International Journal of Economics, Commerce and Management
United Kingdom ISSN 2348 0386 Vol. 14, Issue 11, Nov 2026

https://ijecm.co.uk/

BEYOND SEASONALITY: STRATEGIC MARKETING FOR YEAR-ROUND AGRITOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN ALBANIA AND THE WESTERN BALKANS: A COMPARATIVE SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Tourism seasonality remains a structural challenge to sustainable development and destination competitiveness, particularly in countries where visitor demand is concentrated in coastal areas during summer. In the Western Balkans, agritourism offers opportunities for rural diversification and year-round tourism development, yet its potential remains insufficiently explored from a strategic marketing perspective. This study examines how destination marketing, experiential product diversification, digital communication, and territorial branding can support year-round agritourism, focusing on Albania and comparing Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. The research employs a qualitative comparative approach using secondary data from official tourism statistics, national strategies, institutional reports, and academic literature. Its analytical framework integrates tourism seasonality, destination competitiveness, experiential marketing, and sustainable rural development. The comparative analysis highlights differences in tourism patterns and destination positioning, identifying rural gastronomy, agricultural heritage, local food systems, cultural experiences, and nature-based activities as opportunities to diversify tourism demand beyond peak seasons. Key challenges include fragmented destination promotion, limited integration of agritourism into national marketing strategies, and insufficient disaggregated performance indicators. The study proposes an integrated strategic marketing framework connecting seasonal experience design, digital visibility, market segmentation, and

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stakeholder collaboration to strengthen year-round agritourism demand. The findings emphasize agritourism's potential to enhance rural competitiveness, reinforce local value chains, and promote geographically and seasonally balanced tourism development. The study concludes that mitigating seasonality requires coordinated destination management, differentiated experiential offerings, and market-oriented product development rather than promotional activities alone.

Keywords: Agritourism; Tourism Seasonality; Year-Round Tourism; Strategic Marketing; Destination Marketing; Rural Tourism Development; Experiential Marketing; Western Balkans; Albania; Sustainable Tourism

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become an important driver of economic growth, employment, and regional development in the Western Balkans, particularly in Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. The expansion of international tourism has created opportunities for destination diversification, infrastructure development, and local entrepreneurship. However, tourism growth across the region remains characterized by geographical concentration, seasonal fluctuations, and differences in destination competitiveness (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; OECD, 2024a; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). These challenges highlight the need for tourism development strategies that extend beyond increasing visitor arrivals and focus on creating sustainable economic opportunities throughout the year.

Albania represents a particularly relevant case, having experienced substantial growth in international tourism over recent years. In 2024, the country recorded approximately 11.7 million arrivals of foreign citizens, representing an increase of 15.2% compared with 2023 (Ministry of Tourism and Environment, 2025). Nevertheless, the expansion of tourism has been accompanied by challenges related to seasonal concentration, particularly in coastal destinations, where demand is strongly associated with summer tourism. Similar patterns characterize Montenegro, while Serbia and North Macedonia offer more diversified combinations of urban, cultural, mountain, and rural tourism products (OECD, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c). These differences provide an appropriate basis for examining alternative tourism development models and identifying opportunities for reducing dependence on peak-season demand.

Tourism seasonality is widely recognized as a structural challenge affecting destination competitiveness and economic sustainability. Butler (2001) describes seasonality as a temporal imbalance in tourism activity, influenced by climatic conditions, institutional factors, and travel

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behavior. Such fluctuations may result in unstable employment, underutilized infrastructure, irregular business revenues, and increased environmental pressure during peak periods (Baum & Lundtorp, 2001; Butler, 2001). From a strategic perspective, addressing seasonality requires not only improvements in tourism infrastructure but also the diversification of tourism products, effective destination positioning, and targeted marketing communication (Buhalis, 2000; Pike & Page, 2014).

