

CULTURAL HERITAGE AND EXPERIENTIAL TOURISM: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN GREECE-ALBANIA CROSS-BORDER AREA (BERAT, GJIROKASTRA AND IOANNINA)

Florina PAZARI ^{1*}, Blerta AVDIA ², Elda MAMOCI ¹

¹ Barleti University, Faculty of Social Science, Tourism and Sport, Department of Tourism, Hospitality and Recreation, Tirana, Albania; floripazari@gmail.com (F.P.); mamocielda6@gmail.com (E.M.)

² Logos University College, Faculty of Economic, Department of Management, Tirana, Albania; avdiablerta1@gmail.com (B.A.)

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Abstract: The study aims to analyze the cross-border tourism potential, identify the challenges and opportunities for its development and the impact it has on the social and economic development of the local community. Based on the current situation, the study also proposes concrete strategic measures that need to be undertaken to position it in the competitive regional market. A mixed methods approach was used to conduct the study, including: a review of the literature and similar cases of cross-border experiential tourism development at the international level, qualitative and quantitative interviews with the local community, actors operating in the tourism sector, and institutional stakeholders. The use of analytical tools, such as GIS analysis, helped in interpreting the data, in function of the development of experiential tourism. The Albania-Greece cross-border region presents a high potential for the development of experiential tourism. The results of the surveys and study analyses show a high interest of local communities and a positive impact on the local economy, the preservation of cultural heritage and the development of ecotourism as a form of sustainable tourism. The main challenges are related to the lack of institutional support between the two countries, the road infrastructure and the fragmented marketing strategies for promoting the region. The region is promising for the development of experiential tourism as a long-term sustainable tourism activity that generates employment, protects heritage and improves the life of the local community. Community involvement, infrastructure investments and the integration of technological innovation in the service of tourists are important factors for the transformation into a competitive destination. However, there are limitations to the long-term sustainable development of the sector and methodological limitations that should be addressed by research for future studies in this field. The findings emphasize the need for cross-border cooperation frameworks that ensure continuity and coordination in tourism planning. Capacity-building programs for local tourism actors are essential to enhance service quality and innovation. Additionally, environmental protection must be prioritized to maintain the ecological balance of the region. Finally, the study highlights the importance of joint branding initiatives to position the region as a unified tourism destination.

Keywords: experiential tourism, cross-border cooperation, cultural heritage, sustainable tourism, destination development

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INTRODUCTION

Experiential tourism is the current trend in international tourism. Tourists are increasingly seeking to acquire authentic experiences and experiences of the destinations they visit during their tourist trips. This type of tourism is focused on creating authentic, personalized and emotionally impactful experiences that will remain in the visitors' memories for a long time. The Balkan countries (which include Greece and Albania) have considerable potential for the development of experiential tourism by integrating the cultural and natural heritage of this territory. In the cross border area between Greece and Albania, the cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, together with the unique natural landscapes (UNESCO sites), constitutes a strong foundation for offering differentiated, attractive, and sustainable tourist experiences to international visitors. At a time when global demand for authentic and personalized experiences is constantly increasing, this region has significant potential to become an internationally recognized destination.

The study aims to analyze the importance and potential for the development of experiential tourism in the cross-border region of Greece-Albania, identifying the challenges and opportunities for its development and its return to a major destination in the region. The main objectives include examining existing barriers, exploring opportunities for sustainable and inclusive development, and assessing the economic and social impact of this tourism segment on local communities. Based on the principles of sustainable tourism, the study seeks to provide an in-depth analysis of the opportunities for strategically positioning the region as a major destination for experiential tourism.

The study uses a mixed-methods approach, including a review of existing literature to create a theoretical basis on the concept and importance of experiential tourism; the development of a structured questionnaire for decision-makers, tourism operators and local communities to identify perceptions of this tourism model; and the application of

* Corresponding author

cartographic techniques (GIS) to process and interpret the collected data, ensuring an evidence-based approach. Through analysis and concrete recommendations, this study aims to contribute to the development of innovative strategies and best practices for the promotion of experiential tourism in the Albania-Greece cross-border region.

The study followed a mixed methods approach, including a literature review to develop a theoretical background on the concept and development of experiential tourism in countries with similar potential as the study area; the design of a structured questionnaire for the local community involved in tourism services, decision-making institutions and stakeholders in order to assess perceptions of this tourism model; and the use of cartographic methods (GIS) to process and interpret the collected data, ensuring an evidence-based approach and analysis. The discussions and conclusions drawn from the study aim to support the development of new strategies and best practices in the development of experiential tourism in the Albania-Greece cross-border region. Its conclusions are expected to support not only the economic empowerment of the area and increased opportunities for local communities but also the promotion and international recognition of the region's cultural and natural heritage as an added value to the tourism industry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature research is an essential component to understand the importance of developing experiential tourism and to identify best practices and international trends. Scientific articles, international reports, strategic documents and publications from international organizations such as the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) served as the main sources for building the theoretical basis of this study.

Carli et al. (2020) in their study, define the elements of experiential tourism as inclusive experience, cultural interaction, short stays and sustainability. According to the OsservatorioTuristico Valle d'Aosta (2018), experiential tourism trips last an average of 5.2 days, with variations between urban and rural environments. International practices show its positive impact on territorial promotion and stakeholder cooperation. In the study "Future of Travel and Tourism: Embracing Sustainable and Inclusive Growth" (World Economic Forum, 2025), emphasis is placed on the fact that "tourism experiences should be designed to meet different needs, to give something back to host communities and to create authentic experiences that promote cultural exchange and respect for local traditions. The experiences experienced by tourists are carried in their memories and experiences for a long time, also transmitting them to their friends.

In the study conducted by Raymundo et al. (2024), the contribution of the development of experiential tourism to the preservation of local identity and the active involvement of communities in the sustainable development of rural destinations is emphasized, through the direct interaction of visitors with nature and local traditions. Recent studies (Martínez de Carnero Calzada, 2025; Dimitrova, 2023) emphasize the role of digital technology in the design of personalized itineraries, deepening the experience of authentic local experiences by tourists and the engagement of local communities, especially in rural and cross-border contexts. These developments are in line with post-COVID orientations towards more sustainable practices, authentic experiences and the active involvement of local communities in the process of creating tourism offers. Economically, experiential tourism supports local incomes, jobs and entrepreneurship (Moreschi, 2017; Esau & Senese, 2022). Successful models include Rajasthan (India), Costa Rica and Tuscany (Italy) (Esau & Senese, 2022).

