

SWOT ANALYSIS OF THE TOURISM POTENTIAL OF THE PRESPA REGION

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the natural, cultural, and historical potentials of the Prespa region. We analyze the opportunities for the development of tourism by enhancing alternative forms of tourism by the distinctive potentials of this region. Consequently, we present all possible shapes of tourism, which have the opportunity to develop, and analyze data with other tourist regions and identify the problems that hinder the development of tourism. Further, we present investment opportunities and needed measures for sustainable tourism in this region. Various forms of tourism are an opportunity for gathering tourists throughout the year and not just during the summer season.

The attraction of the area is an opportunity for foreign and domestic investors in the establishment of a tourist area with tourist contemporary models.

Using the SWOT method of analyzing the factors, we will give some suggestions and directions of action needed to improve the tourist offer, making it attractive and competitive in the market.

Keywords: Prespa region, tourism potential, natural-cultural-historical heritage, SWOT analysis.

1. Introduction

The hollow of Prespa spreads in the South-West physical- geographic unit of the Republic of North Macedonia and it is separated by visible natural borders with typical meridian spreading. As natural borders are Baba Mountain on the east, Galicica on the west, Biglla and Platen on the north, and Prespa Lake on the south¹. Being a borderland, there are two border lines, one with the Greece Republic through Mexhitlia which is 45 km from Prespa town, and the other with the Republic of Albania through Stenja which is 23 km from Prespa. There is also another important borderline, called Kemba e Markos that is not activated. Human and natural potentials in Prespa can bring the development of tourism, as one of the biggest industries in the world. Tourism is one of the main economic engines for nations with a total contribution of 10.3 % to global GDP (US 9.6 trillion) and 10.3 % of total employment (333 million). By 2030, there could be 1.8 billion tourists - just over one in five persons in the world – traveling around the globe.² The tourism industry has an intense potential to grow and generate revenues.

2. Research Methodology

The research is based on numerous theoretical studies and information from domestic and foreign contemporary literature. The collection of information and data is based on official tourism statistics in the Republic of North Macedonia, Municipality of Prespa, WTO, web. specialized sites, the Agency for Promotion and Support of Tourism in the Republic of North Macedonia, local communities, publications, references, and different field studies. We used illustrations of theoretical material with photos and sketches. Descriptive and historical methods are used to describe the potential and tourist flows in the region during the period. To compare data on tourism activities, we used comparative, historical, mathematical, and statistical methods. Then, through SWOT, cause and effect analyses and factors that influence the development of tourism in this region. By knowing the natural and human resources, the study aims to provide a sustainable economic

¹ Abdullahi F.: Fushëgropa e Prespës, Detroit, 2010.

² UNWTO, Dec.27, 2017.

development plan for the hollow of Prespa, creating a regional tourism development strategy, and investment possibilities and determining some of the most favorable specific forms of tourism for the region.

3. Literature review

Prespa has a rich tourism potential, a beautiful lake, several national parks, and protected areas with specific flora and fauna that make the region attractive to nature lovers.³ The region is known for its rich cultural heritage, numerous monasteries and religious temples, diverse architecture, and a variety of historical monuments dating from different eras.

