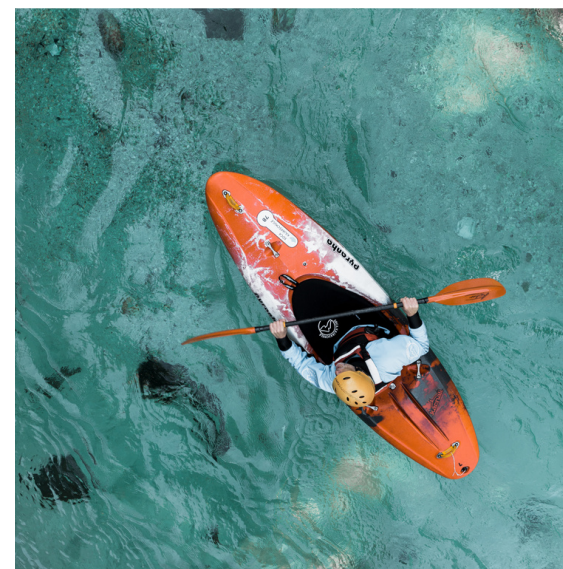
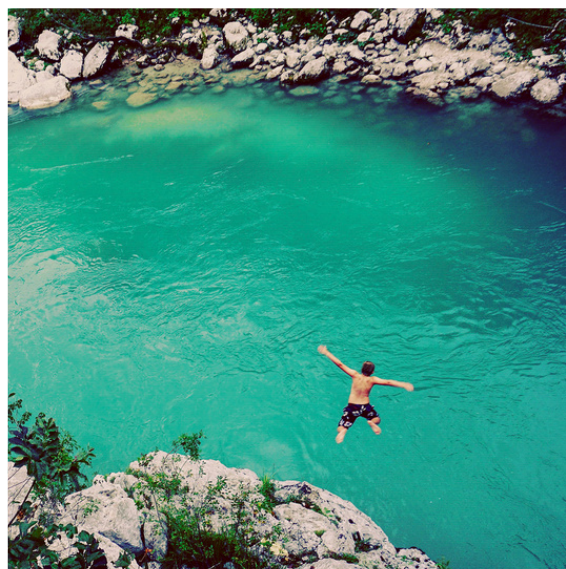


ALBANIA'S OPPORTUNITY in Sustainable Tourism:

Growing tourism that bring positive impacts for the environment, local communities and culture, jobs and livelihoods.

Author: Gavin Anderson



This document has been produced by RisiAlbania. Risi is a youth employment project of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC, implemented by Helvetas and Partners Albania for Change and Development. The views and conclusions contained here do not necessarily reflect neither those of the Swiss Government nor the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC.

DRAFT NATIONAL TOURISM STRATEGY 2024-2030 (OCTOBER 2024)*

‘Over recent years, sustainability has become a key factor in shaping tourism development. The new tourism development in Albania should adhere to sustainable practices... Albania must establish a national framework for sustainable development... to guide subsequent development projects and to align them with the principles of sustainability.’

Draft National Tourism Strategy 2024-2030 (October 2024)

‘Sustainable tourism’ has been highlighted as key objective in the draft National Tourism Strategy published for public consultation in October 2024 with ‘community-based tourism’, tourism product development and diversification seen as key challenges for the growth in tourism in Albania. The paper will explain what sustainable tourism is, why it is important to Albania, who the main actors are to grow sustainable tourism, why local and community involvement is critical, and detail some of the approaches that could be used to develop sustainable tourism.

BUILDING ON EXPERIENCE IN SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN ALBANIA

To realise this strategic vision for a sustainable tourism sector, there needs to be a common understanding of what Sustainable Tourism means and to build on practical experience. The Swiss Development Cooperation funded RisiAlbania project, worked for 7 years from 2017 to 2024 focusing strongly on sustainable tourism development. This work included partnering with 20 national tour operators, and local Destination Management Organisations – DMOs (Visit Gjirokastra and Visit Saranda) to diversify services and products with a particular focus on authentic local tourism experiences, opening up new rural locations, and eco-tourism. This project tested approaches to develop sustainable tourism products, explored the international demand from tourists and international travel industry for these products, developed an understanding of how to work with local, small and family-owned businesses to develop local tourism, and appraised the receptiveness of local communities to tourism that involved them in authentic experiences around cuisine, culture and tradition. RisiAlbania also worked on linking Albanian tourism businesses to the standards and certification of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC).