Within this context, agritourism offers opportunities for diversifying tourism demand while supporting rural economic development. Agritourism integrates agricultural production with accommodation, gastronomy, cultural heritage, and experiential tourism activities, creating additional income opportunities for farmers and rural entrepreneurs (Phillip et al., 2010; Streifeneder, 2016). Previous studies suggest that agritourism can contribute to agricultural diversification, local value creation, and the preservation of rural traditions (Barbieri, 2013; Tew & Barbieri, 2012). Its relevance is particularly significant in Albania, where agriculture accounted for approximately 18.6% of GDP in 2022, according to the OECD (2024a). The combination of agricultural resources and growing tourism demand provides a potentially favorable environment for developing differentiated rural tourism experiences.

The development of year-round agritourism, however, requires more than the availability of agricultural resources. Strategic marketing plays a central role in transforming seasonal agricultural activities into attractive tourism products. Experiential marketing emphasizes the creation of memorable visitor experiences through participation, authenticity, and emotional engagement (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999). Similarly, destination branding, digital communication, and market segmentation can strengthen the visibility of rural destinations and attract different visitor groups beyond conventional tourism seasons (Buhalis, 2000; Leung et al., 2013; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Seasonal gastronomy, harvesting experiences, agricultural workshops, local festivals, and cultural activities may therefore provide opportunities to expand agritourism demand throughout the year (Everett & Aitchison, 2008; Sidali et al., 2015; Sims, 2009).

Despite the growing literature on agritourism and sustainable rural tourism, the relationship between strategic marketing and year-round agritourism development remains insufficiently examined in the Western Balkan context. Existing studies have primarily addressed agritourism definitions, rural entrepreneurship, sustainability, and destination competitiveness (Barbieri, 2013; Phillip et al., 2010; Streifeneder, 2016), while relatively limited attention has been devoted to the role of integrated marketing strategies in addressing seasonal tourism demand. Furthermore, the limited availability of comparable agritourism-specific

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statistics across the region creates challenges for evaluating its contribution to tourism diversification (Eurostat, 2026; OECD, 2024a).

Against this background, the present study examines how strategic marketing can support year-round agritourism development in Albania through a comparative secondary-data analysis of Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Drawing on official tourism statistics, institutional reports, and academic literature, the research investigates three central questions:

1. How do tourism development and seasonality patterns differ across Albania and selected Western Balkan countries?

2. What role can agritourism play in diversifying tourism products and supporting year-round rural economic activity?

3. Which strategic marketing approaches can strengthen the competitiveness and off-season attractiveness of agritourism destinations?

The study contributes to the literature by integrating tourism seasonality, destination competitiveness, and experiential marketing within a comparative regional framework. It also aims to provide practical recommendations for agritourism operators and destination management organizations regarding product diversification, digital marketing, destination branding, and stakeholder collaboration. By positioning agritourism as a potential instrument for reducing seasonal dependence, the research offers insights into the development of more competitive, resilient, and sustainable rural tourism destinations in Albania and the wider Western Balkan region.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Destination Marketing and Tourism Competitiveness

Destination marketing plays a fundamental role in strengthening tourism competitiveness by connecting destination resources with visitor expectations, market demand, and differentiated tourism experiences. Buhalis (2000) conceptualizes tourism destinations as integrated products comprising attractions, accessibility, amenities, activities, and supporting services. Similarly, Ritchie and Crouch (2003) emphasize that sustainable destination competitiveness depends on the effective management of resources, stakeholder coordination, and long-term strategic positioning.

Destination branding represents an essential component of this process, particularly for emerging tourism economies seeking to differentiate themselves in increasingly competitive international markets. Pike and Page (2014) argue that destination marketing organizations contribute to competitiveness through brand development, market communication, and stakeholder collaboration. For rural destinations, branding strategies may strengthen

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associations with authenticity, agricultural heritage, gastronomy, and cultural identity, creating opportunities to attract visitors beyond traditional tourism seasons (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005; Morrison, 2019).

In the Western Balkans, destination marketing is particularly relevant because tourism products are distributed across coastal, mountainous, urban, and rural areas. The development of integrated destination brands may contribute to greater geographical diversification, while targeted promotional strategies can improve the visibility of less-established rural destinations (OECD, 2024a).

