

Tourism Trend during the Pandemic: A Case Study of an Albanian Accommodation Facility through the Online Booking System

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Abstract

The task of this paper is to investigate the extent to which the tourism industry is affected by the pandemic during the year 2020. The aim is to shed light on the influx of tourists during 2020 - 2021 in comparison with the previous year, that of 2019. Emphasis will also be placed on the nationalities of tourists visiting Vlora. The accommodation facility under analysis is an apartment unit located by the seaside in the city of Vlore which provides hospitality to foreigners.

The findings confirm the fact that the numbers of tourists during 2020 had shrunk compared to previous years and the countries mostly entering Albania were those bordering our territory such as the Republic of Kosovo, Northern Macedonia, and Serbia. Online booking reservation system of the apartment unit reveals interesting data on the number, percentage and nationality of accommodated tourists.

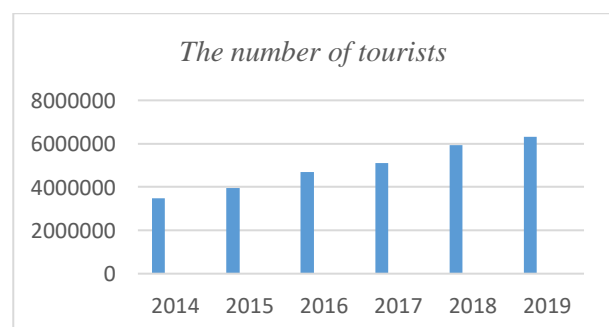
Key words: tourists, accommodation, pandemic, online booking system

Introduction

In recent years, the Albanian government has paid particular attention to the tourist industry, perceiving the sector as key in the economic development of the country. The aim is to establish Albania as a favoured destination within the Mediterranean tourism market by creating a new impression of Albania as a destination which can offer services in line with international standards. As a result, the Albanian tourism industry has seen ongoing growth, with an

average annual increase of 12% in the number of visitors, between 2013 and 2017 (INSTAT, 2018). With its beautiful natural scenery and a remarkable heritage of historical sites, Albania has become an increasingly attractive destination for foreign visitors. Figures released by the Albanian Institute of Statistics in cooperation with the Bank of Albania show that 21 million people had entered Albania for touristic purposes between 2013 and 2017. The figures for 2018 revealed a 15.8% increase in the number of tourists compared to 2017, with numbers reaching a peak in the first 8 months of 2019 with 4,870,588 tourists recorded in this period (see Figure .2).

Figure 1.2. Foreign visitors to Albania 2014-2019(INSTAT, 2020a)



As a result over the last ten years, Albania has experienced a wide range of new encounters and collaborations with people from many different countries, which have created a wealth of new

opportunities in the tourist industry. The majority of trips to the country are made by tourists who show a keen interest in the history, traditions, customs, cultural values and language of the country they are visiting. In contrast to the past, Albania is becoming an increasingly popular choice for foreign visitors who are enthusiastic about what they find there.¹

The Albanian tourist industry is undergoing a rapid expansion in terms of the services that it offers to foreign visitors, with 46 tourist operators and 154 travel agencies currently active in different cities, and 252 professional certified guides offering their services across the entire country. According to data provided by the General Directory of Taxation, there are 2,437 accommodation structures operating in the country, an increase of 186%, since 2013. Hotels make up about 65% of the total, while the remaining accommodation consists in private houses and guest rooms. A particularly substantial increase in the capacity of accommodation was recorded in the municipalities of Vlora and Saranda, with a growth in capacity of around 32% compared to 2018 (Ministry of Tourism and Environment, 2018).

The Effects of Pandemic on Tourism during 2020

The appearance of the lethal disease COVID-19 has resulted in massive financial losses and caused global health and economic crises worldwide (Anderson et al., 2020; McKenna and Bargh, 1998; Brewer, 2016). The major effects of the pandemics result in a steep decrease in the travel and tourism industry, a dominant contributor to the service industry (Abbas, 2021; Jones et al., 2015; Avery, 2010). During 2020 the number of foreign travellers entering Albania for tourism dropped significantly compared to the previous year that of 2019 with about 4 million people less. The decrease had substantial reduction on the country's economy as tourism is considered a profitable industry of income generation.

