

Analysis of the tourism quality of the Durres Region under the perspective of tourism stakeholders

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the tourist offer of the Durres Region from the perspective of tourism stakeholders, in accordance with the objectives set in the Albanian National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development 2019-2023 (Ministry of Tourism and Environment, 2018). The research method employed is qualitative, based on a questionnaire in the form of a semi-structured interview addressed to private operators, public operators, donors, and NGOs related to the sector, as well as training and educational institutions. The findings of the paper highlight the crucial importance of cooperation among the various operators in the tourism sector. They also point out the obligation of the local government to better discharge their duties concerning the management of public works, preparation of the tourist offers, organizing the inventory of tourism resources of the region, as well as the establishment and branding of the Durres Region as a tourist destination. For the private operators, the findings emphasize the need to improve the quality of service and focus a lot more on training and development of human resources.

Keywords: Tourism, Tourist offer, Stakeholder, Durres Region

1. Introduction

Today, the tourism industry is one of the most critical sectors of the Albanian economy. The favorable geographical position, the Mediterranean climate, the long coastline from Velipoja in the north to Saranda in the south, the Alps, and the lakes are known all over the Balkans for their unique features, as well as the rich cultural and historical heritage constitute an essential foundation for the development of tourism in Albania. In fact, through innovative entrepreneurship and strategic investments, tourism is vitalizing the country's economy.

Tourism's contribution to sustainable development is connected to three dimensions: the generation of trade, the creation of jobs, and the creation of essential capacities to promote the advantages of environmental conservation and cultural diversity.

Durres Region, with an area of 766 square kilometers and a population of 468 467 inhabitants (Prefecture of Durres, 2022), is located at the center of the Albanian

coastline, has a favorable geographical position since it serves as the country's central connecting hub for all types of transport. The Mother Teresa Tirana International Airport, the only international airport in Albania, is located in Rinas, which is in the Municipality of Kruja, part of the Durres Region. On the other hand, the Port of Durres is the largest port in the country and a vital gateway for international trade (Prefecture of Durres, 2022). The Durres Region harmonizes and interlaces sun and sea tourism, agro-tourism, and mountain tourism with the rich heritage of thousands of years of civilization and development of the territory. A large number of objects located in the Durres Region are classified as tourism resources and cultural monuments. They include the Castle of Durres, the Castle of Ishmi, the Castle of Skanderbeg, the Castle of Kruja, the Amphitheatre of Durres, the Basilica of Arapaj, the Church of Saint Anthony of Padua, the Bazaar of Kruja, etc. The Durres Region also houses the Archaeological Museum of Durres, the Ethnographic Museum of Durres, the Scanderbeg National Museum of Kruja, the Ethnographic Museum of Kruja, the King Zog's Villa in Durres, etc.

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Article info: Research Article

Received: 11 August 2022

Received in revised form: 28 September 2022

Accepted: 16 October 2022

Ethics committee approval:

*All responsibility belongs to the researcher.

This research is part of the project "Design of tourist offer based on the perspective of sustainable development (Case study: Durres and Vlora Regions)", supported by the Albanian Agency for Scientific Research and Innovation.

To cite this article: Mbrica, A., Braholli, A., Qosja, E., & Licaj, B. (2023). Analysis of the tourism quality of the Durres Region under the perspective of tourism stakeholders. *Journal of Tourism Theory and Research*, 9 (1), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.24288/jttr.1160950>

The Durres Region is also distinguished by a vast number of natural monuments, such as the Cape of Rodon, the Cliffs of Rodon, the Beach of Kallmi, the Beach of Shenpjetri, the Queen Mother Fountain in Kruja, the Sari Salltik Cave in the Mountain of Kruja, the Forest of Kolndrekajve, the Black Pine in Qafe-Shtame, etc. (Prefecture of Durres, 2022).

One of the biggest problems of the tourism sector in Albania, especially for the operators conducting such activity along the coast, is its seasonality and the few days the tourists stay. This paper is based on the project "Design of tourist offer based on the perspective of sustainable development (Case study: Durres and Vlora Region)" supported by the Albanian Agency for Scientific Research and Innovation and is in line with the objectives of the Albanian National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development 2019-2023 (Ministry of Tourism and Environment, 2018). The paper is based on primary and secondary research, where special consideration is also given to the laws related to the sector, such as law no. 7764, dated 2.11.1993, "On foreign investments" (Assembly of Albania, 2018), law no. 93/2015 "On tourism" (Assembly of Albania, 2015), law no. 27/2018 "On cultural heritage and museums" (Ministry of Culture, 2018), etc.