Agritourism and sustainable rural development

Agritourism is commonly understood as tourism activity directly connected to agricultural production and rural livelihoods. Phillip et al. (2010) distinguish agritourism according to the relationship between tourism experiences and working farms, while Streifeneder (2016) emphasizes agricultural authenticity as a defining characteristic. Agritourism therefore differs from broader rural tourism through its direct or indirect integration with farming activities.

From an economic perspective, agritourism contributes to diversification by enabling agricultural enterprises to generate additional revenues through accommodation, food services, recreational activities, and educational experiences. Tew and Barbieri (2012) identify economic diversification and non-economic motivations among agritourism entrepreneurs, while Barbieri (2013) highlights its potential contribution to economic, social, and environmental sustainability.

Agritourism may also strengthen territorial development through connections between local producers, hospitality providers, artisans, and tourism intermediaries. Saxena et al. (2007) emphasize the importance of integrated rural tourism networks in generating collective value from local resources. These relationships are particularly relevant to Albania, where agricultural production and rural heritage provide opportunities for differentiated tourism development (OECD, 2024a).

Experiential marketing and agritourism product differentiation

Experiential marketing provides an important theoretical foundation for understanding agritourism competitiveness. Pine and Gilmore (1999) argue that memorable experiences represent a distinct form of economic value, while Schmitt (1999) identifies sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and relational dimensions of consumer experiences.

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Within agritourism, experiential value emerges through visitor participation in agricultural activities, interaction with local producers, traditional cooking, food tasting, and cultural learning. Such experiences may strengthen destination differentiation by combining tangible agricultural products with authenticity and emotional engagement (Sidali et al., 2015).

Gastronomy represents an especially important component of experiential tourism. Everett and Aitchison (2008) demonstrate the relationship between food tourism and regional identity, while Sims (2009) emphasizes the role of local food in authentic and sustainable tourism experiences. For agritourism destinations, these characteristics provide opportunities to develop seasonal experiences associated with agricultural production cycles.

Digital marketing and rural tourism visibility

Digital transformation has significantly influenced tourism information search, destination selection, and consumer engagement. Xiang and Gretzel (2010) identify social media as an important component of online travel information searches, while Leung et al. (2013) highlights its role in tourism marketing, communication, and customer interaction.

For agritourism enterprises, digital marketing offers opportunities to overcome geographical isolation and limited promotional budgets through social media, online booking platforms, destination websites, digital storytelling, and user-generated content. Nevertheless, digital visibility alone does not guarantee improved tourism performance. Effective digital marketing requires clear market segmentation, differentiated value propositions, reliable booking channels, and consistency between promotional messages and visitor experiences (Buhalis, 2000; Morrison, 2019).

Tourism seasonality and year-round destination development

Tourism seasonality refers to the uneven distribution of tourism demand across different periods of the year. Butler (2001) associates' seasonality with natural and institutional factors, while Baum and Lundtorp (2001) highlight its economic and operational consequences for tourism enterprises and destinations.

Reducing excessive seasonal concentration requires the development of complementary tourism products and targeted market strategies. Agritourism offers potential opportunities through seasonal harvesting, gastronomic experiences, agricultural workshops, rural festivals, and educational activities. However, agricultural experiences are themselves influenced by seasonal production cycles, making strategic product diversification essential.

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The theoretical framework adopted in this study integrates five interrelated dimensions: destination marketing, agritourism diversification, experiential value creation, digital marketing capabilities, and seasonality management. Together, these dimensions provide a basis for examining how rural destinations may strengthen their attractiveness throughout the year, while recognizing that the relationship between marketing activities and actual visitor distribution requires empirical validation (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Pike & Page, 2014; Streifeneder, 2016).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study adopts a comparative, descriptive, and exploratory research design based on secondary data analysis. The methodological approach combines quantitative tourism indicators with qualitative documentary analysis of tourism policies, destination development strategies, and peer-reviewed academic literature.

Secondary-data research is appropriate for identifying patterns, contextual differences, and strategic relationships across tourism destinations without requiring primary data collection (Johnston, 2014). The study does not seek to establish causal effects between marketing strategies and tourism demand; rather, it evaluates the available evidence and develops theoretically informed strategic recommendations.