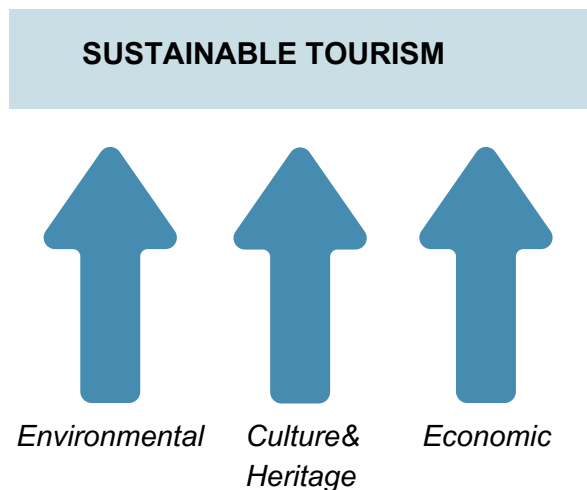
This paper is therefore drawing from this rich experience to provide insights for the future development of sustainable tourism in Albania.

*This material considers the developments of the sector until December 2024, during which the national strategy was in the process of public consultation.

WHAT IS SUSTAINABLE TOURISM?

Sustainable tourism is a globally recognised and increasingly adopted term for tourism that aims to reduce negative benefits and increase positive benefits in 3 key areas.

- 1) Environmental:** The natural environment, wildlife, plants and contribution to factors relating to global warming.
- 2) Culture and heritage:** Built heritage, intangible culture (e.g. music, dance, folklore), cultural identity, and modern community.
- 3) Economic:** Particularly local economic benefits – employment, livelihoods and incomes.



Sustainable tourism recognises tourism's capacity to harm, but also its potential to bring about positive change by, for example, protecting environments and built heritage, highlighting the importance of culture, reducing youth or rural-urban migration, creating jobs and supporting livelihoods at a local level.

Sustainable Tourism is an approach to tourism that is increasingly being adopted by tourism businesses, destinations, and local and national governments. It is defined by international agencies such as the UN Environment Program and the UN Tourism Organisation and promoted and supported through tourism industry bodies such as The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) who have developed criteria, training and certification systems for sustainable tourism in businesses, destinations, events and government agencies working in tourism.

WHY IS SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IMPORTANT?

Sustainable tourism is important from ethical, social/political and market perspectives:

The ethical importance of sustainable tourism: There is of course an important ethical dimension to sustainable tourism. Sustainable tourism is clearly the more ethical approach to tourism development in a world facing global warming and with tourism the tourism industry attracting negative attention for its impact on the environment, communities and culture.

OECD Tourism Trends and Policies 2024 report

'Top policy priorities: to promote sustainable development through tourism: The strong [post-pandemic] recovery is providing a new wakeup call for governments and the sector as a whole, as destinations struggle to manage demand and the impacts on the environment and local communities. This is putting pressure on the social licence for tourism and has highlighted the need to rebalance the impacts, understand the trade-offs and manage tourism sustainably, so the benefits outweigh the costs. At the same time, tourism offers untapped potential for many people, businesses, and places.'

