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## **DIVERSE PATHS, SHARED HERITAGE: MAPPING FUTURE EXTENSIONS OF THE SULTAN'S TRAIL**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Cultural routes are gaining popularity as a means to preserve cultural heritage and boost tourism. The Sultans Trail, a cultural route stretching over 2,500 km from Vienna to Istanbul, showcases Ottoman heritage and symbolizes reconciliation, international cooperation, and cultural coexistence. This study aims to explore the potential for expanding the Sultans Trail by establishing additional branches from Istanbul through Northern Greece (Kavala, Thessaloniki), North Macedonia (Ohrid), Albania (Berat, Tirana), Bosnia and Herzegovina (Trebinje, Mostar), Croatia (Split, Knin, Senj, Zagreb), Slovenia (Ptuj, Maribor), and back to Austria (Graz, Vienna), creating a circular route. Using a cultural route evaluation system based on five criteria—natural, cultural, social, economic capital and quality of the infrastructure—the study examines various indicators. The findings indicate that opinions on the significance of Ottoman heritage range from exceptional to valuable. The study suggests that branching the Sultans Trail into lesser-known tourist areas could enhance the cultural tourism development of peripheral destinations.

**KEY WORDS:** Cultural tourism, Cultural routes, Ottoman heritage, Tourism development

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## INTRODUCTION

The cultural routes as tourist products have accounted for great success in last decades, especially within European scopes. Initially, cultural routes were designed to promote understanding and appreciation of different cultures and heritages, connecting regions and countries with shared heritage. These routes represent special itineraries that link various historical sites, towns, or regions that share a common theme or history. Cultural routes can be categorized into thematic routes (with a focus on a specific thematic element), historical routes (set around monuments and cultural elements of a specific time period or era), and mixed cultural routes (that include elements of both cultural and natural heritage, regardless of type or era, as part of the overall cultural landscape of a place) (Iakovaki et al., 2023). There are many benefits in designing a cultural route, including: promoting cultural exchange and understanding between nations, preserving cultural heritage by raising awareness, and contributing to economic development by attracting tourists and generating economic benefits for local communities.

Cultural routes and long-distance hiking routes often overlap, offering a unique way to combine adventure with cultural immersion. The long-distance trails are extended routes designed for hikers and cyclists, that offer unique ways to experience the outdoors, engaging in active vacations, which are challenging physically and mentally. It fits well, into domain of adventure tourism, as such travels include a challenge, adventure (as they often take place in remote areas with great natural landscape and cultural experiences, unpredictable weather and situations) and immersion (as spending extended periods of time on the trail allows hikers to truly connect with nature and experience the local cultures) (Wright, 2023).

The cultural route of Ottoman heritage in Europe “Sultan’s trail” was developed in 2005, following the old historic caravan route (so called *Via Diagonalis/Via Militaris*), a 2,500 km long route linking West and East, Vienna and Istanbul. The Sultan’s Trail was initially developed as a long-distance hiking and cycling trail, incorporating cultural theme of Ottoman heritage in Europe. The route was thematically focused on the Ottoman conquest of Europe, linked to a single historical event, the sultan Suleiman I’s siege of Vienna in 1529. However, this historical route that once represented the “path of conquest” nowadays seeks to promote itself as a path of peace and culture, a meeting place for people of different faiths, cultures and backgrounds. As cultural routes connect geographically distant areas, its functionality depends on collaboration of stakeholders and municipalities, that

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jointly plan and implement various projects to produce recognizable tourist product (Gonzalez & Medina, 2003).

Noticing that the lure of Orient is still vivid in the preferences of active tourists, with rise of adventure tourism markets, particularly within the Western Europe, the designing of such tourist product with Ottoman theme was well justified. Additionally, it served not only as an attraction for recreation and adventure due to attractive landscapes, but also for introducing history and cultural diversity experience, outlining contested and underrepresented Ottoman history of Europe. Even though Sultan's Trail already covers large area, passing through eight countries (Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey), there is also a great potential for its extension. It allows establishing multiple additional route branches (towards North Macedonia and Romania), or even creation of a circular route, that would cover all European countries that once fell under or were affected by Ottoman power and influence, countries that safe keep the collective memory and heritage from that era. In this line, the main route Vienna-Istanbul could be complemented by branches towards Romania (following the Danube, Eurovelo 6), but also towards North Macedonia and Greece (Skopje – Thessaloniki – Kavala). A circular route could be created by extending the route towards Greece, North Macedonia and Albania (following section of Via Egnatia), towards Adriatic coast in Montenegro and Croatia (following the Mediterranean route "Eurovelo 8") towards inner areas of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia (Via Dinarica route) to reach southeast parts of Austria (Styria and Burgenland) and Vienna.

