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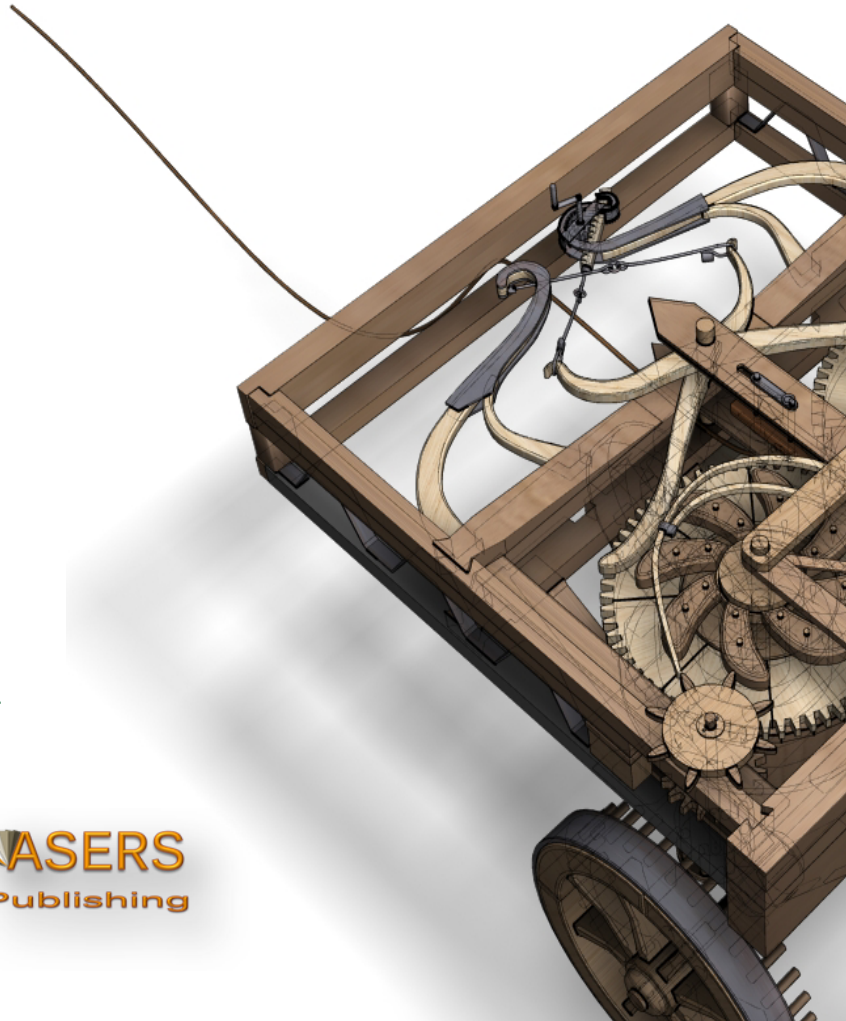
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Call for Papers

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Journal of Environmental Management and Tourism

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Promoting Albania's Tourist Attractions: Tourist Guides and Marketing Strategies for the Successful Management of Tour Groups

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Abstract: Currently, Albania is a growing destination for foreign tourists because the country offers diverse natural, cultural, historical, and spiritual sites. Thanks to the contribution of national and foreign archaeologists, who have shed light on the rich Albanian archaeology, these sites have today received the designation of tourist destinations. However, the current situation does not reflect the full potential of Albania in this field because the country has many more discovered areas that need to be brought to light and promoted. Just as there are, a significant number of historical and cultural objects need to be treated and revived according to the standards of the time. Likewise, there is a need for the tourist guides to find new ways of marketing while leading and guiding the groups of tourists. The purpose of this study is to highlight the problems of promoting tourist attractions and handling cultural objects as well as to suggest new alternatives that are more efficient and compatible with the demands of the time. The methodology used in this research is a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodology. Specifically, for data collection, the main instruments used are a semi-structured interview and a focus group. Also, we have tried to extract data from tourist subjects, the institute of monuments and representatives of the tourism community, through which we have managed to draw conclusions and suggestions. The analysis of the data obtained in this study highlights the urgent need for a new and moderate conception and attitude for the strategy of promoting Albania's tourist attractions. The Albanian monuments of cultural heritage, as a precious asset, should take a special importance in the life of the country, through the functional promotion that becomes part of the life of its own citizens.

Keywords: cultural tourism; tourist attractions; tourist guide; management of cultural monuments; revitalization of cultural heritage.

JEL Classification: Z32; R11.

Introduction

This research focuses on the current demand for effective strategies on the management and especially the promotion of cultural heritage works, seeing this as a basic element to develop a sustainable cultural tourism. In recent years, a tourist movement has been noticed in Albania, which is increasing from year to year. Part of this movement is also the cultural tourism movement, which occupies the main place in the general tourism agenda in our country. For this purpose, our study focuses on the analysis and evaluation of tourism developments to identify problems as well as to argue the need to review and design more effective strategies in our tourism services.

