ENRICHING THE SULTAN TRAIL WITH NORTH MACEDONIA'S OTTOMAN SITES

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Abstract

Cultural tourism routes are typically designed for specific groups of travelers, offering opportunities to explore remnants of the past, both tangible and intangible. North Macedonia boasts a diverse array of cultural relics dating back to the Ottoman period, including bazaars, bridges, hammams, bedestens, karavansarays, clock towers, mosques, and various other types of buildings. This research employs an experiential approach to investigate the feasibility of integrating selected Ottoman heritage sites in North Macedonia (specifically Ohrid, Resen, and Bitola) into the existing Sultans Trail cultural route, which stretches from Vienna to Istanbul. Interviews with local tour guides, who are highly experienced in packaged tours tailored to Ottoman heritage, support the potential for extending the main cultural route. A concise summary of the proposed itinerary, informed by experiential judgment, leads to qualitative findings. Utilizing the Saint Gallen Destination Management model, the study maps out strategic visitor flows, facilitating the integration of North Macedonia into the broader Sultan Trail route spanning 2,500 km. Finally, the research underscores the significance of this extension for further tourism development of the country.

Kew words: *Cultural tourism routes, Ottoman heritage flows, Tourism development, North Macedonia, Sultan Trail.*

Introduction

Heritage sites attract specific groups of travelers, offering opportunities to explore remnants of the past, both tangible and intangible. They often become points of interest for tourism development, leading to the creation of specialized tourism products and cultural heritage routes (Council of Europe, 2010). Developing such tailored routes promotes sustainable tourism by preserving and presenting the cultural assets of nations, bridging the past with the present (Dayoub et al., 2020; Timothy, 2018). These routes have the potential to enhance the attractiveness and competitiveness of a region, encompassing both tourism and cultural dimensions (OECD, 2009). Additionally, cultural routes facilitate the integration of cultural consumption with commercial outlets (Murray & Graham, 1997).

However, utilizing cultural and historical heritage for tourism encounters challenges, particularly regarding the support of local communities (Butler et al., 2022; Grmuša et al., 2020; Terkenli & Georgoula, 2021). Moreover, the successful development of cultural routes requires acceptance, recognition, and maintenance at national and international levels. Designing and sustaining cultural routes related to Ottoman heritage sites necessitate broader stakeholder involvement, primarily due to negative attitudes toward Ottoman cultural influence (Houliston et al., 2021). Such heritage, built on the remnants of one of the most controversial historical periods across the Balkans (the Ottoman Empire, 14th-19th century), remains contested, involving complex social, ideological, and political aspects (Hajdarpašić, 2008).

North Macedonia boasts a diverse array of cultural relics dating back to the Ottoman period, including bazaars, bridges, hammams, bedestens, caravanserais, clock towers, mosques, and various other types of buildings. Many of these sites are utilized for tourism purposes, but many remain undiscovered, each holding specific heritage, history, background, or cultural significance.

While academia has addressed Ottoman heritage for tourism purposes (Alp, 2009; Arslan & Polat, 2015; Davis, 2013; Luke, 2013; Nance, 2007), empirical investigations of tourist practices are scarce. This paper fills the gap by exploring potential flows using the Saint Gallen Destination

Management (SGDM) model (Beritelli et al., 2015; Beritelli & Laesser, 2017). By employing such experiential approach, certain flows that may enhance tourism development based on Ottoman heritage sites in North Macedonia have been noted by Nestoroska et al. (2017), Petrevska (2017), Petrevska and Namicev (2017), and Petrevska et al. (2020).

With reference to Ottoman heritage, enriching the current Sultan Trail in North Macedonia by integrating it with new potential cultural routes becomes crucial. This study goes further by combining the SGDM model to map selected Ottoman heritage flows from the southwest part of North Macedonia and investigates their potential incorporation into the existing Sultans Trail route. To our knowledge, such a comprehensive academic study has not been conducted, providing an additional practical contribution to further the tourism development of the country.

After the introduction, the next section provides background material on the Sultans Trail route, followed by the methodology. The subsequent section presents a summary of the findings and discussion, with the conclusion in the final section.