#### THE SULTAN'S TRAIL: THEME, ATTRACTIONS, SECTIONS

The Sultan's Trail was initially developed based on the specific historical theme (a single event) using linear pattern of route development (Lin, et al., 2024), where the main element, the conquest of Ottoman Sultan Suleiman I on Europe is defining the route. Such routes are unique, and they hardly ever change, like pilgrimage routes. The theme of the route unites the various destinations along the way, where the destinations become transformed to fit into the route's theme. Despite its thematic focus on Ottoman conquests of Europe, the main route is largely overlapping geographically with ancient Roman road network "Via Militaris" (Military Road), which was continuously used for various conquests, but also for trade and cultural exchanges, linking East with West.

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When it comes to Ottoman heritage in Europe, the thematic scope expands significantly, geographically and temporally. Thus, the area-based pattern of route development seems more appropriate, as in this pattern, heritage is shared on a regional scale, containing within it not only historical dimension but defining a civilization current that defined specific regional identity of the Balkan peoples. Thus, the “Sultan’s Trail” can easily expand its thematic focus from a single historical event to a large historical period of Ottoman dominance in Southeastern Europe (14<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century) as it left a deep mark on Europe. The Ottoman legacy has a distinguished position in historical narratives of each country it passes through, linked naturally to the Ottoman conquest of Europe. Nonetheless, these historical narratives are mainly placed in the function of outlining the national historiography, as it represents the most traumatic European historical experience, while at the same time representing the most glorious achievement from the Turkish (Ottoman) perspective. Apart Turkey, obviously, most heritage sites are marked as the traces of the “dark” period in national histories, making such heritage unpopular and relatively underutilized in terms of tourism, particularly within the Balkans (Terzić, & Dogramadjieva, 2022; Terzić et al., 2024; Petrevska et al., 2020). Therefore, the thematic scope is placed into domain of cultural diplomacy, with specific mantra “from conquest to collaboration in cultural diversity” and the direction of the route was reversed to start from Vienna towards Istanbul. The aim of this cultural route (still under development) is to showcase the Ottoman heritage in Europe and raise awareness and outline the need for its preservation, particularly among local communities and national governments.

The Ottoman influence can be seen in many countries that were once part of the empire. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, the Ottoman influences are observed in architectural styles of Sarajevo, Mostar and Trebinje, where mosques, bazaars, bridges and Ottoman-style houses remain as a reminder of the empire's presence. The iconic UNESCO site Old bridge in Mostar is a symbol of the cultural fusion that took place during the Ottoman rule. Likewise, towns of Berat and Gjirokastra in Albania, listed as UNESCO heritage sites, serve as an evidence of the Ottoman influence on traditional Balkan architecture. In Greece, White Tower in Thessaloniki and Kavala Fortress with mosque and house of Ottoman pasha Muhammad Ali (1769-1849) the founder of modern Egypt. In Hungary, popular attractions are Turkish baths in Budapest, like Rudas and the Kiraly Baths. Petrevska et al. (2020) outline the potential to include towns of Ohrid, Bitola and Resen which have sufficient attraction base related to Ottoman heritage to be integrated into the Sultans Trail cultural route. The UNESCO's list of intangible heritage

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recognize the old tradition of the Alka of Sinj (Croatia), traditional equestrian tournament, held in August, dedicated to the memory of Battle of Sinj in 1715, when people of Sinj resisted Ottoman conquerors. The traces of the Ottoman past, heritage and cultural influences can be also found in Adriatic coast and even parts of Slovenia, Hungary and Austria, where it holds different shape and meaning. For example, in Ptuj Castle's Museum there is a rich collection of Turqueries (artistic style in aristocratic circles in Western Europe from 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, imitating aspects of Ottoman art and culture). There are a number of memorial places on the important battle sites, where interesting museums were established and provide a great opportunity for interactive education in history. Such heritage serves as a reminder of a time with intense cultural exchange under Ottoman rule, creating a unique blend of East and West influences still obvious in local cultures that fascinate visitors to this day.

