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# Albanian Riviera / Creative Tourism Transcending Local Expediency

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## Abstract

*The paper explores the concept of creative tourism and its role in the development of touristic destinations. The case of the Albanian Riviera is analysed in its current situation in terms of tourism offers and the main objective is identifying potentials of the destination towards the development of creative tourism. What creative tourism is and how relevant Albanian Riviera is from the perspective of creative tourism's growth, based on authenticity and in accordance with the new tourism market trend, are the two main questions to be elaborated.*

Creative tourism as a new form of cultural tourism is experiencing a recognizable growth in the recent years, providing new opportunities of development for touristic destinations. Marques (2012) describes creative tourism as an aspect of the renewed interest in creativity, where creativity achieves added value in a range of different fields (economic, social, political and cultural). These trends show a phenomenon in which creativity has become embedded in many fields, ranging from innovation to urban regeneration and tourism development (Richards, 2011). The Albanian Riviera as a touristic locality with rich cultural heritage and tradition shows possibilities for new offers that can respond to the trend of creative tourism. In these terms, it is important to understand how existing resources can be developed into creative products, offering new experiences for tourists and opportunities for the local community.

### The concept of creative tourism

Creative Tourism is a relatively new notion. The idea originated in the mid-1990s from EUROTEx project, an European project with the intention of supporting local enterprises through marketing

craft production to tourists (Richards, 2005). The project incited discussions between local producers and tourists which resulted in the development of craft experiences involving visitors in the process, either by seeing or learning. As a term, Creative Tourism was defined for the first time by Richards and Raymond (2000, p. 18) as "Tourism which offers visitors the opportunity to develop their creative potential through active participation in courses and learning experiences which are characteristic of the holiday destination where they are undertaken". UNESCO (2006, p. 3), adopted the definition of Creative Tourism as "Travel directed toward an engaged and authentic experience, with participative learning in the arts, heritage, or special character of a place, providing a connection with those who reside in this place and create this living culture". As a form of cultural tourism, it is attributed to local's culture of living and cultural heritage, thus incorporates a wide range of a region's potentials. The question on the main difference between cultural tourism and creative tourism is based on 'experiencing' rather than 'contemplating' (visiting museums, galleries, concerts, performances and



*Fig1a / Panoramic view of Saranda  
source / internet*

the like), hence the mutual interest of both, the local community and tourists, is considered (Pine and Gilmore 1999).

The preferences of many tourists are changing, from conventional tourism based on cultural sites and package tours to more experience-based tourism. The importance of using tourism to support the identity of the destination and to stimulate the consumption of local culture and creativity, is continuously increasing (Richards and Wilson, 2007). Creativity as a contemporary demand is growing among not only creative professionals but also among developed societies in general. It offers stimulating experiences as well as enables the participants to develop themselves through those experiences (Richards, 2009). Richards also points out the movement in society towards 'skilled consumption', including education, self-development and creative activities, which depend on developing individual skills and creativity.

According to Rudan (2012), creative tourism as a special form of tourism, creates a new dimension that meets the modern traveller's need for creativity and participation in various workshops, educational programs and a variety of creative activities (arts, heritage, nature, the destination's peculiarities), and thus creates a true, authentic experience of the destination. Richards and Wilson point out the role of creative tourism in the involvement of the tourists in the culturescape of the destination, where they take part in different activities – crafts, arts,

culinary and other creative events, thus building a close link between the tourists, the local population, and its cultural heritage.

### **Approaches towards development of creative tourism**

The economic benefits of culture and creativity as instruments for innovation and social integration as well as accommodating the needs of tourists, are becoming prominent. Today there are examples of developed creative tourism activities provided by creative networks aimed at linking tourists and locals (Richards and Marques, 2012). Every touristic region tries to adapt to new tourist demands and stand out through the development of innovative products (Stipanovic and Rudan, 2010). A creative destination is able to generate profits from innovation, culture, research and artistic production, and thus strengthen its own distinctiveness (Sepe and Di Trapani, 2010).

According to Rudan (2012), the following facts have a direct impact on the development of creative tourism of a region: a) the destination stakeholders' own creativity is essential for creative tourism; b) the development of tourism must not destroy the cultural and natural values and resources, i.e. the development must have a sustainable basis; c) even destinations that do not have enough cultural resources can develop creative tourism; and d) this form of tourism is an upgrade of the destination's existing touristic product.

