

Sports Tourism in Balkan Countries

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Abstract: The purpose of this research is to study sports tourism in the Balkan countries. The forms of sports tourism are analyzed, as well as their economic and innovative impact. Then, case studies from the Balkan peninsula where sports tourism is found are reported. Finally, the final conclusions follow, where emphasis is placed on the participation of the local community and the improvement of infrastructure with sustainable ways for beneficial results.

Keywords: Balkan countries, sports tourism

1. INTRODUCTION

Sports tourism combines two basic human characteristics: the desire for movement and action through sports and the desire for exploration through travel. According to the International Sports Tourism Association, it is a type of tourism that involves the movement of people from their place of residence to other locations for the purpose of participating in or watching sports activities.

The growing popularity of sporting events, such as the Olympic Games, the FIFA World Cup, as well as smaller-scale events, has led to the explosive growth of sports tourism. The shift towards activities that combine health, action and culture is evident in a global society that emphasizes physical activity and the search for experiences.

Historically, sports tourism has roots that date back to Ancient Greece. The Olympic Games in Olympia (776 BC) were an international event of the time, attracting visitors from various city-states. This phenomenon has continued and evolved over the centuries, taking new forms in the modern era [1]. Today, sports tourism contributes significantly to the global economy, with its contribution estimated at billions of dollars annually [2].

At the same time, sports tourism, like other forms of alternative tourism, such as wine tourism [3] [4] and photography tourism [5] [6], have social, cultural and environmental impacts, which often require strategic management and planning to maintain sustainability.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Forms of Sports Tourism

According to the literature, sports tourism can be distinguished into three main categories:

Sports Participation Tourism

This form concerns tourists who travel to actively participate in sports activities, such as marathons, cycling races, triathlons and local championships.

For example:

1. The Athens Marathon: It is one of the oldest and most historic sporting events, attracting more than 50,000 runners from all over the world every year. The marathon not only promotes local history, but also strengthens the

economy of the region through hospitality and catering.

2. Ironman Events: Ironman-type events, which include a triathlon, offer a unique challenge to participants, while enhancing tourism in the destinations where they are organized [7].

Sports Tourism

This category includes tourists who travel to attend large-scale sporting events. These events, also known as mega-events [8], have a huge economic impact:

1. Olympic Games: The 2021 Tokyo Games attracted millions of tourists, and are estimated to have contributed over \$10 billion to the Japanese economy.

2. World Cup: The 2018 tournament in Russia attracted over 3 million tourists, with total economic benefits estimated at \$6 billion.

Adventure and Alternative Sports Tourism

This form includes activities such as mountaineering, diving, skiing, rafting and hiking. These activities are often associated with nature, making the destinations sustainable and attractive. Examples include:

1. Mountaineering in Meteora and Olympus in Greece.

2. Skiing in the Alps or Bansko in Bulgaria.

Economic Impact

Sports tourism is one of the most important sources of income for many tourist destinations. Revenue from organizing sports events includes tickets, television rights, sponsorships and commercial exploitation. According to Preuss [9], major events such as the Olympic Games offer multiple economic benefits to the organizers.

Indirect Support

Sports tourism increases employment in sectors such as hotels, transport and catering. Studies show that events such as the 2018 World Cup created more than 200,000 temporary jobs [10].

Environmental and Social Impacts

The development of sports tourism brings with it environmental and social impacts that need to be carefully addressed.

Environmental Challenges

The impact on the environment includes pollution, overconsumption of resources and the degradation of natural ecosystems. A typical example is the Olympic Games, where energy consumption and construction work have left a strong environmental footprint [11].

Social Impacts

Sports tourism promotes cultural exchange and strengthens local social cohesion. However, phenomena such as the increase in the cost of living for permanent residents are serious issues [12].

3. CASE STUDIES IN BALKAN PENINSULA

Case Study 1: Serbia – The Belgrade Marathon

The Belgrade Marathon is one of the most important sporting events in Serbia and Southeastern Europe. It started in 1988 and now attracts thousands of runners from all over the world.

Event Features:

Held annually in April.

Includes marathon, half marathon and 5km races.

The marathon connects participants with the history of the city, as the route passes by historical monuments and the Danube River.

Economic Impact:

□ According to the Serbian National Tourism Organization, the Belgrade Marathon brings approximately 2 million euros to the local economy annually, mainly through accommodation, catering and tourist services. More than 10,000 tourists visit the city for the event, creating opportunities to promote Serbia as a sports tourism destination.