This research aims to analyze the tourist offer of the Durres Region from the tourism stakeholders' point of view. The research question is: What do the tourism sector stakeholders think of the tourist offer of the Durres Region? The additional question is: What are the reasons for tourists/vacationers staying for a small number of days only?

In this research, the qualitative methodology is used. It is based on a questionnaire in the form of a semi-structured interview. The questionnaire was designed with the definition of the tourist offer in mind, and it retains the same bulk of questions for all subjects directed to but has one or two different ones depending on the operator interviewed: private, public, donor, or non-profit organization (NGO), and education-training institution in the sector. A total of 31 interviews were conducted: 16 private operators, seven public operators, six donors and NGOs, and two educational institutions.

The findings of the paper, in addition to highlighting the problems of the sector, emphasize the crucial importance of cooperation among operators, as well as the need for the local government to discharge better their duties concerning the preparation of the tourist offer and to organize the inventory of tourism resources of the region. The findings also emphasize the necessity to improve service quality, focus on human resources, and establish and brand the Durres Region as a tourist destination.

2. Literature review

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, tourism refers to the practice of travel for recreation, directing or managing tourists, tourist promotion or encouragement, and

tourist accommodation. Another definition of tourism is spending time away from home in pursuit of recreation, relaxation, and pleasure while utilizing the commercial provision of services. Tourism is a product of the arrangements of modern society, beginning in Western Europe in the 17th century, although it has appeared since classical antiquity. At the beginning of the 21st century, international tourism has become one of the most important economic activities in the world, and its influence is becoming increasingly visible from the Arctic to the Antarctic.

Tourism is the largest industry in the world, and, considering the size of its growth, we can safely state that it is one of the great engines for economic development. In 2013, tourism represented 20% of the employment created worldwide. Based on the Travel and Tourism Economic Impact Report 2018 of the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), tourism employs 319 million people, which is expected to increase to 421 million by 2029 (WTTC, 2018). In 2019, 1.5 billion tourists were registered, and the growth needs to be managed responsibly to make the most out of tourism opportunities for communities worldwide (UNWTO, 2020). Tourism provides a lot of value to the communities, and almost everyone benefits directly or indirectly.

Tourism has the potential to contribute, directly or indirectly, to all the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In particular, it contributes towards achieving SDG 8, SDG 12, and SDG 14 on inclusive and sustainable economic growth, sustainable consumption and production, and sustainable use of oceans and marine resources. Sustainable tourism is also strongly positioned in the United Nations 2030 Agenda. However, achieving this agenda requires a clear implementation framework, funding, and adequate investment in technology, infrastructure, and human resources.

There is often some confusion in tourism, travel, and hospitality. While tourism is the overarching umbrella term for the activities and the industry creating the tourist experience, travel is defined as the activity of moving between different locations, often for any purpose, but more for leisure and recreation. On the other hand, hospitality is "the business of helping people to feel welcome and relaxed and to enjoy themselves" (Westcott and Anderson, 2021: 3).

As in any other market, the tourism market economy is determined by supply and demand. The tourist offer is a combination of services and products presented for consideration to a customer who wants to make a tourist trip (Centro Europeo de Postgrado, n.d.). Therefore, the tourist offer includes everything that can be used to satisfy the tourist demand: climate, landscape, hotels, restaurants, entertainment facilities, etc. The tourist offer means "quality accommodation" and covers various elements, fun activities, and good service (Avramoski and Ismaili, 2012).

The factors forming a complex tourist offer consist of three groups of essential factors: a) attractive or alluring factors are fundamental to attracting potential tourists, b)

communication or transport factors are factors that enable us to familiarize potential tourists with the advantages of a destination (promotion), the arrival of tourists (means of transport and development of transport connections) and market communication, c) receptive factors are factors that enable stay in a certain destination (hotels, motels, campsites, and other offer holders) and ensure that attractive factors are highlighted (Rudancic et al., 2020).

The object of the tourist offer is the consumer, which in this case is the tourist. The content of the tourist offer also depends on the entities that produce and receive it. Therefore, during the planning and development of a package of services, it is necessary to identify the client's real needs and target the offer for these needs. The tourist offer cannot be examined before it is consumed; to do this, it is necessary to move to different places.