The study was implemented through the qualitative and quantitative approach of scientific research, mainly through interviews with focus groups, but also with individuals. For this purpose, the instrument was built with seven basic questions related to the purpose and objectives of the scientific investigation. This instrument was constructed as an open-ended guide to generate and stimulate discussion about tourism experiences and

practices in Albania. The findings of this study coincide with the findings of many similar studies conducted in other countries that have consolidated experiences in this direction.

Currently, the interest in touristic Albania has been manifested in all dimensions, especially during the year 2023, and a historical record is foreseen until the end of this year. Consequently, such an increasing figure of the tourist movement means even more visitors to the country's cultural monuments. If we refer more specifically to the official data of the Ministry of Tourism and Environment (2023), they speak of a 67% increase in tourists to these monuments in June 2023, compared to the same period a year ago. So, the first six months of 2023 marks a total increase of 53% in the number of visitors to cultural monuments compared to the same six-month period of the previous year. The most visited objects in the country are the archaeological parks and the historical-cultural monuments, which have also recorded record revenues. The Castle of Gjirokastra has the largest number of visitors, followed by the Archaeological Park of Shkodra, the Archaeological Park of Butrint, and the Durrës amphitheater. More specifically, Gjirokastra Castle was visited by 50.6 thousand visitors in the first six months of the year, twice as much compared to the same period in 2022. Shkodra Archaeological Park, 53 thousand visitors or 30% more visitors in January-June 2023, compared to the same period a year ago. Butrint Park in January-June was visited by at least 37.2 thousand tourists, mainly from elite groups, a category which pays a lot of attention. The Amphitheater of Durrës had nine thousand visitors, with an increase of 64%, compared to the first 6 months of 2022 (Maho 2023).

The year 2023 is defined by the Albanian authorities as "the year of the tourist boom", but regardless of this growing trend, to ensure a sustainability and further growth of the tourist movement, first, it would be good to make an assessment of it from all administrative structures to record what went well and where the deficiencies are, or what can be corrected in accordance with international standards. Secondly, we think that it is worthwhile to work for awareness to create a new concept, especially for cultural tourism and its development. Third, concrete measures should be taken to align the treatment and management of our cultural heritage works with the standards of developed countries. Referring to international practices, there are many examples of the integration of cultural heritage in socio-economic development. Examples include urban and rural, national and local spaces in both industrialized and developing countries such as in England, European Union countries, Canada, Australia, Japan, Middle Eastern countries, North African countries and others (World Bank, 2001). However, referring to the researchers (Trautmann, *et al.* 2005), we must emphasize that the cultural heritage, treated in terms of development, still remains an area that needs further research both theoretically and practically.

1. Literature Review

At the end of the 20th century, specifically in 1999, the concept of cultural heritage, given by UNESCO (2003) and accepted internationally, includes material and non-material cultural heritage, as well as the environment. In recent heritage publications, explanations of this concept are evident in the spatial context (in relation to place, leisure and tourism) and in historical reality, national identity, planning and conservation, formal and informal education, business and modelling. According to researchers in this field (Yahaya 2006), the most characteristic elements of inheritance are elasticity and dynamism. What makes heritage resilient is the fact that, in its broad sense, it includes "*everything that is inherited from the past*", and in the narrow sense, it includes what has historical and cultural significance. Other definitions define culture as contemporary purposes of the past, or that part of the past which we have selected in the present for contemporary purposes, whether economic, cultural, political or social (UNESCO, 2003).

According to Colin Michael Hall and Mc Arthur (1996), four main heritage values are identified: economic values, which are related to the generation of income that comes to a country as a result of the use of this heritage for tourism and recreation purposes; social and cultural values, which are expressed in a person's strong spiritual connection with the country and his identity at the local and national level; scientific and educational values, which are expressed in the transmission of cultural values from one generation to another, to better understand the high cultural level that characterizes the period of their construction; and political value, which is expressed through the use of cultural heritage and the values it contains by politicians to promote their historical values and national identity.

A more complete definition of cultural heritage has been given by the Japanese researcher Tolina Loulanski (2006a), according to which cultural heritage includes aspects of material culture - sites, buildings, landscapes, monuments and objects, as well as immaterial (spiritual) culture. The idea that the recognition and preservation of cultural heritage can be economically beneficial goes back to 1970, when the UNDP and the World Bank began to provide funds for the protection of building environments and the development of

handicrafts, justifying them in purely economic terms. Cultural heritage is increasingly recognized as a public good (Rypkema 1999). While, in the non-economic evaluation, cultural heritage is considered as a value for education and awareness, cultivation of identity, social cohesion, development of human potential as well as preservation and transmission to future generations. While some researchers (Hall M. *et al.* 1996) view the valuation of cultural heritage in economic terms with risk, others try to provide methods to demonstrate the potential benefits. But good management is key for cultural heritage to be used for development purposes. For this, the World Bank points out that cultural heritage can increase values, can reap benefits, while assets are effectively preserved. Far from being only a liability for national budgets, heritage is increasingly becoming an "added value". This means that a somewhat different concept must be created for tourism in general, and for cultural tourism in particular.