Table 1.1 Number of Foreign Tourists in 2019

Year 2019
Foreign citizens 6,406,038

¹ Statistics collated by the Ministry of Culture from the information offices of all Albanian cultural sites administered by the Ministry report that almost 1 million foreign and domestic tourists visited cultural attractions in 2018, an increase of 49.2% on the number of visitors recorded in 2017. The most popular cultural destinations among foreign visitors are the World Heritage Sites, such as the Butrint Archaeological Park, Berat and Gjirokastra,

Table 1.2 Number of Foreign Tourists in 2020

Year 2020
Foreign citizens 2,323,938

Source: <http://www.instat.gov.al/al/temat/industria-tregtia-dhe-sh%C3%ABrbimet/turizmi/#tab2>

Although 2020 the year of pandemics, marked the greatest drop in tourists, 2021 the subsequent year saw revival of this industry in Albania as demonstrated by the figures (Table 1.3). 4,718,114 tourists visited Albania during 2021, more than a half compared to 2020.

Table 1.3 Number of Foreign Tourists in 2021

Year 2021
Foreign citizens 4,718,114

Source: <http://www.instat.gov.al/al/temat/industria-tregtia-dhe-sh%C3%ABrbimet/turizmi/#tab2>

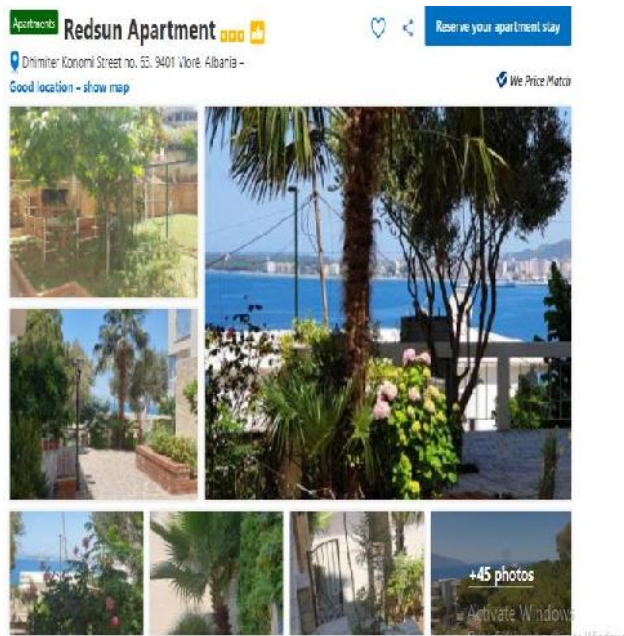
Case Study and Analysis

The accommodation facility under analysis is listed on booking.com as Redsun Apartment shown in Figure 1.1. Booking.com a travel agency for lodging reservations & other travel products² is considered one of the most popular online travel sites with international availability. As well as a safe and reliable platform to book trips. Redsun apartments are located in the city of Vlora, in the area known as "Uje Ftohte" along the seaside.

the National History Museum in Tirana, the Apollonia National Archaeological Park and the cultural attractions of Korça and Shkodra. Domestic visitors accounted for approximately 26.4% of the total number of visitors, with the remaining number consisting of foreign tourists who had visited the country throughout the year.

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Booking.com>

Figure 1.1 Screenshot of the accommodation facility listed on Booking



Taking permission from booking admin, I had the possibility to check the data on reservations, nationality and travel purposes during 2020 and 2021 from foreign tourists.