It is necessary to emphasize that the development of specific tourist destinations must be adapted to the goals of the development plans of local authorities and tourism boards. It is essential to understand the needs of the local communities to stimulate the overall economic development of all the local communities in harmony with the development and growth of tourism itself. Bearing this in mind, tourism development must be planned to avoid or reduce the negative consequences, such as overcapacity, noise, water pollution, land pollution or air pollution, and waste disposal (Bruza et al., 2020).

The components of the tourist offer are as follows: attractions (Iaromenko, 2021), which are the places the tourists perceive as the satisfaction of their leisure-oriented needs; transportation, which are the modes of commuting; intermediaries, which are the mediators; destination, which is the place the tourists visit; activities, which are all events the tourists are interested in engaging in (Camilleri, 2018).

3. Methodology

Due to its geographical position-being very close to Tirana and the international airport, as well as offering easy access for the Albanians living in Kosovo and for visitors from North Macedonia and Serbia- the Durres Region is preferred during the second and the third quarter of the year (Institute of Statistics, 2021). Tourism in the Durres Region is characterized mainly by short trips, which in Albania make up about 68.8% of all trips and refer to a stay of up to three nights (Institute of Statistics, 2021). Based on the Travel and Vacation: Tourism Survey 2019, the throughout the year distribution of trips to Durres Region as compared to the whole of Albania is as follows: the first quarter stands at 5.2%, the second quarter at 23.5%, the third quarter at 25.2%, and the fourth quarter stands at 5.3%. The Durres Region seems to have a more extended tourist season than other regions, except the capital city of Tirana. During the second quarter of the year, the Durres Region has the highest concentration of vacationers at the national level, even though they mainly stay on weekends (Institute of Statistics, 2021).

Suppose we refer to seasonality's objectives of the Albanian National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development 2019-2023 (Ministry of Tourism and Environment, 2018). In that case, the small number of days of stay of tourists, the quality of service, and the management of destinations constitute the primary concern of the Albanian government. Its interventions are aimed precisely at improving these factors.

Based on the above, this paper aims to analyze the Durres Region's tourist offer from the tourism stakeholders' point of view. According to law no. 93/2015 "On tourism" (Assembly of Albania, 2015), the tourist offer for each region is to be compiled by the Regional Council, while the promotion is the task of the National Tourism Agency and the Ministry of Tourism and Environment.

This research aims to analyze the tourist offer of the Durres Region from the tourism stakeholders' point of view. The research question is: What do the tourism sector stakeholders think of the tourist offer of the Durres Region? The additional question is: What are the reasons for tourists/vacationers staying for a small number of days only?

The methodology used in this research is the qualitative methodology, and the instrument used is a questionnaire in the form of a semi-structured interview, which retains the same bulk of questions for all subjects but has one or two different ones depending on the operator interviewed: private, public, donor or NGOs, and education-training institution in the sector. The distribution was based on a contact database provided by the authors of this paper. The sample consists of 31 entities located in the Durres Region: (i) private operators, (ii) public operators, (iii) donors and associations, and (iv) educational and training institutions. The questionnaire was distributed and collected during the November - December 2021 period.

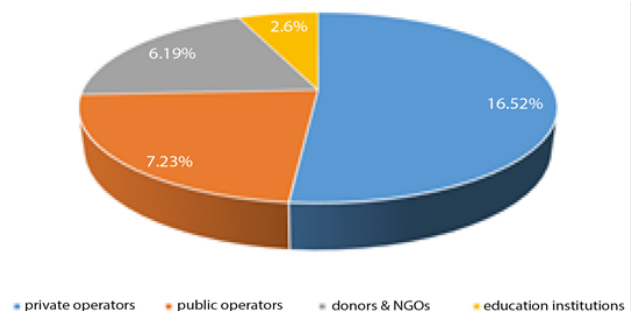


Fig. 1. Composition of the sample of respondents

The semi-structured interview, which was conducted with stakeholders of the tourism sector, contains the following questions: What is your opinion about the tourist offer of the Durres Region? What is your idea about why tourists stay on limited days? Is there a difference between Albanian and foreign tourists? Do you keep regular statistics of visitors (tourists)? If so, what percentage of them return? How many of them are foreigners, and how many are Albanians? Are there any tourism information centers in your region?

