

## Tourism in the Balkan Peninsula: Issues and Challenges

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### Abstract

Balkan region is geographical region in South Eastern Europe and comprises of the nations of Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, FYROM, Montenegro, Kosovo and European part of Turkey. Adriatic Sea is to the North West of the Balkans, Ionian sea to the South West, Mediterranean Sea to the south, Aegean Sea to the south east, Black sea to the east and north east. Balkans has the capability and plethora of resources both physical and man made to charm the tourist and enthrall the tourist with its rich past and cultural diversity.. An attempt has been made to study the Tourism potential in the Balkans as well as key issues and challenges faced by this emerging region as far as tourism is concerned.

**Keywords:** Tourism, Balkan, EU Policy

### Introduction

The growth of the travel and tourism industry in recent years has been phenomenal. It has grown from 25 million international tourist Arrivals in 1950 to 1186 million in 2015 and the revenue generated from this activity has increased from 2 billion USD in 1950 to 1260 billion USD in 2015. International tourist arrivals are expected to increase from 1.4 billion in 2020 to 1.8 billion international tourists by 2030(United Nations World Tourism Organization). The industry at the present rate supports 1 in 11 jobs worldwide (World Travel Tourism Council).

Tourism as a major economic, political, social, environmental activity has grown exponentially over the years as per the results displayed by UNWTO. International tourist arrivals have increased from 25 million in 1950 to 100 million in 1964, 200 million in 1974, 500 million in 1992, 700 million in 2001 and 1 billion in 2012(UNWTO) . Further growth was witnessed in the following years reaching 1186 million in 2015 in terms of International Tourist Arrivals and the revenue generation reached 1260 billion USD in 2015. It is expected that by 2020 the International Tourist Arrivals would reach 1.4 billion and the revenue generation from Tourism activities is expected to reach 2000 Billion USD by 2020.

Balkan Peninsula is a geographical region in the Southeastern part of Europe and has population of more than 40 million. Balkans comprise of diverse ethnic groups with professed religions being Christianity and Islam. The Balkan Region is gaining prominence as far as tourism is concerned and emerging as one of the tourism stalwarts which for centuries has occupied the imaginations of the human race in the most mystical and respectful way. It is the habitat of Zeus-son of god, Socrates the great philosopher and the shipping baron Onassis. Greece indeed is a gem with its white sand and blue water apart from its rich history and the world famous Mount Olympia.

On thousands of islands and the Greek Mainland. Greece brings one closer to the history. In Athens one can witness the Acropolis. In Crete the ruins of the palace of Minos surrounded by pine glades, Olive Orchards. At Santorini one can hide oneself in the white walls and the bright blue domes of the villages imagining the legendary city of Atlantis lying below the waves. Greece offers plethora of

adventure activities and not to forget it is the birth place of the mega games i.e. the Olympics. Be it hiking, sailing, driving or visiting protected biospheres, Greece has it all.

Balkans have abundance of UNESCO World Heritage Sites with the leaders being Greece and Turkey having 15 WHS each followed by Bulgaria with 9 sites, Croatia with 8 sites, Romania with 7 sites, Serbia with 4, Slovenia has 3 sites, Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina with 02 sites each.

However Balkans is not just Greece it has plenty more in offer. Small nation of Bulgaria can also leave an indelible impact on the tourist. Bulgaria is a natural gem set on the Black Sea tourists can enjoy the outstanding turquoise sea where one can sail, surf, fish, swim or just lay back on the beach. The snow capped mountains also provide plethora of adventure activities be it hiking, rock climbing or exploring some of the beautiful caves and rock formations. The varied landscape provides a wonderful contrast which draws tourists to this unique tourist destination. Sofia the capital and the largest city is located on the Sofia plain and is surrounded by mountains. The city has a 7000 years old history and has seen a number of excavations from the stone and bronze eras. Further there are a number of monuments, museums and churches of cultural and architectural interest. Plovdiv is Bulgaria's second largest city and is located on the banks of Maritza River. A visit to the old town will provide vivid images of past lifetimes through the architecture of Byzantine walls and renaissance mansions. The city has a vibrant arts and cultural scene with a great number of fairs, festivals, plays and concerts.