Case studies such as Tuscan cooking courses, Irish folk experiences or ecotourism in the Albanian Alps create lasting connections for visitors (Carli et al., 2020). The Iso-Polifonia Labe in Gjirokastrë, Xhuleta and K'cimii Tropojes (UNESCO sites) further enrich Albania's cultural attractiveness (UNESCO, 2023). Berat, Gjirokastra and Ioannina illustrate its role in heritage preservation and economic growth. Cross-border experiential tourism has been expanded through EU and Council of Europe initiatives, with cultural routes such as the Camino de Santiago, Viking Route, Amber Road and Balkan Heritage Route (Prokkola, 2008; Council of Europe, 2021). Projects such as "Danube Limes" and "Via Dinarica" foster regional cooperation, while "Smart Travel on Cultural Route" (Interreg, 2023) increases cross-border tourism in Greece-Albania. Similar approaches to cross-border cooperation have also been explored in Central Asia.

For example, Turaev et al. (2023) analyze the potential of cross-border pilgrimage tourism in the Lower-Tisa Valley, highlighting how cultural and religious heritage can foster sustainable regional tourism networks. Although the context is different, the study offers useful parallels for the Albania-Greece region in terms of identifying common heritage assets and building coordinated tourism strategies. Also, the study on the reintegration of Albanian returned migrants (Xhaho et al., 2024) emphasizes the importance of social and human capital in the development of new ventures, including those in the experiential tourism sector. Finally, recent advances in technological development such as the use of artificial intelligence, augmented reality, digital storytelling, have a significant impact on tourism development models. These developments are in line with global tourism trends that emphasize the growing importance of personalization, technology-driven experiences, and sustainability as pillars of future tourism models (Chinekeokwu, 2025). As an example, citizen science initiatives such as those implemented around Lake Pamvotis in Ioannina demonstrate how experiential tourism can integrate digital tools and environmental education to strengthen visitors' connection to nature (Potsikas et al., 2023).

Experiential tourism is one of the tourism models that is being affected by these developments for the enjoyment of personalized experiences, which are combined with the direct engagement of local communities and the principles of sustainability. This collaboration aims to strengthen cultural identity and promote local development. Models such as "slow tourism" and "green experiential centers" are increasingly being implemented in various countries in Europe and Asia, being considered as effective tools for social and economic impact (WTTC, 2024; UNWTO, 2025).

However, the scientific literature on experiential tourism still remains limited for countries like Albania, especially for cross-border cases. In this context, this study aims to analyze the potentials and challenges of cooperation between Albania and Greece, with a focus on sustainability and building an inclusive and experience-oriented tourism model.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods, with the application of primary and secondary data sources in analyzing the potential and problems of the development of experiential tourism in the cross-border regions of Albania and Greece. Primary data were obtained through surveys and in-depth interviews with the community, public institutions, tourism enterprises, etc. The questionnaire analyzed the contribution that experiential tourism brings to the economic and social development of the community, while interviews with experts addressed strategies for strengthening cross-border cooperation. The analysis of secondary data included literature reviews, reports of national and international tourism institutions, as well as Albanian and Greek statistical data to assess current tourism trends and economic contribution. The study is based on the hypothesis that experiential tourism affects the growth of economic income, increases cross-border cooperation, increases tourism diversification and extends the tourist season. The study aims to answer the following questions:

- Does the region have sufficient cultural and natural potential for experiential tourism?
- What benefits and challenges does the local community face?
- Are there effective policies to promote cross-border cooperation?

By integrating primary and secondary data, the study provides a comprehensive analysis and recommendations for the sustainable development of experiential tourism in the region.

The questions were open-ended and included key issues related to the tourism industry and the impact this industry brings to the region. Participants answered open-ended questions on the development of experiential tourism, the social, economic and cultural impacts as well as the opportunities and challenges of the development of experiential tourism. The specific open-ended questions addressed to both public and private sector actors are summarized in Table 2, which reflects the differentiated yet complementary perspectives that each group brings to the experiential tourism development process in the region.

1. Data collection

1.1. Survey and interview

Surveys and questionnaires were used in the study as the main sources of primary data, with the aim of identifying the perceptions and expectations of stakeholders in the local community regarding the development of experiential tourism in the Albania-Greece cross-border region. Meetings and interviews were conducted with 26 representatives of interest groups, which were classified into two main categories, as shown in Table 1:

1. Representatives from the public sector (institutional actors involved in the design and management of tourism policies at local, regional and national levels).
2. Representatives from the private sector (tour operators, tourist guides, accommodation providers, travel agencies, restaurants/gastronomy and other tourism-related entities).

Table 1. Number of potentially relevant stakeholders per category (Source: Authors' elaboration based on stakeholder mapping and interviews with public and private actors in the Albania–Greece cross-border area (2024))

| Category of target group | Number of subjects |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Public Sector/Organizations | 6 (Municipality of Berat, Gjirokastrer and Ionniana, Regional Agency, Tourism and Cultural Heritage Agency of Gjirokastra and Berat, National Tourism Agency, etc) |
| Private Companies | 15 private subjects; 4 from accommodation sector; 4 from Experience activities/ventures; 3 from tourist office; 5 from thematic tours; 4 restaurants/gastronomy |
| Total | 26 |

Tables 2. Research questions by target group (Source: Authors' elaboration based on semi-structured questionnaires developed for public institutions and private tourism operators in the Albania–Greece cross-border region (2024))

| Open questions for the Public Sector/Organization | Open questions for the Private Section |
|---|--|
| What policies and strategies have been followed for the development of experiential tourism in your area? | How do you incorporate elements of culture and tradition into the services you offer to tourists? |
| How do you think we can integrate cultural and natural heritage into the development of experiential tourism in the cross-border region? | What do you offer specifically to tourists that differentiates your offer from other offers and mass tourism? |
| What are the biggest challenges you see in the sustainability of the development of experiential tourism? | How do you think visitors are interested in authentic experiences and collaboration with the local community? |
| Have you had any cross-border cooperation with a neighboring country to increase the promotion and sustainable development of experiential tourism? | What are the most common challenges you face in providing tourist services? Have you tried to design a joint itinerary between the two countries for experiential tourism? |
| How do you assess the involvement and engagement of the local community in experiential tourism initiatives? | What is your perspective on the role of cooperation between the public and private sectors in the development of experiential tourism? |

Questionnaire structure and general data of respondents

To provide a detailed analysis of perceptions and impact of experiential tourism, the questionnaire was structured into 6 sections: I) General information; II) The impact of cultural heritage on experiential tourism; III) Opportunities and benefits of experiential tourism; IV) Challenges for cultural heritage and experiential tourism; V) Suggestions for improving cultural heritage and experiential tourism; VI) Additional Information. The survey was conducted with target groups involved in the provision of tourism services as well as tour operators and the local community. 150 participants responded to the survey, of which 66.7% belonged to the young age group 18-30 years old and 68% were women, highlighting the role that these two

elements play in employment and the provision of tourism services. Also, 62.8% of respondents worked in tourism and 59.2% had lived in the area for more than 10 years, reflecting their strong connection to the local heritage and authenticity of the area.