Background Material

Each historical epoch, notably the Ottoman rule (1392-1912), deeply influenced tradition, mentality, language, and the culture of its people. The rapid expansion of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans facilitated the dissemination of Islamic architecture, constituting a significant cultural wave leaving imprints in many countries.

The Sultans Trail is a long-distance hiking and cycling trail spanning over 2,500 km from Vienna to Istanbul, passing through Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey (Fig. 1). Typically, completing the trail on foot requires approximately 20-25 weeks, while cycling it takes around 5 weeks. It traverses remarkable natural landscapes and archaeological sites, showcasing a diverse array of cultures spanning from the Ottoman, Habsburg, Byzantine, Roman, to the communist era (Cultural Routes Society, online). Contrary to its historical context of conquest, the present-day Sultans Trail represents a path of peace (Smits, 2021). The primary objective is to illuminate the Ottoman heritage of the region, making it accessible to the public and tourists, with the goal of obtaining a European Cultural Route certification from the Council of Europe. This mission is spearheaded by the Sultan Trail Foundation, a non-governmental organization headquartered in Haarlem, the Netherlands.

Fig. 1. Sultan Trail
Source: STF. (online).

The route runs through areas rich in history and nature and holds great promise as a tailor-made tourism product, currently in its exploration stage of tourism development (Brinkmann et al., (2021) according to the Tourist Area Life Cycle Model (Butler, 2006). Despite its potential, the route currently attracts relatively small number of visitors and possesses limited tourism infrastructure, resulting in minimal interaction between locals and tourists. Therefore, the objective is to enhance visitor numbers (Bassrucker et al., online; Brinkmann et al., 2021; Ionescu et al., online; Omar, online) while simultaneously fostering the development of a smart and sustainable tourism destination. The countries along the main route have invested substantially in tourism governance, averaging around one billion euros annually, aimed at establishing new administrative bodies and development policies to promote tourism as a pivotal sector in the Balkan economy (Porfido, 2020).

Furthermore, international initiatives focusing on rural sustainable development, as highlighted by Saarinen (2020), have been introduced to complement national efforts in supporting the Sultans Trail cultural route. These initiatives align with studies exploring the perception of students from various countries regarding the route (Dogramadjieva et al., 2021; Dogramadjieva & Terzić, 2024; Terzić & Dogramadjieva, 2022). These studies emphasize the challenging status of Ottoman heritage in the Balkans due to historical factors, political implications, and issues related to public acceptance. Nevertheless, they also reveal positive perceptions regarding the utilization of Ottoman heritage for tourism purposes.

Cupcea (2012) extensively examines the enduring political, cultural, social, and economic impact of Ottoman heritage on Balkan countries, including North Macedonia. Korunovski (2008) demonstrates that during the zenith of Islamic architecture's expansion in North Macedonia between the 15th and 16th centuries, parallels with Christian architecture emerged due to mutual influence and the active involvement of local craftsmen, particularly in mosque construction. Today, the remnants of this historical period are visible in over 150 diverse cultural artifacts dating back to the Ottoman era, scattered across North Macedonia's landscape (Marinoski, 2012). More than half of these monuments, approximately 80, hold potential for tourism development, yet less than half of them are included in tour itineraries (Petrevska et al., 2020).

Methodology

The research utilizes qualitative data and employs an experiential approach to address the following research questions (RQs):

RQ$_1$: Investigating the feasibility of extending the Sultans Trail route.

RQ$_2$: Identifying and proposing Ottoman heritage sites in North Macedonia suitable for incorporation into additional cultural routes.

RQ$_3$: Recommending support for newly emerging strategic visitor flows and advocating for their seamless integration into the main route.

To facilitate responses, these research questions were used during interviews with local tour guides. A total of 12 in-depth interviews (Trainor, 2013) were conducted informally, in the local language, with conversations lasting between 15 to 20 minutes each. The interviewees were highly experienced professionals in conducting packaged tours tailored to Ottoman heritage. The objective was to gather data solely based on personal experiences. Conducting face-to-face interviews allowed participants to express themselves freely and facilitated guided discussions with minimal intervention. Comprehensive notes were taken, capturing repeated phrases and the intensity of expression, enabling subjective assessment and concise summarization.

