



MARITIME HERITAGE OF ALBANIA – AN ANCHOR FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM?

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Abstract

One of the most suffering sectors from the worldwide pandemic situation is tourism. The pandemic situation has significantly attacked this economic sector by restricting travelling and tourism. In such conditions countries have to find chances to re-position and attract the travellers. Environmental tourism is a growing industry generating €190 million per year (RSTC). The aim of this paper is to analyse if Albania might develop to a suitable diving tourist destination considering the acceptable prerequisites in place as demanded by international and E.U. based organizations, e.g. ISO Standards for Safety and Security for Recreational Scuba Training (e.g. RSTC). Scuba diving is one of the most attractive environmental tourism sectors therefore it is worth to investigate if Albania is or has prepared to attract this traveller specific group. Diving tourists from Europe visit mainly five principal destinations which include the Mediterranean. Albania with 476 km coastline and ship wrecks from antiquity to modern days offers a range of dive sites, but lacks infrastructure and legal frameworks. Based on the analysis of the tourism sector in Albania we came to the conclusions that scuba diving can be considered as a potential tourism attraction, but the Albanian government still doesn't consider it as attraction in which investments are needed.

Keywords: Sustainable Tourism, Tourism Management, Scuba Diving, ISO Standards



INTRODUCTION

The World Travel & Tourism Council has estimated that more than 330 million jobs and 10.3% of global GDP in 2019 were being created or depending on tourism and travel industry, stressing the importance for global economic recovery and growth. (WTTC, 2020). Creating 1 out of 4 new jobs worldwide, Travel & Tourism as one of the world's largest economic sectors is driving socio-economic development. It plays an important role in poverty reduction, driving prosperity, reducing inequality, regardless of nationality, gender, education or any other classification. Travel and Tourism offers opportunities regardless of gender, education, nationality, and beliefs with 54% of the sector's workforce being women and over 30% are youth.

Although Albania is still unknown to many Europeans as distinct holiday travel destination, it now earned reputation as „secret pearl“ in recent years. Unfortunately, Albania has not found it's niche and target group yet, but despite struggles with it's image and reputation, the tourism sector was growing by approx. 12% annually, with total tourism expenditures (both foreign and domestic) reaching 2,306 million EUR in 2018 (Macrotrends.com, 2021).

TOURISM SECTOUR ANALYSIS

The Albanian Institute of Statistics (INSTAT, 2021) reports increasing numbers of foreigners visiting the country over the past 5 (pre-)Covid pandemic years for vacation (Fig.1, Arrivals of foreigners in Albania by Purpose of Travel, 2014-2020, authors' selection: Holidays, Visits to Relatives..., non-business related).

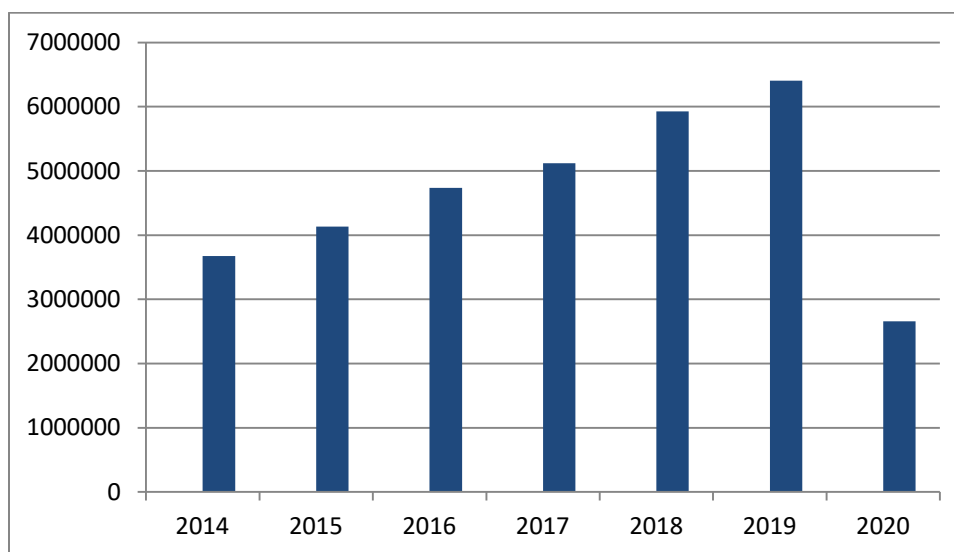


Figure 1. INSTAT, Arrivals of foreigners in Albania by Purpose of Travel, 2014-2020