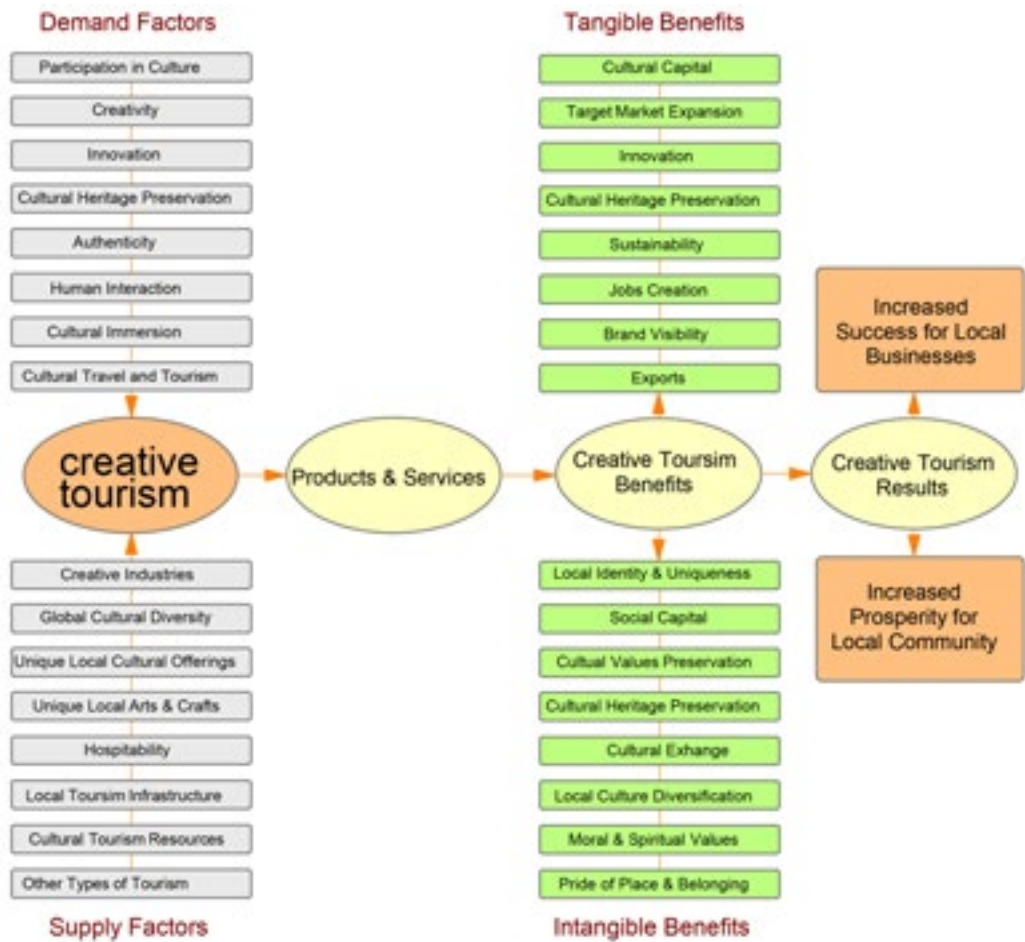


Fig1 / Creative Tourism Business Model  
source / Ohridska-Olson and Ivanov 2010



Fig2 / Albanian Riviera.  
source / Arta Januzi-Cana



Richards (2009) has described the following factors that support creative tourism from the view of consumption and production:

- The increasingly skilled consumption-society is driven towards 'skilled consumption', including self-development, education and creative activities as more interesting and directly practiced, increasing the level of challenge and the excitement of the activities rather than just meeting basic needs and offers
- The experience economy - where competition based on producing goods or services has been replaced by competition to produce experiences that will allow the consumer to use their own creativity; and
- Shift to intangible tourism resources - such as the image, the stories or atmosphere of the places, where creativity is needed to turn these into experiences and products for the tourists. Small-scale places such as local bars, or restaurants serving local food, markets selling regional products are becoming types of places where tourists hope to encounter 'authentic' culture rather than visiting museums, art galleries, monuments etc.