For the identification and mapping of Ottoman heritage sites in southwest part of North Macedonia, specifically Ohrid, Resen, and Bitola, that could potentially augment the existing Sultans Trail cultural route, this study employs the Saint Gallen Destination Management (SGDM) model (Beritelli et al., 2015; Beritelli & Laesser, 2017). This model is particularly suitable for tourism as it accounts for demand dispersed across fragmented supply both spatially and temporally. Rooted in phenomenological theory, it integrates practicality through the intuitive method of mapping, enhancing the feasibility of identified tourist flows and fostering a deeper understanding critical for sustainable tourism development.

Findings and Discussion

In addressing the research questions, the findings and discussion unfold as follows:

Interviewees offer pragmatic opinions on the feasibility of extending the Sultan Trail route with new itineraries (RQ_1). Drawing from their experiential judgment, they identify a strong potential for expanding the current main route. They argue that developing a new cultural flow can be achieved not only by enriching its content but also by linking it to the current Sultan Trail as the main strategic visitor flow and refining its structure to create a new Ottoman heritage tour as a complementary strategic visitor flow. Moreover, they stress the justification for introducing a new cultural pathway via North Macedonia, thereby enhancing the existing content and introducing structural improvements.

Furthermore, interviewees identify, describe, and propose new additional cultural routes featuring Ottoman heritage sites in the southwest part of the country, which they can professionally guide (RQ_2). They pinpoint the main supply elements in terms of spatial configuration for Ohrid, Resen, and Bitola. Each location harbors distinct identities, memories, and history. The study uncovers that some of these sites are frequently overlooked or intentionally omitted from regular tours, lacking adequate public awareness. When creating an additional route to integrate into the current main route, consideration of time constraints is paramount. A cultural tour encompassing Ottoman sites in Ohrid, Resen, and Bitola offers a comprehensive experience within reasonable time limits, aligning with previous findings emphasizing the importance of time in creating tailored sightseeing tours (Petrevska et al., 2020; Wong & Kwong, 2004).
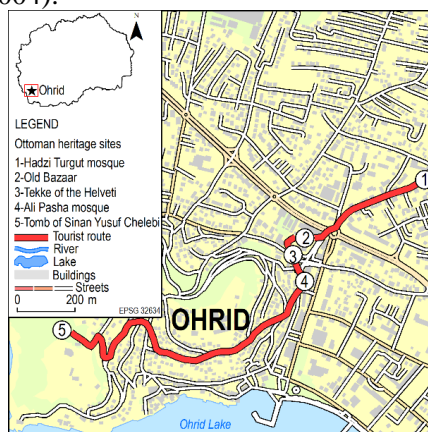

Fig. 2. Ottoman heritage strategic visitor flow in Ohrid
Source: Petrevska et al. (2020).

Applying the SGDM model, flows are mapped based on the intuitive and professional expertise of the interviewees. In Ohrid, cultural sites dated from the Ottoman period include the Hadzi Turgut mosque (15th century), Old bazaar (4th century), Tekke of the Helveti (18th century), Ali Pasha mosque (17th century), and the tomb of Sinan Yusuf Chelebi (16th century) (Fig. 2).
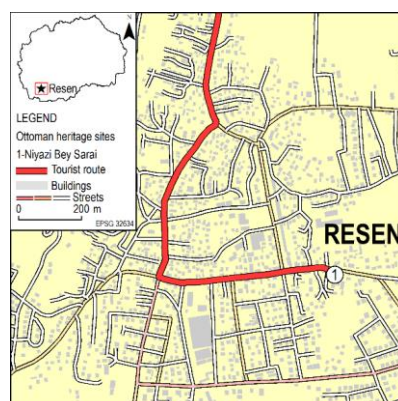

Fig. 3. Ottoman heritage strategic visitor flow in Resen
Source: Petrevska et al. (2020).

The route proceeds to Resen (small city 40 km. from Ohrid) where Niyazi Bey Sarai (20th century) stands as the sole site dating from the Ottoman period (Fig. 3).

The flow concludes in Bitola (70 km. form Ohrid), near the Greek border, featuring Ottoman heritage sites such as the City museum (Mustafa Kemal Ataturk section - 19th century), Bazaar (15th century), Yeni mosque (16th century), Bedesten (17th century), Isak Chelebi mosque (16th century), and Haydar Kadi mosque (16th century) (Fig. 4).