1.2. GIS and mapping of tourism resources in the region

The use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) has been essential in the identification, analysis and visualization of cultural and natural attractions of the Albania-Greece cross-border region, providing a structured approach to planning experiential tourism. GIS not only provides accurate spatial localization of attractions, but also facilitates spatial analysis to find the most effective and cost-effective solutions for successful strategic tourism management. The thematic maps created within the framework of this study provide important digital information on the region's tourist attractions as well as cultural routes that can be described during a several-day tour, locating the attractions of the authentic values of the area. The use of GIS as an analytical method highlighted the importance of data-driven planning, creating a structured platform for the design of long-term strategies in experiential tourism. Furthermore, geospatial visualization of the region helps identify infrastructure challenges, as well as needs for improvement in access and tourism services.

2. Data analysis

The study applied thematic analysis and the Potential Assessment Matrix. The thematic analysis identified the main tourist trends, which emerged as a result of the analysis of questionnaires with stakeholders and experts in the field and helps to identify the main factors for the sustainable development of experiential tourism in the Greece-Albania cross-border area. that affect this type of tourism and its role in the sustainable development of the cross-border region. The analysis also highlighted best practices and innovative approaches for strengthening experiential tourism, while preserving cultural and natural heritage. The Potential Assessment Matrix was used as a standardized instrument to measure the region's capacity to develop experiential tourism, analyzing five key indicators: (i) quality and diversity of tourism resources, (ii) suitability for experiential activities, (iii) institutional and political support, (iv) level of existing infrastructure, and (v) suitability for marketing strategies. Adapted from Crouch & Ritchie (1999), this method used empirical data from interviews, surveys, and secondary data sources. GIS was applied to visualize the spatial distribution of tourism resources and to create thematic maps that aid in the design of tourism development strategies. The combined approach of these methods presents a comprehensive framework for identifying the region's strengths and weaknesses, setting priorities, and recommending sustainable strategies for the growth of experiential tourism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Description of the study area and tourism potential for experiential tourism

The cross-border region between Albania and Greece presents a significant potential for the development of experiential tourism, thanks to the combination of cultural wealth, natural landscapes and interconnected history of the two countries. Figure 1 presents the geographical position of the study area, highlighting the cross-border connection between the regions of Ioannina (Greece), Gjirokastrë and Berat (Albania), which serve as the main focal points of the research. Albania, with a population of 2.77 million inhabitants (Worldometer, 2025), and Greece, with 9.93 million inhabitants (Worldometer, 2025), have a strong demographic base for the development of a sustainable tourism, where local communities play a key role in providing authentic experiences for visitors. While tourism contributes €45.8 billion to the Greek economy (WTTC, 2024), Albania is experiencing continuous growth, with tourism contributing \$565 million to GDP in 2023 (WTTC, 2024), reflecting efforts to improve infrastructure and diversify the tourism offer.



Figure 1. Geographical position of the study area: Cross-border area Greece-Albania

(Source: Authors' processing based on data from the Albanian National Geoportal and Google Maps (2024))

In 2023, Greece hosted 36.08 million international tourists, while Albania recorded 10.1 million visitors (Statista, 2023), indicating a positive trend for tourism development. The region has a rich range of historical and cultural attractions, including UNESCO monuments, traditional festivals and gastronomic heritage, positioning this area as an ideal destination for experiential tourism. Improving infrastructure and facilitating movement through border crossings such as Kakavija and Kapshtica are key factors in exploiting this potential and creating an integrated tourism ecosystem between the two countries.

Ioannina – The cultural heart of Epirus – UNESCO site

Ioannina, the capital of Epirus in Greece, is rich in history and culture, with a blend of Ottoman, Greek and Balkan influences. It offers the potential for diverse tourist experiences, such as historic forts, Orthodox monasteries and Lake Pamvotis. Figure 2 illustrates the touristic potential of the Ioannina region, emphasizing the variety of cultural and natural attractions that support the development of experiential tourism. Known for its goldsmithing, tourists can participate in the process of making handmade jewelry. The region also offers nature-based experiences such as boat trips, hiking and exploring nature in Lake Pamvotis and the Pindus Mountains.

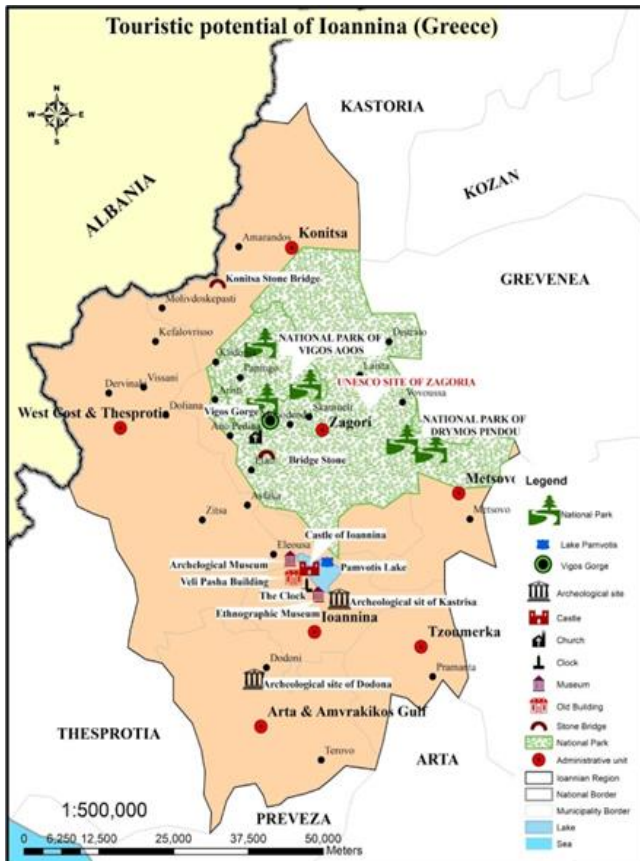


Figure 2. Touristic potential of Ioannina Region (Source: Authors’ processing based on data from the Greek National Tourism Organization, Epirus Region Tourism Office, National Parks Management Body of Northern Pindos, and Municipality of Ioannina GIS services (2024)