Country selection and data sources

Four Western Balkan countries were selected: Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Albania constitutes the principal case, while the other countries provide comparative perspectives based on differences in tourism specialization, geographical characteristics, and destination development models.

The analysis draws on official data and publications from the Albanian Institute of Statistics (INSTAT), Eurostat, the Statistical Office of Montenegro (MONSTAT), the State Statistical Office of North Macedonia, the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, and the OECD. Academic literature is used to interpret tourism development patterns and identify relevant marketing mechanisms.

The reference period is 2019-2024, allowing consideration of pre-pandemic tourism conditions, the disruption associated with COVID-19, and subsequent tourism recovery. Where directly comparable annual or monthly statistics are unavailable, the analysis relies on the latest identifiable observations and explicitly distinguishes different reporting years.

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Indicators and comparative analytical approach

The comparative analysis is organized around the following indicators:

Table 1. Research Indicators

Analytical dimension	Indicators	Purpose
Tourism development	International arrivals, accommodation arrivals, overnight stays	Assess tourism market scale and growth
Tourism seasonality	Monthly overnight stays, peak-season concentration	Examine temporal distribution of demand
Rural tourism potential	Agricultural resources, rural tourism products	Identify diversification opportunities
Destination marketing	Branding, digital promotion, product positioning	Assess marketing orientation
Institutional development	Tourism strategies, policy priorities, coordination mechanisms	Compare enabling conditions

Where harmonized monthly accommodation data are available, tourism seasonality can be assessed using the seasonal concentration ratio:

A higher value indicates greater concentration of registered accommodation demand during the three summer months. This indicator is suitable for comparative analysis when consistent statistical definitions and coverage are maintained. It does not, however, measure agritourism seasonality independently.

The documentary analysis applies thematic comparison across four dimensions: tourism diversification, agritourism development, destination marketing, and year-round tourism policy. Findings are interpreted through the theoretical framework developed in Section 2.

Methodological limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, official tourism statistics differ in their definitions, reporting coverage, and measurement procedures. Border arrivals, accommodation arrivals, and overnight stays are not interchangeable indicators. Second, agritourism-specific statistics are not consistently available across the selected countries, limiting direct measurement of its economic contribution. Third, documentary evidence concerning marketing

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policies does not establish the effectiveness of individual promotional activities. Finally, the descriptive and comparative design does not support causal inference. Accordingly, the findings are interpreted as evidence-based strategic insights rather than experimentally verified relationships.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: ALBANIA AND THE WESTERN BALKANS

Tourism development and market structure

The comparative analysis of Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia reveals different tourism development patterns, reflecting variations in geographical resources, tourism specialization, and domestic and international demand. Although the selected countries belong to the same regional context, their tourism industries differ in market scale, accommodation structure, and dependence on specific tourism products (OECD, 2024a; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003).

Table 2. Selected Tourism Indicators in the Western Balkans, 2024

Country	Reported arrivals	Overnight stays	Statistical basis
Albania	≈11.7 million	-	Foreign citizen border entries
Montenegro	2,606,854	15,594,299	Tourist accommodation, including individual accommodation
North Macedonia	1,260,425	≈3.3 million	Registered tourists and overnight stays
Serbia	4,432,751	≈12.7 million	Registered accommodation tourists and overnight stays

Sources: Ministry of Tourism and Environment (2025); MONSTAT (2025); State Statistical Office of North Macedonia (2025); Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2025). North Macedonia's overnight-stay figure is rounded. Albania's border-entry measure is not directly comparable with accommodation arrivals in the other countries.

Montenegro's tourism sector demonstrates a particularly high concentration in coastal destinations. According to MONSTAT (2025), seaside resorts accounted for 93.8% of all recorded tourist overnight stays in 2024. This concentration illustrates the importance of coastal tourism to the national market and provides a strong rationale for developing complementary inland tourism experiences.

In contrast, Serbia's registered tourism market includes substantial domestic and international visitor segments. The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2025) reported

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approximately 4.43 million tourist arrivals in 2024, suggesting a different market structure from destinations whose international positioning depends primarily on summer coastal tourism.