3.1. Tourism potential of Prespa region:

- *Nature.* The Prespa region's nature is its incontestable value and its preserved natural wealth, combined with the diversity of flora and fauna with many protected species. The hollow is characterized by a very rich, unique, and incalculable nature. Among these values, there is Lake Prespa one of the oldest tectonic lakes in Europe (1 million years ago) and also the highest tectonic lake on the Balkan Peninsula (853 meters), awarded as a natural monument, two national parks (Pelister, Galicica), ornithological park Ezerani (the home of 200 different bird species, out of which 62 are protected), the Great Island (The Great Town) on Lake Prespa with area of 1km², great biodiversity and cultural-historic. All these elements have a great potential for creating diverse and rich tourist products for the region. It is very suitable for different activities, such as hiking, cycling, paragliding, swimming, sports, climbing, fishing, hunting, skiing, etc.
- *Geomorphology.* Prespa Valley is surrounded by mountains Galichica, Petrinska Planina, Ivan Planina, Suva Planina, and Suva Gora. The region is characterized by fairly complex geological-tectonic structures with rocks from the oldest Paleozoic formation to the youngest Neogene and Quaternary sedimentary rocks.⁴ It has great potential for mountain tourism, eco-tourism, study missions, etc.
- *Climate.* The Prespa Hollow is characterized by a mediate continental climate with Mediterranean influence coming from the Small Lake of Prespa in the southwest.⁵ The Macedonian plains are situated in a climatic transition zone between the Mediterranean climatic zone to the south and the continental climatic zone to the north.⁶ It is known for hot dry summers and cold humid winters. Mediate long-term temperature is 12.9 °C with 5.1 °C in January and 21.6 °C in August. The annual rainfall is 572 mm and the annual air humidity is 63 %. These climatic features show an ideal condition for tourism development in Prespa throughout the year. Especially attractive for the development of health tourism and treatment for different types of specific respiratory diseases.
- *Hydrography.* The great tourist potential with unique value is Prespa Lake. It has been declared a World Heritage site by UNESCO since 1979. The lake belongs to Lakes Desaretis formed during the Pliocene as a result of tectonic movement.⁷ Prespa Lake consists of two lakes: the small Prespa Lake and the great Prespa Lake. The Great Prespa Lake is situated at an altitude of 835 m, with an

³ SWG for Regional and Rural development, Prespa Region, Nacionalna i univerzitetska biblioteka "Sv.Kliment Ohridski", Skopje, 2014.

⁴ Micevski, E. (2000). Geological and hydro-geological characteristics of the Ohrid - Prespa region. Proceedings of the International Symposium "Sustainable Development of Prespa Region", Oteshevo 23-25.06.2000, Republic of Macedonia, 10-17.

⁵ Lazarevski A.: Klimata na Makedonija, Skopje, 1972.

⁶ C. S. Kosmas., N. G. Danalatos., N. K. Moustakas., Lake Prespa, Northwestern Greece., Article in Hydrobiology, 1997.

⁷ Zhaku S., Ismaili R., Idrizi B., Tourism potential of Prespa as an opportunity for investment., Effects of global risk in transition countries., 2013.

area of 284 km², from which 65% belongs to the Republic of Macedonia, 18% to the Republic of Albania, and 17% to the Republic of Greece. The small Prespa Lake belongs to the Republic of Albania and Greece Republic. Water resources of this zone are the Great River of Bratucina, the River of Kranj, and the River of Pretor which flow in Prespa Lake and other sources.⁸ The average temperature of water in Lake Prespa is 12.9 °C and it reaches over 20 °C in July. All these potentials allow the development of lake tourism, amateur fishing, etc.

- *Biogeography.* Flora and fauna are important components for touristic potential. Fauna is characterized by a vertical emphasized structure and contains oaks, beeches, pines, and alpine pastures.⁹ Flora with its variety in the Prespa region is an important biogeography tourist motive consisting the plant cover and water. There are 23 types of fish in Prespa Lake of which 5 types are endemic for the region and 2 for Balkan. There are 37 plant communities, 12 of which are endemic, 266 bird species, 51 mammal species, and 1644 butterfly species. These enabled me to develop of special interest in tourism, study tours, expeditions, etc.

3.2. Anthropogenic :

- *Cultural and historical elements.* The Prespa Hollow has very rich cultural and historical heritage and we can consider it as an ancient area. Almost in every village, there are archeological places, where 130 antiques of different periods are presented, including nearly 1000 archeological exhibitions, 500 coins, and 450 exhibitions of ethnological heritage.¹⁰ An important archeological finding are in The Great Island-Golem Grad (archeological locality from Roman and Byzantine Times), three churches of the early Christianity, and other archeological sites in the villages of Kurbin, Asamati, and Pretor. The Egnatia Road passes through this region (constructed by the Romans in the 2nd century BC), churches with frescoes from the Byzantine period as well as inheritance from the Ottoman Empire. Among them are the Church "Of St. George" from the 11th century, the Church "Of St. Peter" from the 14th century in Kurbin, the Church "Of St. Arangel" from the 17th century, "Prespas Sarai", a luxurious palace with French architecture. The cultural events of the region such as the International Theatrical Event-European Actor, Agricultural Activity Apple Collection in Prespa, Resen Ceramic Colony (part of the Ceramics Academy in UNESCO), Temporary Exhibition Keratza Visulceva, Saray Culture Centre, Ethno Museum Podmocani, etc. Due to a rich and diverse historical, architectural, and religious heritage, there is a great opportunity to develop a unique product, as a key element for the development of sustainable tourism.