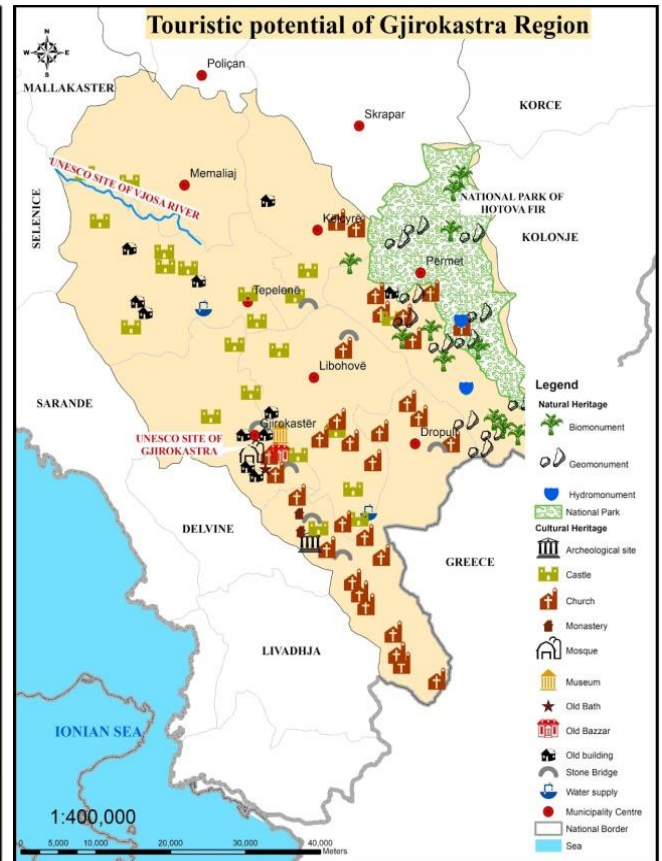


Figure 3. Touristic potential of Gjirokastra Region (Source: Authors’ processing based on data from the National Tourism Agency of Albania, Regional Directorate of Cultural Heritage in Gjirokastra, and the Albanian National Geoportall (2024)

Gjirokastra – The "Stone city" – UNESCO site

Gjirokastra, the "Stone City," represents a unique example of Ottoman-era architecture in the Balkans. Declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it offers a journey through history, exploring historic forts, characteristic Gjirokastra houses, and museums, where visitors can learn about art, culture, and traditional ways of life. Figure 3 presents the touristic potential of the Gjirokastra region, highlighting its rich architectural heritage, traditional crafts, and cultural assets that contribute to experiential tourism development. Traditional handicrafts such as carpets, textiles, and wood and stonework offer a unique experience for tourists who want to participate in artisan workshops. Furthermore, the city's rich and unique cuisine and local festivals help create a direct connection between visitors and the local community.

Berat – “The City of One-on-One Windows”, UNESCO site

Berat, the "The City of One-on-One Windows", is a key cultural heritage site in Albania. Located along the Osuni River and surrounded by the Tomorr and Shpirag Mountains, it offers a rich tourist experience through visits to the historic castle, the old quarters of Mangalem and Gorica, as well as the iconographic and ethnographic museums, which reflect the identity of the city. Known for its traditional gastronomy, tourists have the opportunity to experience the art of traditional local cooking and wine tasting. Nature lovers can experience the adrenaline of rafting in the Osuni canyons and hiking on Mount Tomorr, adding adventure and ecotourism to the experience. Figure 4.a) illustrates the

overall touristic potential of the Berat region, while Figure 4.b) focuses on the specific assets within Berat Municipality, emphasizing both cultural heritage and opportunities for experiential tourism in urban and rural contexts.

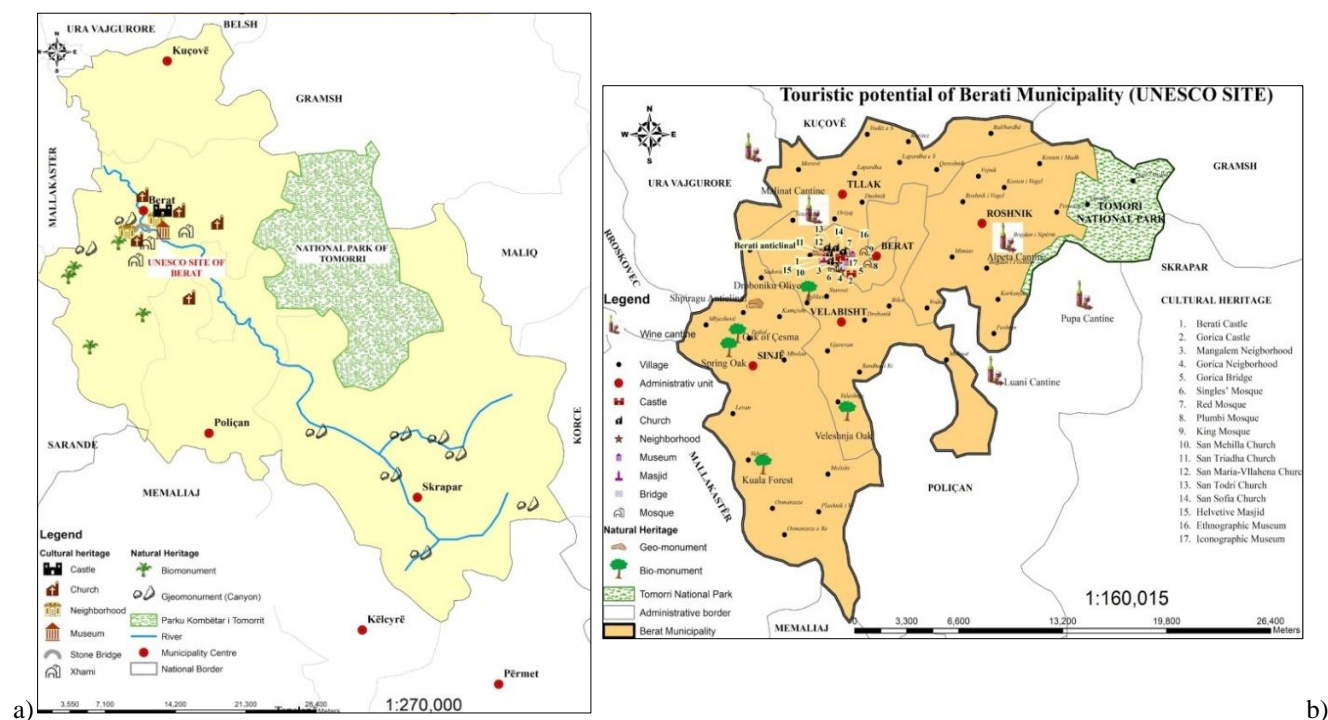


Figure 4. a) Touristic potential of Berati Region (Source: Authors’ processing based on data from the National Tourism Agency of Albania, Regional Directorate of Cultural Heritage in Berat, and administrative GIS data (2024); b) Touristic potential of Berati Municipality (Source: Authors’ processing based on official data from the Municipality of Berat, the Institute of Cultural Monuments, and the Albanian National Geoportal (2024))