The World Tourism Organization (WTO) defines tourism as the activities of individuals during their travel and stay in a country outside their usual place of residence, in a period of less than one year, for leisure, business or other purposes (WTO, 2010). In this view, the European Organization of Tourism and Leisure (ATLAS) describes cultural tourism as the movement of people towards cultural attractions, away from their place of residence, in order to gather information and experiences to satisfy the needs of their cultural. Researcher Catherine Trautmann (1994) points out that cultural tourism is not only cultural heritage tourism. Cultural tourism works as a network. Indeed, it includes types of art, such as dance, music, theatre. Thus, cultural tourism can be seen as the visit of people from abroad motivated in whole or in part by the hospitality of the community, with an interest in the historical, artistic, scientific heritage or lifestyle offered by a community, a region, a group, or an institution. The increasing inclusion of culture in tourism as a basic component for the tourism industry is a change that has led many authors to suggest that the current growth of cultural tourism is something "new" and qualitatively and quantitatively different from the cultural tourism of Grand Tour. However, guided tours can be more effective if they are part of a long-term dynamic process (Burrai *et al.* 2023).

There are several ways in which people conceptualize tourism and do tourism. Theresa Rappensperger (2023) says that, for her, tourism is when she is offline and is skiing or hiking in the mountains. Meanwhile, Kevin Eagan (2024) sees tourism as connected to technology. He indicates that important technological developments, such as artificial intelligence (AI) and green technology, are going to impact the tourism industry through 2024, resulting in beneficial outcomes for travellers, hotels, hosts, vacation rental leaders, OTAs, and other tourism businesses that can forecast future growth (Eagan 2024). Cultural tourism is also undergoing changes in both terms: in the way in which tourists consume culture and in the way in which culture is offered for tourist consumption. Cultural tourism has repeatedly been identified as a powerful economic and social resource, a development asset that can be used as a catalyst for local development, provide employment, generate income, revitalize urban and rural spaces, protect of the environment and the strengthening of social communities (Richards 1996). Forecasts show that investments in cultural heritage will increase even further, making it the most important product of the 21st century, determining the future of communities (Willmott, *et al.* 2001). This means that cultural tourism is part of sustainable development, along with the other three components, economy, society, and environment. Numerous social and economic benefits can be achieved from its appreciation and protection. According to Japanese researcher Loulanski (1996b), attention and debates between theorists and practitioners should focus not so much on the question of "if" but on the question of "how" cultural heritage, tourism and development can be successfully integrated in a sustainable manner?

2. Research Methodology

As mentioned above, the methodology we use to elaborate on this topic is mainly qualitative methodology. For data collection, the main instrument is a semi-structured interview with a focus group. But in order to provide sufficient data and to help in understanding the current tourist situation in our country, we also used some ready statistical data obtained from the Portal of the Ministry of Tourism and Environment of Albania.

3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to help create a clear and more complete vision for the management of our cultural heritage, seeing this in relation to the new situation of the tourist movement in general and cultural tourism in particular.

4. Objectives of the Study

- To assess the current state of how cultural heritage is treated and promoted.

- To highlight the problems that tourist attractions are facing today and to contribute in any way to overcoming them.
- To suggest new innovative ideas for the treatment and promotion of tourist attractions according to the standards of the time.
- To give orientations on the enrichment of typologies and marketing alternatives of these attractions.
- To give suggestions and solutions, for the quality of performance, with tourist groups during the development of guides and the practice of historical and cultural tourism.
- These ideas should be put to the function of institutions or subjects, which deal with hospitality tourism.

5. Limitations and Limitations of the Study

Regardless of the results, this study has some limitations that should be addressed in future research in the field of cultural heritage management strategies. First, this study is not a purely longitudinal study, nor does it aim to get inside the problem it deals with. Second, the study did not extend to a generalizing sample and did not touch many variables of the relationship of cultural heritage with cultural tourism. Thirdly, the study did not include all the target regional territories of our country, but only in a limited sample of 54 visiting subjects and managers or specialists of some of the most important territories of our cultural heritage. Also, in the study, no other method of expanding information was used to ensure comprehensive benefits, except for the focus group method and some statistical data.

6. Ethical Issues

First, the subjects were informed of the request to be part of the study as well as their informed consent. Also, the participants were made aware of the importance of confidentiality, which includes not disclosing any information brought up during the focus group discussion. Likewise, before the focus group interview, respect for the diversity of everyone's thoughts, perspectives and experiences was requested, as a high ethical consideration in a group communication.