Social and Cultural Impacts:

The Belgrade Marathon has become a symbol of social unity and encourages a healthy lifestyle. In addition, the event has strengthened the cultural identity of the city, with the participation of local communities and schools.

Case Study 2: Bulgaria – Winter Tourism in Bansko

Bansko, one of the most popular winter resorts in Bulgaria, has emerged as a leading ski destination in Southeastern Europe. The area combines natural beauty with modern infrastructure, attracting visitors from all over the world.

Destination Features:

- Bansko has more than 70 km of ski slopes.
- It hosts global events, such as the Ski World Cup, which enhances its international reputation.
- Its facilities include modern ski lifts and luxury hotels.

Economic Impact:

□ Bansko contributes significantly to the Bulgarian economy, with revenues exceeding 20 million euros annually from the winter season [13]. The destination creates thousands of seasonal jobs in sectors such as hospitality services and sports activities.

Environmental Challenges:

Despite its success, Bansko has faced challenges regarding environmental sustainability. The expansion of ski facilities has raised concerns about biodiversity loss and overexploitation of natural resources.

Case Study 3: Romania – The Carpathian MTB Epic

The Carpathian MTB Epic is one of the most demanding and renowned mountain bike races in Eastern Europe. It is held in the Carpathian Mountains, offering unique challenges and exceptional landscapes.

Race Features:

- It takes place on 180 km long routes covering mountain trails and forest areas.
- It is aimed at professional and amateur cyclists. The event is supported by the local government and international sponsors.

Economic Impact:

□ The race attracts tourists from more than 30 countries, boosting the local economy through accommodation, catering and transport. The race promotes Romania as a sports tourism destination, contributing to the long-term development of the region.

Social Impact:

The event strengthens cooperation between local communities and promotes an active and healthy lifestyle. In addition, it highlights Romania's natural and cultural heritage.

Case Study 4: Croatia – Nautical Tourism and Sailing in the Adriatic

Croatia, with its extensive coastline and over 1,000 islands, has emerged as one of the leading nautical tourism and sailing destinations in the world.

Destination Characteristics:

- The Adriatic Sea offers ideal conditions for sailing, windsurfing and diving.

□ Sailing competitions are organized every year, such as the Vis Regatta and the Dubrovnik Sailing Week.

Economic Impact:

- Nautical tourism accounts for 10% of Croatia's total GDP [14].
- Sailing tourists usually spend more money than traditional tourists, contributing to the strengthening of the local economy.

Environmental Sustainability:

Croatia has adopted measures for the sustainable management of the coastline, while investing in "green" technologies for marinas and tourist boats.

Case Study 5: North Macedonia – Hiking in Shar Mountain National Park

Shar Mountain National Park in North Macedonia is one of the most well-known mountaineering and winter sports destinations in the Balkans.

Destination Features:

- Shar Mountain's trails stretch for more than 200 kilometers and attract tourists for hiking, mountain biking and skiing. The park has emerged as a center for ecotourism, as it combines natural beauty with environmental protection.

Economic Impact:

- Tourism in the region has doubled in the last decade, with revenues exceeding 5 million euros annually. Skiing and organized hiking have contributed to the creation of new jobs.

Social and Environmental Impacts:

The development of tourism in the park strengthens the local economy, while promoting awareness of the protection of the ecosystem.

Case Study 6: Bosnia and Herzegovina – Skiing in Sarajevo (Bjelašnica and Jahorina)

The 1984 Winter Olympics left a legacy for sports tourism in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Bjelašnica and Jahorina mountains, which hosted the games, remain popular destinations for skiing and winter sports.

Destination Features:

- Bjelašnica has 8 ski slopes of different levels, while Jahorina is a favorite destination for families and beginners. Infrastructure has been upgraded, attracting tourists from neighboring countries such as Croatia and Serbia.

Economic Impact:

- The winter season brings in around 10 million euros annually to the local economy [15]. The region has seen a 20% increase in tourist arrivals since 2015.

Environmental and Cultural Impact:

The development of ski resorts has boosted the local economy, while promoting the preservation of cultural identity through local festivals and events.

