

## **Geotourism as a means of increasing stay and diffusion of visitors in the hinterland: The case of the Meteora-Pyli Geopark**

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The role of geotourism and other forms of alternative tourism in the sustainable development of the hinterland and mountain communities directly touches our region. The Meteora-Pyli Geopark, recognized as a UNESCO Global Geopark, extends over approximately 2,500 km<sup>2</sup> and includes the internationally recognized Meteora, as well as important geotopes that remain less known in the hinterland. It is a space where geological history, monastic tradition, the natural environment, villages, mountain routes and local production can function not in isolation, but as a single developmental whole.

Meteora is a globally recognizable destination. The image of the rocks and monasteries attracts over 2,000,000 visitors each year and is one of the strongest elements of the region's identity. To date, this traffic is largely associated with the religious and pilgrimage character of Meteora. However, the length of stay of visitors is often short and the benefits are not sufficiently diffused to the hinterland and mountain communities.

The aim, therefore, is to enrich this image, highlighting geotourism as an alternative proposal, so that the visitor has reasons to stay longer or return to the area. The main challenge is how we lead the visitor from the well-known Meteora and Kalambaka towards the hinterland, so that he can experience meaningful experiences in the mountainous part of the Geopark. In other words, how we ensure that the benefits of tourism are not concentrated only in limited zones, but are spread to more communities.

It is not enough to increase the number of visitors. The real challenge is to increase the quality of the experience, the length of stay and the local footprint of each visitor. A visitor who comes for a few hours, sees the monasteries and leaves has a limited connection to the place. In contrast, a visitor who stays for two or three days, walks a route, visits a geosite, gets to know a village, tastes a local product and interacts with the locals, creates much greater economic, social and cultural value.

In this context, geotourism provides a powerful answer. It is not just a specific form of alternative tourism. It is a place-making tool that connects geological and cultural value with the local economy, the visitor experience, and the sustainable development of communities.



For the Meteora - Pyli Geopark, the geotourism implementation strategy can be based on three basic directions.

The first is the interpretation of the place and its effective presentation to the visitor. The visitor must be able to understand the landscape he sees. He must not only see the rocks, paths, rivers or bridges as images, but as elements of a larger story. This interpretation does not need to be heavy or academic. It must be simple, modern and useful: it must explain to the visitor what he sees, where he is, how he can move and why it is worth staying longer in the area. Information centers, information boards, digital maps, QR codes, applications and thematic routes that connect points of interest with a common narrative identity contribute decisively to this.

The second direction is the interconnection of Meteora with the points of interest of the inland. Meteora should not function as an isolated tourist destination, but as a gateway to a wider network of experiences. From Meteora, the visitor should be able to be led towards the inland, the geotopes and the villages of the Municipality of Meteora and the Municipality of Pyli. This interconnection can take the form of geological, walking, cultural, religious, gastronomic or educational routes. Thus, the visitor is not simply invited to see more points, but to follow a coherent experience.

For this reason, the strategy of the Meteora Geopark - Portal is not limited only to the interconnection of points of interest, but also includes their systematic promotion to the visitor. The Geopark Information Center, in a central point of Kalambaka, the Meteora Geological Museum, the Digital Representation Center and the Theopetra Cave function as key information and orientation points. Through informative brochures, maps, proposed geotrails and digital material, they can systematically promote the Geopark, all of its geotopes and routes.

The third direction is the creation of a common geotourism identity for the local economy and communities. To date, the region has been mainly associated with religious tourism and visits to the monasteries of Meteora. This dimension is a huge advantage and an integral part of our identity. However, the Geopark gives us the opportunity to highlight a broader form of tourism: geotourism, which is motivated by the understanding and enjoyment of the geological heritage of a place, in a way that promotes environmental protection and the sustainable development of local societies.

Geotourism connects landscape, geology, nature, villages, routes, local production and authentic experience. To function effectively, it is not enough for each business or entity to move alone. Guesthouses, catering businesses, local product producers, mountain guides, tourism professionals and cultural associations need to operate with a common identity, a common direction and a common narrative. To present the area not as a sum of individual points, but as a single Geopark experience.

This means cooperation in practice: joint route suggestions, connecting accommodations with local experiences, highlighting local products within the tourist experience, cooperation with mountain guides and people who know the



natural environment, as well as active participation of cultural associations in the creation of thematic actions. Of particular importance is the institutionalization of festivals and events related to geology, geotopes, nature, trails, local products and the cultural identity of the communities. In this way, festivals, narratives, traditions, gastronomy and gentle activities in nature become key elements of a comprehensive experience that gives the visitor reasons to stay longer, get to know the hinterland and support the local economy.

Of course, this perspective cannot be based on an uncontrolled increase in visitor numbers. The Geopark is a living and sensitive place. Its geological, environmental and cultural value requires attention. Development must be based on balance: exploitation without alteration, promotion without overexploitation, access without degradation. The goal is not to simply transfer pressure from one point to another. The goal is to better organize flows, create higher-quality experiences and enhance areas that are currently less visible to visitors.

In this effort, the role of the Local Government is crucial. The Municipality can act as a coordinator and as a guarantor of a common strategy, bringing together the Geopark managers, geopartners, tourism professionals, producers, cultural institutions, communities and educational institutions.

The recognition of the Meteora-Gate Geopark by UNESCO gives us the opportunity to redefine our tourism model. Understanding the geological and cultural value of the Geopark is the foundation. The challenge is to turn this knowledge into action: into synergies between geopartners, into organized routes throughout the Geopark, into better experiences for the visitor and into real benefits for local communities.

We are therefore invited to move from a brief stop to a substantial experience. From the visitor who sees only the emblematic landscape, to the visitor who experiences and connects places in the wider region with geological, environmental and cultural routes. This is the great opportunity: for the global radiation of Meteora to function as a lever of sustainable development for the entire hinterland of the Geopark.

With geotourism we aim for the visitor who stays, wanders, learns, participates and returns. This is the perspective we want to build at the Meteora-Pyli Geopark.

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