7. Data Collection and Analysis

Based on the concept of Krueger and Casey (2000), the collection and analysis of data is put at the service of realizing the purpose of the study. For this reason, our analysis also went through meaningful units of identification, coding these units in relation to the context, goals and objectives of the study. This procedure is known as the "open coding process" in the literature (Berg 2001). Also, the data were coded in terms of the frequency of mention of terms by the participants, for similar terms for the same or similar purpose questions (Gough and Madill 2008).

The coding process went through a comparative phase in a comparative axial axis, evaluating and repairing the data several times to understand differences and similarities, obtaining issues related to the study participants' interpretation of the topic while converging with the goals and study objectives. The data analysis of this study is presented in three tables, which summarize the demographic data in (Table 1), the most frequent citations from the data collection, the coding of terms and the classification of conceptual categories in (Table 2), and in (Table 3) where conceptual indicators of classifications are listed as findings and conclusions of the study, whenever in accordance with the purpose and objectives of this study.

Table 1. Presentation of demographic data

No. of participants	54 subjects
Gender	40 (M) and 14 (W)
Age	39 – 61 years old
Schooling	Highier and medium education
Time period	May- September 2023
Citizenship	40 foreigners and 14 Albanians
Region	Tirana, Berat, Korça, Gjirokastra, Saranda

Comment: The table above presents demographic data of the subjects that were part of this study. More specifically, subjects (40 men and 14 women) were activated in the study. Of them, 40 have Italian citizenship and 14 have Albanian citizenship. 5 focus group interviews were conducted (4 interviews with Albanians, who were employees and specialists in the Regional Directorates of Culture as well as operators of tourist agencies, while 1 interview was conducted with Italian tourists during a 5-day tourist itinerary that they conducted in Albania during the year 2023). The data were collected in regions such as Tirana, Berat, Korça, Gjirokastra, and Saranda.

Table 2. Citations, indicators, codes

<i>Citations</i>	<i>Indicators</i>	<i>Codes</i>
I had other thoughts about Albania and its cultural heritage.	Country image	The tourist movement has a strong influence on the growth of the image of a country.
I changed my opinion about cultural tourism and its real values, that's why I practice it.		
Tourism satisfies my interests when it is well directed and managed.	Cultural heritage	Monuments of material culture (medieval castles, arched bridges, museums and others) and monuments of immaterial culture (Folk costumes and traditional clothing, customs and ceremonial rites, traditional songs and dances, traditional cooking and serving food and others).
I think cultural tourism is at the top of the list. We want to see as many concrete things as possible and not too many stories.	Management strategy	There is a need for effective strategies in the management of cultural heritage.
The tourist movement is more oriented towards cultural monuments, but I want to practice other innovations of tourist activities.	Cultural tourism	Tourist movement towards a country or region to get to know the culture, history, art, architecture, religion and other elements that have helped in the way of life.
The tourist movement is more oriented towards cultural monuments, but I want to practice other innovations of tourist activities.	Cultural ecotourism	Tourist activities for flora and fauna, intertwined with material and spiritual cultural heritage.
I practice more cultural Ecotourism. I want to explore nature, its beauties and values as much as possible.	GIS technology	GIS, Information Device (digital geo-information), which serves all tourists, to get a detailed information on cultural objects as well as the identification of their location, planning well and faster their tourist tour.
I practice tourist movements with groups, walking or horseback to areas that are far from large urban centres.	Typology of tourist activities	Development of diverse tourist activities that practice the sport of skiing, tourist trips with special cars, walking or horseback in groups to areas with natural wealth: characteristic rivers, karst caves, waterfalls and others.

The analysis of qualitative data in this study, in order to arrive at assessments and conclusions, has been subjected to a long process of deductive reasoning, passing the stages of de- contextualization, dividing the quotes into small units of meaning. In the re-contextualization phase, checking that all aspects of the content are related to the purpose of the study (Burnard, 1991). From the analysis of the quantitative data that we were able to provide from the Portal of the Ministry of Tourism and Environment, it is noted that in the last three years there is an increase in the tourist movement in all its indicators. Thus, more specifically, in Albania, there are 621 tourist agencies distributed throughout the territory, 222 tourist operators and 522 tourist guides. If we refer to the data below (Graphic 1), we must emphasize that from 2021 the number of certified national and local tourist guides has increased.

Table 3. Certified tourist guides during the years 2021-2023

Year	For national category	For category local	Total
2021	35	6	41
2022	54	2	56
2023	118	6	124

Graphic 1. Certified tourist guides during the years 2021-2023.



