Adventure, culture and nature in Western Balkans - EU supports sustainable tourism for exchange and growth

By developing unique and sustainable tourism models based on natural, traditional and cultural values and promoting the best features of the Western Balkans, the European Union helps boost economic development, generate income and jobs and increase cross-border cooperation in the region’s most beautiful corners.

Exploring nature, history and culture in the Western Balkans via some of the best known long-distance hiking or cycling trails has never been easier. In cooperation with local governments,
small businesses and associations, the European Union has helped renovate tourism infrastructure, and map and promote tourism products and activities across this region, often in cross-border initiatives. Learn about some of these exciting initiatives below.

Via Dinarica trails: Prepare to cycle through Albania and Kosovo

The Via Dinarica, the mountain corridor of the Dinaric Alps, lies at the heart of the Western Balkans and connects seven countries in Southeast Europe: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, Kosovo and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, each offering a vast range of activities, from adventure to relaxation, on both land and water.

In 2016, the Via Dinarica mega trail was declared ‘a must-see’ by both Wanderlust magazine and The Guardian, and it was one of the National Geographic Traveler’s “Best of the World” destinations for 2017.

It is considered a nature lovers’ paradise and is one of Europe’s least explored mountain ranges. Beside activities such as world-class hiking, cycling, skiing, kayaking, rafting and many more, visitors can experience traditional lifestyles and taste the cuisine of the highlands. Also, more and more “bed and breakfasts” are opening in mountain villages, as well as small guest houses that offer accommodation, food and outdoor activities.

The latest additions to the itinerary include two new hiking and biking long-distance routes that connect Albania and Kosovo, passing through the Bjeshkët e Nemuna national park, Gjakova, Decan, Junik and Peja in Kosovo, and the Kukës and Lezha regions in Albania.

By developing these trails, the European Union supports local tourism, while valorizing the unique natural wealth and local cultural and historic heritage of the region.

Search for stećci in the Montenegrin Stonehenge

In Montenegro, across 35 locations, the Piva Nature Park hides a whopping 787 medieval standing tombstones, known as “stećci”. One of these locations, due to the magical charge generated in the collision between the Piva river and the Durmitor mountain, is called the Montenegrin Stonehenge. Some of them were recently recognized as UNESCO World Heritage. Stećci are scattered throughout the meadows and mountains of Piva, which makes the search for them a real adventure.

Another unique feature of this region is that here birdwatchers can in a single place observe all ten European species of woodpeckers, also known as “bird astronauts”. Why astronauts? Because this unique bird, while searching for insects hiding under the bark, hits the tree with its beak with a force that is 1,200 times stronger than the force of gravity, 250 times more force than astronauts experience during lift-off!

From Herzegovina trails to Dubrovnik Elafiti islands

A few hundred kilometers away, a new tourist product connecting Bosnia and Herzegovina
and Croatia was developed thanks to an EU project which mapped more than 260 households, hotels, restaurants, cultural and historical monuments, as well as adventure activities such as trekking, hiking, kayaking and paragliding, into a distinct tourism offer.

Hiking and biking trails reaching up to 1500 metres above sea level were first identified and marked, and are now promoted through a searchable online database with local tourism resources, maps and multimedia content.

An EU cross-border initiative, this project aims to promote small business, producers of often traditional products or local delicacies, and generate jobs and income, by enhancing the capacities of local partners such as micro and small enterprises, craftsmen, or other service providers, and developing new tourism opportunities.

Cycle through history: EU revitalizes the old narrow gauge railway in Bosnia and Herzegovina

A similar example of cross-border success is a 38 kilometer long cycling route developed along the old Ćiro railway. Over two years, the EU and local partners worked together to revitalize this narrow gauge railway between Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Konavle in Croatia by creating and promoting a bicycle trail, while in parallel increasing the offer and quality of tourism services in the bordering regions.

“The whole cycling trail, the old railway, is, in a way, an outdoor museum”, said Ana Soldo, Director of the local public company Vjetrenica – Popovo polje. “It starts in Gabela, crossing the Nature Park Hutovo Blato, through the beautiful karstic phenomenon Popovo field, alongside the Vjetrenica cave
and the Zavala Monastery all the way to Konavle in Croatia.”

Tourism is a sector of considerable importance for the Southeast European economies, with significant potential for regional cooperation. It has emerged as contributor to approximately 6% both to the region’s employment and GDP and adds almost a quarter to the region’s overall exports.

The European Union continues to support sustainable tourism development in the Western Balkans and has recently, in collaboration with the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), launched a grant scheme worth 1.62-million-Euros that will be used to improve infrastructure and the quality of services along regional cultural and adventure tourism routes. The grant scheme is an integral part of the EU-funded and RCC-implemented Tourism Development and Promotion project worth 5 million Euros. It will be carried out through three consecutive cycles with an aim to implement at least ten pilot projects in each cycle.

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