Romania, Croatia and Slovenia have rich forest cover and are marketed as green destination. The 13<sup>th</sup> Century church of St. John at Kaneo and the Ohrid Lake in FYROM have been designated as UNESCO World Heritage site in 1980. The beautiful city of Istanbul can be admired at the confluence of Bosphorus and Sea of Marmara. Several prominent attractions such as Sultan Ahmed Mosque, Hagia Sophia, Topkapi Palace can be witnessed along their shores. Drvengrad an ethno village in Serbia and has emerged as the home to the annual Kusturica film festival. Belgrade the capital of Serbia has the enormous Kalemegdan Fortress and interesting walking tours. Zagreb the capital of Croatia has numerous museums and Skopje the capital of FYROM has incredible variety of architecture and cultural destinations to explore.

Table I: International Tourist Arrivals in 2013, 2014 & 2015 in the Balkan Peninsula

NATIONS OF BALKAN PENINSULA	INTERNATIONAL TOURIST ARRIVALS (2013) (MILLION)	INTERNATIONAL TOURIST ARRIVALS (2014) (MILLION)	INTERNATIONAL TOURIST ARRIVALS (2015)
1. GREECE	17.9	22.0	23.5
2. BULGARIA	6.9	7.31	---
3. ROMANIA	1.7	1.91	2.23
4. ALBANIA	2.857	3.34	3.78
5. CROATIA	10.9	11.63	12.68
6. SLOVENIA	2.2	2.41	2.70
7. SERBIA	0.9	1.029	1.13
8. BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA	0.5	0.536	0.678
9. FYROM	0.4	0.425	0.486

10.MONTENEGRO	1.3	1.35	1.56
11.TURKEY	37.7	39.8	---

UNWTO Tourism Highlights 2014,2015,2016

Table III: International Tourism Receipts in 2013,2014&2015 in the Balkan Peninsula

NATIONS OF BALKAN PENINSULA	INTERNATIONAL TOURISM RECEIPTS (2013) (USD BILLION)	INTERNATIONAL TOURISM RECEIPTS(2014) (USD BILLION)	INTERNATIONAL TOURISM RECEIPTS(2015)(USD BILLION)
1.GREECE	15.9	17.8	15.67
2.BULGARIA	3.8	3.9	3.1
3.ROMANIA	1.5	1.81	1.7
4.ALBANIA	1.47	1.7	1.5
5.CROATIA	9.5	9.9	8.8
6.SLOVENIA	2.7	2.7	2.5
7.SERBIA	1.0	1.13	1.04
8.BOSNIA&HERZEGOVINA	0.68	0.70	0.65
9.FYROM	0.26	0.295	0.267
10.MONTENEGRO	0.88	0.90	0.90
11.TURKEY	27.9	29.5	26.6

UNWTO Tourism Highlights 2014, 2015, 2016

### EU Policy and Its probable Impact on the Tourism Sector in the Balkans

EU is a major economic and political bloc in Europe comprising of 28 nations at the moment with the accession years being 1958,1973,1981,1986,1995,2004,2007 and 2013.Croatia is the latest entrant to the EU in 2013.Greece joined this bloc in 1981 .Slovenia joined in 2004 ,Romania and Bulgaria in 2007.Many of the Balkans are the applicant nations and on road to join the EU in the years to come.EU has categorically mentioned the role of Tourism in integrating the European Continent which was totally devastated as it was the Centre stage of both the world wars. Though EU doesn't have an obligatory tourism policy as a legal entity but its role is well defined in employment generation and regional development across Europe. It is important that the Balkan community implement and utilize EU Cohesion funds to develop and improve their tourism products at par with their counterparts across other regions of Europe.Croatia, Montenegro and Albania have potential for further development across their coastlines and position themselves as coastal tourism destinations.FYROM,Serbia ,Bosnia and Herzegovina have the potential to position itself as an ideal destinations for Winter Sports and also have unique blend of historical, cultural and religious sites as a unique bouquet. The accession of 10 nations in 2004 has opened the markets for the Balkans as these countries are not just destinations but also serve as tourism generating markets. Success stories have

been Croatia and Bulgaria from the Balkans benefited from the tourists of Poland, Hungary and Czech Republic. Structural funds will help the new EU nations of Romania and Bulgaria for aiding the rural areas, infrastructural development and restoring the cultural assets. The private sectors role needs to be more competitive and the government should develop and establish the framework for tourism development. EU Support in building the infrastructure in the Balkans especially the roads and rail network which will smoothen the movement and transportation in this region.