Thus, this cultural route can evolve in different directions, spatially and temporally by adding the overall appeal and number of attractions, but also different layers and interpretations of heritage and history. Despite its great potential, the route currently attracts a relatively small number of visitors (between 50 and 100 tourists annually) and possesses limited tourism infrastructure. Therefore, the objective is to enhance visitor numbers on this cultural route while simultaneously fostering the development of sustainable tourism destination. The countries along the main route have invested substantially in tourism development policies to promote tourism as a pivotal sector in the Balkan economy (Porfido, 2020), which can serve the goals of further expansion and promotion of the Sultan's Trail in the future.

#### MAIN CONTINENTAL ROUTE: SECTIONS AND DESTINATIONS

Sultan's Trail is a linear route 2,200-2,500 km long, which takes an average person about 15 weeks to complete the entire trail by foot (about 20 km a day) or about 4 weeks on a bike. The main route of the Sultan's Trail follows the line Vienna – Bratislava – Budapest – Szekesfehervar – Mohacs – Sombor - Novi Sad – Belgrade – Kruševac – Niš – Pirot – Sofia – Smolyan – Edirne - Istanbul. What is particular about this route is that it passes through relatively undiscovered areas in a tourism sense, the Balkans. Long-distance routes, including those with cultural themes, are specially designed tourist products, offered to a highly limited tourist market. Here, the flexibility in travel choices, stop-overs and sleepover destinations is essential as to fit the individual needs of travelers.



Picture 1. The Sultan's Trail – main route.

Source: <https://sultanstrail.com/>

Standard hiking package of the Sultan's Trail is divided into 115 day-stretches, based on 6 sections ([www.sultanstrail.com](http://www.sultanstrail.com)). These are as follows:

1. **Vienna – Bratislava**, 110 km (North Austria, Burgenland, Slovakia).
2. **Bratislava – Budapest**, 225 km long section, following the Danube River (Komarno, Šturovo), two alternatives to the main route: via Velký Meder in Slovakia, or via Győr in Hungary (Esztergom) towards Budapest.
3. **Budapest – Belgrade**, 649 km long, following the Danube (Székesfehérvár, Dunaföldvár, Mohacs (Battle of Mohacs, 1526), Bačka Palanka, Ilok (Croatia), Fruška Gora Mt., Novi Sad, and Sremski Karlovci (where the famous Peace treaty was made between Ottoman, Habsburg Empire and the Venetian Republic in 1699). Alternative branch under development follows the line Vienna – Sopron – Koszeg – Siget – Osjek – Ilok – Belgrade, inspired by the attempts of sultan Suleyman to reach Vienna by traveling east of lake Balaton and the Neusiedler See, following Drava, Raab and Mur rivers.
4. **Belgrade – Sofia**, extensive section of 588 km length. Belgrade – Smederevo – Kruševac – Niš – Pirot – Dimitrovgrad – Sofia. At Niš, the road is separated in two branches: Skopje - Thessaloniki via Sićevo gorge, and

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Sofia - Istanbul through Suva and Stara Planina (Balkan Mts.). Branches join again at Bela Palanka. After crossing the Bulgarian border near Dimitrovgrad, the Sultan's trail enters the plain of the Sofia valley, continuing towards the Bulgarian capital, Sofia.

5. **Sofia – Edirne**, runs for 550 km, mainly through the mountainous areas of Bulgaria, starting with the Rila mountains (Orthodox Rila's Monastery and Velingrad spa-resort), then Western Rhodopes between Velingrad and Kardzhali, to Eastern Rhodopes towards Edirne. Alternatively, the route can pass through Plovdiv, Haskovo and Svilengrad. Near the Rudozem, the Trail reaches Arda River, crossed by a spectacular 18<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman (the Devils') bridge, and the area is inhabited by large Muslim community, including Pomaks (converted Bulgarians).

