

**ALTERNATIVE TYPES OF TOURISM AS THE BASIS OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM
DEVELOPMENT IN OHRID**

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Abstract: The Ohrid region represents one of the most important tourism destinations in the Republic of N. Macedonia. As a UNESCO World Heritage Site it possesses tourism values that simultaneously create opportunities for economic development and challenges related to heritage preservation and sustainable management. Tourism plays a significant role in the local economy of the Municipality of Ohrid, contributing to employment, regional development, and the diversification of economic activities. However, the rapid growth of tourism, particularly during the summer months, has led to increasing pressures on the environmental, cultural, and social systems. Concerns related to uncontrolled urbanization, traffic congestion, pollution, and overcrowding have raised warnings about the potential inclusion of the Ohrid region on the List of World Heritage in Danger. In this context, sustainable tourism planning and diversification of tourism products represent essential priorities for preserving the Outstanding Universal Value of the region while maintaining its competitiveness as a tourism destination. The aim of this research is to identify and valorize tourism resources within the Municipality of Ohrid that could support the development of alternative and sustainable types of tourism while reducing the spatial and temporal concentration of visitors in the most sensitive tourism sites. The study is the result of the research activities conducted during the preparation of the Strategy for Development of Tourism in the Municipality of Ohrid (2020–2025). A comprehensive methodological approach was applied, including situation analysis, statistical analysis of tourist arrivals and overnight stays, accommodation capacities occupancy rates, and making an inventory and valorization of natural and cultural tourism resources. The results indicate several structural characteristics of tourism development in Ohrid. Tourism activity in the municipality is characterized by strong seasonality, with the highest accommodation occupancy rates recorded during July and August. Additionally, tourism activity is spatially concentrated primarily in the historic city core and the lakeside areas, which contain the majority of the most recognizable cultural and natural attractions. Despite these challenges, the research identified significant opportunities for tourism diversification and spatial redistribution of visitor flows. Several development zones within the municipality possess valuable natural, cultural, and rural resources suitable for alternative tourism development. Rural areas demonstrate considerable potential for agro-tourism, eco-tourism, and gastronomy-based tourism experiences through the use of local farms, traditional food production, forest resources, and authentic rural lifestyles. Cultural and religious heritage assets, including cave churches located along the eastern lakeside cliffs, represent important opportunities for expanding cultural tourism through appropriate conservation and visitor management measures. Furthermore, there are favorable climatic conditions, scenic landscapes, and opportunities for recreation, wellness tourism, and short-stay experiences based on outdoor activities and cultural events. The results suggest that sustainable tourism development in Ohrid requires a balanced strategic approach that combines heritage protection, diversification of tourism products, spatial redistribution of visitor flows, and improved destination management and marketing practices. By promoting underutilized tourism resources and strengthening rural tourism initiatives, the Municipality of Ohrid can reduce overtourism pressures while enhancing visitor experiences and ensuring the long-term sustainability of tourism development.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism, alternative tourism, UNESCO World Heritage Site, overtourism, tourism diversification

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of Ohrid as the most attractive tourist destination in the Republic of N. Macedonia is based on its long tradition, the dedication of management structures in governing the municipality, the stakeholders involved in this activity, and the conditions that imply a connection between the attractive and receptive development base (Risteski & Nestoroska, 2024). Sustainable tourism development in this tourist destination is of particular importance given the fact that the resource base for tourism in this area is unique. Tourism acts as a driver of the overall economic sector, a balancing factor for underdeveloped, predominantly rural areas, and an accelerator of social and cultural advancement.

Strategic tourism planning in the municipality of Ohrid should valorize and optimally utilize its resources, considering the wealth it possesses in both the natural and cultural spheres, which defines it as a priority category. Sustainable tourism development should represent the dominant driving force for the region of Ohrid that would serve as the foundation upon which subsequent actions, plans, and programs will be adopted. This is of particular importance for this region because it is a designated World Heritage Site (mixed property).

