



International Journal of Economics, Management and Tourism

GOCE DELCEV UNIVERSITY OF STIP
FACULTY OF TOURISM AND BUSINESS LOGISTICS

**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ECONOMICS,
MANAGEMENT AND TOURISM**

VOL. 1 NO. 1

2021

ISSN 2671-3810 online version

ISSN 2671-3802 printed version

Publisher:

Faculty of Tourism and Business Logistics
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www.ugd.edu.mk

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The International Journal of Economics, Management and Tourism (IJEMT) is peer-reviewed and issued two times per year, in both print and online versions at the following website of the web portal of Goce Delchev University in Stip: <https://js.ugd.edu.mk/index.php/ijemt/index>. The official language for papers is English language.

IJEMT DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46763/IJEMT>

IJEMT Vol.1 No. 1 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46763/IJEMT2111>

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WINTER TOURISM IN NORTH MACEDONIA AND ITS IMPACT IN THE ECONOMIC GROWTH

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Abstract

In this paper we gave an overview of winter tourism in North Macedonia, how tourism is developed here, which are the best and attractive places to visit, also the highest and prettiest mountains have been mentioned, best hotels for accommodation in Mavrovo, Popova Sapka and Pelister, best restaurants for food that will make it easier for the tourists to decide where to eat. What North Macedonia offer for people who like winter tourism and skiing, which are the most popular places that are visited by domestic and foreign visitors and most attractive places for Skiing, what people can enjoy while they visit mountains in North Macedonia. Also is given a good picture and explanation of the famous place like Mavrovo, one of the Largest National Park and best ski resort to be offered, the Mountain Of Ice Lakes And Popova Sapka also best places for skiing and snowboarding, where there are 20 km of slopes available, and *Pelister is another famous National Park* in the Municipality of Bitola, filled with remarkable flora and fauna, where we presented the natural beauties and capacities of these places. In this paper have also been mentioned what could be the possible benefits from winter tourism, who is the most visited and preferred by visitors and has there been a large influx of tourists for this year, have there been changes and investments by the government, are the roads to these destinations accessible, what prices are offered, do they offer good conditions for the visitors? What impact does winter tourism have on the economic growth of the country and how attractive is it for tourists from the neighboring countries, from which countries most of the visitors are that visit Macedonian mountains, what need to be improved in the near future in order to attract more tourist.

Keywords: Winter tourism, tourists, visitors, mountains, country, skiing, best places

WHAT IS THE POTENTIAL OF WINTER TOURISM IN MACEDONIA?

Tourism in North Macedonia is a large factor of the nation's economy. The country's large abundance of natural and cultural attractions make it suitable for tourism. Winters in Macedonia can be cold, but they can be cold anywhere in Europe. Macedonia is particularly beautiful in winter and it is less crowded so you are able to enjoy the sites without overcrowding. It is very picturesque, Macedonia is still a very mountainous country and can be cold. As we know geographically, almost 80 percent of Macedonian land is covered by mountains so Macedonia has very good potential and opportunities to develop winter tourism. Some of the most popular places for winter tourism are Mavrovo, Popova Sapka and Pelister. During winter season those places are mostly visited, by domestic and foreign tourist, usually visitors that came from the neighbour countries.

Macedonia has many mountain beauties on which are spread several ski centers. They have been known at home for a long time, but also abroad, All have one or more hotels, , ski slopes, cable cars, elevators, coffee shops for tea, coffee or mulled wine.

NATIONAL PARKS AND NATURAL RESERVES

North Macedonia has three national parks and 33 natural reserves:

Mavrovo, located in the northwestern part of the country, is the largest of the three national parks. It is home to several river valleys, gorges, waterfalls, caves, and other morphological formations.