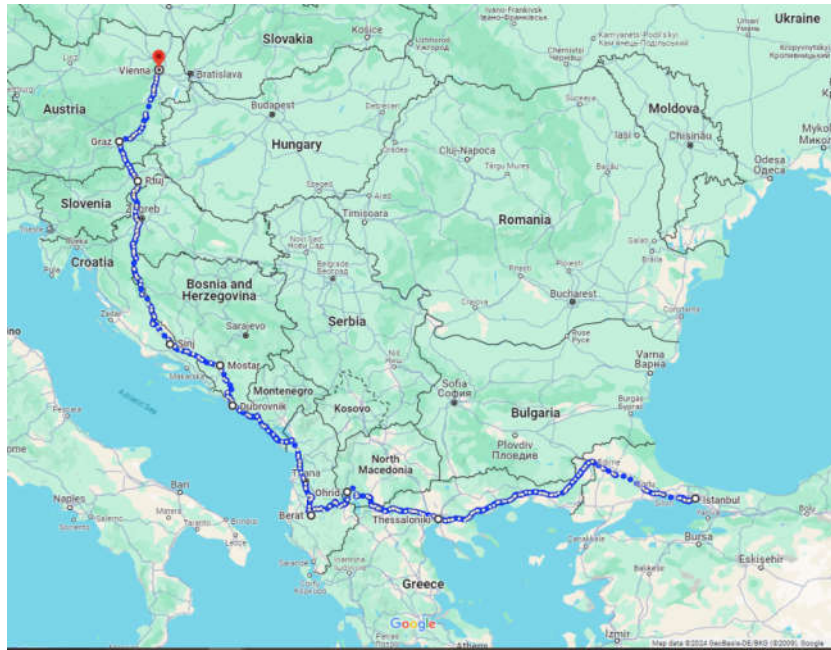
6. **Edirne – Istanbul**, continues for about 341 km. From Edirne (former capital of the Ottoman Empire), the route follows the old Byzantine Road through the foothills of Yildiz Mts. near the Black Sea coast (Kirkklareli, Pinarhisar, Vize and Saray). Moving north towards Cilingoz Tabiat national Park, the Trail approaches Istanbul, passing Lake Sazlidere on the way.

The same route is also available for cyclists, separated in two sections Vienna-Belgrade and Belgrade-Istanbul. The Sultan's Trail is following sections of the EuroVelo 6 (Vienna – Belgrade), EuroVelo 11 (Belgrade-Skopje) and EuroVelo 13 (Bratislava – Edirne), all characterized by good infrastructure and signposting.

#### PROPOSED EXTENSIONS: CREATING A CIRCULAR ROUTE WITH OTTOMAN THEME

Proposed extension of the Sultan's Trail – main historic/caravan route to Istanbul, particularly having in mind distribution of the rich Ottoman heritage within the whole Balkan region, has a great ability of enriching the tourist offer. Due to its extensiveness, it is directed primarily to cycling tourists. This means that potential tourists could use well-developed alternative routes like Danube Route (Eurovelo 6), as well as Mediterranean extension of the route Eurovelo 8 in each direction.





Picture 2. Proposed extension of the Sultan's Trail.  
Source: Google Maps, authors' selection

1. **The Danube Route (Eurovelo 6)** is a cultural corridor that follows the Danube River and has been the line of cultural exchange for centuries. The large section of cycling route Eurovelo 6 (Atlantic – Black Sea) follows the Danube route all way towards the Black Sea (Constanta): Belgrade – Giurgiu/Ruse – Constanta. It allows extension to Istanbul following the coastline of the Black Sea through Varna and Burgas to Istanbul (following the old roman road Via Pontica).

2. **Mediterranean route (Eurovelo 8)** is a long-distance cycling route that stretches roughly 7,500 kilometers from Cadiz in Spain to Cyprus. Sections 8 and 9 cover Croatia, Montenegro, Albania, and parts of Greece, following mostly the Adriatic coastline. This area also served as a line of demarcation between Ottoman, Venetian and Austrian Empires, where the relics of defense fortification system, so called “Military Border” can still be found.