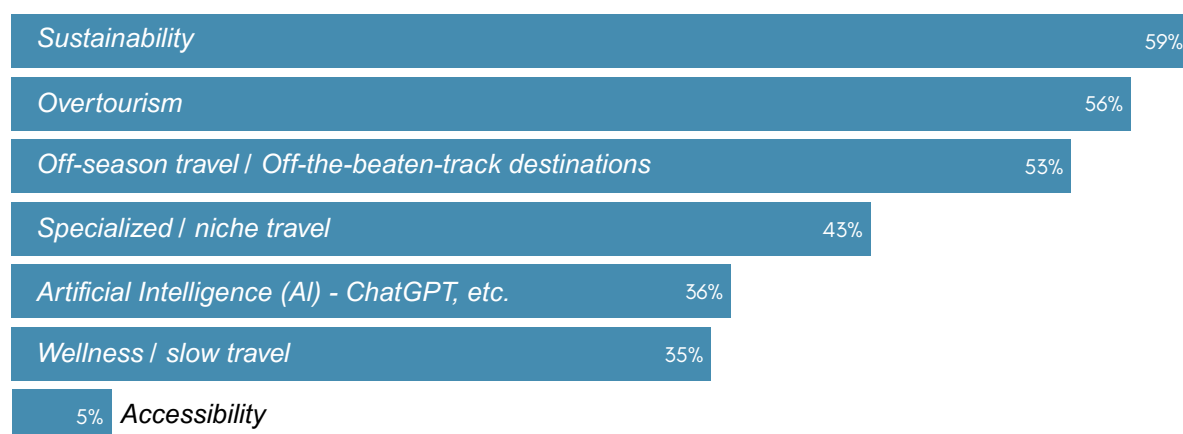
The social and political importance of sustainable tourism: Sustainable tourism is also important from a social perspective, and therefore for governance. In many countries tourism growth has created pockets of over-tourism provoking anger and frustration from local communities who feel that tourism is something done to them, predominantly benefitting external investors, providing meagre benefits in terms of local jobs and employment and creating negative impacts on local culture and community. Sustainable tourism offers the potential to create more grassroots driven and engaged tourism and avoid loss of cultural identity, which is actually one of Albania's key strengths in the European tourism market.

The market importance of sustainable tourism: Sustainable tourism is also a huge market opportunity and one that emerging tourism destinations (such as Albania) can capitalise on. There is a clear growth in awareness of, and demand for, more 'responsible tourism' and also a demand for destinations that offer authentic experiences. For example a Booking.com survey in 2024 highlighted that '75% of global travelers say that they want to travel more sustainably over the next 12 months, and (43%) would feel guilty when they make less sustainable travel choices'. Sustainable tourism products have a significant existing demand and a growing demand. A 2024 survey of members of the International Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA) ranked sustainability as the top-of-mind issue along with over tourism. Members recognise a strong demand for sustainable tourism and interest to identify destinations with lower tourism numbers (off the beaten track). The need for authenticity and sustainability is a recurrent theme in key tourism trends recognised by analysis of the tourist industry over the last decade.

Sustainable tourism has a potential price dividend: Truly sustainable tourism, such as eco-tourism and cultural tourism and experiences that can be seen to directly benefit local communities, can be niche marketed at higher prices compared to mainstream tourism. This is important for the Albanian tourism market which has become known as a 'cheap European destination' and increasing the value and uniqueness of Albania's tourism market is a key priority for the country.

WHAT TRENDS ARE TOP OF MIND FOR YOU IN 2024?

Select which trends you expect to impact adventure travel / tourism the most:



ATTA Community Poll January 2024 (n=80) Chart: Adventur Travel Trade Association

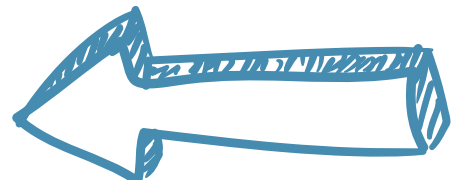
WHO CAN GROW AND DEVELOP SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN ALBANIA?

Sustainable tourism needs to be developed at a wider industry level that includes local and national government – with the support, active engagement and change taking place across the industry. Sustainable tourism cannot be developed with strongly top-down approaches through policy, regulation or even funding) and neither can it be developed purely from the local or industry levels. Sustainable tourism requires integrated development and promotion from the grassroots (communities), through local and national actors to key international stakeholders and existing and potential international partners.