Do you think you have sufficient human capacities to cover the tourist offer? In your opinion, are there any local and central policies supporting the enrichment of the tourist offer and the creation of tourist destinations? What are the most acute problems of tour operators that affect the tourist offer? Do you engage in any form of cooperation with other stakeholders in the tourism industry? If so, how does this cooperation affect the tourist offer? How do you assess your collaboration with the education sector?

4. Findings

The data collected through interviews was processed based on the definition of the tourist offer, the components it is made up of, and based on law no. 93/2015 “On tourism” (Assembly of Albania, 2015).

4.1. Evaluation of the tourist offer of the Durres Region

The assessment of the tourist offer of the Durres Region is based on the SWOT analysis. Therefore, the weaknesses and strengths of the tourist offer of the Durres Region were identified, as well as the threats and opportunities related to the external environment (Table 1).

Table 1. Evaluation of the tourist offer of the Durres Region

Weaknesses	Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is no tourist product that offers exploration of the mountains, the sea, culture, archeology, gastronomy, etc., that extends throughout the year and in accordance with the law no. 93/2015 “On tourism” • Poor offer at the regional level; • There is a gap between the demands of tourists and the offer of the tourism businesses and the municipalities of the Durres Region regarding the preparations for the tourism season; • Seasonal tourism, limited to sea and sun tourism • Most of the hotels/restaurants are closed for six months • During the June-August period, there are difficulties in managing the flow of tourists • The construction standards are still vague, even after the release of the categorization of these structures based on their construction and services they offer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proximity to Tirana, the airport and to the Durres port • Rich offer regarding the number of beds • The coastal areas at Shkembi i Kavajes, the Bay of Lalzi and Hamallaj count dozens of two-star, three-star and four-star large resorts and other accommodation structures • Opening of five-star hotels that are part of well-known international brands; • Cooperation with tourist agencies through advance contracts and operation of hotels through booking and OTA platforms are diversifying the countries from which tourists come (Northern Europe countries, Belarus, Russia, Poland, Czechia, Moldova, etc.) • Improved standards related to sea and sun tourism services (beaches, HoReCa services, extra activities during the summer period)
Threats	Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low level of law enforcement • Chaotic urban planning and development • Infrastructure problems, mostly related to urban planning, road traffic, potable water supply, parking spaces • Environmental management and especially urban waste management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designing the tourist offer in cooperation with the Regional Council • Compilation of an inventory of the main tourism resources of the local government unit by the Regional Council • Coordination of local government work with the tourism sector related to waste management, environmental protection, allocation of private beaches, improvement and development of infrastructure • Coordinated efforts of central government, local government and tourism operators in relation to information and advertising campaigns • Various projects for the establishment of organizations for destination management

4.3. Statistics for the sector in the Durres Region

Regarding all the indicators and features that the Durres Region embodies, the local government units process several statistics, mainly sourced from the data collected at the

4.2. Reasons for the short stay of Albanian and foreign tourists

The subjects interviewed state that tourists stay only for a few days in the Durres Region because of its proximity to Tirana, the poor offer of product variety, and the fact that Durres is mainly considered a weekend destination. Among the reasons for the present situation also include the lack of coordination among stakeholders, the lack of a chain of experience for the tourists, which could lead to more extended periods of stay, the lack of additional tourist activities, and the lack of guides or information about tourist areas.

Most of the accommodation structures in the region are not designed to provide green and relaxing entertaining spaces, and the quality and culture of service, as well as prices, vary in a great range. The respondents also point out the high level of pollution of the environment, especially the polluted sea and beaches. On the other hand, many tourists are one-time customers, so they try to visit as many places as possible. About this attitude, the subjects interviewed also state that the behavior of both foreigners and Albanian visitors is the same.

border crossing points (Port of Durres and Mother Teresa Tirana International Airport). For these purposes, the data collected from the registers of guests that, by law, every hotel, guesthouse, or similar accommodation structure must maintain is also used. The Municipality of Durres possesses

such statistics, but they mainly come from the data collected at the Port of Durres, which represent general information related to the arrivals and departures of tourists, but not their destination/destinations.

Private operators, although by law are required to maintain the register of guests, are usually not very diligent, and their data is controversial due to informality. On top of that, the non-declaration of the accommodation activity conducted by private residences is a widespread phenomenon.

4.4. Tourist information offices in the region

Although the possibilities of accessing information today are endless, tourist information remains problematic due to difficulties with the address system and road signs. During the interviews with the private operators, it turned out that they do not have accurate information about the tourist information offices in the region. While the public operators state that there are two such information offices, one at the Port of Durres ferry terminal and one near the Palace of Culture in the city of Durres, they are actually not functional and therefore do not serve tourists.