The cross-border region represents an integrated tourist ecosystem where experiential experiences from different historical eras, authentic local cultures and traditions, as well as the potential for experiencing adventurous and relaxing activities in nature are combined. This offer is a strong basis for the development of experiential tourism, which is based on several main pillars:

1. *Region with shared cultural and historical heritage* – The region has a cultural blend of different eras and has experienced dominant influences from different periods. This offers opportunities for itineraries of historical interest, reflecting the historical connections between Epirus and southern Albania.
2. *Culinary tourism* – Authentic experiences in traditional local cuisine, visits and tastings in wineries, cooking courses and traditional festivals, foster a strong connection between tourists and local culture.
3. *Ecotourism and outdoor activities* – Mountainous and water landscapes offer a wide range of activities for adventurous tourists, such as hiking, rafting, kayaking and exploring natural habitats, contributing to the development of sustainable tourism.
4. *Rich heritage of crafts and handicrafts* – Traditional silversmithing, carpet weaving and souvenirs create a unique offer for tourists, who can be involved in their handicrafts. On the other hand, they bring income to the local community, as they are involved in the purchase of souvenirs and traditional crafts.
5. *Cross-border cooperation in destination promotion* – The development of joint Albania-Greece itineraries, coordinated marketing strategies and collaborative investments in infrastructure contribute to increasing the visibility of the region and attracting tourists who want to experience unique history and culture in the Balkans. In this context, the development of experiential tourism in the Albania-Greece cross-border region represents an important opportunity for promoting sustainable tourism development, preserving cultural heritage and diversifying the tourist offer.

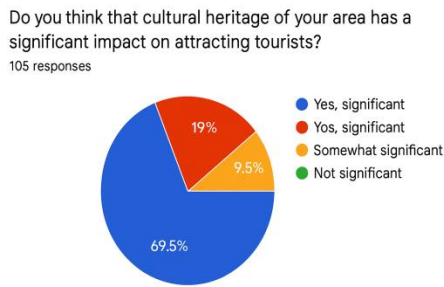
2. Questionnaire analysis

In order to assess the perceptions of the local community on the opportunities and benefits of developing experiential tourism in the Albania-Greece cross-border region, an analysis of the results of the questionnaires was carried out, which identify the importance of cultural heritage, economic and social benefits, main challenges and opportunities for the development of this sector. The results show the impact of experiential tourism on local communities, as an important element for the sustainability of tourism.

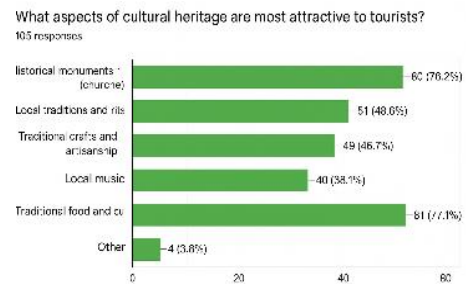
2.1. Analysis of section II: The impact of cultural heritage on experiential tourism

As shown in Figure 5, the survey results show that cultural heritage plays an important role in attracting experiential tourists. The most attractive elements of cultural heritage are identified as gastronomy (77.1%) and historical monuments (76.2%), reflecting the tendency of tourists to experience the combination of history and local cuisine. Half of the respondents (48.1%) consider experiential tourism as an important tool for the promotion and preservation of cultural heritage, seeing it as a mechanism for strengthening local identity and increasing interest in local traditions. In economic terms, 45.7% state that this form of tourism is sustainable and has an impact on the well-being of the community, as it not

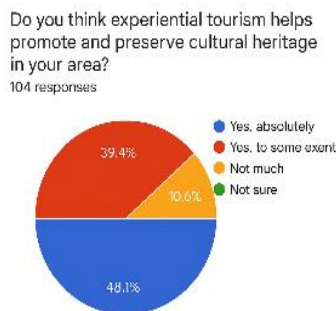
only generates new opportunities for employment and increased income, but also strengthens the connection between the community and the heritage and influences its awareness and preservation.



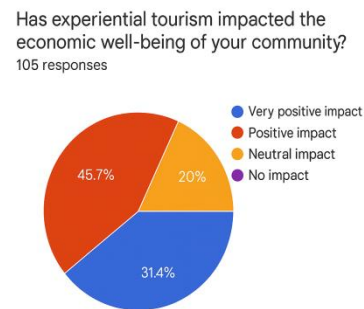
(a) Impact of cultural heritage on attracting



(b) The most attractive elements of cultural heritage for tourists



(c) Impact of experiential tourism on promoting and preserving heritage

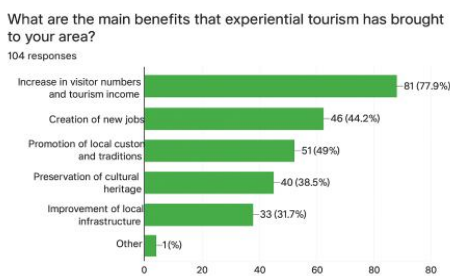


(d) Economic impact of experiential tourism on the community

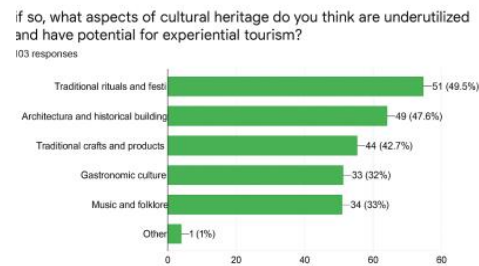
Figure 5. Responses of section II: The impact of cultural heritage on experiential tourism (Source: Authors' analysis based on survey and interview data collected from local community stakeholders in the Albania–Greece cross-border area, August–October 2024)

2.2. Analysis of section III: Opportunities and benefits of experiential tourism

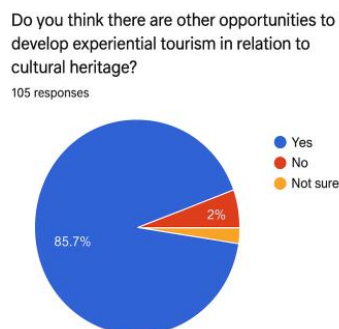
Experiential tourism contributes to the economic income and social development of the community. As illustrated in Figure 6, 77.9% of respondents stated that they have benefited from the increase in the number of tourists in the area and over 44.2% identified it as a source of employment for the community. Interestingly, 49% of them see this form of tourism as an important element of preserving the local traditions of the area.