The growth of creative tourism is related to the potential of services and products the touristic region can offer, hence different models of tourism provide frameworks for sustainable tourism development. Ohridska-Olson and Ivanov (2010) have developed a Model of Creative Tourism Business, which claims a community's local economy improvement by stimulating creative industries. The model presents key demand and supply factors which support a sustainable development of creative tourism, providing tourism benefits through products and services toward the growth of local economy and prosperity. Five groups of elements (demand and supply factors, tangible and intangible benefits, and financial results) provide the strategies for developing creative tourism products that should come from the tourism business rather than EU or governmental policies (Ohridska-Olson and Ivanov).

The importance of this business model resides in the fact that it provides possibilities of profit from creative tourism of any cultural tourism destination. Therefore, the Albanian Riviera which already possesses the assets for the development of creative tourism, can use the advantages of the respective model.

## **Albanian Riviera: analysis of the current situation in relation to creative tourism development**

The Albanian coastal Riviera is located in the southwestern part of Albania, running along the Ionian Sea with a climate that is dominated by Mediterranean and continental influences. It belongs to the county of Vlorë and comprises the region of Himarë and Lukovë. The coastline is spread along 144 kilometres, from the national park of Llogara in the north to the village of Lukovë in the south and is characterized by rock formation and pebble beaches. It consists of 16 settlements that spread throughout the region and has a population of about 70,000 (World Bank, 2007).

With the improvement of the access, the Albanian Riviera is experiencing a growth of foreign visitors especially from the neighbouring countries. Although the destination's tourism is established in an unintentional manner, the private sector has responded to the market demand impulsively while acclimating to these demands. According to statistics from the County of Vlorë (Albania. Këshillii Qarkut Vlorë, 2013), approximately 98.000 tourists visit the Riviera each year. From the total number of foreign visitors in 2010, about 68% came for "sun-and-sea" holidays (Kruja, 2012), a trend that continues in similar fashion and indicates the high seasonality of the Albanian Riviera tourism. A high increase of tourism through years is detected, although it is necessary to develop tourism on the basis of sustainability in accordance to the new market trends.

The National Strategy Plan for Development of Tourism in Albania 2014-2020 (Albania, Ministry of Urban Development and Tourism, 2013) does not address the development of creative tourism as a potential for the improvement of regional tourism. This means that creative tourism as a potentially driving force is still not well recognized.

The plan distinguishes three following key aspects of the success of cultural tourism in general: Coastal tourism- (as a key product defined in the 'sun and sea' tourism and is the main purpose of tourists visiting coastal destination); Cultural tourism- (with a diversity of cultural in regarding the tourist offer and the variety and quality of cultural contents, events and traditional values); and Natural/ECO/rural tourism- (rural areas provide surroundings for ecological, sporting and outdoor activities). In the framework of the workshop on the

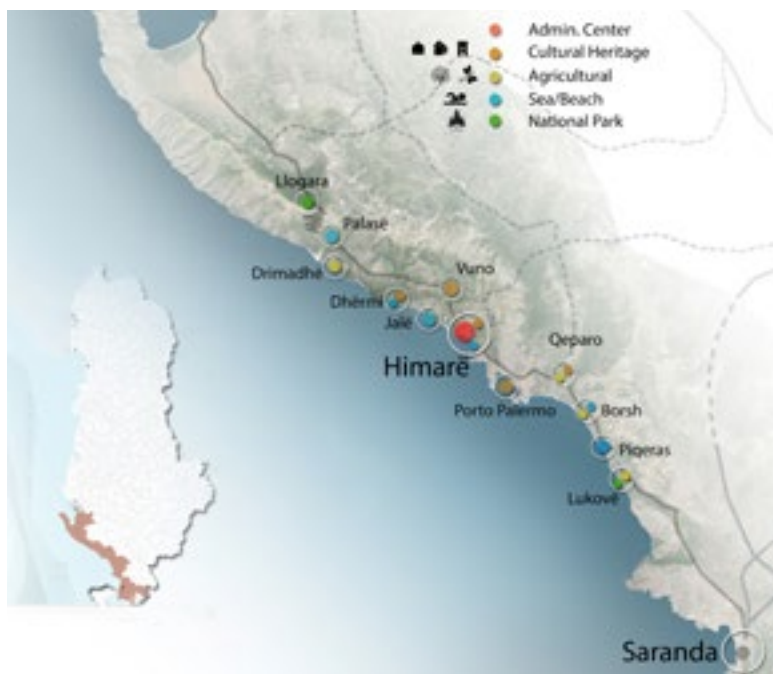


Fig3 / Albanian Riviera: Overview of the existing creative tourism potential  
source / Arta Januzi-Cana

development of the Albanian Riviera, an analysis of the current situation of the destination within a context of tourism has been made. Based on site visits in the area, analysis and discussions of the team's researchers, and the Integrated Coastal Development Study and Plan (Albania. Government of Albania. PAP/RAC - SOGREAH Consortium, 2005) the potential of various forms of cultural offers and activities that support creative tourism is recognized. However, most of them are not managed or coordinated as creative tourism and are not included in a platform of the planning organization and of the authorities in charge of tourism policy.