Case Study 7: Montenegro – Water Sports in the Adriatic

Montenegro has developed into one of the top water sports destinations in the Balkans. The area around the Bay of Kotor and Budva attracts tourists for sailing, diving and canoeing.

Destination Features:

- Montenegro's coastline is 300 kilometers long, offering excellent infrastructure for water sports.
- Porto Montenegro, a luxury marina in Tivat, has become an international reference point for sailing.

Economic Impact:

Water sports contribute approximately 15% of the country's tourism revenue [16].

Montenegro has attracted over 500 million euros in investment to develop marine tourism in the last decade.

Challenges:

Despite success, overdevelopment in some areas has raised concerns about environmental degradation and water resource management.

Case Study 8: Kosovo – Mountain Biking in Rugova Valley

The Rugova Valley in Kosovo, with its impressive mountains and forests, is an emerging destination for mountain biking and hiking.

Destination Features:

□ The valley's network of trails attracts cyclists from all over Europe, while international competitions are held every summer. The area combines natural beauty with traditional hospitality, promoting its cultural heritage.

Economic Impact:

□ Tourism in the area has increased by 30% in recent years, mainly due to the promotion of sports events [17].

Social Impact:

The development of the area has helped reduce unemployment and strengthen social cohesion, while emphasizing the cooperation of local communities.

Case Study 9: Albania – Outdoor Activities in Valbona National Park

Albania is an emerging destination for ecotourism and outdoor sports. Valbona National Park, in the Valbona Alps, attracts tourists interested in hiking, mountaineering and cycling.

Destination Features:

The park includes hiking trails that cross impressive mountains, gorges and rivers.

The area hosts mountain biking and hiking competitions, such as the annual Valbona Ultra Trail.

Economic Impact:

Tourism in the area has increased by 40% in the last five years, contributing to the development of local businesses [18]. Local production is being strengthened, with an emphasis on ecological products and traditional hospitality.

Social and Environmental Impact:

The activity promotes ecological awareness, while local communities are actively involved in the management and conservation of natural resources.

Case Study 10: Slovenia – Water Sports on Lake Bled

Lake Bled is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Slovenia, known for its outdoor and water activities.

Destination Features:

The lake hosts rowing and canoeing competitions, which attract professional athletes and tourists.

Visitors can also participate in activities such as SUP (Stand-Up Paddling) and sailing.

Economic Impact:

Lake Bled hosts major international events, such as the World Rowing Championships. In 2011, this event generated over 8 million euros for the local economy [19]. The area has increased its popularity as a water sports destination, attracting high-income tourists.

Environmental Sustainability:

Slovenia is investing in preserving the natural beauty of the lake through sustainable practices, such as the use of eco-friendly transportation and the ban on motorized boats.

Case Study 11: Croatia – Zadar Triathlon

Croatia, in addition to water sports, has also developed triathlon tourism. The annual Zadar Half Triathlon is one of the most popular sporting events in the region.

Event Features:

The race includes a 1.9 km swim, 90 km bike ride and 21.1 km run.

It is held along the scenic coastline of Croatia, showcasing the natural beauty of the region.

Economic Impact:

The event attracts more than 1,500 participants each year, as well as thousands of spectators.

Local hotels and hospitality businesses see an increase in bookings during the race period [20].

Social Impact:

Promoting the triathlon encourages local community participation and promotes a healthy lifestyle.

Case Study 12: Serbia – Rafting on the Tara River

The Tara River, which runs through Serbia and Montenegro, is known for its rafting activities, attracting tourists from all over Europe.

Destination Features:

The river includes impressive canyons, such as the Tara River Canyon, which is the deepest in Europe.

Rafting activities are combined with hiking and ecotourism.

Economic Impact:

Tourism on the Tara River contributes to the local economy, with revenues exceeding 2 million euros annually [21]. Seasonal jobs are created in activity centers and accommodations.

Environmental Management:

Local authorities have taken measures to maintain the cleanliness of the river and protect the ecosystem from excessive tourist exploitation.

Case Study 13: Romania – Transylvania 100 Marathon

The Transylvania 100, an ultramarathon held in the Carpathian Mountains, is one of the most impressive sports tourism events in Romania.

Event Features:

The race includes distances ranging from 20 to 100 kilometers, on routes that pass through landscapes of particular natural beauty, such as Dracula's Castle.

It is aimed at both professional and amateur athletes.