With funding allocated by the National Tourism Agency, three static info points have been provided, which have a map of the city of Durres with its central locations and destinations. However, the information is old, and it is not in English.

4.5. Human capacities covering the tourist offer

Human resources are one of the biggest problems for businesses at the global, European, and Albanian levels. All four stakeholders interviewed admit to the crisis the sector is facing, and for 2022 it seems that the situation will become even more challenging (Syri, 2022).

The problem in human resources is related to a series of social and economic phenomena accumulated over the years. Since 2017, Albania has been going through a very high emigration rate. During the last two years, the trend has become even bolder because of the easier conditions applied by Germany and Austria for granting work permits to immigrants (Institute of Statistics, 2021; Lapsi, 2022). Another critical factor is the seasonality of the coastal tourism sector, which, on the one hand, makes it very difficult to find staff, and, on the other hand, the quality of human resources in this sector remains questionable.

The job offer in the tourism sector is much lower than the business demand for human resources. On top of that, the respondents interviewed state that the continued education and training of the employees in the tourism industry continues to remain problematic. Large accommodation structures and four-star or five-star hotels have employed international staff.

The tourism sector also suffers from a lack of management staff, but there is also a lack of managerial capacity to absorb tourism workers and motivate or grow them

professionally. The interviewed stakeholders conclude that the human resources in the sector are still far from what tourists/vacationers deserve.

4.6. Local and central policies in support of enriching the tourist offers and creation of tourist destinations

During the interviews, the operators stated that the laws that support the creation and enrichment of tourist offers and the creation of tourist destinations exist. Still, their implementation leaves much to be desired, perhaps due to mismanagement or lack of cooperation in the sector, lack of vision, bureaucracy, and clientelism.

Based on law no. 93/2015 "On tourism" (Assembly of Albania, 2015), the Regional Council must formulate the tourist offer for the whole region. However, the process shows problems and produces little outcome due to the lack of structures and expertise and the lack of responsibility in fulfilling an obligation arising from the law.

The respondents interviewed state that the municipalities of the Durres Region are still far from taking a proactive and cooperative role with the tourism sector from a developmental point of view. Municipalities mostly see businesses in the industry as subjects to collect taxes from or impose fines mainly during the summer season rather than as essential contributors to the local and national economy.

The respondents point out that the institutions or agencies responsible for tourism promote destinations without any information, regardless of the conditions on the ground. Moreover, due to political clientelism, participation in international tourism fairs encourages sellers (operators), not tourist products or destinations.

4.7. Problems of tour operators that affect the tourist offer

The subjects interviewed state that there are several problems faced by the business operators in the tourism sector that impact the tourist offer, such as culture and quality of service; difficulty in finding staff; lack of qualified human resources either at the management level or in operational roles; seasonality; lack of cooperation of operators with each other; prices varying in a great range depending on the type of tourist; quality-price ratio; entrepreneurial mind-set; discrepancies between what is advertised and what is provided; lack of connections with financing channels, such as the national support schemes (Agency for Agricultural and Rural Development or EU Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance for Rural Development) or other channels (this mainly for businesses in rural areas); investment quality and limited accommodation capacities; lack of diversity of services; hospitality infrastructure.

The tourist offer of the Durres Region is also affected by a number of environmental factors in which this offer is created and operates, such as: lack of services provided by the local and central government: potable water supply; cleaning of the city/beaches/sea; road infrastructure;

mismanagement of waste; maintenance of public spaces; measures prior to the start of the tourist season by the municipalities; lack of public transport; lack of road signs; continuous checks and controls by the tax administration throughout the season; land ownership; informality; constructions without any criteria or plan; urban chaos; lack of sustainable tourism development strategies at the municipal or regional level; lack of destination branding; lack of standardization of accommodation structures; lack of a calendar of cultural activities in the central municipalities; lack of marketing and public relations campaigns for the city/region directed to the foreign and local tourists; lack of attractions along the coastline and in the city; lack of infrastructure in the most essential material and non-material cultural monuments; lack of tourist information centers; delays in granting permission for private beaches.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The goal set in this paper, which was to analyze the tourist offer of the Durres Region from the tourism stakeholders' point of view, was made possible through the use of a qualitative methodology based on a questionnaire in the form of a semi-structured interview, on a variety of literature sources and concepts related to the tourist offer, tourism product and destination in tourism. A total of 31 subjects were interviewed, of which 16 are private operators, seven are public operators, six are donors and associations, and two are educational institutions. The tourism sector in Albania is new in terms of experience, and its chaotic development reflects the evolving entrepreneurial mindset, the lack of vision of governments to design and implement strategies aimed at creating a sustainable sector, the problems of local administration, and the lack of cooperation among stakeholders.