North Macedonia recorded approximately 1.26 million tourists in 2024, of whom 66% were international visitors (State Statistical Office of North Macedonia, 2025). Its tourism offer incorporates lake, cultural, mountain, and rural attractions, providing opportunities for experience-based destination differentiation.

For Albania, the growth in foreign citizen arrivals indicates increasing international visibility. However, the absence of a directly comparable accommodation-based indicator in Table 2 prevents a statistically valid ranking of Albania against the other countries based on these figures alone.

Tourism seasonality and agritourism diversification

Tourism seasonality represents a central issue for destination competitiveness because fluctuations in visitor demand influence employment, business profitability, and infrastructure utilization (Baum & Lundtorp, 2001; Butler, 2001).

The regional comparison suggests different structural exposures to seasonality. Montenegro's concentration of overnight stays in seaside resorts indicates a strong dependence on coastal tourism products, although this annual geographical indicator does not independently establish the proportion of demand occurring during summer months. Albania faces similar strategic concerns due to the prominence of coastal tourism, while Serbia and North Macedonia possess different combinations of tourism resources that may support alternative seasonal demand patterns (OECD, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c).

Agritourism may contribute to destination diversification by connecting tourism experiences with agricultural production cycles. Gastronomic activities, harvesting experiences, rural cultural events, and agricultural education can potentially create tourism motivations across different periods of the year (Everett & Aitchison, 2008; Sidali et al., 2015; Sims, 2009).

Nevertheless, the available annual figures do not establish that agritourism has already reduced tourism seasonality. Such a conclusion would require comparable monthly accommodation data and, preferably, agritourism-specific visitor or booking statistics.

Tourism policies and marketing orientation

The OECD (2024a) identifies tourism governance, destination management, infrastructure, and sustainability as important dimensions of competitiveness across the Western Balkans. However, the strategic relevance of these dimensions differs according to national tourism structures.

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Albania's agritourism policy framework recognizes opportunities to connect agricultural production with rural tourism development (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development & Ministry of Tourism and Environment, 2024). Montenegro's high concentration of coastal overnight stays suggests opportunities for complementary inland destination positioning. North Macedonia's combination of natural and cultural resources provides a basis for thematic tourism development, while Serbia's substantial domestic tourism market may support regional and short-stay tourism products.

From a marketing perspective, these differences indicate that year-round agritourism strategies should be adapted to national and local market conditions rather than applying a uniform regional promotional model (Buhalis, 2000; Pike & Page, 2014).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis identifies three important findings concerning tourism development and the strategic potential of agritourism in the Western Balkans.

First, tourism market expansion does not necessarily imply a reduction in seasonality. Albania's rapid growth in foreign visitor arrivals demonstrates increasing international visibility, but this indicator alone cannot establish whether demand has become more evenly distributed throughout the year. Montenegro provides particularly clear evidence of geographical concentration, with 93.8% of overnight stays recorded in seaside resorts in 2024 (MONSTAT, 2025). These findings support the argument that destination competitiveness requires attention to tourism diversification and resource management rather than visitor growth alone (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003).

Second, differences in domestic and international tourism demand create opportunities for differentiated marketing strategies. In Serbia, domestic tourists accounted for approximately 52% of registered overnight stays in 2024, compared with 48% for international tourists (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2025). This contrasts with Montenegro, where foreign tourists generated 96.1% of overnight stays (MONSTAT, 2025). These differences suggest that domestic short-break tourism and international experiential tourism may require distinct marketing approaches.

Third, agritourism provides opportunities for connecting rural economic activities with tourism product diversification. Previous studies emphasize its contribution to agricultural entrepreneurship, experiential value creation, and local economic linkages (Barbieri, 2013; Phillip et al., 2010; Tew & Barbieri, 2012). For Albania, this suggests opportunities to integrate gastronomy, agricultural activities, cultural heritage, and rural hospitality into differentiated visitor experiences.

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The findings are consistent with experiential marketing theory, which emphasizes memorable customer experiences as a source of competitive differentiation (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999). They also reinforce the importance of integrated destination management and stakeholder coordination (Buhalis, 2000; Pike & Page, 2014).