International and National community



Local and community



Coordinated action for sustainable tourism

- **International level:** To be effective, Albanian sustainable tourism are aligned with international standards and approaches and Albanian tourism businesses effectively link to the international tourism industry that can bring tourists choosing and preferring sustainable tourism experiences to Albania.
- **Albanian National Government:** Sustainable tourism is prioritised in national strategies and policies and in the promotion of Albania as a destination and brand. Incentives and support are targeted to growing sustainable tourism in Albania.
- **Local Governments:** Sustainable tourism is part of regional and local economic development plans and supported strategically and practically.
- **Larger tourism businesses and investors:** Embrace sustainable standards in their own businesses, but also collaborate with local MSEs, communities and non-profits to diversify their services and 'localise' their supply chains.
- **Micro and small enterprises (MSEs):** Are at the core of sustainable tourism, providing the services and products that will make the Albanian tourism offer diverse, distinct and authentic.
- **Non-profit and community organisations:** Existing and new community based and non-profit organisations (including locally initiated DMOs) embrace sustainable
- **Local communities:** Have an effective voice and influence on tourism growth and become involved in delivering authentic tourism services and experiences in a way that benefits those communities

GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN GROWING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN ALBANIA

The private sector is critical to developing and growing sustainable tourism, with a particular importance of Micro and Small Enterprises at local level; but government and communities are essential to the growth of sustainable tourism.



National Government support to Sustainable Tourism

As the National Tourism Strategy 2024-2025 highlights, The Government of Albania (GoA) has a critical role in prioritising, supporting and incentivising sustainable tourism. This includes not only integrating sustainable tourism into activities of Government Agencies such as the Albanian National Tourism Agency and existing and emerging DMOs (Destination Management Organisations), but coordinating more broadly with departments and agencies involved in environmental, cultural, economic development and small business promotion.



Local Government support to Sustainable Tourism

Local governments play a critical role in ensuring that tourism grows in ways that is sustainable, through local investments, infrastructure development and planning rules. Ineffective planning and growth of mass tourism, can impact on existing and future potential growth of sustainable tourism and needs to be planned effectively.



Community involvement in sustainable tourism

While the concept of community involvement in sustainable tourism appears good in theory, it is often difficult to integrate meaningfully in tourism development planning and tourism operations. Effective representation is likely to require the formation of civil society interest and representative groups at local level where tourism is existing, growing or planned.

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

Sustainable tourism requires not only adapting and adhering to sustainability standards, but innovation and entrepreneurship to develop and expand tourism services, products and experiences. Sustainable tourism is not business as usual with the added aspect of applying sustainable practices, but involves innovating products and services that are tailored to local opportunities and environments, and therefore unique. For example:

Emerging Sustainable Tourism in Albania

While sustainable tourism is still a fledgling sector there are many examples of products and destinations where eco-tourism, authentic experiences and products that truly benefit local communities that have launched in Albania and have proven highly successful and noteworthy. For example:

- **An ecotour of wildlife, local culture and gastronomy in Southern Albania** developed by Albanian Tour Operator Albanian Trip and promoted through international travel operators including the UK based Intrepid Travel and promoted as unique within an [article in a major UK newspaper](#)
 - **Shepherd huts into tourism accommodation.** A collaboration between a local travel company, horse riding tours (Caravan Horse Riding Albania/[C-Adventures and Tours](#)) that resulted in the creation of [shepherd hut accommodations](#) that have expanded tourism routes while diversifying incomes for shepherds in the hills of southern Albania.
 - **Ornithological Tourism identifying and opening the birding sites of Albania.** Albania has become recognised in tourism focused on birding. The country is not only attracting international specialists in bird tourism (e.g. [The Travelling Naturalist](#)) but is growing its own specialist national tour agencies such as [Birding Albania](#). This growing awareness of Albania's niche in ornithological travel is beginning to support conservation efforts around fragile wetland and other wildlife habitats such as the Vjosa-Narta lagoon.
-
- **An expansion in ecotourism products and experiences:** Expanding and adapting tourism products and experiences to include wildlife, natural habitats (e.g. mountains, sea and wetlands) and explicitly linking this into conservation and preservation initiatives.
 - **Slow Tourism:** 'Slow tourism' is a concept that has grown in importance and relates to travel that focuses on travelling slower (e.g. land based), staying longer in specific locations, exploring deeper and prioritises local services and products.