Sustainable tourism development should contribute to improving the quality of life, raising the level of visitor satisfaction during their stay, continuously enhancing service quality, generating new values, improving promotional activities, and expanding the focus of the tourism offer toward emissive zones with different segmentation of the tourist clientele. The World Heritage Committee has already considered listing Ohrid as a World Heritage Site in Danger due to increased and uncontrolled urbanization, traffic congestion, planned large infrastructure projects, pollution and overcrowding (UNESCO World Heritage Committee, 2016). This paper is the result of research activities by the authors in preparing a Strategy for Development of Tourism in the Municipality of Ohrid (2020-2025). A complex study was carried out on determining tourism potentials, valorization of tourist attractions, analysis of previous strategies and statistical data analysis. This resulted in recommendations for developing alternative and sustainable types of tourism in the municipality of Ohrid. The goal is to determine and promote such sites and locations for tourism development that will lower the pressures of overtourism to Ohrid's main attractions (Parliament of the Republic of N. Macedonia, 2020). Precisely because of the dual nature of tourism in protected areas—on the one hand providing utilizing natural and cultural capital in the function of the economic development of the regions, and on the other hand, through uncontrolled growth, threatening the Outstanding Universal Values of the region—special emphasis is placed on sustainable tourism development. The World Heritage Committee also emphasizes the following required actions for developing sustainable tourism: Development of branded products in creative industries related to cultural heritage; Labelling of cultural heritage; Development of traditional handicrafts and promoting immaterial heritage of the Ohrid Region; Conducting Carrying Capacity analyses; Visitor Management Plans; as well as Heritage Impact Assessments; Environment Impact Assessments, etc. These recommendations as well as the current global tourism trends guided the research work in the prepared tourism development strategy and in this paper.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

For the purpose of the study a situation analysis was conducted in terms of determining the concentration of visitors throughout the season in the municipality of Ohrid in the registered/categorized accommodation facilities in order to determine if the tourist season needs to be expanded. In accordance with the identified global tourism trends within the National Strategy for Tourism of the Republic of Macedonia (Kohl and Partner, 2016) and in regard to the UNWTO predictions for global tourism development where greater diversification of tourism flows and the rise of emerging destinations are emphasized (World Tourism Organization, 2011), an inventory of natural and cultural values in the Ohrid municipality has been conducted. These identified values underwent a process of valorization in terms of the existing possibilities to be included in sustainable alternative types of tourism.

The aim was to promote such tourism values and attractions that are located out of the old city core which is often overcrowded in the peak months of the tourist season (Korunovski & Risteski, 2023). This means that cultural and lake-side tourism are the dominant types that most tourists are currently seeking. Statistical data about the overnight stays in the last 5 years and the number of available beds in the registered accommodation facilities in the municipality of Ohrid were obtained, primarily through the State Statistical Office and through the close cooperation with the municipal administration related to tourism. These data made it possible to calculate the occupancy rate per months in the municipality which shows the temporal distribution of tourists during the season. In close cooperation with the Sector for Tourism and Local Economic Development of the Municipality of Ohrid and through conducted interviews with stakeholders, the main sites and values within the municipality were identified for development of alternative and sustainable types of tourism. The process of identification (inventory) and valorization of tourism values involved making a distinction between attractions and resources/potentials (Risteski, 2020). Attractions in this sense are the already established and most recognizable tourist sites, localities or values with the highest number

of visitors. Tourism resources on the other hand represent the potential sites, localities or values that could be included in future tourist services/products but need promotion, equipping and infrastructural undertakings (Risteski, Kocevski, & Arnaudov, 2012). Important for the development of alternative and sustainable types of tourism in the municipality of Ohrid are identified and valorized resources and potentials that are not utilized enough (cultural and natural resources alike).

3. RESULTS

Regarding the recommendations by the World Heritage Committee about the Ohrid region as a World Heritage Site related to tourism development, and in accordance with the National Strategy for Tourism, the following global tourism trends were identified as applicable for the Ohrid region: Health; Shorter stays, cultural experience and lifestyle; Information technology and communications; Economic, demographic and marketing trends; Political and security trends and risks. All of the identified trends were evaluated in terms of their attractiveness, the possibilities for providing accommodation and related services, the problems and issues that may arise and the existing perspectives for development.

Regarding Health as a global tourism trend, the region of Ohrid provides excellent possibilities. Namely, the National Park Galichica and Ohrid Lake are the main attractions for tourists who are searching for health related services and recreation activities. Ohrid is known to be an “air spa” because of its relatively milder temperatures and elevation. Interesting places were identified for tourism development: Skrebatno, Kuratica, Velestovo and Rechica, villages located in mountainous areas known for clean air and relatively well preserved nature. Furthermore, there are many marked hiking and mountain biking trails on Galichica. From an organizational point of view there are several associations and organizations for recreational activities (mountaineering, hiking, paragliding).