The tourism and travel sector is one of the most suffering sectors from the worldwide pandemic situation, as the pandemic situation has significantly caused restrictions for travelling and even inhibited “non-essential” travelling as tourism.

The latest estimates of the WTTC are that by the end of 2020, over 197 million jobs and 5.5 \$ trillion were lost worldwide due to the collapse of travel globally (“G20-Recovery-Plan”, 2021). Within the European Union, tourism halved in 2020 (Eurostat, 2012), Mediterranean countries (Cyprus, Greece and Malta) experiencing decreases exceeding 70%. In neighbouring Albania with similar climatic attraction, the number of foreign visitors dropped from 2.6 million to 1.2 million people, a loss of almost 60% (INSTAT,2020, see also Fig.1) Albania’s advantage is the factor of around 71% of all international arrivals are from four neighbouring countries (Kosovo, Macedonia, Greece and Montenegro), entering the country by car (ibid).

The continuing prohibitions on international travel and the feeling of insecurity associated with flights and airports will obviously make tourism gear towards the domestic market. Unknown national locations will probably increase exposure to more people, and less frequently visited tourist destinations may benefit from the demand for less crowded places before a „normal“ tourism and travel behaviour can be reached as vaccination programs worldwide will last over the summer holiday periode 2021. As long term effects are still uncertain, movement restrictions, quarantine imposements flight cancellations is still a common tourists risk: At least for short term, the tourism behaviour is expected to follow recent trends in place for mitigation, for example increasing travel by road instead of flights. Also, the concept of micro-holidays will probably be more common. Instead of the impossibility to make long-distance trips, which usually have a longer duration, the typical big annual trip might be replaced by smaller ones, throughout the year, within shorter reach and travel time. In terms of distancing, travel privacy will be important from now on. The fear of proximity between people and the need to avoid crowded spaces will play a role and group travels will be replaced by individual travel. Preferred escape places are destinations in open nature, a form of tourism which allows people to get together and still respect social distancing. This trend could be easily observed after every ease of a one of the stricter lock-downs in Europe, when people tended to discover and contact with nature (parks, beaches, mountains).

The crisis has challenged tourist destinations world wide, but with the vast majority (of approx. 85%) of all foreign visitors to Albania entering the country by road, significant increases are not expected as road trip visitor numbers are exhausted by travellers from neighbouring countries, Fig 02 (INSTAT, Movemements of Foreign Citizens by Mode of Travel 2014-2018).