The rural communities of the Riviera embody rich spiritual hereditary values, traditional customs, mythology and folklore, which are transmitted from generation to generation and symbolize a strong local identity. Most of the villages are only 30- 50% inhabited throughout the year (Albania. Government of Albania. PAP/RAC - SOGREAH Consortium, 2005). The elderly reside and live from remittance from the next generation since a constant trend of emigration, especially by the younger generations, has characterized the region since WWII and particularly during the '90's. Families that are absent most of the year usually return during the summer season to tend to the incoming flux of visitors.

Except for the village of Borsh which has a community of Muslims, the Orthodox Christian religion is predominant in the region, characterized by a significant number of saint days (each village boasts

its saint). A large number of historical monuments such as late antiquity basilicas, medieval churches and old citadel foundations attest to the rich cultural heritage of the region, (e.g. only in Dhërmi village there are 27 churches and monasteries). The remains of Borsh Castle, Church of Palasa, Church of Holy Mary in Dhërmi, Spiridon Church in Vuno, Church of St. Mary Kasopitra and Castle foundations in Old Himarë, Monastery of St. Mary in Kakome, Monastery of St. Mary in Krorëz, Ali Pasha Castle in Porto Palermo with its submarine tunnels constructed before WWII during which it was used as a military base etc., are among the monumental sites of the region.

The architecture of the villages of Old Qeparo, Vuno, Dhërmi, Old Himarë etc. is characterized by a dense spread of houses next to, and above each other, with very little space in between, providing a view of the beach from each structure. At the same time it provides an impressive view of the main village façade complex from the main road (Albania. Government of Albania. PAP/RAC - SOGREAH Consortium, 2005).

The houses represent a valuable architectural ensemble, authentic way of traditional living and aesthetic style that is promoted within the framework of family-owned tourism and preservation of a traditional rural identity. Approximately 30% of the structures are abandoned in various stages of neglect and ruin and some new, out-of-character construction has taken place within the confines of the old village (Albania. Government of Albania.

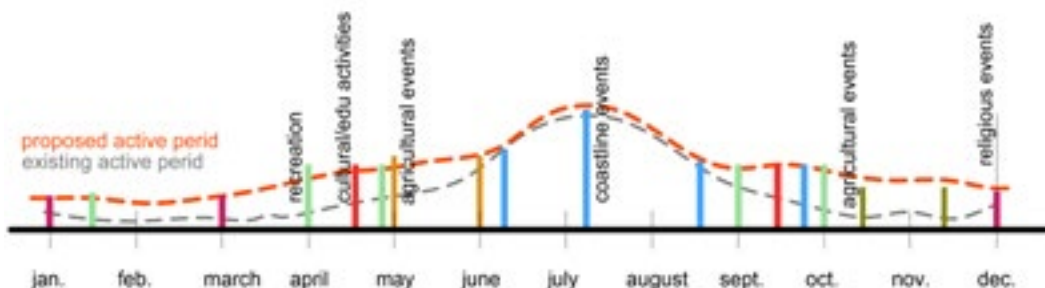


Fig4 / Extending the active period throughout the year  
source / Joana Dhiamandi and Arta Januzi-Cana

PAP/RAC - SOGREAH Consortium).

The villages of Lukovë, Shën Vasil, Nivicë, Kudhës, Palasë are accentuated with olive groves and fruit orchards terracing on the surrounding hillsides. It is a common practice of the villagers to hire workers from northern Albania to look after their gardens, olive groves and to harvest olives and citrus fruit. Local communities strongly hold on to old traditional customs, culinary and apparel that are vibrant and unique. However, there is a lack of related events and festivities that could promote these values.