In terms of possibilities and perspectives related to the tourism trend of shorter stays, experience and culture, Ohrid provides a unique synergy of culture and nature (Dimitrov & Joldeska, 2025). Visitors who seek shorter stays can be diverse. There are classical accommodation possibilities in hotels or private apartments, as well as camping sites or outdoor camping. Ohrid is the cradle of culture with hundreds of churches and holy sites often called “Jerusalem of the Balkans” where renowned cultural events are being organized, such as the Ohrid Summer Festival (Risteski & Risteski, 2016). Traditional handicrafts are also being practiced such as filigree or handmade Ohrid pearls which already represent a brand by itself. Traditional cuisine is also an important potential for further development (Kocevski & Risteski, 2020). Ohrid provides different possibilities can satisfy the diverse tourist needs regarding cultural experiences and lifestyle.

Regarding information technology and communications as an emerging tourism trend, Ohrid is becoming more and more interesting for visitors who travel and work, such as people working in programming, or web/IT developers and designers. However, the level of digitalization and visualization using IT technology is still not developed enough.

Regarding economic, demographic and marketing trends, Ohrid shows some throwbacks. The main issues stem from depopulation of rural areas and local emigration (Risteski, Korunovski, & Georgioska, 2022). As the most developed tourist area in the country, Ohrid tourism contributes significantly to the local economy but it is still unsatisfactory. Marketing promotion is still underdeveloped, but represents a significant potential. Digitalized marketing using social networks and influencers are still unsatisfactory. The positive side is that many products and services already represent recognizable brands (Ohrid trout, Ohrid pearls, Ohrid Summer Festival, Ohrid Lake, St. Naum Monastery).

Political and security trends and risks pose a significant challenge for tourism globally. For Ohrid the main risk is probably climate change, besides global political and security uncertainties. Locally, Ohrid is regarded as a relatively safe place for visitors and tourists, even in the peak season (Ministry of Internal Affairs - Ohrid, 2024). Even active types of tourism (adventure tourism) are relatively safe in Ohrid. There exist organized mountain rescue and lake rescue services in the municipality of Ohrid.

From the statistical analysis it can be concluded that tourism revenues in Ohrid contribute to 1.5% of the total GDP of RN Macedonia. The income of employees in the Accommodation and Food Services Sector in Ohrid amounts to 6.24% of the total incomes in the municipality (Biljan & Trajkov, 2018) while the employment rate is lower than the countries average (Sekulovska, Marinoski, Nestoroska, & Risteski, 2018). In 2024 a total of 363.281 tourists visited Ohrid with a total of 1.194.516 nights spent. Foreign arrivals exceeded domestic arrivals by 1.46 times. While domestic overnights exceeded foreign by 1.7 times. This means that fewer domestic tourists spent more nights in Ohrid than foreign tourists. (State Statistical Office of RNM - MakStat Database, 2024). This disproportion is most probably higher, given the fact that many private accommodation facilities are not registered officially but provide accommodation services to domestic tourists. The occupancy rate of accommodation facilities in Ohrid are also not evenly spread throughout the tourist season (Andreeski, Marinoski, Korunovski, & Risteski, 2020). The highest

values are recorded in the months of July and August (77% and 86% respectively), while the lowest in January and February with a registered occupancy rate of only 2%. This speaks about the high level of seasonality of the municipality of Ohrid and the unprofitable situation for the accommodation facilities which mostly operate during the summer season only. The pressures on the environmental and social spheres are also significant during the peak season and can have many irreparable consequences.

The different identified tourist resources and potentials were appointed to different tourism zones within the Strategy for Development of Tourism in the Municipality of Ohrid (Andreeski et al, 2020). In the interest do redirect tourist flows away from the most vulnerable areas, such as the city core of Ohrid and Galichica National Park, excluded are the zones: *Old city core*, *New part of Ohrid* and *Galichica*. The reason for their exclusion is that most tourist attractions are located and most visitors are concentrated (Korunovski & Risteski, 2023). The zone *Former municipality of Kosel* is located in the northern part of the municipality of Ohrid. It is a rural region where tourism development is still in its infancy. Some of the villages that could become tourist sites are Vapila, Kosel, Rechica, Skrebatno, Kuratica. Identified values in this zone are: small livestock bio-farms (goats, sheep, cows, piglets, etc.), small rural organic gardens (vegetables and fruits), locally produced food and gastronomy, forest fruits (plums, apples, mushrooms, cornelian cherries, wild cherries, wild strawberries, teas and other herbs), centuries-old beech and oak forests, mountain streams and springs, forest trails and roads. The village of Skrebatno is interesting for its gastronomic event and a famous picnic area for the locals during spring and summer. Kuratica is known for its carnival, while the village of Kosel for its unique geological phenomenon (solfatara). The villages of Openica and Zavoj are interesting for eco-tourism activities. The agro-tourism potential has not been fully utilized.