⁸ Abdullai F.: Prespa, Detroit, 2004.

⁹ Kolčakovski D.: Osnovni biogeografski karakteristiki na R.Makedonija, Skopje, 2000.

¹⁰ Zhaku S., Ismaili R., Idrizi B., Tourism potential of Prespa as an opportunity for investment., Effects of global risk in transition countries., 2013.

3.3. Tourism Infrastructure and tourist flows in the region:

Besides the region's natural attractiveness and man-made sites and facilities, there are different types of accommodation capacities for tourists which are shown below.

Table 1. Number of beds and types of accommodation capacity.

Types of Accommodation Capacity	Number of beds	Number of beds in %
Hotels	445	5.65 %
Rest Houses	1864	23.69 %
Camps	4886	62.10 %
Private accommodation capacities	600	7.62 %
Rehabilitation home for respiratory and chronic disease	72	0.91 %
Total	7867	100 %

Source: www.resen.gov.mk

Table 2. Number of tourists and nights 2018-2022.

Year	Number of tourists			Overnight stays		
	Domestic	Foreign	Total	Domestic	Foreign	Total
2018	7027	1085	8112	29213	2431	31644
2019	6889	1250	8139	27560	2774	30334
2020	4178	72	4250	16785	145	16930
2021	3720	627	4347	14047	1404	15451
2022	2333	1062	3395	8612	2465	11077

Source: www.state.gov.mk

Table 3. The number of overnight stays in Prespa, Ohrid and Struga, 2018-2022.

Year	Overnight stays in Prespa			Overnight stays in Ohrid			Overnight stays in Struga		
	Domestic	Foreign	Total	Domestic	Foreign	Total	Domestic	Foreign	Total
2018	29213	2431	31644	585051	449807	1034858	256741	148014	404755
2019	27560	2774	30334	621390	480168	1101558	260983	160911	421894
2020	16785	145	16930	652644	29530	682174	279955	11285	291240
2021	14047	1404	15451	677699	173032	850731	273838	34863	308701
2022	8612	25	11077	690384	336033	1026417	320565	107405	427970

Source: www.state.gov.mk

3.4. SWOT analysis of the Prespa region

Strength	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ecologically clean environment with two national parks and a nature reserve. ▪ Creation of the Prespa Park by three neighboring countries. ▪ Two lakes connected with flora and fauna ▪ The lack of heavy industry. ▪ Multiple opportunities for sustainable tourism etc. ▪ Good conditions for the development of agro-tourism (eco). ▪ Rich in archeological sites. ▪ Archeological locality from Roman and Byzantine Times). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The old accommodation infrastructure does not meet the demands of the contemporary tourist. ▪ Very old communication infrastructure-roads that do not meet contemporary standards. ▪ Relief, which requires large investments to improve the road infrastructure. ▪ There is no development of other traffic infrastructure such as rail, air, and water traffic. ▪ There is no defined tourist market. ▪ Poor tourist offers. ▪ Lack of cooperation with other tourist regions and