By the law regulating all tourism activities enacted in 2015, the Regional Council is responsible for preparing the inventory of the leading tourism resources of the local government unit. Still, the study showed that this process does not happen due to a lack of expertise, vision, or public accountability. Meanwhile, the region's municipalities continue to show incompetence in managing public works in function to the tourist season and in managing problems related to environmental pollution, waste management, lack of maintenance of public spaces, 24-hour potable water supply, etc.

Overlapping activities between the central and local government bodies, little focus on the tourist offer, cooperation among the operators, and promoting the tourist product is easily identified problems. Lack of destination branding, lack of a calendar of artistic and cultural activities, and absence of and dysfunctionality of tourist information offices are also related shortcomings. The entrepreneurial mindset is, however, evolving. The sector is new in terms of experience, and problems in communication and cooperation among stakeholders exist. That is reflected in the lack of coordination between the local government bodies and

business operators and the lack of coordination regarding marketing efforts.

The difficulties of business operators in finding qualified human resources, but, above all, in keeping them, and the lack of employee motivation to work in this sector due to a complexity of factors that may or may not depend on the operators, which also includes its seasonality, as well as the lack of a law protecting seasonal workers only add to the many problems faced by the tourism sector in the Durres Region. Questionable approaches to the overall quality, the quality-price ratio, and the quality of accommodation remain evident.

5.1. Recommendations

Central and local government institutions must do their share in formulating, supporting, and promoting the tourist offer of each region, discharging their responsibilities by the laws regulating tourism activities. The Regional Council must record and create an inventory of the leading tourism resources of the region, as well as formulate the tourist offer of the Durres Region. The National Tourism Agency should take on the responsibility of promoting the tourist offer in cooperation with private operators. Municipalities should also conceive and budget all the support needed for the sector through investments. Meanwhile, the local and central policies should focus more on developing and improving infrastructure in tourist areas.

It is also required a change of mentality for the cooperation among the operators themselves and between them and the local government; the promotion of private strategic investments and the attraction of well-known international brands in hospitality and tourism; the development of new methodologies for the assessment, standardization, certification, and classification of services related to tourism and tourism operators; consolidation and development of tourism products, as well as re-orientation of promotion towards tourism potentials, branding of destinations; the creation of TID/BID (Tourist Improvement District and Business Improvement District); a public-private partnership for the development of tourism and business areas; keeping statistics and registering the declarations of tourists at the border crossing points regarding the reasons for the trip, maintaining the registers of guests by the law; formalization of family residences, etc. However, maybe the most important of all is the fight against informality.

Increasing the number of days the tourists stay can be achieved through designing consistent policies and strategies at the macro level for several years that would uniformly impact the sector to enable recognition and competition with the countries of the region; the study of consumer behavior models for the local tourists, for those from Albanian-speaking countries and those from other countries; emotional tourism, which in the case of Albania means tourists from Kosovo and emigrant tourists, who continue to contribute to this sector of the economy.

The issue of human resources in the sector requires an approach both from within the businesses and from the local government bodies. The service's quality must be improved to meet international standards and make tourism entrepreneurship competitive with the region. The protection of seasonal employees by law is critical; meanwhile, within businesses, one should think about continuous motivation and training schemes for human resources.

The Durres Region should expand the tourism season so that it is not based only on sun and sea tourism. The short distance of this region from Tirana and the Albanian-speaking countries should lead the operators to design the appropriate tourist packages and to have year-round tourism, where the tours are also related to culture, tradition, religion, etc.

Author contribution statements

Authors contributed equally to the design and implementation of the research, to the analysis of the results and to the writing of the manuscript.

Disclosure statement

No potential competing interest was reported by the authors.

Ethics committee approval

All responsibility belongs to the researcher. This research is part of the project "Design of tourist offer based on the perspective of sustainable development (Case study: Durres and Vlora Regions)", supported by the Albanian Agency for Scientific Research and Innovation

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