The tourist zone of *Eastern lakeside* is already known for the beaches where most visitors go during the summer months. However, the cliffs are interesting for its cave churches that represent an important potential for cultural/religious tourism. They need to be adapted for tourist visits. This involves the restoration/protection of frescoes. Some of the camping areas are located in this zone which can be used for accommodation of tourists out of the main tourism season.

The *Peri-Galichica development zone* encompasses the foothills of the mountain Galichica and includes three villages: Velgoshti, Ramne and Velestovo. This is mainly an area that offers beautiful panoramic views on the lake and the mountain area. Its elevated location allows it to function as an “air spa”. Considering the level of development and the distribution of weekend houses and villas, it can already be regarded as a weekend recreational zone. This zone is also characterized by religious events (St. Petka) and literary evenings (Velgoshti and Velestovo) important for religious and event tourism.

4. DISCUSSIONS

The results of the research confirm that the Municipality of Ohrid possesses significant potential for the development of diversified and sustainable tourism forms that could contribute to reducing the existing spatial and temporal concentration of tourism. Despite the high attractiveness of the region and its internationally recognized heritage status, tourism development in Ohrid remains strongly characterized by seasonality, spatial concentration, and insufficient diversification of tourism products. These issues pose challenges not only for the economic sustainability of the tourism sector but also for the preservation of the Outstanding Universal Value of the region.

The statistical analysis clearly demonstrates that tourism activity in Ohrid is highly concentrated during the summer months, which negatively affects the profitability and long-term sustainability of accommodation facilities and tourism-related businesses. At the same time, this concentration of visitors creates significant pressure on the environmental and social systems of the destination during peak periods.

Another important issue is the spatial concentration of tourism in the old city core of Ohrid and the lakeside areas. These locations contain the majority of cultural and natural attractions, which leads to overcrowding and increased pressure on infrastructure, heritage sites, and local communities (as recognized as warnings by the World Heritage Committee. In this context, redirecting tourist flows toward alternative zones within the municipality represents an important strategy for mitigating overtourism and supporting more balanced regional development.

The identification and valorization of tourism potentials outside the traditional tourism core demonstrate that the municipality has significant opportunities for diversification of tourism products. Rural areas contain valuable resources suitable for the development of agro-tourism, eco-tourism, and gastronomy-based tourism experiences. The presence of small livestock farms, organic gardens, traditional food production, and forest products reflects a strong potential for authentic rural tourism experiences that correspond to contemporary tourism trends focused on sustainability, local culture, and nature-based activities. At the same time, the preservation of traditional lifestyles and local heritage can contribute to strengthening local identity and creating additional economic opportunities for rural communities.

Similarly, the development of cultural and religious tourism through the valorization of cave churches and historical religious sites represent an important potential for tourism development in Ohrid. However, the development of tourism in this area should be carefully managed through controlled access, visitor management, interpretation systems, and infrastructure improvements.

The mountainous areas also represent an important opportunity for tourism diversification. Its favorable climatic conditions, panoramic landscapes, and proximity to the main tourist center of Ohrid make it suitable for recreation, wellness tourism, and short-stay tourism experiences through enriching tourist experiences and preserving local traditions.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Contemporary tourists increasingly seek authentic experiences, nature-based activities, health and wellness opportunities, and cultural engagement rather than traditional mass tourism. Ohrid's natural environment, cultural heritage, and traditional gastronomy are well positioned to meet these expectations. However, the current level of digitalization, tourism marketing, and technological integration remains limited. Improving digital promotion, developing interactive visitor experiences, and utilizing modern communication technologies could significantly enhance the international visibility of the destination and attract new segments of visitors, including digital nomads and experience-oriented travelers.

Another important aspect is the socio-economic dimension of tourism development. Although tourism contributes to local economic activity and employment, its overall contribution remains relatively modest considering the tourism potential of the region. Rural depopulation and migration trends further limit the capacity for sustainable tourism development, especially in villages that possess significant tourism resources but lack human and financial capital for development. Encouraging community-based tourism initiatives and supporting local entrepreneurship could therefore play an important role in strengthening rural tourism and ensuring that tourism benefits are more evenly distributed across the municipality.

Overall, the results of this study indicate that sustainable tourism development in Ohrid requires a balanced approach that combines heritage protection, diversification of tourism products, spatial redistribution of visitor flows, and improved management and marketing strategies. By utilizing its rich natural and cultural resources in a more strategic and sustainable manner, the municipality of Ohrid can enhance its competitiveness as a tourism destination while simultaneously preserving the values that justify its status as a World Heritage Site.

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