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Rich and diverse historical, architectural ethnological, and religious heritage. ▪ Beautiful and clean nature. ▪ Different cultural events. ▪ Favorable climate beautiful mountains and clean air. ▪ Unique flora and fauna. ▪ Prespa Lake - World Heritage site – UNESCO. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ another tourist entity. ▪ Lack of Management Tourist Destination. ▪ There is no tourist propaganda and marketing for certain markets. ▪ High migration and limited human resources. ▪ Non-professional staff. ▪ Lack of domestic and foreign investment ▪ Very little is known about the international tourist market.
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Investment in accommodation capacities. ▪ Investment in the catering industry, restaurants with traditional food, etc. ▪ Diverse tourist offers and development of sustainable tourism. ▪ Develop a special interest in tourism, study tours, and expeditions. ▪ Lake tourism, amateur fishing. ▪ Health tourism and treatment for different types of specific respiratory diseases. ▪ Hiking, cycling, paragliding, swimming, sport, climbing, fishing, hunting, skiing. ▪ Mountain tourism, eco-tourism, study missions. ▪ Investment in road infrastructure ▪ Investment in sports facilities and recreation centers. ▪ Developing Rural tourism ▪ Joint tourist offers with neighboring countries (Greece and Albania). ▪ Water communication with the neighboring countries connected by the lake. ▪ Religious tours. ▪ Archeological and cultural tours. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Economic crises ▪ Post Pandemic recovery ▪ Unstable Global Circumstances ▪ Political, war, inflation, living standard ▪ Continuous Migration ▪ Technological changes ▪ New trends in tourism

4. Real opportunities for the development of different types of tourism in Prespa

Based on the rich tourism potential, Prespa can develop a rich tourism offer with different types of tourism products. Below, we will highlight some of the tourism types which can be attractive and competitive in the market.

Prespa has a huge potential for the development and promotion of **rural agro-tourism**. We must emphasize that the main income of inhabitants in the region is provided by agriculture, i.e. production and sale of apples. Developing this type of tourism can be a great opportunity for promoting traditional cuisine, cultural heritage, the way of living, the sale of agricultural products, new business initiatives, new jobs, etc. It will contribute to the strengthening of the local economy, affect rural development, provide additional income to the population, and most important thing, prevent migration. Based on the long tradition of cultivating fruits, especially apples, we should single out and encourage initiatives similar to the fruit farm "Spirit of Prespa" in Carev Dvor. On this farm, visitors learn about the cultivation of apples and cherries, buy local products, and eat traditional food.

The rich and diverse historical, archeological, architectural, ethnological, and religious heritage of this region is a great opportunity for the development of **cultural** and **monastery tourism**. There are several monasteries and churches on the North Macedonian side and a lot of churches and monasteries across the border on the Albanian and Greek sides. The creation of a joint tourist product with a religious narrative will attract a

considerable number of tourists and contribute to the sustainable development of the region. Based on some international and local events in the area, tour operators can build a specialized offer for **event and transit tourism**. Taking into account the large number of weekend houses in the lakeshore and other settlements in the region, Prespa can offer **weekend tourism**, enriching the stay of tourists with various activities. Natural resources like Prespa Lake, rivers like Great River, River Kranj, and Pretor River, several small streams, and numerous sources represent a great opportunity for **lake tourism and fishing tourism**.

Winter tourism- has a development opportunity with ideal conditions. This form has great potential for development in the Baba Mountains, Galicica Dry Mountain, Biglla, and Pllaken. Such opportunities exist in villages Brajčin, and Luboj which gravitate towards Baba mountain where there is a ski center by cable - car.¹¹ Good weather conditions, clean air, rich hydrographics, and diverse forms of relief are important factors that can be used to attract investments in health institutions and develop **health tourism**, especially for respiratory diseases. **Sports tourism** has a great potential for development in this area too. There are opportunities for investment in closed, semi-closed, and open types of sports infrastructure. These will represent an attraction not only for tourists but also for various sports clubs, representations, as well as sport-loving tourists.

5. Results and discussion

As we can see from the table, there are 7867 beds in Prespa from which 445 beds are in hotels, 1486 beds in the rest houses, 4886 beds in the camps, 600 beds in private houses, and 72 beds in rehabilitation institutes of chronic and respiratory disease. Most of the hotels are old and do not meet the contemporary standards of hotel capacities. None of them is categorized with five stars. In general, hospitality service is limited, accommodations do not align with the market expectations, and food and service often do not meet the needs of different segments of the market. The most important problem is the limited entrepreneurial and investment capacity for new accommodation facilities. We must also highlight the managerial problem, which has to do with targeting specific market segments and adaptation of the tourist product to the selected segments. Based on the table above, the number of tourists and overnight stays in Prespa is far behind the other tourist regions of Ohrid and Struga. Although the area does not lag behind these areas in terms of rich heritage and beautiful nature, it fails to develop genuine tourism which will also enable economic development of the entire area. This situation is the result of many problems that have to do with road infrastructure, transport to and within the destination, parking, signage, accommodation, and catering facilities, outdated offers, non-existing destination management, poor marketing, regional cooperation with cross-border regions, online markets, etc.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

