

Decentralized Cooperation in the Balkans



Former Yugoslav Republic
of Macedonia

Assessment and Analysis
of Interventions in
Macedonia 2010

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1. Summary of the aims of the intervention as featured in the registered project

Heading of Intervention 3

Follow up to 2008 and 2009 Projects in Macedonia

Aims of the Intervention

- To provide professional experience in the field for qualified guides (trainers) and trainee guides with groups of French hikers
- To test a tour in Macedonia with French tourists who often travel on this type of trip
- To finalize setting up a department for tourism for the Tetovo town hall
- To promote the destination in the media by inviting journalists on the trips

Brief description of the Project

Two groups of French hikers, representing the typical type of client for this destination, (either retired or close to retirement, interested in culture and with a lot of experience of hiking in France and abroad) took part in a holiday accompanied by Macedonian guides supervised by a French expert. Promotion in the media was ensured by inviting a journalist to join each of the groups (Grégory Rohart, i-trekkings.net, i-voyages.net). The French expert stayed on for three extra days to follow up the 2009 assignments, and in particular, set up the new Tourist Office.

The Programme

Two groups of hikers interested in discovering Macedonia were put together through the CRET and the French consultant's communications. The trip was organized by a French travel agency, randoqueyras.com, working with a local incoming tourist agency in Tetovo. Therefore, the project was not financially involved in the services offered to the client and included in the trip.

The French consultant was in charge of the following tasks :

- providing training for the guides in the field
- finding out what the participants thought of the choices made by socioprofessionals and tourism authorities both locally and regionally. This feedback is very important to help fine-tune details, confirm that choices made were the right ones and establish which new options to make.

2 The Test groups and the tour

The participants

The majority of hikers currently visiting the Macedonian mountains are physically fit, come from former Yugoslav countries or are expatriates living in Skopje and speak Albanian, a Slav language or English. The two groups of French hikers were quite different, but fairly representative of the type of client that can be expected to visit Macedonia and the Balkans in the near future; namely over 50, no children or no dependent children, just as interested in nature discovery and the culture of the country as by a specific summit and spending as much time taking photos as walking. This thirst for discovery is a major factor in attracting hikers to the Balkans as “if I want to go out walking just for the sake of it, I can step out my front door in Chambéry or go on a two hour train ride”.

Obviously not all future visitors to Macedonia fit into the same category but, for the time being, this is the type of client who is most attracted to the destination and who has the means to visit the Balkans.

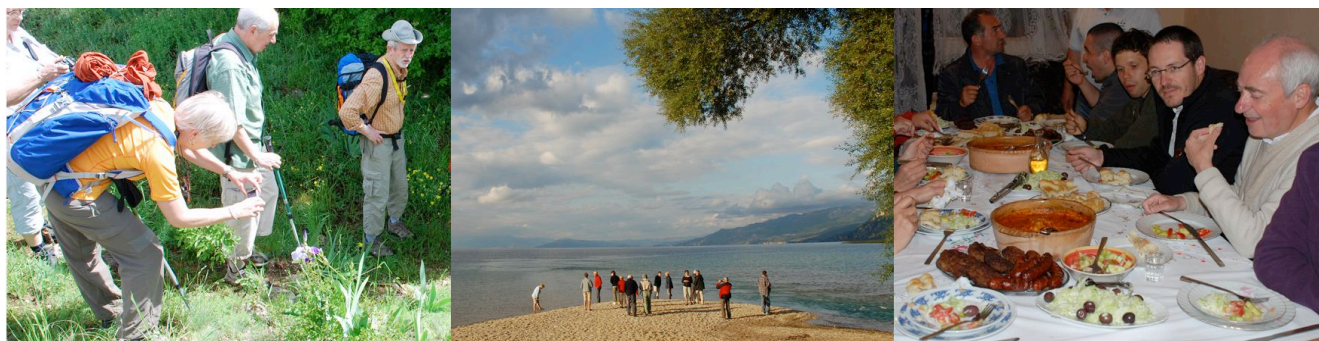
Guides

It is important to make the difference between a tour guide, from airport to airport, and a mountain guide.

The first accompanies the group from the first day to the last and unites the group members who do not necessarily know each other beforehand. This guide handles any eventual problems during the trip and is the contact with accommodation providers. In nature tourism, the tour guide is generally also the mountain guide: he knows his group and each person's individual character. He can understand and even anticipate their reactions. Therefore, separating the two jobs is not the best solution as it increases costs, thus making the destination less competitive compared with neighbouring countries like Bulgaria. It can also lead to conflict between the two guides when there are decisions to be made. However, at the present time, using two guides enables us to organize such a trip in the best conditions and is the only possible solution for French groups as none of the mountain guides speaks French.