Seasonal camping and art workshops are the main alternative youth recreational oriented events that take place on the beaches of Dhërmi and Jalë. These spaces host diverse creative event-sand are progressively attracting young foreign visitors. Recreational and sports activities (rafting, sky jumping, mountain biking, fishing, trekking, cliff climbing, hiking, etc.) are also prominent.

It can be summarized that creative tourism is only present on a small-scale. Creative programs of individual destinations do not constitute a significant component of the destination's overall tourist offer. Certain forms of cultural offers are present (urban core, religious buildings, monuments, concerts, events, traditional customs) including some temporary forms of creative provisions that are not only meant for tourists but also for the local population. Development strategies with the involvement of the local community and partnerships with relevant policymakers are needed.

### Albanian riviera: a creative tourism development approach

The vision for Albanian tourism (Albania, Ministry of Urban Development and Tourism, 2013) is to fashion touristic destinations as attractive, authentic and welcoming in Europe, based on utilization of natural, cultural and historical potential accessible for the international market. The Albanian Riviera with its potential for creative tourism development could remain vital without further exploitation of the landscape and respecting the local cultural heritage and environment. Well-planned and managed activities can yield economic profit with the help of branding the destination, cultural heritage and local community products and, thereby, attracting national and international tourists and investments. The destination with its strong cultural identity as creative potential can serve as a powerful network bringing people and new ideas as well as fostering cultural, business and educational relations.

Creative tourism can extend the current active tourism period (June to August) to yearlong tourism by providing interesting alternative events that are not necessarily related to seasonal tourism and integrate the inactive areas of the destination. The elongated employment would also stimulate the local community to self-engage, interact and improve their skills, which would assist in a decrease of the villages' abandonment.

Diverse creative offers that highlight the potential of Albanian Riviera as creative destination can be the following:

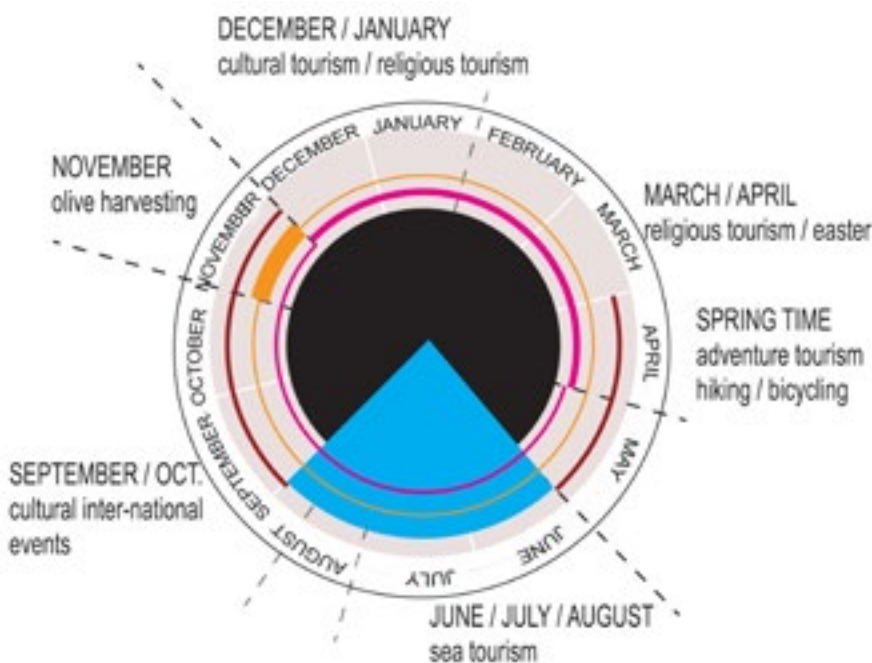


Fig5 / Existing yearly calendar of strategic activities  
source / Joana Dhiamandi and Arta Januzi-Cana

- Coastline activities: (Lukova, Bunec, Borsh, Qeparo, Llamani, Filkuri, Himara, Livadhi, Jalë, Gjipe, Dhërmi, Dhralë): scuba diving, fishing and culinary courses, camping, festivals and workshops (art, music, film, 'do it yourself' local crafts), sport and recreation etc.
- Village activities: (Shën Vasil, Lukova, Pigeras, Borsh, Qeparo, Jalë, Vuno, Dhërmi): religious events, national seasonal educational trainings/workshops on olive harvesting, traditional cooking and honey production, festivals and workshops, etc.
- Himara as an administrative centre: international festivals, educational trainings and tourism in the historic castle of old Himara
- Porto Palermo: Cold War tours, traditional products fair, herb harvesting international political and VIP events etc.