Comment: From the analysis of quantitative data, we come to the conclusion that the tourism movement of recent years increases the responsibility of the institutions that deal with its management to show continued care not only for the expansion and extension of tourist units throughout the territory of the country, but also to increase the care for increasing the quality of the tourist service by the subjects and operators through their training and licensing.

Table 4. Summary table of study findings

The value	The codes
Reflection in thought	The tourist movement affects the thinking and attitude differently.
Vision for the future	The tourist movement affects the growth of the country's image, opens development perspectives.
New management strategies	The tourist movement influences the increase of care for the cultural heritage, draws up development, monitoring and management plans.
Increasing professionalism	The tourist movement affects the increase of professionalism to increase the quality of services to tourists.
Social/economic benefits	The tourist movement affects the increase in employment and income level.
Other material benefits	The tourist movement affects the improvement of tourist infrastructure and information technology.
Enriches promotional ability	The tourist movement affects the improvement of promotional experiences, enlivens the regional market.

8. Study Findings and Their Discussion

Based on the growth of the tourist movement in the Albanian reality in recent years, and based on the analysis of the data and facts that we have been able to provide, we are listing the findings of our research as follows:

The first finding is related to the fact that in recent years in Albania, especially during the year 2023, a "boom" of the tourist influx has been observed, and all the actors involved in it have begun to reflect, thinking somewhat differently to understand the usefulness of this movement and to take measures to ensure that this trend remains sustainable and develops further in the years to come. What stands out is that in today's Albania, the tourist movement is more oriented towards cultural tourism. The interviewees emphasize that, in the years we have left behind, we have lacked a clear vision for cultural heritage and continued care for it. In this direction, there have been shortcomings not only in terms of the concept for the development of cultural heritage and especially in terms of its treatment or management, but also in legal aspects, since many problems that our heritage has encountered have not been found solution due to vacuums or legal loopholes. In this view, the Law on Cultural Heritage (2003), although it is a relatively new law, it has become more than necessary to reformulate it in order to help and orient it concretely in solving the many problems that our heritage has faced. Regarding the improvement of the Law on Inheritance, not only our specialists, but also international organizations such as ICOMOS and others should be invited to contribute. In recent years, the Albanian government has drawn up and approved a series of laws, by-laws and instructions in record time, but the truth is that many of them have been defective both in content and in technical terms.

The second finding is related to the fact that the network of state institutions that are responsible for our cultural heritage, so far has not functioned well, and has not been able to protect and manage it properly. In this

direction, remarks and suggestions have also been made by foreign experts regarding the deficiencies in human resources as well as efforts to preserve its values during the implementation of restoration projects. According to our specialists, in this regard, it was better to work only in the historical centres of Berat and Gjirokastra, where restoration interventions were made within normal parameters, and this came from the fact that they were monitored by UNESCO specialists. We emphasize this fact since the preservation of cultural monuments as well as restoration interventions are among the main commitments of the actors involved in the management of cultural heritage. From the monitoring of the current state of the management of cultural monuments in the area of our study, in recent years it has been noticed the increase in the interest of our actors as well as many foreign organizations involved in the process for the protection of monuments in areas with rich heritage such as and increasing the number of projects for the restoration of damaged buildings during the transition years.

The third finding is related to the fact that local government institutions are becoming aware of the importance of drafting concrete plans in rural areas to manage cultural heritage in their territory. In this regard, the main responsibility falls on the local government itself, because its structures have not been seriously engaged in properly presenting the real values of works or objects of cultural heritage in their community, or in the general public and especially in the clientele tourist income. In addition, during the years of transition that Albania is going through, the lack of qualified personnel in the Regional Centres of Culture has been noticed. In fact, in the Regional Directories of culture, there were not enough and genuine specialists (administrators, architects, restorers, historians, translators or cicerones, etc.) to deal concretely with the administration of the cultural heritage and especially with the promotion of its values. In addition, their absence has made the work to educate the public and especially the young generation with the historical and original values of our people, referring to the cultural monuments or visiting the works of our cultural heritage for this purpose. In the same way, the interaction with the main consumers of culture, such as schools, different tourist operators, public and private, as well as planned educational activities in school curricula, has been missing.

The fourth finding is related to the fact that the tourist movement has influenced the improvement of the tourist infrastructure. In this direction, in addition to investments for the development of tourist capacities (hotels, bars, restaurants, etc.), the training of staff has become necessary, as actors of the services offered by tourist agencies and all tourist structures. These trainings aim to increase the quality of services related to food serving, hotel services, reception, communication in foreign languages and more. Likewise, Tourist Houses, especially in cultural centres, are being encouraged to advertise their traditional products, in order for tourists to see what is offered to them, especially tourists interested in the typical cuisine of all regions. Regarding hotels, under the pressure of the tourist movement, the tendency to increase their capacity and the extent of attendance throughout the year is being observed, improving the quality of services.