However, the comparative evidence does not establish a causal relationship between agritourism promotion and reduced tourism seasonality. Rather, it identifies strategic opportunities that could be tested through future enterprise-level research and monthly tourism demand analysis.

STRATEGIC MARKETING FRAMEWORK FOR YEAR-ROUND AGRITOURISM

Based on the theoretical literature and comparative evidence, this study proposes an integrated strategic marketing framework organized around four interconnected dimensions.

Market segmentation and targeting. Agritourism enterprises should distinguish between domestic weekend travelers, international experiential tourists, gastronomy-oriented visitors, educational groups, and nature-based tourism segments. Differentiated targeting may improve promotional efficiency by aligning tourism experiences with visitor motivations and travel periods (Dolnicar, 2008; Morrison, 2019).

Seasonal product diversification. Agritourism offerings should be organized around the agricultural calendar, transforming seasonal production activities into marketable tourism experiences. Spring agricultural workshops, summer rural recreation, autumn harvesting and wine-related activities, and winter gastronomy experiences represent potential opportunities for developing complementary products (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Sidali et al., 2015).

Digital marketing and destination branding. Rural destinations should strengthen digital visibility through coordinated destination websites, social media storytelling, online booking channels, and seasonal promotional campaigns. Marketing messages should communicate authentic experiences and the specific value of visiting during different periods of the year (Leung et al., 2013; Pike & Page, 2014; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

Territorial collaboration and integrated destination management. Cooperation among agricultural producers, accommodation establishments, restaurants, municipalities, and destination management organizations can support the development of thematic tourism routes, joint packages, and coordinated promotional initiatives (Buhalis, 2000; Saxena et al., 2007).

The framework proposes that strategic marketing may influence year-round agritourism performance through improved destination visibility, stronger experiential differentiation, and greater accessibility of tourism products. Its effectiveness should be assessed through

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longitudinal indicators, including monthly visitor arrivals, overnight stays, occupancy rates, tourism expenditure, and repeat visitation.

Table 3. Proposed Strategic Marketing Framework for Year-Round Agritourism

Strategic dimension	Proposed actions	Performance indicators
Market segmentation	Domestic and international targeting	Off-season bookings by segment
Product diversification	Seasonal agricultural and gastronomic experiences	Number of bookable seasonal products
Digital marketing	Targeted campaigns and online distribution	Conversion rate, direct bookings
Destination branding	Authenticity-based rural positioning	Destination awareness, visitor interest
Territorial collaboration	Joint routes and tourism packages	Partner participation, package sales

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

From a managerial perspective, the findings suggest that Albanian agritourism enterprises should adopt a more systematic and market-oriented approach to reducing seasonal demand fluctuations. Managers should prioritize differentiated visitor experiences, seasonal product development, digital communication, and targeted market segmentation rather than relying exclusively on accommodation and traditional gastronomy. In practical terms, agritourism operators could develop experience-based offerings linked to agricultural calendars, including harvesting activities, farm-to-table workshops, traditional food preparation, local wine and olive oil experiences, and educational visits that attract visitors during traditionally low-demand periods. Furthermore, the development of thematic packages combining gastronomy, cultural heritage, nature-based activities, and rural accommodation could encourage longer stays and strengthen destination attractiveness throughout the year.

Digital marketing strategies should focus on communicating the distinctive value of these experiences through storytelling, social media engagement, online booking platforms, and targeted promotional campaigns directed toward domestic tourists, regional visitors, families, and special-interest market segments. Collaboration among agritourism enterprises, local producers, tour operators, and destination management organizations could also facilitate joint promotional initiatives, cross-selling opportunities, and integrated rural tourism itineraries. At the operational level, managers should monitor indicators such as seasonal occupancy rates, visitor expenditure, booking patterns, customer satisfaction, and digital engagement to evaluate marketing effectiveness and adjust their offerings accordingly. These managerial practices

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could contribute to improved market positioning, diversified revenue opportunities, stronger local value chains, and greater business resilience beyond the traditional tourism season.

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