- Pelister, located in the southern part of the country, near Bitola, is the smallest of the three national parks. The park consists of land that surrounds Baba Mountain. On top of the mountain are two glacial lakes, known as Gorski Oči, or mountain eyes.
- Galičica, located between Lake Ohrid and Lake Prespa, is the second largest national park in the country. The park is home to an abundance of diverse flora and fauna, and offers terrific views of Ohrid and Lake Ohrid.
- Ezereni Bird Sanctuary, located on the northern shore of Lake Prespa, is a strict natural reserve. It is home to over 120 different bird species.
- Tikveš Strict Natural Reserve, located 30 km southeast of Kavadarci, is a natural reserve that covers an area of approximately 100 square kilometres. 23 species of predatory birds are present in the reserve and 17 of these nest in the area. Tikveš is said to be one of the most important ornithological sites in Europe.
- Lokvi-Golemo Konjari Strict Natural Reserve, located near Kruševo, is a natural reserve that is the last remnant of a once enormous swamp.

Mavrovo National Park

The largest of Macedonia's national parks, Mavrovo boasts some of the best scenery in the country and is an ideal travel destination for nature lovers. The Mavrovo Mountain peak is the highest in the region, thus the park is also a popular destination for climbers, and it operates as a winter ski resort too, bustling with snowy adventures. Lake Mavrovo stretches out over an expanse of 10 kilometers and makes for some of the country's best trout fishing, whilst also being a wonderful place to swim, sail and walk. Visitors to the lake should be sure to take some time to marvel at the half-submerged Church of St Nicolas, once left completely underwater by floods in the 1950s before gradually re-emerging to form the mystical sight that it is today. Explorers should bring a tent and spend a few peaceful days enjoying the tranquility of the park's lush expanse of forests, lake, and craggy mountains. For those who don't want to rough it, the neighboring village of Mavrova offers a small selection of cozy hotels and restaurants. Some of the best hotels for accommodation and food are Hotel Mavrovo, Hotel Radika, Mia's favorite Hotel etc. The ski resort Mavrovo is located in Polog (Pološki region) (North Macedonia). For skiing and snowboarding, there are 25 km of slopes available. 14 lifts transport the guests. The winter sports area is situated between the elevations of 1,255 and 1,860 m. Ski Mavrovo is one of Macedonia's longest established ski resorts, and one of the most prestigious winter & summer sports destinations in Macedonia.

Pelister National Park

Renowned for its diverse ecology and hiking trails, a visit to Pelister National Park makes for a great walking holiday. Here hikers can view a diversified range of flora and fauna, and will perhaps be lucky enough to spot a roe deer, a wild boar or a red-billed chough. A celebrated ski resort alongside Mavrovo, Pelister is an intimate destination and a great spot in which to take advantage of 1172 meters of vertical descent void of the crowds of other popular ski resorts. As well as gorgeous natural camping grounds, there are a number of hotels dotted around the park and Bitola is only 30 km away, meaning that visitors can split their time between the urban buzz of the city and the refreshing natural beauty of the park.

Popova Sapka Ski Resort

Macedonia's premier ski resort, Popova Sapka is located west of the capital, Skopje. Set amongst North Macedonia's highest peaks in the Shar (Šar) mountains, Popova Sapka (Popova Šapka, Popova Shapka) is home to some superb cat skiing operations and high alpine freeride terrain. Even though the village & resort feels like a crumbly shadow of its

former self, a visit to Popova Sapka is a cultural & culinary experience vastly different to other European ski holidays. Popova is not necessarily a family ski holiday destination as such, but anyone that can already ski & has their own backcountry touring gear will enjoy it immensely.

Pros & Cons for Popova Šapka Ski Resort

Pros

- Uncrowded & intriguing powder skiing destination.
- Great terrain inbounds & via ski touring or snow-cat.
- Food, drink, accommodation & lift passes are incredibly cheap.
- Local cuisine is awesome – plentiful & delectable.
- 'Ski-in' accommodation available.

Cons

- Generally aging & dilapidated infrastructure (but they are gradually improving it).
- Chairlift operation can be unreliable.
- Accommodation can be of a lower standard than the rating would otherwise suggest (but they are improving!)
- Piste trails are limited & grooming is poor.
- No quality ski rental or repair location available (other than the cat ski operators).
- The best restaurant is incredibly hard to find without local knowledge (should possibly be listed below)!