Based on the tourist resources of the Prespa region, we can conclude that there are a lot of opportunities to develop different types of tourism in the region. However, the rich heritage and unique nature are not enough to create an attractive and recognized tourist product in the market. It needs a more serious approach from all relevant factors, such as different sectors of the central and local government, as well as the private sector, and domestic and foreign investors. The old accommodation infrastructure in the region does not fulfill the needs of the modern tourist as well as the specific demands of the tourist market. It can be changed by encouraging new investment with fiscal reliefs, subsidies, favorable concessions, etc. We consider that there is a lack of coordination of activities, and the absence of a genuine tourism development strategy. A good example of what is mentioned above is the inability to use the advantages offered by the project "Transboundary Biosphere Reserve Ohrid-Prespa Watershed" inaugurated in 2014 by UNESCO. There are no real efforts to promote a combined tourist product within the different tourist sites in this region. The immense natural and wonderful

¹¹ Zhaku S., Ismaili R., Idrizi B., Tourism potential of Prespa as an opportunity for investment., Effects of global risk in transition countries., 2013.

nature of the region should be a starting point for a strategy for the development of sustainable tourism. We consider that there are great opportunities to develop different types of tourism based on these three main pillars of resources with special tourist potential of the area. The *unique nature, religious-cultural heritage, and lake tourism* should be the basis of the tourist product, while the offer must be concentrated in tourist groups with special interests. The area has all the prerequisites to offer a diversified tourist product and includes many different activities as an integral part of it. In this sense, we would like to suggest three types of tourism that we consider will distinguish Prespa from other tourist destinations:

- *Agro-tourism* – local culture, culinary tradition, and farming practices could be a distinctive element of the heritage. The region has a long tradition in agriculture and production of typical products of the area. Collaboration with specialized tour operators can help in packaging these assets in a market-relevant format. This can initiate in development of different products, such as special souvenirs, crafts, food items (homemade wine, homemade alcohol-rakia, fruit jams, spices, herbs, agricultural and livestock products, etc.), farm-to-table experience and encourage entrepreneurship in building accommodation capabilities, restaurants with traditional cuisine, small craft shops, etc.
- *Monastery tourism* - A large number of monasteries enable to development of this type of tourism by visiting and accommodating the tourists in these religious objects. Besides Monastery San Maria in Slivnica, and Monastery St. Petka in Brajcino, Monastery routes on Mountain Baba and tours to other churches in the area, can be an attractive destination for religious tourism. Joint religious tourist packages with neighboring countries¹² such as Albania and Greece, will increase the interest of tour operators in this region. Different religious and cultural heritage enable to development of combined religious tourist packages, too.
- *Special interest tourism* – Geographical position, mountains, relief, suitable climate, unique flora and fauna, etc., provide many opportunities for the development of niche tourism and special interest tourism. The is favorable for paragliding, and freestyle skiing for hard adventure tourists, hiking, biking, rock climbing, bouldering, study expeditions, etc.

7. Study limitations and future research

In general, the paper focuses on an analytical description of the tourist resources of the region and gives some suggestions on the possibilities of tourism development. The paper does not aim to detect all the negative factors that have prevented the development of tourism, nor to analyze the development policies undertaken by the state for this region. Although, the research highlighted many factors as the main obstacles that hinder the development of tourism, the possibilities and alternatives for solving them should be part of other research in the future. However, the research intends to determine the basic tourist product of the area and within this framework compile detailed strategies that will enable the development of these types of tourism. The improvement of tourist activities in the area requires a very serious commitment from the central and local government, the private sector, various agencies that operate in the function of tourism development, residents, etc., which will be the subject of future research.

¹² Oda A., Zhaku S., Opportunities for the development of religious tourism in the western part of Republic of North Macedonia, *Economic Vision*, Vol.9, No.17/18 (2022).

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