

CULTURAL TOURISM AS A DRIVER OF LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF OHRID, NORTH MACEDONIA

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Abstract

Cultural tourism has become one of the most dynamic segments of the global tourism industry, offering opportunities for sustainable local development. This paper examines the role of cultural tourism in promoting the local economy of Ohrid, North Macedonia — a UNESCO World Heritage site renowned for its cultural and natural heritage. Through analysis of secondary data, literature, and tourism statistics, the study highlights how cultural tourism contributes to employment generation, entrepreneurship growth, and the preservation of heritage. The findings show that investing in cultural events, museums, and heritage infrastructure attracts a diversified tourist base and extends the tourist season. However, challenges such as overtourism, environmental pressure, and lack of innovation in tourism services remain. The paper concludes that balanced management and promotion of cultural tourism can transform Ohrid into a model of sustainable cultural destination in Southeast Europe.

Key words: cultural tourism, local development, Ohrid, sustainability, heritage

JEL Classification: Z32, O18, R11

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is widely recognized as a catalyst for economic growth, regional development, and cultural exchange. Among its various forms, cultural tourism has gained increasing attention for its ability to link cultural heritage with socio-economic progress. It includes visits motivated by cultural attractions such as historic sites, museums, festivals, and traditional lifestyles.

Ohrid, one of the oldest human settlements in Europe, stands as the cultural capital of North Macedonia. It is home to a unique blend of Byzantine architecture, medieval churches, and the ancient Ohrid Lake ecosystem. As a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1979, Ohrid attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors annually. This paper aims to explore how cultural tourism contributes to the local economic development of Ohrid by creating jobs, stimulating small business growth, and preserving cultural identity.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study is based on a qualitative-descriptive methodology. Secondary data were collected from academic literature, official statistics from the State Statistical Office of North Macedonia, and reports from the Ministry of Economy and the Municipality of Ohrid. Comparative analysis was conducted with other Balkan destinations such as Dubrovnik (Croatia) and Kotor (Montenegro) to identify common development patterns in cultural tourism. The research also integrates insights from previous studies on sustainable tourism and cultural management, emphasizing the relationship between heritage conservation and economic benefits.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Economic Impact of Cultural Tourism in Ohrid

Cultural tourism significantly contributes to Ohrid's local economy through several channels: direct spending by tourists on accommodation, food, transport, and souvenirs; indirect impacts on local suppliers; and induced effects through increased household income. According to estimates by the National Tourism Agency, cultural tourists spend on average 20% more than leisure tourists.

Local entrepreneurs, including artisans, guides, and family-owned guesthouses, benefit from the increased demand. Festivals such as the Ohrid Summer Festival and Balkan Folklore Nights not only attract international audiences but also extend the tourist season beyond July and August, improving the overall annual revenue of local businesses.

2. Cultural Heritage as an Economic Asset

Cultural sites such as the Church of St. John at Kaneo, the Ancient Theatre, and the Monastery of St. Naum serve as major attractions. These landmarks act as economic assets that generate entry fees, cultural tours, and merchandise sales. Furthermore, they enhance the city's global image, attracting investment in hospitality and infrastructure.

3. Challenges of Managing Cultural Tourism

Despite its benefits, cultural tourism in Ohrid faces sustainability challenges. Overtourism during summer months leads to congestion, environmental degradation, and threats to heritage preservation. The informal economy in accommodation and transport sectors undermines tax revenues and quality standards. Additionally, there is a lack of innovative digital promotion and insufficient training among tourism staff in heritage interpretation.

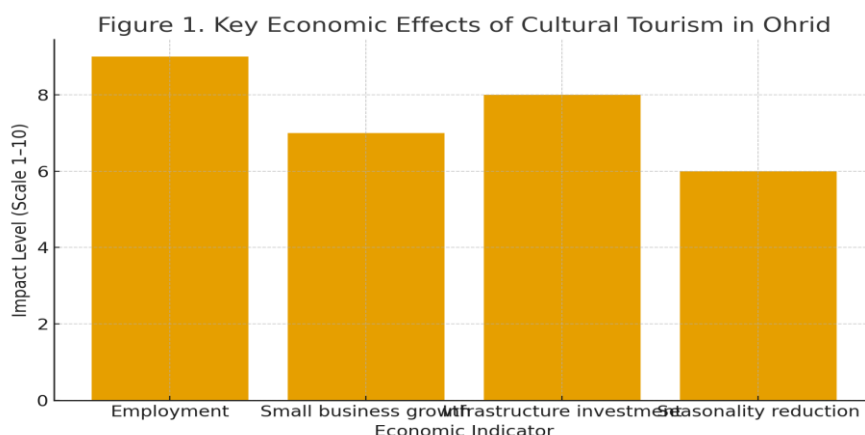
4. Strategic Approaches for Sustainable Development

A sustainable cultural tourism strategy should focus on diversification and innovation. Encouraging year-round cultural programs, integrating digital storytelling, and promoting eco-friendly practices can mitigate seasonality. Partnerships between local government, private sector, and NGOs can help implement heritage protection measures while supporting entrepreneurship.

Table 1. Name Key Economic Effects of Cultural Tourism in Ohrid

Economic Indicator	Impact	Example
Employment	High	Over 3,000 seasonal jobs in hospitality
Small business growth	Moderate to high	Expansion of family-run guesthouses and souvenir shops
Infrastructure investment	Increasing	Renovation of museums and public spaces
Seasonality reduction	Moderate	Cultural festivals extend visitor period

Figure 1. Name Key Economic Effects of Cultural Tourism in Ohrid



CONCLUDING REMARKS

Cultural tourism plays a decisive role in strengthening the local economy of Ohrid. By connecting the city's cultural wealth with sustainable economic opportunities, it fosters entrepreneurship, job creation, and urban revitalization. However, for long-term benefits, policy efforts must prioritize balanced tourism management, community participation, and environmental sustainability.

Ohrid's future as a cultural destination depends on maintaining the harmony between tourism growth and heritage protection. With strategic planning, cultural tourism can continue to be a driver of inclusive local development, showcasing how heritage can serve as both a symbol of identity and a source of prosperity.

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