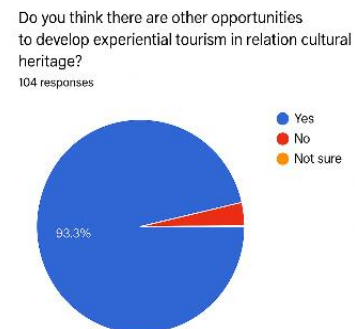
(a) The main benefits that experiential tourism has brought to the study area



(b) Undervalued aspects of cultural heritage that have potential for experiential tourism



(c) Perception of the existence of other opportunities for the development of experiential tourism



(d) Perception of the connection of experiential tourism opportunities with cultural heritage

Figure 6. Responses of section III: Opportunities and benefits of experiential tourism (Source: Authors' analysis based on survey and interview data collected from local community stakeholders in the Albania–Greece cross-border area, August–October 2024)

Although they appreciate the increase in tourist interest, 93.3% of respondents emphasize that its potential has not been fully exploited, especially in traditional rituals and festivals (49.5%), historical architecture (47.6%) and handicrafts (42.7%). These findings indicate that experiential tourism can play a key role in preserving cultural heritage, linking it to economic development and community involvement.

2.3. Analysis of Section IV: Challenges for Cultural Heritage and Experiential Tourism

As shown in Figure 7, the challenges faced by this sector are related to the lack of funding for the restoration and maintenance of historical monuments (63.5%) and the lack of interest of young people in cultural heritage (51%), which jeopardize the continuity and appreciation of local traditions. The lack of effective promotion (49%) and the degradation of historical monuments (33.7%) are two issues highlighted by interest groups, for which they state that stronger marketing strategies and investments in the protection of cultural assets are needed. At the cross-border level, the lack of institutional coordination (44.1%), legal barriers (48%) and the lack of joint funds for projects (48%) represent important challenges for the harmonization of strategies and effective cooperation between the two countries.

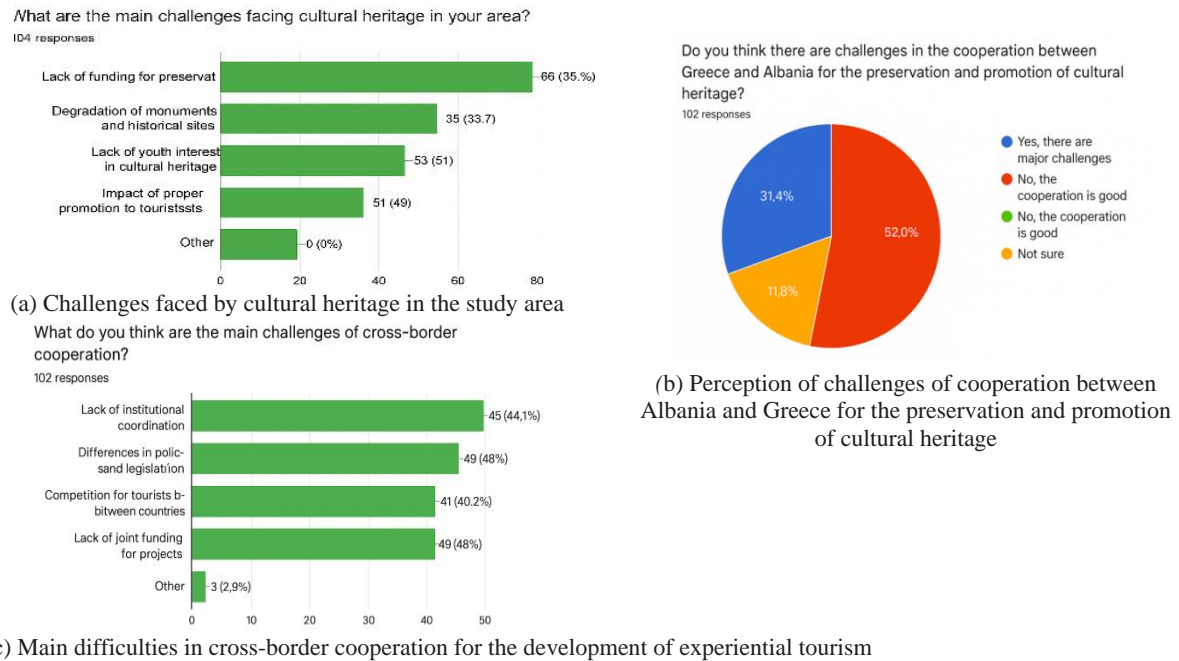


Figure 7. Challenges for cultural heritage and experiential tourism (Source: Authors’ analysis based on survey and interview data collected from local community stakeholders in the Albania–Greece cross-border area, August-October 2024)

2.4. Analysis of section V: Suggestions for improving cultural heritage and experiential tourism

To strengthen the development of experiential tourism in the Albania-Greece cross-border region, 71.2% of respondents emphasize the necessity of improving tourism infrastructure, such as transport and accommodation. Also, 49% of participants identify the need for a more effective promotion of cultural heritage at the international level, aiming to expand the tourist audience and strengthen the image of the destination. Involving local communities in the preservation and promotion of heritage, organizing authentic activities, such as workshops and traditional events, and creating cultural routes connecting the two countries are identified as key steps for the development of tourism. The digitalization of the potential of experiential tourism is an element that significantly affects the improvement of tourist services and the promotion of the destination. These actions will help create rich experiences, increasing the interest of tourists.

2.5. Analysis of section VI: Additional information

In the findings of the last section of the survey, emphasis is placed on the fact that this form of tourism is the tourism of the future with a significant impact on community life. Its sustainable development requires investments in infrastructure, increased marketing and promotion, involvement of the local community in decision-making, and awareness of the preservation of this important heritage. This requires an integrated approach between the public and private sectors, as well as cross-border cooperation between the two countries.

3. Interpretation of the potential assessment Matrix for Experiential Tourism

The Potential Assessment Matrix has been applied for an in-depth analysis of the capacity of the Albania-Greece cross-border region to develop experiential tourism, considering five main dimensions: the quality and diversity of tourism resources, suitability for experiential activities, institutional and political support, the level of existing infrastructure, and suitability for marketing strategies. The findings from the questionnaires showed that the region has significant potential for experiential tourism, but faces challenges that require strategic solutions. The detailed results of this analysis, including the criteria, respondent-based scoring, and interpretation of key factors, are presented in Table 3.