In Figures 5 and 6, an annual calendar is depicted that shows existing recreational and cultural activities which are organized in the Riviera and the proposal that highlights these activities. Applying principles that support creative tourism would increase the strength of the overall offer of the destination

Based on the analysis of the current situation and prospective new opportunities, supporting measures that enable the development of creative tourism can be summarized as following:

- Recognition of the potential of cultural events as the main infusion of creative tourism for the national interest;
- Development of a structure as a driving force by professional teams that would raise the awareness of the significance of events for the local community;

- Development of a plan that would predict economic benefits from new events, and satisfy a wide range of tourists;
  - Create relationships with similar event associations organized internationally as new opportunities for self-marketing and branding in international markets;
  - Offer high quality, distinctive and promotional creative events;
  - Utilize online social and cultural event networks as a key promotion to the (inter) national market;
  - Engage communities in groups of events practicing competitive advantages;
- The promotion of new opportunities and stimulation of alternative tourism with the purpose of increasing the number of local and foreign visitors subsequently extending the touristic season and thereby creating a more sustainable development of this sector, could be achieved by highlighting the features, values, characteristics and strengths of the specific areas along the Southern coast line.

## Conclusion

The Albanian Riviera as a touristic sector is a very important asset for the country. Even though tourism has been growing through the years, it is still in its early phase of development. This study shows that the concept of creative tourism has not been applied to the region. Some creative activities are present but they are related only to a few individual micro-destinations. Natural and cultural preconditions are appealing, but the intangible resources (identity, narratives, atmosphere, way of living) need to build up into new quality



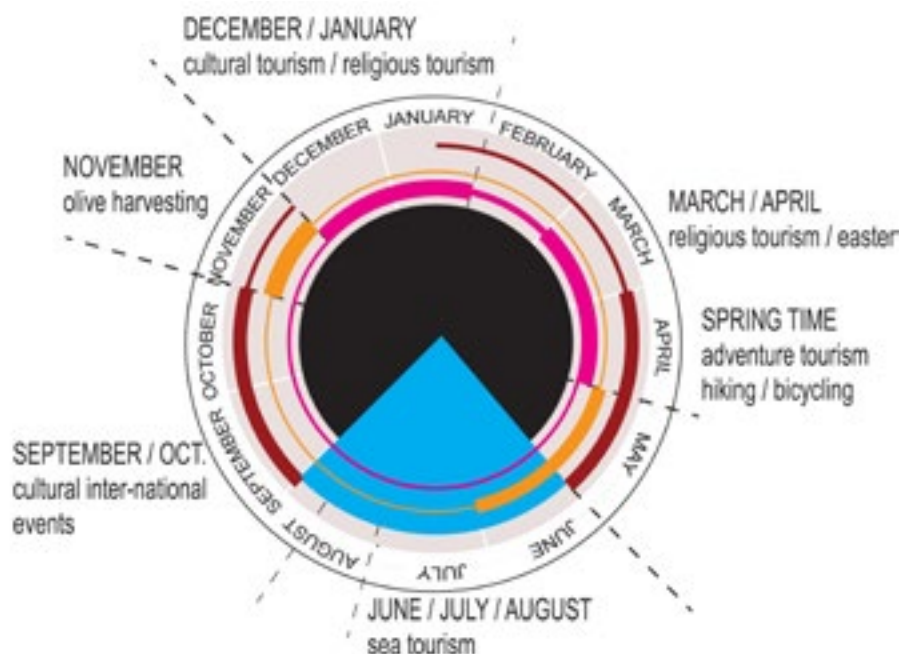


Fig6 / Proposed yearly calendar of strategic activities  
source / Joana Dhiamandi and Arta Januzi-Cana

experiences for locals and visitors. Through creative educational, recreational and cultural activities (workshops, fairs, authentic culinary events etc.), Albanian Riviera has a unique opportunity to effectively develop creative tourism. An integrated study with a broad perspective will be needed first. Development strategies need to be innovated with the involvement of local community and partnerships with relevant policy makers. A solid interaction between tourism and culture can be fostered to help locations intensify their attractiveness to tourists, as well as increase their competitiveness as locations in which to live, visit, work and invest.

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