actually, there is missing the information on internet for the small hotels situated in the characteristic houses, for the restaurants which offer traditional food and there is a lack of tourist agencies to create the competitive offers which will enable the stay of the tourists in Gjirokastra.

The local authorities have to organize more often workshops which have to aim the training of the offers of the services in the museum area towards the preferences of the tourists. We mean the orientation of the

restaurants situated in the museum part towards the traditional dishes of this area, the orientation of the small shops towards the traditional artisan products and souvenirs as it happens in such tourist places in the different tourist town in the world.

There has to be stimulated the logo of the stony town in the souvenirs and in the handmade products. This will bring an increase in the production of the handmade products produced by Gjirokastra artisans. Actually, someone can find more souvenirs with the logo of Albania than that of Gjirokastra.

There have to be qualified the guides and the tourist books not only on the knowledge they have of the different languages but mainly on the quality of the information they transmit to the tourists.

There has to be increased the cooperation of the local public institutions with the NGOs and University of Gjirokastra on the compilation of the policies for a sustainable development of the cultural tourism and the exploitation of the potentials of the historians and managers of the tourism that this university graduates.

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