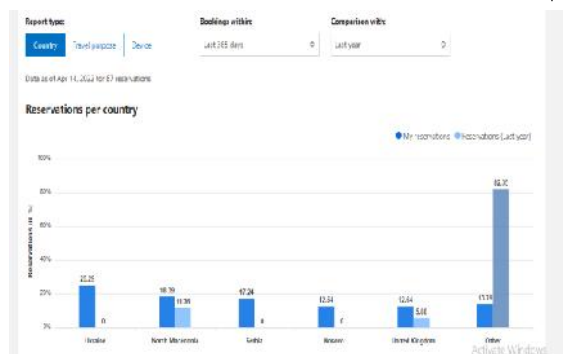
The data reveal that the tourists dominating tourism in 2020 during the pandemics were Albanians themselves standing on the top of the list with a percentage of 64.71%, Montenegro following the second with 17.65 %, North Macedonia 11.76% implying that the neighbouring countries were the ones which opted for Albania during 2020.

Figure 1.2 Reservations per Country during 2021 in Comparison with year 2020

Ukraine	25.29%
Last year	0%
North Macedonia	18.39%
Last year	11.76%
Serbia	17.24%
Last year	0%
Kosovo	12.64%
Last year	0%
United Kingdom	12.64%
Last year	5.88%
Italy	10.34%
Last year	0%
Albania	2.3%
Last year	64.71%
France	1.15%
Last year	0%
Montenegro	0%
Last year	17.65%

Albanians standing on top implies that tourism within the country itself was encouraged and boosted. It is quite obvious that European tourists such as Italians, French or British were absent during the pandemics, meaning no reservations in the platform from those nationalities. Even tourists from Serbia who really prefer Albania to spend their holiday lacked during the pandemics. Another trend of tourist influx in Vlora is that from Ukraine. Redsun Apartments accommodate many Ukrainians every year since they are keen on the comfort, proximity and convenience offered by the accommodation facility and the city itself. However, during 2020 there were no reservations from them due to the Covid-19 outbreak. But, 2021 saw an increase in their numbers reaching 25.29 %. The data bring visible results on the increase of tourists during 2021 during which tourism was reviving. Albania was being promoted as a Covid-19 free country allowing tourists to enter without any restrictions or tests. Thus, tourists from Ukraine and Serbia boosted from 0% to 25.29% and 17.24 respectively. Tourists from Italy had booked the apartments as well with a percentage of 10.34 % quite a significant increase compared to the previous year of the pandemics. Rather surprisingly the number of Albanian tourists dropped considerably reaching a percentage of 2.3 % compared to 64.71. Moreover, there is an increase of tourists from the UK with a percentage of 12.64% in comparison to 5.88% which was the previous year.

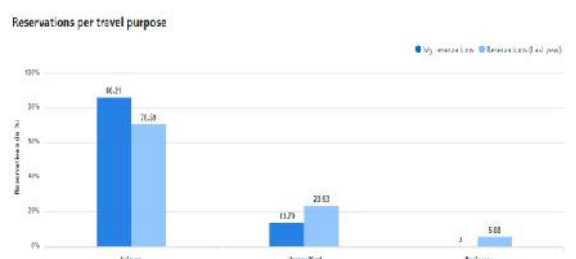
Figure 1.3 Screenshot of the accommodation facility's report on tourists



Reservations based on Travel Purpose

Much interest poses even the reason of travelling to Albania and staying at the apartments. The main reason is for leisure with 86.21% during 2021 and 70.595 during 2020. Quite a similar figure with a slight difference. While, the others do not specify it in the platform, comprising 13.79% and 23.53% during 2020.

Figure 1.1 Screenshot of the Reservations per Travel Purpose



The results are expected since the main purpose tourists visit this accommodation facility is for leisure. Taking into consideration its location and proximity to the beach one can easily assume that this place is quite comfortable for summer holidays.

Conclusions

The results showed that there were differences in tourists' numbers among European and non-European visitors during 2020 which marked the isolation year and 2021. Tourists who mostly booked at Redsun Apartments were from Albania and the neighbouring countries which could travel based on a rapid test certificate. Europe had strict regulations or some were totally closed for travellers to enter. So, the destination with no travel restrictions was Albania. Fortunately tourism improved during 2021 during which European tourists such as French and British would come as well. Gradually, the tourism industry

improved and more travellers were visiting Albania for leisure purposes as demonstrated by the data and reservations at the apartments under analysis.

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