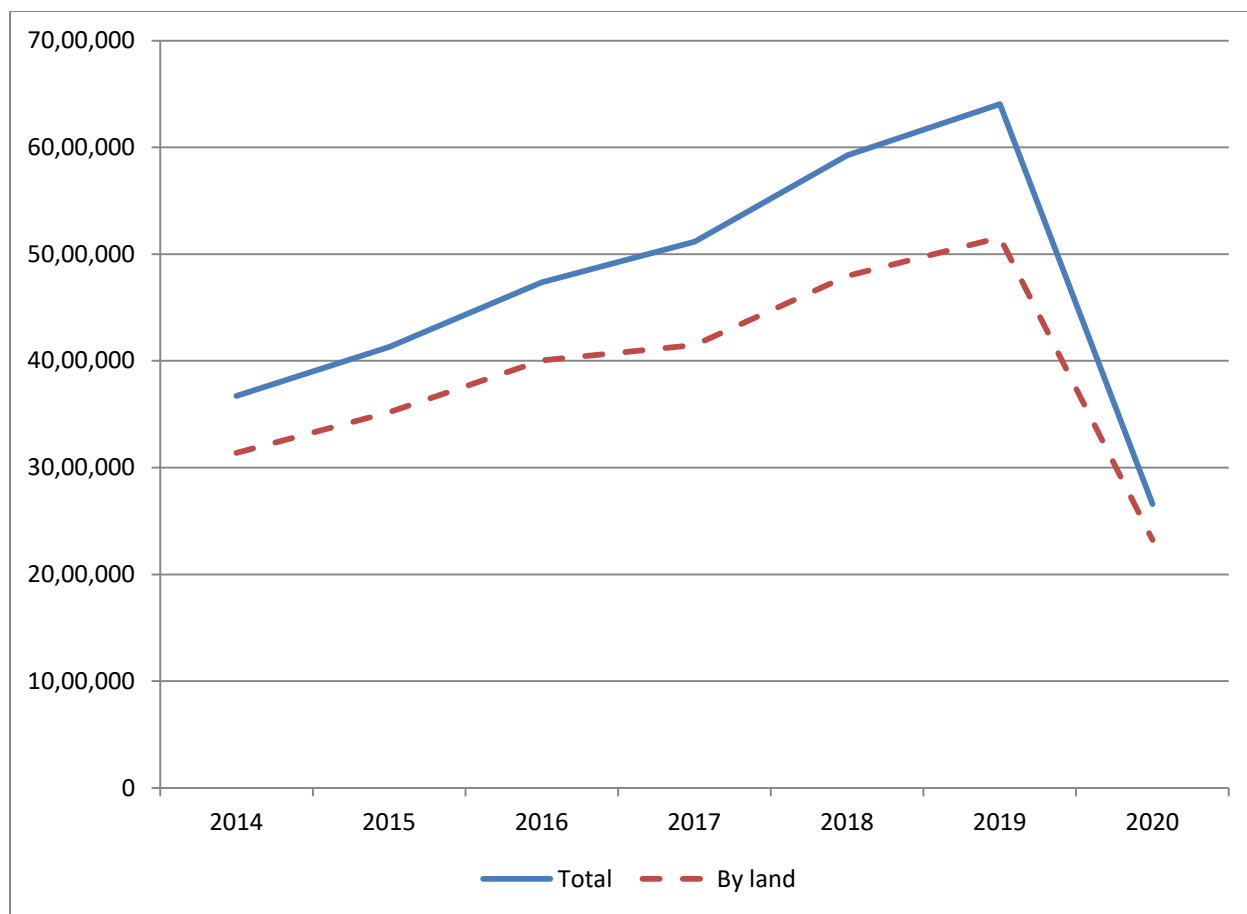


Figure 2. INSTAT, Movements of Foreign Citizens by Mode of Travel 2014-2018

For potential visitors from more northern Europe, road trips exceed available resources (especially travel time) to arrive at destination Albania (Table 01, Flight times to Tirana Airport).

Table 1: Flight times to Tirana Airport, wizzair.com

Vienna	1:40 hours	Brussels	2:45 hours
Munich (Memmingen)	1:55 hours	Hamburg	2:45 hours
Milano-Malpense	1:55 hours	Paris	2:50 hours
Berlin-Brandenburg	2:15 hours	Stockholm	3:05 hours
Frankfurt (Hahn)	2:25 hours	London	3:10 hours

Authors' elaboration from <https://wizzair.com>

Currently, Albania has only one international airport (Tirana International Airport „Mother Teresa“) in operation, a second, smaller airport in northeastern Kukes is expected to become operational in 2021. In March 2021 Albania's government selected a

corporation to build a new international airport near Vlore and another airport is projected to be built in southernmost Saranda. "With four airports Albania (will move) to another level of social and economic development," said Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama (Associated Press, APNews.com, 5 March 2021 „Albania to build 2nd international airport to boost tourism“).