3. **Via Egnatia** is an ancient Roman road, connecting Rome and Constantinople (Istanbul). It went from Tirana and Durres (Albania), along the valley of Skumbia, over Ohrid and Edessa to Thessaloniki, to further

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continue along the Aegean coast (Kavala) to Istanbul (Terzić et al., 2018). The whole region contains relics of lasting Ottoman past that is visible in traditional architecture, monuments, mosques and lifestyle of the people.

**4. The Via Dinarica** is a hiking and cycling route through Western Balkans established in 2010, connecting Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Albania, following the so-called Dinaric Alps and spanning over 2000 km. It is a network of trails for hikers, cyclists, and other outdoor enthusiasts, that offers a unique opportunity to explore the natural beauty and cultural heritage of the Western Balkans, passing through several national parks such as Durmitor, Biogradska Gora, and Prokletije in Montenegro. ([www.viadinarica.com](http://www.viadinarica.com)).

Thus, the proposed circular route would follow historic Roman route Via Egnatia (Albania, North Macedonia, Greece), Mediterranean cycling route (Eurovelo 8) in Croatia, Montenegro and Albania, and parts of hiking route Via Dinarica (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro). Thus, the route would cover Northern Greece (Kavala, Thessaloniki), North Macedonia (Ohrid, Berat), Albania (Berat, Tirana), Bosnia and Herzegovina (Trebinje, Mostar), Croatia (Split, Knin, Senj, Zagreb), Slovenia (Ptuj, Maribor), moving back to Austria (Graz, Vienna).

The extension of the initial linear route would best suit the needs of cycling tourists, but also the hikers, capitalizing on the already well-established network of cycling routes (EuroVelo). Despite the fact that this extension would make the walking and hiking extremely difficult due to morphological characteristics of the area, there are several interesting hiking sections with attractive landmarks (particularly Via Dinarica), with good flight connections that fit the needs of adventurous tourists. The extension proposal was based on the overall popularity of the EuroVelo routes that pass through the Balkan area. Cycling on EuroVelo grew strongly (+9.8%) in 2023 compared to 2019, both on weekends and weekdays, be it for leisure, tourism or mobility purposes. Growth was the highest on EuroVelo 8 – Mediterranean Route (+32%), while the growth of EuroVelo 6 was more modest (+2%). Almost  $\frac{3}{4}$  cycling visits on EuroVelo routes are being realized in spring and summer, particularly in May. In terms of popularity measured in online search, in 2023 the Eurovelo 8 (Mediterranean Route) was ranked first (114,035 online visitors), and Eurovelo 6 (Atlantic-Black Sea Route) ranked third (84,239 online visitors) ([www.eurovelo.com](http://www.eurovelo.com)). The parts of Eurovelo network that pass through the Balkans are still in development process, but there are significant rise in popularity of these sections particularly within Croatia and Serbia.

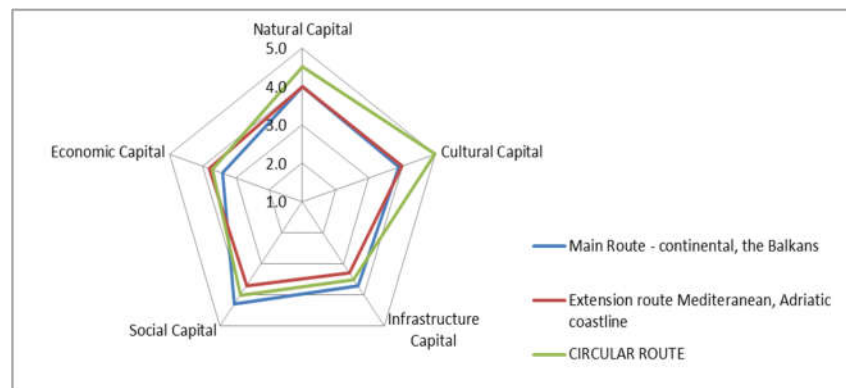
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## EXAMINATION OF TOURISM DEVELOPMENT POTENTIALS OF THE SULTAN'S TRAIL

### Methodology

The evaluation of the tourist potential of the Sultan's Trail was conducted to identify optimal conditions for tourism development. The study employed the Saint Gallen Destination Management (SGDM) model (Beritelli et al., 2015) to identify and map destinations with representative Ottoman heritage sites in North Macedonia, Greece, Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Slovenia, which could potentially augment the existing Sultan's Trail cultural route. The SGDM model, rooted in phenomenological theory, uses an intuitive mapping method that enhances the feasibility of identified tourist flows and fosters a deeper understanding of critical aspects of sustainable tourism development. This model was combined with various evaluation methods (Asmelash & Kumar, 2019; Romão & Nijkamp, 2018; Terzić et al., 2019), such as the model of territorial capital and Hilary du Cros's model of cultural heritage valorization (Du Cros, 2001), measured on a 5-point Likert scale.