The fifth finding has to do with the fact that, in recent years, Albania has begun to pay more attention to the improvement of information technology in the management of cultural heritage, using modern technology, such as the use of GIS technology, which assists in the management of cultural heritage through the creation of geo-information, which is digital information that helps management actors to more easily locate damaged objects and the values they contain. Also, this information serves all tourists, domestic and especially foreign ones, who have the cultural one as the main motivation of the tourist movement. The ease of use of this geo-information gives them the opportunity to get detailed information on cultural objects as well as their location, planning their touristic tour well and faster.

The sixth finding is related to the fact that we have started gaining new experiences in relation to the promotion of cultural heritage through the organization of holidays, events, fairs by local enterprises, both in urban areas and in rural areas. This affects the stay of tourists for a longer time and consequently, their expenses would be higher. In this way, the local population is encouraged or motivated to be an active participant in the organization of cultural events in the area and beyond, presenting traditional products. Likewise, community participation in the promotion of cultural heritage and the design of development strategies at the local and regional level has begun to be valued more and more, becoming the main beneficiary of the development of regional cultural tourism.

The seventh finding is related to the increase in the number of tourist agencies, which have begun to promote local cultural tourism attractions, including them not only in one-day excursions, but also in tourist packages with longer stays, where the development of guides is also practiced in deep rural areas. This fact is positive, since in recent years, thanks to these initiatives, the licensing process has also begun for the employees of these agencies. This affects the increase of knowledge and quality in tourist services and satisfying the interests of local tourists, but above all foreign ones. Through national and local tourist guides, more space and territorial extension has begun to be given to the tourist movement and the promotion of these attractions.

The eighth finding shows that not only agencies and tourist guides, but also national and regional media, have begun to contribute more and more to the promotion of cultural values, products and attractions. This is through TV shows and documentaries, where the presenters of these shows put themselves in the role of tourist, visitor, explorer and even ethnographer or tourist guide.

The ninth finding illustrates that the profession of tourist guide, is a very good instrument which has served not only the protection and promotion policies of current tourist attractions, but also the bringing to light or advertising of new tourist attractions, as well as the implementation of strategic plans in tourism marketing and inclusion in various research projects.

The last finding indicates that there is an increased interest of tourists in the historical objects of the period of monism, and there are even many premises for these objects to turn into attractions of black tourism or dark tourism.

Conclusions

In the current conditions of integration, Albania is increasingly becoming an attractive country for foreign visitors, but *host or active tourism* highlights the demand for *a better management* of the works of the cultural heritage and the need for effective strategies in the promotion of their values. This means that the time has come for our cultural heritage to become functional, to popularize, to enliven the civic spiritual life, to increase human and financial resources.

Currently, in Albania, it has become necessary to reform the entire organizational scheme of state institutions that deal with cultural heritage to bring a contemporary spirit and a modern attitude regarding the protection, restoration, management and promotion of its values. This must be in sync with the requirement to place professionalism at the foundation of every activity within this field and operating according to a long-term strategy that ensures a correct and effective management of our cultural heritage. The time has come to appreciate and become aware of the values of our cultural heritage, awakening interests and increasing attention to them. Integrating does not mean losing the original, special national identity, but knowing how to treat, how to save this wealth built over centuries, how to present its values, how to preserve and pass them on these values to future generations.

The protection of the cultural heritage and the promotion of its values should be seen as one of the main factors contributing to the European integration of the Albanian society. This should serve as a basis for the development of cultural tourism and as support for the sustainable economic development of our country. Although many problems are encountered in this direction, it should be emphasized that, currently, the tourism sector and its development constitute one of the best opportunities to improve the image of Albania and to develop economically, creating premises for better living standards for its population. For this, we think that clearer and more complete concepts should be developed for the contribution of the tourist movement and its further development. This means that Albania offers quite good potentials in the historical and cultural context, but unlike other Mediterranean countries, these potentials have not been properly used to date, but they are best discovered and required by sustainable development and further of the tourist movement.

The more moderate treatment of our cultural heritage means looking at it also in the mutual relations that are created between it and the development of historical and cultural tourism, about which there is so much talk recently, truly appreciating the great contribution that the interventions make restorative and conservative in its successful practice. It is known that historical and cultural tourism is a very good instrument for strengthening Albanian tourism in general, but, on the other hand, it should be emphasized that to develop and adapt it according to the standards or requirements of the time, more knowledge and creative skills are needed. In the tourist destinations frequented by tourists, there should not only be restored and carefully maintained objects, but also the environment around them should be organized with accessible routes, with physical or digital orientation maps as well as with physical or electronic information boards to orient visitors. In addition, the need for qualified people, who must deal not only with the care of the monuments, but also with the development of animation or recreational activities is always growing. The need for better legal protection of cultural heritage and the awareness of the population about the important role it plays in the development of the country is also increasing.