Growing flight connections, especially direct flights from major „northern“ capital cities, increases affordability for travelling to Albania. Under the consideration of total costs for a traveller, the access to Albania with „budget airlines“ enhances the probability of choice for Albania to become a further destination for short term (micro-) holidays, for weekend trips or extended weekends in combination with „bridge days“, when it suits the travellers' available time.

SCUBA DIVING POTENTIAL IN ALBANIAN TOURISM

Targeting Scuba Diving as tourists for Albania might be one option for acquiring new customer groups. In Europe, there is an estimation of approximately 3.5 million active scuba divers, and another 225,000 new certification are issued every year (pre-Covid, Upton, 2019). The Recreational Scuba Training Center (RSTC) has evaluated that out of these, about 1.16 million divers are active „holiday divers“. These diving tourists from Europe tend to travel to five main destinations for their desired activities, when not diving in their local waters; the Red Sea, Maledives, Southest Asia, the Carribean and the Mediterranean Sea. While the desire for far distance travelling is more seen in the colder winter season, during the summer months in Europe, the majority of the divers travel to short haul destinations. Diving holidays last in average between five and seven days with costs of 300 – 400 Euro per diving packages. Passionate and enthusiastic divers travel up to three times per year to warm water regions (RSTC).

Albania with its 476 km of coastline and numerous discovered ship wrecks from antiquity to modern days offers a range of dive sites, but when looking into public available sources we clearly can see that the Albanian coast is represented as a big gap in the map for scuba diving activities (Fig.3, www.dive.site - *Interactive dive site map and online logbook for divers*), encircled by hotspots nearby in both neighbouring coastal countries (Montenegro in the north and Greece in the south).¹

¹To the authors awareness is only one dive centre, located in Durres



Figure 1. www.dive.site - *Interactive dive site map and online logbook for divers.*

In 2006, the Albanian Government, together with World Bank, initiated a survey in order to assess the potential for diving Tourism (Upton, 2006). For recreational scuba diving, a mix of several different dive experiences is needed within the daily acceptable reach (either on land or by boat) from the point of the scuba divers' residences. Such interesting points for divers are either of geological-stratigraphic nature (rocks, reefs, caves, bottom formations) or by biodiversity (quantity of marine life, colourfulness, scarcity).

Due to perceived attractions under water, the research group focussed on the southern Albanian regions between Vlora and Saranda². Although limited in time and region, the survey concluded that the coastal regions around the two cities Saranda and Himara are suitable for scuba experiences and worth to develop, while the tourist “hot spot” Saranda only offers few dive spots for casual diving, but not justifiable “scuba diving holidays”.

It has to be noticed, that the scuba diving activity only lasts a few hours per day due to physical (medical) limitations, therefore every scuba diver has additional free time to spend for other activities than diving. Divers' travel destinations must also offer alternative programs for „down

² The northern beaches were considered less interesting; the sand surface of the landmass continues under water, which does neither support geologic typology nor abundance of underwater flora and fauna.

days“ when weather conditions may not allow diving activities. Scuba divers must also stay at least one day without diving before their return flight (or road travel when crossing mountains is required). If suitable infrastructure and entertainment can be found, the average diver’s holiday is estimated with additional costs of around 750 Euro per vacation for travel, accommodation, meals and entertainment other than scuba diving (RSTC).

A closer look to neighbouring Greece underlines economic potential of scuba diving activities. Although spear fishing and sponge diving has a long tradition in Greek waters, but recreational scuba diving activities had a difficult stand until 2005. Until then it was fairly impossible to dive in Greece - around 90% of their waters were off-limits for recreational divers, either to protect archaeological/historical sites from looting or coastal installations were considered as „military sensitive areas“. Many restrictions were lifted in 2005/2006 (with some E.U. Intervention), and scuba diving has now become fairly widespread in Greece. The international internet forum *Diveadvisor.com* currently counts for Greece 183 Dive Shops and 269 Dive Sites. In August 2020, Greece even announced the opening of the first „Underwater Museum“ for the public (National Geographic, 2020).