As the guides have little experience for this type of clients, they needed some observation time so that they could understand different behavior and reactions, and adapt their guiding techniques to this type of client who asked many questions about the fauna, flora, way of life and made frequent photo stops.

The concept of continuing training is obviously not popular in Macedonia, with only about ten guides who saw the utility of joining in a part of the trip and coming to meet the participants, apart from in Tetovo. However, they will have to realize that no travel agency in Western Europe specializing in nature tourism will entrust a guide for the whole trip who has not already worked in tandem with a travel guide or experienced guide. On the other hand, guiding a group for day hiking does not pose the same problems as they already have the basic skills required.



The Tour

Firstly, it is important to stress that the participants were all very pleased with their trip. The idea of Macedonia as a popular “Nature and cultural tourism” destination is now becoming a reality.

Macedonia’s rich heritage needs no further introduction.

All the participants arrived with the latest Balkan wars in mind, but not always with a clear notion of specific time and place. But after the first three days, everyone was soon in the picture. We all know about Macedonians and Albanians but Bektashi and Torbesh ...?, anyway it is all quite complicated but in the end everyone understood the nuances and variations in different backgrounds and religions. As we enjoyed a warm welcome wherever we went and there were no apparent tensions, only the wealth of this diversity remained.

Hospitality

Service is very professional in hotels and restaurants, and the warm welcome in guest houses in the villages was exceptional.

For example, at Vejce in the Shar mountains above Tetovo, we were welcomed twice, we were a group of 16, by a family who offered us tea, yoghurts, biscuits and even music (shifteli) - an unforgettable memory for everyone. In all the villages as soon as we went out there was always someone who came to meet us and wanted to chat. It didn’t matter if we couldn’t speak the same language, there was always something more than mere words. Good humour, natural, simplicity, refined rustic character and kindness all go to sum up Macedonia.

Accommodation

All the hotels were of an international standard but not adapted to hiking clients who are looking for personal contact with the owners. There was no real criticism but no one would shout home about them. On the other hand, the quality of the meals was mostly poor and with not much variety, just meat, crudely prepared frozen vegetables, and salads. They still need to work on providing simple meals based on fresh produce and with a minimum of preparation, surely Macedonian cuisine is rich enough .

Everyone appreciated the guest houses where we were always warmly welcomed and the level of comfort was fine even if there weren’t always private facilities for each room. Meals were copious - at times too much so. Comments made by the first group were successfully put into practice for the second group- the meals were much better adapted! There is no need to provide three different starters followed by a huge main course and dessert. Same thing goes for breakfast which was like a full meal whereas packed lunches were inadequate. However, we have to emphasize how open they are to all suggestions and eager to please the visitor but without losing their spirit and respecting their traditions, exactly what the same said visitor is looking for.

Everyone we spoke to commented on how Macedonian governmental intervention appeared to be lacking. They are not asking for financing for investments but help in promoting this type of tourism, for networking, organizing publicity campaigns and professional training.

Album photos : <http://picasaweb.google.com/yvesfouque/Macedoine>

The Shar mountains

Our knowledge of the Macedonian and Kosovar sides of this mountain chain confirmed that the Shar Mountains are the ideal place to develop nature tourism along the same lines as that set up in the French Regional Natural Parks. The villages are still lively and welcoming with agricultural activity and traditional lifestyle. Taken all together, this is fairly unusual in this region. There are other beautiful villages such as Lazaropole and Galicnik but the population has left and they are only inhabited during the summer. Novo Selo, Bozovce, and Vejce, to name but three, could eventually become fairly prosperous while finding a balance between economic development and protection of their cultural, natural and human environment. In this way, agricultural activities would remain- they have proved their worth in these mountain areas through direct sales of local produce.

Tetovo

The project floundered for a time in 2009 when the municipal team changed over, until the new council was established and made the project their own. Involvement never flagged, with paying for fees, supporting students on the Tandem project, and producing a hiking Guide to the Shar Mountains. The region of Tetovo is still little known in Macedonia let alone in foreign countries, but all of the interventions mean that both civil society and political parties now realize the town's and the region's potential for tourism and private initiatives have started to see the light of day. France, and the Hautes Alpes in particular, are renowned for their expertise in the field of mountain tourism. The involvement of the "Alliance Francaise" has strengthened this position and helped give Tetovo a very positive image of France.

For the time being, setting up a department for tourism has fallen through and there is not even a project manager in charge of tourism. A tourism strategy would however lead to concrete and durable results and create employment. The absence of a motivated and experienced team in charge of tourism also explains that the website www.enjoytetova.com, has been shelved and not yet completed.

The municipality has registered a project financed by European IPA funds in association with that of Elbasan in Albania. With tourism as paramount, this project should give a well-needed boost to proceedings.