Tables 3. The results of the Matrix analysis
(Source: Results of interviews with local community in cross-border are Albania-Greece, August-October 2024)

| Category for evaluation | Critter | Description | Data from interviews & questionnaires | Max point | Earned points |
|--|---------------------------------------|---|---|------------|---------------|
| 1. Quality and diversity of tourism resources | 1.1 Cultural wealth | Monuments, museums, traditions, and local crafts. | 89% of respondents consider cultural heritage a very important element in the region (Section II). | 20 | 18 |
| | 1.2 Natural wealth | Landscapes, biodiversity, rivers, and natural attractions. | 77.1% of respondents emphasize the importance of the natural environment for tourism (Section II). | 20 | 15 |
| | 1.3 Uniqueness | Special elements that distinguish the region from other tourist destinations. | Only 48.1% of respondents recognize the unique potential of local culture (Section II). | 10 | 5 |
| 2. Suitability for experiential activities | 2.1 Capacity for authentic activities | Opportunities to offer experiences such as cooking classes, festivals, crafts, and nature explorations. | 77.9% of respondents consider cooking courses and handicrafts to have great potential for experiential tourism (Section III). | 15 | 12 |
| | 2.2 Interaction with the community | Involvement of local residents in the creation and management of tourism activities. | 44.2% of respondents mention job creation as a key opportunity resulting from community involvement (Section III). | 15 | 8 |
| 3. Institutional and political support | 3.1 Supporting policies | Existence of programs, strategies, and policies that support experiential tourism. | 63.5% of respondents highlight the lack of funding for cultural heritage preservation (Section IV). | 10 | 4 |
| | 3.2 Cross-Border cooperation | Links between Albania and Greece for the joint promotion of the region. | 48% of respondents identify legal barriers as a major obstacle (Section IV). | 10 | 5 |
| 4. Level of existing infrastructure | 4.1 Access to tourist attractions | Roads, public transport, and accessibility to sites of interest. | 33.7% of respondents cite the degradation of monuments and limited access as a major issue (Section IV). | 10 | 5 |
| | 4.2 Services for tourists | Accommodation, restaurants, and other facilities that meet visitors' needs. | 71.2% of respondents recommend improving tourist infrastructure (Section V). | 10 | 7 |
| 5. Suitability for marketing strategies | 5.1 Visibility of the region | Promotion of the region at national and international levels. | 49% of respondents highlight the lack of promotion as a significant challenge (Section IV). | 10 | 5 |
| | 5.2 Potential for market development | Capacity to attract new segments of the tourist market through marketing strategies. | 93.3% of respondents believe there are additional opportunities for development (Section III). | 10 | 10 |
| Total point | | | | 140 | 94 |

The results of the matrix show that the Albania-Greece cross-border region has high potential for the development of experiential tourism, particularly due to its rich cultural heritage and natural resources.

However, the main challenges include a lack of institutional support, limited infrastructure, and the need for more effective promotion. In this context, a key step to exploit this potential is the creation of a cross-border cultural route, connecting the three main cities of the region in an integrated network of experiential tourism. Based on the study carried out, we present the proposal for the creation of the **“Heritage route and experience during the cross-border area: Ioannina-Gjirokaster-Berat”**. The creation of this joint cultural route aims to promote a unique and joint tourist product, where history, culture, traditions, gastronomy, nature, adventure, etc. are integrated.

It also affects the strengthening of cross-border cooperation between the two countries, creating an innovative offer that promotes authenticity, community engagement and sustainable development.

The **“Heritage route and experience during the cross-border area: Ioannina-Gjirokaster-Berat”** itinerary spans seven days, offering a rich combination of historical, cultural, natural, and culinary experiences.

- **Day 1-2:** Begins in Ioannina, exploring Ioannina Castle, Dodona, and Lake Pamvotis, followed by a visit to Drymos Pindus National Park.

- **Day 3:** Visits Zagori Village and Aaos National Park (UNESCO), then travels to Gjirokastër via Drinos Valley, concluding with traditional music and local cuisine.

- **Day 4-5:** Gjirokastër’s castle, bazaar, and Antigonea’s ruins are explored, followed by a wellness retreat at Bënjë Thermal Baths and Fir of Hotova National Park in Përmet.

- **Day 6-7:** Adventure along the Vjosa River, then exploration of Berat’s UNESCO-listed sites, Osumi Canyons, and a farewell dinner.

Figure 8 provides a visual representation of the proposed cross-border cultural route, showcasing the geographic linkage of the three main cities: Ioannina, Gjirokastër, and Berat along with key natural and cultural attractions featured in the itinerary. The figure illustrates how the combination of UNESCO sites, local heritage, and nature-based experiences forms the foundation for a sustainable and competitive tourism model in the Albania–Greece border region.

The creation of the Ioannina-Gjirokastër-Berat Cultural Route constitutes a strategic step for the development of cross-border experiential tourism, placing this region on the map of sustainable and authentic tourism destinations in the Balkans. The integration of all cultural and natural potential, with all the experiences that accompany it, means that this itinerary will offer a rich and comprehensive experience for visitors, while strengthening cooperation and economic development of local communities. Through the use of GIS and digital access to tourist potential, this route will be structured efficiently, creating a new model for the promotion and sustainable management of tourism in this region.



Figure 8. Heritage route and experience during the cross-border area: Ioannina-Gjirokastra-Berat (Source: Authors' processing based on Google Maps (2024), National Tourism Agency of Albania, Institute of Cultural Monuments, Greek National Tourism Organization, and local municipality promotional brochures (Berat, Gjirokastrë, Ioannina, Zagori) Note: The photographs presented in the visual include: a) UNESCO Site of Berat – Mangalem Quarter, Berati Castle and Onufri Museum; b) UNESCO Site of the Vjosa Wild River – Europe's last wild river; c) UNESCO Site of Gjirokastrë – Castle of Gjirokastra, Traditional Bazaar and Stone Architecture; d) Konitsa Bridge – Historic stone arch bridge over the Aaos River; e) UNESCO Site of AOS National Park– Zagori village; f) Old Town of Ioannina – Traditional pedestrian street with tavernas

DISCUSSION

Personalized experiences and travel has become a global trend today. Tourists are increasingly looking for new experiences in their travels. Tourist flows in Albania and Greece have increased significantly, during 2023 Albania hosted 10.1 million foreign visitors, while Greece more than 36 million tourists.