Pro or Con (depending on your perspective)

- Snow-pack can change dramatically from day to day.
- Choice of cat-ski operators
- Packs of dogs wander the ski area, intimidating some visitors & intriguing others!
- Not necessarily a family friendly ski destination!

Skiing & Snowboarding, Lifts & Terrain

Popova Shapka ski resort will appeal to powder hounds looking for a sense of adventure & something completely different. The ski slopes are all set above the treeline on high alpine meadow terrain requiring very little snow base to become skiable. The on-piste terrain in the resort is limited to about 20km of not so well-groomed trails (if you are lucky). Skiable vertical is around 800m. Ski lifts include a couple of very old double chairs & several surface lifts, some of which have a questionable functionality. A new hooded six-seater chairlift was finally fully installed in 2019. It serves around 300m of skiable vertical including some tasty, advanced terrain. The off-piste has loads of opportunity & minimal competition, unless the cat ski clients have a down day! There is night skiing on weekends on one of the lower surface tows. Only one lift is important. The double chair heading up to the 2,510m summit opens-up the real business at Popova Shapka - the expansive backcountry ski terrain. Access via the lift and then either human-powered or snowcat-powered! Terrain is varied and can include easy alpine bowls, steep chutes, tree skiing & everything in between. Several peaks can be climbed & skied without too much effort, including the area's tallest, Tito's Peak (Titov Vrv) (2,747m). The area is best experienced through a combination of ski touring via the chairlift plus cat skiing.

Cat Skiing

To truly experience the area, the main reason to ski Popova Sapka is cat skiing. The longest established cat ski company in Europe is based here, as are a group of upstart locals

running new snowcats across some of the same terrain, much to the chagrin of the original operator!

Snow & Weather

The Shar Mountains are amongst the highest in the region and have historically received a high annual snowfall of around 5 to 10m, but it can vary markedly from month to month, and season to season. A reasonably settled snow base is on the ground by December. The months of January, February & March provide the best conditions, with the coldest month being February and the most snow falling in March. Quality snow can sometimes still be accessible into May. As with all high alpine areas, mother nature can be fickle. During the Powderhounds visit in mid-January 2019, the snow was blower powder early in the week, then after a huge windstorm, was stripped back to the worst kind of variable alpine muck. A week later it was pristine powder again. Who can judge what it will be like when you visit. Either way, the area doesn't need much of a base to be skiable. Hoorah! The ski terrain in Popova is mainly south-facing so it gets plenty of sun. With that the snowpack can become baked if temps rise too much. Days can warm up quickly in these lower latitudes, so the key is to make the most of any cold, dry powder as soon as it settles.

What impact does winter tourism have on the economic growth of the country?

One of the biggest benefits of tourism is the ability to make money through foreign exchange earnings. Tourism expenditures generate income to the host economy. The money that the country makes from tourism can then be reinvested in the economy. Those famous places for winter tourism in North Macedonia have a big impact in the economic growth, especially during winter season which are frequented by foreign tourists also. During this season hotels and restaurants that are located in those areas have more benefits. The bigger is the number of tourists, the bigger are benefits for our country, which have a positive impact for the economic growth every year.

CONCLUSION

Those beautiful places for skiing during winter tourism are frequented currently, but the government needs to invest more on them, in order to have more visitors in the near future. But the problem is that they are far from attractive for years. At least compared to what the competition from the neighborhood offers. Without concrete investments, this ski season will start with insignificant novelties in the offer. Macedonia generally needs a new strategic approach for tourism and ski resorts are another special story. We must work on the infrastructure and definitely think about Public Private Partnership projects. Some kind of concession, to ensure competitiveness. "If we leave the current situation like this, things are unlikely to move forward," The concept of public-private partnership would be a novelty for the ski resorts in the country, which are partly state-owned and partly operated by private owners. But the problem, according to insiders, is that even where the private factor operates, there is no concrete state support. Especially in the part of the accompanying infrastructure, which needs modernization. There is money, or sources of money, but the problem is how to use it.

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