The financial support from the structural funds of EU will help the underdeveloped regions of Bosnia and Herzegovina, FYROM and Kosovo. Due to positive effects of tourism in the form of employment, diversification of industries, tourism industry has become one of the most important industry across these underdeveloped regions which have benefited a lot from the tourism activities. Regional cooperation is one of the important element of the EU policy for the Balkans .EU has played a major role in the overall progression of the Western Balkans through the structural funds in a cohesive manner. EU will help in infrastructural development, providing funds for regional development, environmental protection, preservation of coastlines, maintaining the purity of water, preservation and restoration of cultural and historical sites. It is worthy to note that in areas of tourism development, EU Policies needs to be followed judiciously and in line with EU Legislation. In this manner the Balkans can develop themselves as major destination in South Eastern Europe.

### **Tourism Policy in the Balkans**

Tourism is recognized as a Industry in many Balkan Nations with the prominent nations being Turkey which featured in the top 10 visited nation in 2010 followed by Greece and Croatia. One of the major devices of the Tourism Policy is the establishment of strategies for Tourism Development .From the overview and tourism prospects in the Balkans it is observed that all the nations have developed and adopted national strategies for the development of tourism in their respective countries. Balkan nations have developed their tourism products which is well reflected in their national strategies for tourism development which give prime importance to the following:

a. Marine Tourism which includes highlighting water sports, sun bathing across Greece which has an extensive coastline of 15000 Kms followed by Croatia with 5790 Kms of Coastline .These countries are the beneficiaries .The countries of Slovenia which gained an entry into the EU in 2004 and also a member of Schengen and Euro Zone has a meagre coastline of 32 Kms followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina with a coastline of only 20 Kms.

b. Mountain Tourism across Dinaric Mountains, Shar Planina, Pindos, Stara Planina, Rhodope. There are numerous ski resorts across Mount Olympus, Rila Mountains and Mount Pirin.

c. Cultural Tourism which includes to various cultural, historical sites across Albania, Romania, Bulgaria, Montenegro, Slovenia

d. Rural Tourism includes visiting rural sites, witnessing traditional crafts across Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania.

e. Health and Spa Tourism which includes positioning of nations as cost effective in providing medical treatments and presence of thermal mineral waters across Romania.

### **Issues and Challenges in the Balkans**

a. Product Diversification: offering more than sun, sand and beaches. It also gives us the glimpse of the ancient and medieval world in the form of its untouched countryside.

b. Tackling New Markets: The region welcomes tourists of varying budgets, time-frames and most importantly interests.

c. Positioning: Balkans have an extensive forest cover like Slovenia, Romania, Croatia and are marketed as green destinations

d. Developing long term developmental strategies: It outlines maintaining the quality of environment and also establishing a stable economy in which will ensure steady flow of tourists in the region.

e. Increasing Regional Cooperation: This step should be initiated to promote travel within the Balkans similar to the Nordic Passport Union across the Nordic Region.

There are issues and challenges which needs to be addressed by the Balkan Region. These can be summarized as:

1. Temperatures which will continue to increase in the wake of climate change
2. Droughts across the Balkans may become more frequent
3. Population density across the Balkan Peninsula is on the rise
4. Heatwaves will become more frequent across the Balkan Peninsula
5. Biodiversity is bound to be affected by the temperature rise and climate change

All the above are result of climate change and environmental degradation resulting from population and tourism explosion.

The emotions behind the competition between Mediterranean and the Balkans has been aptly summarized by the freelance journalist Lia Grainger (Readers Digest August 2014) on Transylvania Region of Romania as:

“In these villages something rare persists that has been nearly obliterated elsewhere in Europe: a glimpse of ancient rural life, unchanged by the passage of the time... Entire civilizations have passed through these lands and then departed, replaced by others. That which remains is a true rarity.”

## **Conclusion**

In the present scenario Balkan Region has the capacity and capability and plethora of tourism resources both physical and manmade resources to charm the tourist with its beauty and serenity and is all set to mesmerize the tourists with its bouquet of offerings. Tourism is a success story in western and northern Europe. Balkans need to understand and seek a lesson from the above mentioned sub regions of Europe that Tourism can prove to be a major economic tool for employment generation and poverty alleviation. Effective Tourism Policy and planning needs to be developed across the Balkans in order to sustain and compete with other globalized tourism markets. Due to the similarities of the countries across the Balkans i.e cultural and historical creation of Tourism Product is of prime importance and their joint presence and mutual promotion of the Balkans needs to be done in order to attain prime importance in the International Tourism Market in the years to come.

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