

TOURISM IN ALBANIAN TERRITORIES: RESOURCES, DEVELOPMENT TRENDS, AND SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGES IN ALBANIA AND KOSOVO

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Abstract: This paper examines the tourism resources, recent development tendencies, and sustainability challenges of Albania and Kosovo as two closely connected destinations within the Western Balkans. The purpose is to replace a mainly descriptive inventory of attractions with a structured comparative assessment that links natural and cultural assets to destination management, market development, and sustainable tourism principles. A qualitative comparative approach was applied through a narrative review of peer-reviewed studies, official tourism statistics, and institutional heritage records. The analysis shows that Albania possesses a diversified tourism portfolio based on the Adriatic and Ionian coast, mountain landscapes, protected areas, historic cities, and UNESCO-listed heritage, while Kosovo's strongest comparative advantages are mountain and rural tourism, cultural heritage, urban experiences, caves, waterfalls, and diaspora-related travel. Official statistics also indicate continuing growth in visitor demand, although the two destinations differ considerably in scale, infrastructure, seasonality, and international visibility. The findings suggest that tourism can contribute to employment, local entrepreneurship, regional cohesion, and cultural preservation, but unmanaged expansion may intensify coastal pressure, construction, waste generation, traffic, ecosystem degradation, and the commercialization of heritage. The paper concludes that future competitiveness should be based not only on increasing arrivals but also on extending stays, raising local value added, improving service quality, diversifying demand beyond the peak season, and protecting destination carrying capacity. It recommends coordinated destination governance, reliable tourism data, professional training, digital destination management, cross-border thematic routes, and stronger integration of local communities into tourism planning and benefit sharing. The contribution of the study is a concise evidence-based framework for repositioning both destinations from fragmented attraction promotion toward integrated, measurable, and environmentally responsible tourism development.

Keywords: Albania, Kosovo, sustainable tourism, cultural heritage, destination development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become one of the most visible channels through which Albania and Kosovo interact with international markets, their diasporas, and the wider Western Balkan region. The two destinations combine Mediterranean and continental landscapes, dense layers of cultural heritage, traditional cuisine, and relatively short travel distances. Yet their tourism systems are not identical. Albania has developed a large coastal market alongside cultural and mountain tourism, whereas Kosovo remains a smaller, predominantly landlocked destination whose strongest assets are mountain areas, historic towns, cultural monuments, events, and visits linked to family and diaspora networks.

The original version of this paper catalogued destinations such as Durrës, Vlorë, Saranda, Velipoja, Theth, Valbona, Prizren, Prishtina, Mirusha, Gadime Cave, and Gjeravica. These sites remain relevant, but a scientific article must move beyond enumeration. Recent research emphasizes that tourism competitiveness depends on destination image, perceived quality, infrastructure, innovation, governance, and the ability to convert visitor flows into sustainable local benefits (Burlea-Schiopoiu & Ozuni, 2021; Tase & Lulaj, 2022; Ndou et al., 2023). Accordingly, this study asks: (1) What are the principal tourism resources and product groups in Albania and Kosovo? (2) What do recent data indicate about tourism development? and (3) Which policy priorities are necessary for sustainable and integrated destination development?

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study applies a qualitative, comparative, and desk-based research design. Evidence was selected from three categories: peer-reviewed literature on tourism development and sustainability; official statistics published by the Institute of Statistics of Albania and the Kosovo Agency of Statistics; and institutional records concerning protected cultural and natural heritage. Sources were screened for direct relevance to Albania, Kosovo, the Western Balkans, destination management, and sustainable tourism. Priority was given to publications from 2021 onward, while foundational institutional sources were retained where necessary.

The evidence was coded into five analytical themes: tourism resource base; demand and market trends; destination infrastructure and accessibility; economic and social contribution; and environmental and governance risks. The comparison is descriptive and interpretive rather than causal. It does not estimate the economic impact of tourism and does not treat border entries as equivalent to overnight tourists. This distinction is important because Albania's movement-of-citizens statistics count entries at border points, whereas

accommodation statistics measure guests who spend at least one night in registered establishments (INSTAT, 2026). Kosovo's annual hotel statistics similarly refer to recorded visitors and overnight stays in accommodation facilities (Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 2025).

3. RESULTS

3.1. TOURISM RESOURCES AND PRODUCT STRUCTURE

Albania's principal advantage is product diversity within a compact territory. Coastal tourism is concentrated along the Adriatic and Ionian seas, including Durrës, Shëngjin, Velipoja, Vlora, Himara, Saranda, and Ksamil. The cultural product is anchored by archaeological sites, historic centres, religious heritage, museums, and living traditions. UNESCO records four World Heritage properties associated with Albania: Butrint; the historic centres of Berat and Gjirokastra; the natural and cultural heritage of the Ohrid region; and the transnational ancient and primeval beech forests (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026a). Mountain and nature-based tourism is represented by the Albanian Alps, Theth, Valbona, Korça and Voskopoja, Dajti, and numerous protected landscapes. This combination enables coastal, cultural, rural, adventure, gastronomic, and ecotourism products.