Today, historical and cultural tourism ranks at the top of the classification and is among the typologies of tourist activities most preferred by tourist agencies and groups of tourists, when they design itineraries or develop tourist guides in Albania. But this also highlights the urgent demand for promoting the values of our heritage, as an important element of strategic plans and sustainable tourism. The time has come that the design and management of projects with an impact in the field of cultural heritage must be done in close cooperation with local communities, sensitizing the population and especially the young generation so that they themselves

become aware of protecting cultural heritage and its values. This presupposes that it is needed to change the approach to cultural monuments, treating them according to the standards of the time, as it happens in the civilized world.

It should be noted that in recent year, important steps have been taken in the good management of tourist movements and in proving the material and spiritual cultural heritage, practicing the development of tourist guides to historical and cultural centres with national tourist guides, local tourist guides or special tourist guides who operate as trained and licensed professionals. It is worth emphasizing that this is really a strategic plan, which serves to promote the cultural heritage and save it, as well as to find alternative opportunities for the employment of the new generation which paves the way for sustainable tourism and economic development of the country.

If we take into account the great prospects that the monuments have received in the framework of the development of a cultural tourism, in those environments where tourism is the primary economic activity for the relevant entities, whether from the local government or private entities, special attention should be paid to tourist propaganda, by publishing various written or electronic materials for the tourist clientele. Their presentation should be done intentionally in different meetings, offering the tourist clientele the cultural values of different territories through leaflets, posters, panoramas, video clips of tourist guides, etc. Today, this is common practice for any tourist environment.

This paper constitutes a step in the field of cultural heritage study from the point of view of its integration in the socio-economic development of a regional or local space. It would be of interest that other studies in the future focus on the broad analysis of the economic, social and cultural effects that derive from placing the values of cultural heritage in the function of tourism development. Cultural tourism, considered as a concrete development alternative, can be studied more broadly and more deeply, being coordinated with such development experiences from neighbouring countries or beyond.

Suggestions and Recommendations

Wanting to contribute to solving the circle of problems that Albania's heritage faces today, below we are giving some suggestions and recommendations, which are triggered not only by the reflection we made about the "boom" or the explosion of the tourist movement in Albania during the year 2023, but also from concrete data that we have collected in the field, as well as comments, suggestions or proposals of specialists as well-versed in this field. Our suggestions are as follows:

First, currently, in Albania, it is necessary to reform and restructure the scheme of institutions dealing with our cultural heritage. It is suggested that this reform be done in accordance with the standards required by UNESCO, EC, ICOMOS, ICROM and others to ensure clarification of the duties and competencies of every institution that deals with cultural heritage, its treatment and management. The promoter of this reform movement should be the Albanian government itself, responsible central and local institutions as well as tourist agencies, which are increasing every day.

Second, nowadays in Albania, it is more necessary to renew and expand the concept of tourism in general and cultural tourism in particular. In this direction, there is a need for new information and knowledge, for better quality tourist services and for the range of trained and certified professionals to expand further. This would pave the way for finding effective strategies that ensure diverse typologies of activities for tourists visiting Albania, would satisfy their interests, and serve as a basis for maintaining the sustainability of the tourist movement.

Third, it is suggested to pay special attention to the development of tourist infrastructure, providing suitable facilities for tourist movement. More specifically, we have many opportunities in this direction, even with little expenses, such facilities can be provided where, for example, group trips on foot (*off-road*); with bicycles (*biking-tour*); cultural ecotourism (*hiking and trekking*); skiing (*ski-tour*) in mountain areas or tourist villages; tourist activities with a focus on sailing in characteristic rivers, canyons (*rafting, kayak, canoe*), etc.

Fourth, it is suggested that the government should support tourist agencies to pay more attention to the marketing of tourist destinations. Even in our country, historical and cultural tourism remains the most preferred for tourists. Albanian tourist agencies should pay more attention to the promotion of the cultural identity of our people, suggesting typologies of activities that were mentioned above, stimulating the development of improvised guides with volunteer groups, or rehabilitating, restoring and activating the objects that encourage special tourist activity. Thus, this recreation gives the possibility of developing a year-round tourism, and as a result, it paves the way for sustainable tourism in the country. In this regard, the promotion of digital media and animation marketing would be of incalculable value.

Fifth, it is suggested by our specialists that, at the Ministry of Culture, it should be established a special centre which deals with the management of cultural heritage, its development. This centre should have a special

focus on the development of new heritage potentials in permanent consultation with the residents and owners of the respective areas for the promotion of heritage values, seeing this as a key component for the development of local tourism.

Sixth, it is suggested to define clear criteria for the recruitment of tourism service employees. For this reason, it is suggested that the Regional Directorates of Culture employ qualified specialists in the field of restoration, from the field of archaeology as well as that of education, translators and lecturers (cicerones). They do not only control the works within the territory and keep under control the objects declared cultural heritage, but also bring to light the potential of their values in front of visitors or tourist clientele.