- **Inclusive authentic tourism experiences:** Authenticity in tourism is recognised as a key demand from tourists and the international tourist industry. From visiting authentic locations (villages, towns and cities), to experiencing authentic and living culture and local hospitality, to tasting local produce, cuisine and local products and services, to participating in authentic festivals, craftmaking activities or cultural events.



AFA, a local tour operator, introducing and promoting Slow Food through a cooking class in the Lunxhëria area, Gjirokastra region, supported by Helvetas

- **Slow Food and ‘farm to table’:** For almost three decades, slow food has become a movement focused on prioritising traditional recipes and methods, organic and local ingredients, slow cooked and then slowly enjoyed and consumed food of high quality. Slow Food has been adopted and is growing in Albania, and example being the Slow Food Foundation for Diversity in the Permet region of Albania which has been supported by CESVI.
- This has also been allied with the ‘farm to table’, movement, where restaurants, hotels and resorts build their linkages with local producers and farmers to improve the quality of produce, ensure local economic benefits and potentially provide unique experience to clients who can visit the farms where the ingredients or products are grown or produced.
- **Inclusive supply chains into tourism:** With the tourism sector being a major buyer of inputs (such as produce and food), external services (e.g. guides, transport, hire-services, experiences for guests), and products (e.g. handicrafts, furniture, art), there is a potential to strengthen and localise supply chains to make the tourism experience more unique and authentic and maximise local economic and employment benefits.

RisiAlbania tested all of these approaches through its work with Visit Gjirokastra (DMO) and Albanian travel operators and proved that these have strong demand in international markets, very strong consumer appeal, and strong consumer satisfaction. Not only does sustainable tourism work for tourists and tourism businesses, it also unlocks opportunities to make tourism more economically inclusive for local businesses, farmers, producers, communities and households.

Case study: Bringing Back Life to Historic Houses through Sustainable and Community Tourism

(<https://www.krujaalbergodiffuso.com>)

In Kruja, tourism faced numerous challenges in the historic area of Kalaja e Krujës. The area was largely abandoned, leading many property owners to list their homes for sale at significantly reduced prices (as low as €40,000-€50,000) and detracting the historic area as a potential tourism area. The area suffered from extensive neglect, with considerable waste and pollution, adding to the economic hardships faced by many local families.



A tourism development initiative, called the Albergo Diffuso project, dramatically transformed this scenario. With small amounts of financial support, the historic and abandoned houses were thoughtfully renovated and placed under new tourism management, creating a unique and appealing destination. In its first years as a pilot project, Albergo Diffuso Kruja, which was supported by the RisiAlbania project, successfully attracted around 1000 visitors, with approximately 1000 overnight stays recorded. This initiative significantly increased interest in local properties, tripling their value and motivating property owners to further invest in converting homes into tourist accommodations.

Consequently, family incomes markedly improved, growing from roughly €100 per month to up to €80 per night from room rentals alone. Inspired by the rising number of visitors, local stakeholders collaborated more effectively to offer authentic local tourism products and cultural experiences. This successful model earned international recognition when National Geographic recommended Albergo Diffuso Kruja as a must-visit location, highlighting the potential and importance of sustainable, community-based tourism. Moreover, this model has served as an inspiration not only for the Kalaja e Krujës neighborhood but also for the entire city of Kruja, resulting in a significant increase in accommodation facilities throughout the city starting in 2024.

THE POWER AND IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INVOLVEMENT

To achieve the vision of a growing and diversifying sustainable tourism sector in Albania it is critical that tourism is undertaken with the engagement and participation of local communities. With unfocused growth in tourism, communities and local businesses are likely to become more marginalised from tourism with larger tourism businesses and investors capturing the majority of the benefit. As many tourism locations across Europe and globally have seen, this can lead to growing local negativity towards tourism.

As many of the sustainable tourism product examples above illustrate, unlocking growth in truly sustainable tourism must involve local communities, businesses and households. Kerala in SW India recognised this opportunity and effectively turned their tourism around from one of rising resentment from communities to one that has a robust and unique brand. In Kerala they used the indigenous community governance system to engage local communities in tourism. In Albania this may be achieved by effectively applying the European Union's LEADER Programme approach to participatory community-led local and rural development.