This growing interest represents an important opportunity for cooperation between the two countries to design sustainable tourism development strategies. The study highlights some of the main benefits that come from the strengthening and development of experiential tourism in the Greece-Albania cross-border region:

1. *Social and economic impact:* 77.9% of respondents stated that experiential tourism offers a very good opportunity for the economic development of the region, which is related to the creation of new jobs not only in the promoted historical areas, but also in rural areas, where tourists find local authenticity in both gastronomy and local cultures. Traditional artisans in Ioannina, Gjirokastra and Berat report increased demand for their products, thus strengthening local economies.

2. *Preservation of cultural heritage:* The fact that the region has a series of World Heritage Sites represents a special cultural value at an international level, which contributes to the awareness of tourists and the local community for its preservation not only by institutions but also by the community. The study found that 48.1% of respondents see this form of tourism as an effective tool for preserving and promoting cultural heritage, while 49% emphasize its role in supporting local traditions. These results show how the development of experiential tourism affects not only the economic impact, but also the preservation of local heritage and the strengthening of community identity.

3. *Potential for the development of ecotourism:* Part of experiential tourism is also the enjoyment of experiences in nature. The natural landscapes of the region offer opportunities for various outdoor activities such as hiking, rafting and nature-based

tourism, as an integral part of the authentic experience. This form of tourism encourages appreciation by both tourists and local communities for biodiversity, bringing awareness to environmental protection. Although the region has a series of benefits from the development of this tourism model, there are a series of obstacles that hinder its development such as:

1. *Limited institutional support*: In the potential assessment matrix, institutional support was assessed with 4-5 points out of 20. This assessment shows weak governmental and institutional commitment in the function of the development of this tourism model.

2. *Infrastructure deficiencies*: 33.7% of respondents stated that infrastructural difficulties on the road as well as the lack of integrated transport networks, limit the access of tourists to the entire area.

3. *Fragmented marketing strategies*: The promotion of the region as a common tourist destination is very low. About 49% of respondents in the study stated that there is a lack of effective promotional efforts, limiting the visibility of the region in regional and global tourism markets.

An important element that emerges from the study is the role played by the local community in providing authentic experiences. Handicrafts, the establishment of agrotourism businesses, local tourist guides have created a more authentic and attractive offer for tourists. An important element that emerges from the study is the role played by the local community in providing authentic experiences. Handicrafts, the establishment of agrotourism businesses, local tourist guides have created a more authentic and attractive offer for tourists. Recent research also shows that generational differences significantly influence travel motivations and preferences in domestic tourism, suggesting that experiential tourism offers should be tailored to meet the needs of different age groups (Varadzhakova & Naydenov, 2024). This aspect is in line with the literature on experiential tourism, where local empowerment is seen as essential for long-term sustainability (Raymundo et al., 2024). International practices, such as the “Camino de Santiago” route in Spain or the “Via Dinarica” in the Balkans, show that cross-border itineraries can create sustainable economic and cultural networks, if supported by strong co-management mechanisms.

In this context, the “Ioannina–Gjirokastër–Berat” route represents a promising pilot model for cross-border cooperation in the region, combining tangible and intangible heritage, gastronomy, nature and authentic experiences. The introduction of tourism innovation represents an untapped opportunity. Virtual storytelling, interactive maps and mobile applications can complement the missing physical infrastructure and increase tourist engagement. Experience from other destinations confirms that technology can improve promotion, information dissemination and tourism flow management (UNWTO, 2025; WTTC, 2024). Another important challenge is the lack of functional mechanisms for cross-border cooperation. Currently, cooperation is informal, fragmented and dependent on temporary projects. The creation of a joint inter-institutional “task force” would help overcome these obstacles and create a sustainable platform for joint management and promotion of destinations. Similar challenges and solutions have been observed in other European border regions. For example, in the Lower-Tisa Valley, coordinated cross-border tourism strategies have been explored as a way to strengthen regional identity and economic cooperation between neighboring countries (Tóth et al., 2020). The low performance of institutional and cross-border coordination reflects the structural fragmentation still present in the Balkans. This is the result of unstable policy harmonisation, weak inter-institutional communication, cooperative agreements between countries and weak involvement of the local community in decision-making issues. Additional efforts should also be directed towards ensuring that tourism is integrated into the regional context as a whole, their involvement in small and medium-sized businesses, rural towns and artisans.

CONCLUSIONS

The Albania-Greece cross-border region has significant potential for the development of experiential tourism, as a sustainable form that stimulates employment, increases rural community income and helps preserve cultural heritage. The engagement of local communities in the creation and provision of authentic experiences promotes the strengthening of local identity and strengthens cross-border cooperation. Maximizing this potential requires investments in road infrastructure, harmonization of policies and legal frameworks between the two countries, as well as effective and sustainable management of the destination. Integrated marketing and digital promotion are essential for increasing regional competitiveness. The use of technological innovations in virtual tourist guides or promotion through mobile applications can expand the visibility of the region in the eyes of tourists looking for authentic experiences in the Balkans. Also, the diversification of the offer through rural tourism, ecotourism and traditional gastronomy will attract different target groups of tourists. For this, it is necessary to design long-term marketing strategies, taking into account the aspects of the social, economic and cultural development of the region. This is in line with similar cases of the development of this form of tourism in other countries as well as with the literature used, where the emphasis is placed on the need for the involvement of the local community in the design of sustainable tourism development strategies.

The proposed model for the creation of the “Heritage route and experience during the cross-border area: Ioannina-Gjirokaster-Berat” presents a comprehensive approach that combines history, nature and culture, and can serve as a model applicable to other cross-border regions with a common heritage. The involvement and empowerment of the local community is a key element for the long-term success of the development of experiential tourism.

Training and financial support for the local community involved in providing authentic experiences for tourists (artisans, traditional cooks, tourist guides, establishment of agrotourism, etc.) will ensure quality service as well as inclusive and equitable development. Priority should also be given to environmental sustainability, through careful destination management and funds for the preservation of both natural and cultural heritage. Further studies are needed to explore the long-term social, economic and cultural impacts of tourism in this region, as well as the use of innovative tools to overcome gaps in infrastructure and promotion. This study is subject to some limitations. First, primary data were collected from a relatively small sample size in specific locations (Berat, Gjirokastër and Ioannina), which may limit the generalizability

of the findings to other cross-border regions. Second, although a mixed methods approach was used, the qualitative data were limited to short-term engagement and may not capture longer-term trends or deeper community dynamics.

Finally, the analysis relied on self-reported data, which may introduce biases in terms of truth. Future studies should broaden the geographic scope, increase the sample size, and include longitudinal studies to validate and enrich these findings. With these measures, the region has the potential to become a leading experiential tourism destination in the Balkans, offering authentic experiences while ensuring economic and social benefits for local communities.

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