One very significant difference between Albania and Greece is the open access to the sea for everybody. The Greek fishing fleet, which operates almost exclusively in domestic waters, is in fact the EU’s largest fleet in terms of the number of vessels according to the National Register of Fishing Vessels. According to (Ministry of Rural Development and Food, Hellenic Republic, 2019. Greek Fishing Fleet), the Greek fishing fleet comprised 14,123 active fishing vessels on 31 December 2018. In contrast, the Albanian fishing fleet consists of only 581 vessels (Invest in Albania, 2021), which are concentrated in the four fishing ports of Saranda, Vlora, Durres, and Shengjin.

None of the commercial ports is in close vicinity of the dive spots. Beside the fact that in the fishing fleet, about 40% of the vessels are small polyvalent vessels less than 6 meters long, thus not suitable for tourist travel, recreation or diving platform. Vessels above 12 meters, which could build the nucleus for a new developing „scuba fleet“ are relatively old (more than 35 years), which implies not only limited conveniences, but also outdated standards in terms of Safety and Security Regulations, especially considering for passenger transport (Upton).

Albania has one of the strictest laws accessing the open sea, (justified by the program to fight sea trafficking), Legislation for changes is in process (Albanian Daily News, 2020). As consequence, there are currently no marinas for private recreational boats in place, which could be utilized as scuba diving platform either.

Clearly, Albania currently lacks significant parts of infrastructure, vessels and skilled and trained vessel operators, coming either from the commercial or from the private sector.

Beside the initial installation of facilities for scuba divers' needs as transport vessels with capable to transport and host passengers not only conveniently, but also under the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) to assure health and safety for international (and national) scuba divers. Scuba diving is not “dangerous” per se, but like in every sportive activity, accidents and injuries will occur. Therefore it is immanent for a the scuba community, especially in the early years of gaining reputation, that proper precaution by internationally recognised standards (e.g. Training and Education Guideline of RSTC) are followed in order to produce reliability and credibility. The primary “First Aid” in scuba diving is inhalation of 100% Oxygen, which is delivered/stored in metal cylinders (5litre, 200-300 bar), but by authors' own experience, these are almost impossible to acquire in Albania for private persons due to current law in place, which prohibits these items as “dangerous goods”.

CONCLUSIONS

Any increasing number of active divers, including inexperienced students and not least divers experimenting new equipment, dive sites or techniques, the probability for major accidents will increase as well. With focus on the “dive disease” (decompression sickness), Upton's already in 2006 recommended the installation of a “post-traumatic chamber” in the coastal region, cooperative with a medical facility. As far as the authors' figured, this was not followed yet.³

Despite all these deficiencies, the Albanian Ministry of Tourism, since 2006, publish a pocket guide in 2006 including findings of Upton's report, promoting “sport and adventure diving”, “exploratory and archaeological diving”. The same brochure promotes to “organize groups of 10-15 divers” and also lists several dive places between 37 and 50 meters of depth.

Serious dive organisation worldwide (including manufacturers for dive equipment) set the limit for recreational/non-professional scuba diving at a depth of 30 meters.

Based on the findings, the authors' conclusion is that Albania is an interesting travel destination for cultural and recreational tourists, and the increasing number and quality in international connections to northern European countries are benefiting the tourist and travel sector. Albania has good chances to become a future destination in the scuba diving world. But currently, and in close post-Covid times, water sports including scuba diving, as practised in other European/Mediterranean countries, cannot be practised in the near future due to lack in legislation, concerning vessel ownership, free vessel movements, dive specific infrastructure (considering the special needs for baro-traumatic treatments) and more.

³ crossing the mountains to Tirana for medical evacuation is extremely dangerous because of the nature of the baro-trauma

Published documents so far also indicate also that the Albanian government does not understand the needs and requirements for recreational scuba diving as individual sport more and hopefully seeks more external expertise in physical, technical and practical questions. Otherwise the beauty of Albania's maritime heritage will be reserved for professional or scientific dive organisations only.

Researching through tourism industry and based on the results, we plan to repeat the research in five years, this because think that during this period the COVID effects will vanish and will leave the space to tourism market to be normal.

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