Unlocking local innovation in Sustainable Tourism through Albanian Tour Operators

RisiAlbania pioneered an approach of working through 'innovative incoming tour operators to provide support to local communities and businesses to develop unique and authentic accommodation, new routes for ecotourism (trekking, birding, horse riding), and authentic cultural experiences. Tour operators understood the quality requirements for international tourism markets and had the linkages to this market. Local communities, households and businesses had the land and wit access to finance and know-how could grow existing and new businesses to cater for new types of tourism (see RisiAlbania's case study: Innovation for Employment in Albania's Tourism Sector)



THE IMPORTANCE OF MICRO AND SMALL ENTERPRISES (MSEs) IN SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

As with local communities, MSEs are also central to sustainable tourism. To achieve slow tourism, slow food, authentic experiences, and local supply chains involve growth and innovation from MSE needs to be supported and unlocked. Sustainable tourism will not be achieved only by larger investors and tourism businesses – but will be rolled out with effective collaboration with smaller and micro businesses, producer groups and the more informal sector (for example households or cultural groups hosting tourists for experiences).

MSEs are therefore integral to the roll out of sustainable tourism and any support or finding must be designed to be inclusive of MSEs ranging from the most local, micro and perhaps less formal (e.g. homestays, cultural groups, households, local guides, farmers) to the more established and formal (e.g. tour operators, restaurants, guest houses, local hotels, transport providers).



THE ROLL OF CERTIFICATION AND STANDARDS IN SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Standards and certification in sustainable tourism have been growing in prevalence and importance. International standards, such as those of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) are being adopted at International, country, region and firm level. Despite the growing consumer demand for more ‘responsible tourism’ products, consumer understanding and awareness of sustainable tourism standards is low and is not helped by an apparent proliferation of certification bodies and names. Despite this low consumer recognition, standards and certification play an important role in consumer confidence and growing sustainable tourism.

- **Standards and certification as a way of growing consumer confidence in sustainable tourism:** Perceptions of ‘greenwashing’ and ‘ethical washing’ of tourism products have undermined even legitimate work in sustainable tourism. Standards and certification are a way of restoring and building consumer confidence.
- **Increasing the market for sustainable tourism through the tourism supply chain:** International Tour Operators are also increasingly seeking partners that are certified in sustainable tourism to enable them to grow this part of the market.
- **A driver and an incentive for changed practices in sustainable tourism:** Certification can also effectively act as a driver of growth and change in sustainable tourism.
- **EU regulations driving certification:** EU Regulations that aim to reduce misleading environmental claims will come into effect in 2027. The ‘EU green claims directive’ is likely to drive coordination in standards and certification.

From Albania’s perspective, Sustainable tourism standards and certification is therefore becoming increasingly important. It is important that Albania adopts an approach to certification which is integrated fully with Global Standards – increasing integration with this fast-moving field and avoiding fragmentation and parallel standards. Standards and certification offer an approach to not only coordinate activity in sustainable tourism, but to give tourists and the international tourism industry a strong message that Albania is at the forefront of the ongoing move towards better tourism.



SUMMARY OF KEY LESSONS FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

This paper aims to highlight some key points for the effective growth of sustainable tourism in Albania:

1

Sustainable Tourism is not just an ethical choice for growth in tourism but offers **a huge market opportunity for Albania** to develop a strong a distinctive niche in global tourism.

2

As an emerging and lesser- known tourism destination, and with rich and distinctive cultures and natural resources, **Albania is in a particularly strong position to build a brand and reputation for sustainable tourism.**

3

To realise this **community involvement** and **integrating micro and small enterprises** into tourism development is essential.

4

Furthermore, a strongly top-down approach will not work effectively, and approaches to **community participation** and **micro and small enterprise development** should be effectively integrated into a strategy for sustainable tourism.

5

Albania can build its brand and reputation in Sustainable Tourism as well as influence the national industry by adopting relevant **international standards and certification in sustainable tourism.**



Ismail Qemali Str,
P18, H.3, Apt. 15
Tirana, Albania



+355 (0) 422 48 527



info@risialbania.al