Seventh, the national or local tourist guides should be heard more and be more involved in policies and strategic plans related to the promotion of current and new Albanian tourist attractions.

Eighth, it is suggested that as many animation and eventual activities as concerts, theatrical plays, interpretation of myths and legends take place in cultural monuments, as these activities would bring about their activation and promotion.

Ninth, it is suggested that the historical objects, belonging to the monist period, be revived and turned into assets, being put to the benefit of tourism. This is where creativity and digitization would play a big role, where videos and virtual games turn into marketing instruments against black tourism.

Tenth, the school should include in its programs, disciplines related to the promotion of Albanian tourist attractions, in order to cultivate, from the pre-university study cycles, individuals who have all the tendencies to become talented tourist guides.

Credit Authorship Contribution Statement

Gjokë Uldedaj: Theoretical analysis, Setting study objectives, Drawing conclusions; Formulating recommendations and suggestions, Writing – original draft, Sta curation, Supervision, Funding acquisition.

Edlir Orahni: Conceptualization, Data Collection, Methodology, Formal analysis, Visualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

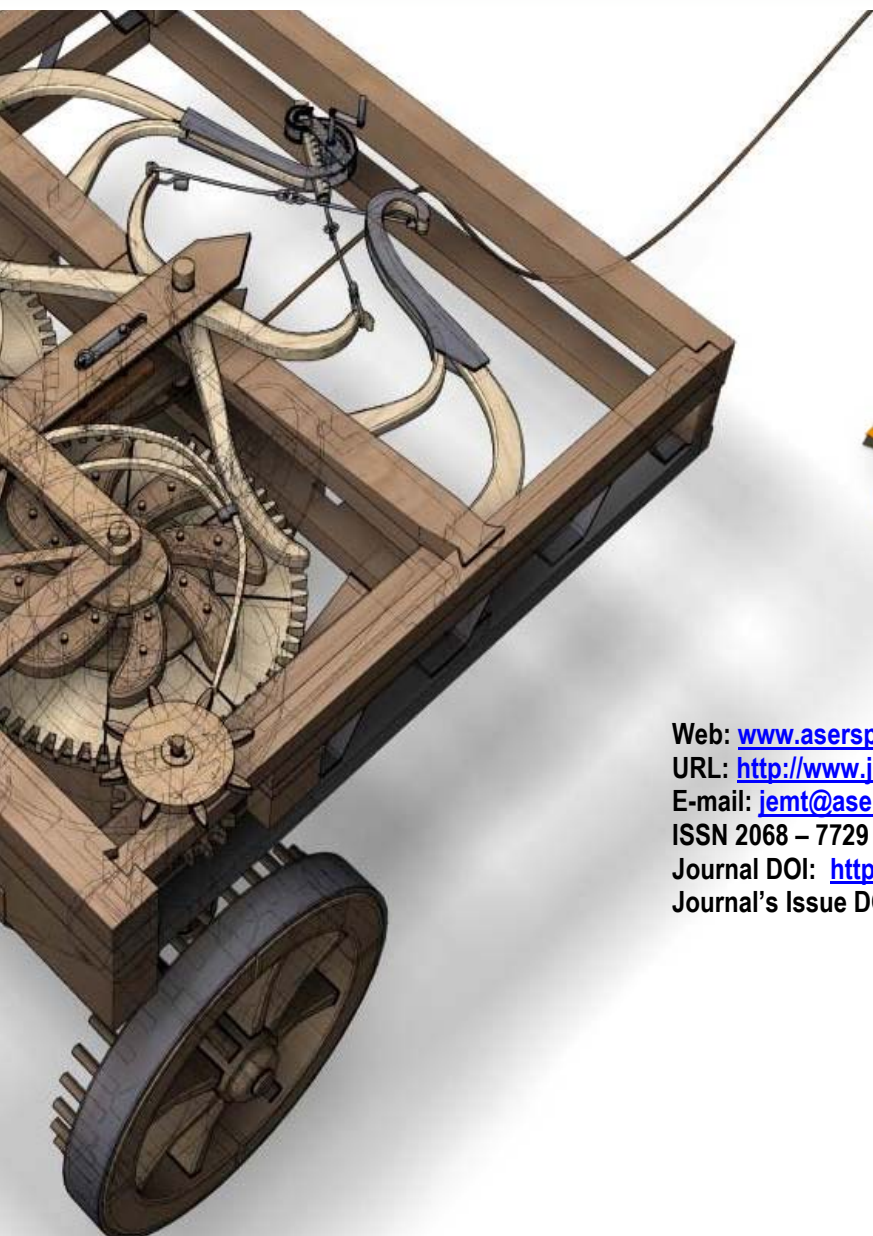
The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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