Graph 1. Evaluation of tourism development potentials of Sultan's Trail



Source: Authors' calculations

Despite its limited reach and contribution to tourism development, the Sultan's Trail, as a non-governmental and non-profit organization, has the potential to bring significant social and economic benefits to local communities by developing the route as an adventure tourism product. So far, its greatest strength has been in promoting and altering the stereotypical image of the

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Balkans in tourist perceptions. Long-distance cultural routes offer several benefits to regions and countries. They require relatively low investment and infrastructure, complement other tourist products, provide socio-economic benefits to locals, and have high market potential. Key considerations in the development process include route characteristics (safety, infrastructure, level of difficulty, attractiveness, and access), coordination and maintenance systems, economic opportunities (accommodation, local services, transportation, cultural assets, retail), marketing, and commercialization. The Sultan's Trail aligns with sustainable tourism goals by helping to disperse tourism from hotspots and during off-peak seasons. According to Graph 1, the cultural and natural capital within the current route and its proposed extensions provide the greatest resources for sustainable development. Unlike typical economically-oriented tourism development systems, the Sultan's Trail follows a more sustainable approach, focusing on the slow and effective use of existing destination capacities rather than exponential growth in tourist numbers and destination amenities.

This cultural route leverages existing cultural and natural resources, along with established tourism infrastructure, enhanced by signposting and digital tools for information and monitoring. It enriches the tourism offer in complementary ways, attracts new demand markets, and introduces relatively new destinations to Europe's growing adventure tourism market. This approach disperses tourists both spatially and seasonally, which is particularly beneficial for peripheral areas like the Balkans, supporting local tourism development and heritage preservation. The preferred seasons for long-distance hikers and bikers are March to June and September to October, as moderate climates are essential for outdoor activities due to weather-related exposure and limitations. Consequently, most coastal destinations on the Adriatic coast could benefit from an increase in off-season visitors. The heritage aspect of many coastal destinations is often secondary, with a few exceptions (such as Dubrovnik, Venice, Split, and Kotor). This route would increase tourist demand and diversify the tourism offer to attract both cultural and adventure tourists.

## CONCLUSION

The Ottoman heritage prominently showcased by the Sultans Trail holds a significant position in the cultural landscape of the regions it traverses. However, the interpretation and significance of this heritage vary, ranging from exceptional to merely valuable. This diversity of perspectives

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underscores the richness and complexity of the Ottoman legacy, highlighting the need for a nuanced approach in expanding the Sultans Trail to encompass a broader array of historical narratives. The thematic coherence of the expanded Sultans Trail, enriched by incorporating new destinations, diverse cultural elements, and historical narratives, has the potential to attract a wider range of participants and stakeholders. However, the design and development of the route's infrastructure are crucial for ensuring seamless connectivity and accessibility. By leveraging innovative technologies, sustainable tourism practices, and community-driven initiatives, the route can be optimized to offer a harmonious blend of adventure, historical authenticity, cultural immersion, and modern amenities.

By engaging with local communities, cultural institutions, tourism agencies, and other relevant entities, the expanded route can foster a sense of collective responsibility towards preserving and promoting local cultural heritage. This engagement can also stimulate local pride by highlighting regional histories. Additionally, the diversified activities and experiences along the extended route can cater to a wide range of interests, preferences, and travel motivations, thereby enhancing the overall visitor experience. The route encourages the exploration of the culture and heritage of various countries, contributing to education and a broader understanding of historical knowledge and worldviews. It also facilitates better communication and understanding between people, fostering deeper relationships through direct interactions between tourists and local communities. These aspects, often underestimated in tourism policy-making, can achieve more significant long-term benefits than mere economic interests.

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