Additionally, interviewees reveal that certain Ottoman heritage sites have garnered significant attention in recent years receiving considerable financial support from official Turkish policy (TIKA, 2020). While refraining from casting doubt on the motives behind this support, as characterized by Luke (2013) as a 'geopolitical goal' aimed at 'reinventing' and 're-establishing' the Ottoman legacy as a symbol of the 'Golden Age of the Balkans', it is undeniable that there are positive implications associated with the restoration of Ottoman cultural heritage for tourism purposes.
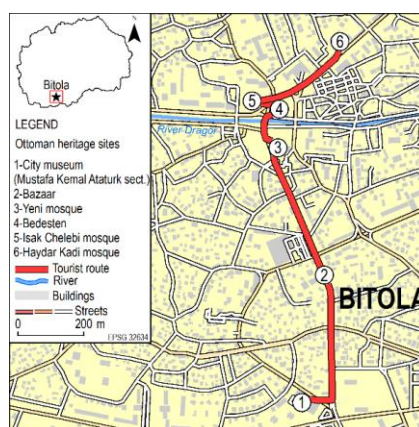

Fig. 4. Ottoman heritage strategic visitor flow in Bitola
Source: Petrevska et al. (2020).

Finally, interviewees retrospectively justify the emergence of mapped strategic visitor flows, considering challenges associated with the additional routes and their seamless integration into the main route (RQ$_3$). They advocate for urgent awareness-raising among tourism policymakers at all levels, highlighting the potential benefits for North Macedonia upon integration into the main Sultan Trail route. Furthermore, they discuss approaches to:

(1) Enhance the visibility of Ottoman heritage to evoke positive memories in cultural tourism product development, mitigating negative attitudes or minimizing downplaying of Ottoman cultural influence (Houliston et al., 2021). This approach aims to create a more representative Ottoman heritage tourism product, extending beyond North Macedonia's borders.

(2) Advocate for supporting and maintaining the establishment of historically legitimate cultural routes, contributing to the creation of an indigenous and competitive tourism supply in North Macedonia. This entails developing various activities to achieve sustainability and long-term development, aligning with the research of Todorova (2009) emphasizing the historical significance of cultural routes within European civilization.

Conclusion

Cultural heritage routes, acknowledged as tourist products (UNWTO, 2015), present the Sultan Trail as a platform for significant regional tourism dynamics. Employing a comprehensive multidisciplinary approach, this study investigates the feasibility of incorporating selected Ottoman heritage sites in the southwest part of North Macedonia into the existing Sultans Trail route. The study raises the issue of affirming the idea for its further expansion by offering new experiences to tourists and benefits to service providers as part of the tourism values chain.

Qualitative insights are drawn from local tour guides specializing in Ottoman heritage sightseeing in North Macedonia. The research underscores the significance of this extension for further tourism development of the country. Moreover, it empowers tourism developers and planners to better

understand the decision-making process concerning spatial tourism expansion. Aligning with prior studies by Naef and Ploner (2016) and Ploner (2012), this research underscores the power of tourism to enhance awareness and understanding of Ottoman heritage by integrating dispersed cultural sites across the Balkans into the intricate and ambitious Sultan Trail route. The study also sheds light on several shortcomings in national tourism governance that could adversely affect inclusion in the main route, such as limited budget allocations for tourism, insufficient attention to collectively diversifying tourism products across the Balkans, and the absence of plans for monitoring and evaluation, as previously discussed by Porfido (2020).

Finally, this study not only furnishes practical guidance for tourism policymakers but also outlines conceptual frameworks for Ottoman heritage cultural tours. The findings underscore the significance of developing specific cultural tourism products and emphasize the importance of comprehending the nature of the Ottoman cultural route in predicting future visitor flow patterns. Failure of policymakers to recognize the imperative of establishing a conceptual framework for creating Ottoman heritage cultural routes will impede substantial tourism progress for two main reasons. Firstly, without acknowledging the importance of extending the current main route, the proposed national sub-routes in the southwest part of North Macedonia may prove ineffective. Insufficient dissemination of publicity and information may constitute potential catalysts for the failure of cultural routes (Božic et al., 2014). Secondly, the development of specific cultural tourism products based on Ottoman heritage is crucial for fostering sustainable spatial tourism growth.

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