Economic Impact:

The event attracts tourists from more than 40 countries, contributing to the local economy through hospitality and catering. The region records a 25% increase in tourist arrivals in the weeks leading up to the race [22].

Promotion of Cultural Heritage:

The marathon highlights the connection between sport and the history and culture of the region, attracting tourists interested in the legend of Dracula and the natural beauty of the Carpathians.

Case Study 14: Montenegro – Hiking in Durmitor Park

The Durmitor National Park, in the Montenegrin mountain range, is a top destination for hiking, mountaineering and nature adventures. Declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the park boasts impressive natural features such as lakes, gorges and rocky peaks.

Destination Features:

The park includes more than 20 marked hiking trails, covering beginners to advanced hikers. Activities such as climbing and rappelling down the Tara Canyon are particularly popular.

Economic Impact:

Tourism in the area generates around €8 million annually, with the majority of visitors coming from Central Europe [23]. Local communities have benefited through eco-lodges and tourist tours.

Environmental Challenges:

Increasing tourism is putting pressure on the park's ecosystem, but local authorities are implementing sustainable practices to preserve it.

Case Study 15: Bulgaria – Equestrian Competitions in the Pleven Region

The Pleven region, known for its equestrian traditions, hosts international equestrian competitions and events that attract athletes and visitors from all over Europe.

Event Features:

The Pleven Horseback Championship includes endurance, obstacle and skill competitions. Professionals and amateurs from more than 10 countries participate.

Economic Impact:

Equestrian events bring revenue to the local economy through accommodation, transportation and service provision [24]. The event strengthens the local market for equestrian-related products, such as equipment and horse feed.

Social Impact:

The strengthening of equestrian traditions promotes the cultural identity of the region and brings local communities closer together through participation in the events.

Case Study 16: Croatia – Water Sports in Dubrovnik

Dubrovnik, known for its historical beauty, has expanded its tourism identity through water sports. The destination attracts tourists interested in diving, sailing and kayaking.

Destination Features:

Kayaking around the Dubrovnik islands is one of the most popular activities. Diving in the coastal areas offers a unique experience, as participants explore shipwrecks and underwater caves.

Economic Impact:

Water sports account for 12% of Dubrovnik's total tourism revenue [25]. Over 100 local businesses provide water sports services, creating jobs for local residents.

Environmental Sustainability:

The development of water tourism is accompanied by marine life protection programs and restrictions to avoid environmental degradation.

Case Study 17: Romania – “Via Transilvanica” Cycling Race

The “Via Transilvanica” is a 1,400 km network of trails that runs through the heart of Romania, connecting historical and natural sites. Alongside hiking, the annual cycling race held on the network has gained great fame

[26].

Race Features:

The race includes routes for amateurs and professionals, with distances ranging from 50 to 200 kilometers. Participants pass by important sights, such as Sighisoara and Bran Castle.

Economic Impact:

The event contributes to the local economy, with thousands of visitors staying in small family businesses and hotels. Interest in the cycling race has contributed to the emergence of Via Transilvanica as a leading ecotourism destination.

Cultural Promotion:

"Via Transilvanica" combines the love of nature with the promotion of cultural heritage, attracting tourists from all over Europe.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Sports tourism is a sector with huge growth potential. For its sustainable development, responsible actors must emphasize: Strengthening local communities through investments in infrastructure. Using environmentally friendly technologies. Creating awareness campaigns for visitors and organizers. Sports tourism in the Balkans has proven to be an important source of economic development and social cohesion. Despite the challenges, countries in the region can strengthen their position in the international tourism market by investing in sustainability and promoting their unique characteristics. In addition:

1. Natural Diversity: Each country uses its unique characteristics, such as mountains, coastline or natural parks, to attract tourists.

2. Diversity of Sports Activities: While Bulgaria and Bosnia and Herzegovina focus on winter sports, Montenegro and Croatia emphasize water sports, while countries such as Kosovo and Romania invest in mountain biking.

3. Economic Impact: All countries record significant revenues from sports tourism, although resource management remains a challenge for many of them.

Sports tourism in the Balkans presents enormous growth prospects, offering opportunities for economic growth, social cohesion and international visibility. However, it is necessary to adopt sustainable practices to preserve natural resources and protect the environment. The governments of the Balkan countries, in cooperation with the private sector, can further invest in infrastructure, educational programs and marketing strategies to promote sports tourism.

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