Kosovo's offer is more strongly centred on mountains, cultural landscapes, urban tourism, and short-stay regional travel. The Sharr Mountains, Brezovica area, Rugova, the Accursed Mountains, Gjeravica, Mirusha waterfalls, the White Drin waterfall, and Gadime Cave support hiking, skiing, climbing, cycling, speleological visits, and nature-based recreation. Prizren combines a historic urban fabric, fortress, religious monuments, festivals, and gastronomy, while Prishtina provides museums, cultural events, nightlife, and business-related travel. The UNESCO-listed Medieval Monuments in Kosovo comprise four major ecclesiastical sites reflecting Byzantine-Romanesque cultural traditions (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026b). Peja, Gjakova, and other towns can further support cultural routes, craft production, and rural experiences.

3.2. DEMAND, SCALE, AND MARKET DEVELOPMENT

Available indicators confirm strong demand but also reveal substantial differences in scale and measurement. Albania's official monthly releases show sustained increases in citizen movements and accommodation demand, while the statistical framework distinguishes border entries from arrivals in accommodation establishments (INSTAT, 2026). Kosovo recorded 698,068 domestic and foreign hotel visitors and 1,522,890 overnight stays in 2024. Foreign visitors represented 60.6% of recorded visitors and 54.3% of overnight stays; foreign visitor numbers increased by 18.3% compared with 2023 (Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 2025). These figures indicate expanding international demand, although Kosovo remains a smaller market and is more dependent on regional accessibility, diaspora mobility, and short stays.

The two destinations also face seasonality. Albania's coast concentrates demand during summer, while Kosovo's mountain and urban products can support winter and shoulder-season travel. Diversified itineraries connecting coast, mountains, historic towns, gastronomy, and events can stabilize employment, increase length of stay, and distribute spending across regions.

3.3. ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS

Tourism can stimulate accommodation, transport, food services, agriculture, construction, crafts, and creative industries. It can also encourage the restoration of historic buildings and strengthen incentives to maintain cultural practices. Research on Albania and Kosovo associates favourable destination perceptions with tourism demand and wider economic and financial opportunities (Tase & Lulaj, 2022). However, local benefits are not automatic. High visitor numbers may coexist with seasonal jobs, import leakage, informal accommodation, weak municipal revenues, and unequal distribution of benefits.

Environmental risks are increasingly important. Coastal construction, traffic congestion, water demand, wastewater, solid waste, erosion, and pressure on protected areas may undermine the assets on which tourism depends. Mountain destinations face trail degradation, uncontrolled building, habitat disturbance, and safety constraints. Sustainable tourism research therefore stresses coordinated economic, environmental, and social management rather than growth measured only through arrivals (Palacios-Florencio et al., 2021; Sharpley, 2023; Dwyer, 2024). For Albania and Kosovo, carrying-capacity assessment, spatial planning, enforcement, and local participation should accompany investment promotion.

4. DISCUSSION

The evidence suggests that Albania and Kosovo should be treated as complementary rather than competing destinations. Albania offers international gateways, a recognized coastal brand, and a wider accommodation base. Kosovo contributes distinctive mountain landscapes, cultural cities, festivals, religious and archaeological heritage, and strong diaspora connections. Joint thematic products could include Albanian Alps and cross-border hiking, gastronomy and wine routes, cultural-city circuits, religious heritage, and event calendars. Such cooperation would be consistent with smart-destination approaches that integrate stakeholders, digital information, mobility, and visitor experience (Ndou et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, cross-border branding should not obscure differences in institutional capacity and data. Comparable indicators are needed for arrivals, overnight stays, occupancy, visitor expenditure, seasonality, employment, resident attitudes, and environmental pressure. A shared evidence base would improve investment decisions and allow destination managers to distinguish high-value tourism from simple volume growth. Digital platforms should provide verified information, booking links, transport options, trail conditions, accessibility data, and behavioural guidance for protected and cultural sites.

Human capital is equally important. Service quality depends on language skills, hospitality management, guiding, digital marketing, safety, and heritage interpretation. Training should involve universities, vocational institutions, municipalities, and private operators, while community enterprises and small producers should be integrated into destination supply chains.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Albania and Kosovo possess a broad and complementary tourism resource base. Albania's coastline, UNESCO-related heritage, historic cities, and mountain landscapes support a diversified international offer, while Kosovo's mountains, cultural centres, natural attractions, events, and diaspora connections provide a strong foundation for regional and specialized tourism. Recent official indicators demonstrate growing demand, but quantitative expansion alone cannot guarantee competitiveness or sustainability.

The main policy priority is to shift from attraction-based promotion to integrated destination management. This requires: reliable and comparable statistics; protection of coastal, mountain, and cultural carrying capacity; improved transport and visitor infrastructure; professional training; digital coordination; stronger local supply chains; and cross-border thematic routes. Future research should use visitor surveys, resident-perception studies, expenditure data, and spatial indicators to measure value creation and environmental pressure. The central conclusion is that tourism should be managed as a long-term territorial development system in which economic gains, community welfare, heritage protection, and ecosystem resilience are mutually reinforcing.

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