

THE ROLE OF DESTINATION MANAGEMENT COMPANIES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF ADVENTURE TOURISM: EVIDENCE FROM SPLIT-DALMATIA COUNTY

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Abstract: Croatia is recognized as one of the most visited destinations in the Mediterranean and faces the challenge of spatially and temporally unevenly distributed tourist demand. Most of the tourism activity is concentrated in coastal counties, with Split-Dalmatia County among the most visited. In this context, the development of special interest tourism has been identified as a key strategy for reducing seasonality. Destination management companies (DMCs), through specialization and an in-depth understanding of the resource and attraction base, play an increasingly significant role in creating complex, high value-added tourism products. The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of DMCs in Split-Dalmatia County in the development of adventure tourism. An empirical study was conducted to explore the perceptions of DMCs regarding the importance, potential, and challenges of adventure tourism in Split-Dalmatia County.

The findings indicate that most DMCs independently develop and promote adventure-related activities, frequently combining them with other forms of tourism services. However, several limitations were identified, including seasonality, insufficiently developed promotional channels, a lack of specialized guides and limited inter-institutional cooperation. Based on the results, recommendations were proposed to improve the development of adventure tourism in the county. These include extending the offer beyond the main season, introducing multi-day tours, promoting digital innovations, and strengthening safety standards. The study highlights the pivotal role of DMCs not only in organizing and coordinating adventure tourism products but also in fostering collaboration among destination stakeholders, thereby contributing to the sustainable competitiveness of the region.

Keywords: sustainable tourism development, destination management companies (DMCs), stakeholder collaboration, adventure tourism, Split-Dalmatia County

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INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Croatia has been recognized as a prominent tourist destination within the Mediterranean region, continuously attracting increasing interest from international tourists year after year.

In 2024, Croatia recorded a total of 20.246.060 tourist arrivals, of which 85,8% were generated by international tourists, while the remaining 14,2% were attributed to domestic tourists (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2025). The imbalance is even more pronounced when considering the number of overnight stays: of the total 93.683.814 overnights recorded in 2024, as many as 90,7% were realized by international tourists, whereas only 9,3% were attributed to domestic tourists.

Although international demand for Croatian tourism is undoubtedly strong, the sector faces the persistent challenge of spatially and temporally uneven distribution of tourist flows. The seven coastal counties of Croatia, which together comprise 43,7% of the country's total land area (Croatia.eu, 2025), account for 86,5% of all tourist arrivals and as much as 94,4% of total overnight stays (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2025). This spatial concentration would appear even more pronounced if data were analyzed separately for the narrow coastal strip, given that within each county, tourist activity is heavily concentrated along the coast, while the hinterland remains comparatively less visited.

Split-Dalmatia County represents the second most visited county in Croatia, following Istria County. In 2024, it recorded 18.397.016 overnight stays generated by 3.760.263 tourists (The Tourist Board of Split-Dalmatia County, 2025). Despite these impressive numbers, the monthly distribution of tourist flows reveals a marked seasonality. During the four peak months of 2024 (June to September), 77,2% of total arrivals and 84,6% of total overnight stays were realized, with 50% of arrivals and as much as 58% of overnights occurring in only two months – July and August (The Tourist Board of Split-Dalmatia County, 2025; 2024). These patterns clearly indicate that Split-Dalmatia County continues to experience a high degree of seasonality in tourist demand.

The diversification of the tourism product through the development of special interest forms of tourism represents one of the key instruments for reducing the spatial and temporal concentration of tourist demand and for extending the summer tourist season (Ćorluka et al, 2013). In this context, destination management companies, as specialized intermediaries in tourism possessing in-depth knowledge of the destination's resource and attraction base, play an increasingly important role

in creating and integrating complex tourism products with high added value. Their activities contribute to more effective management of the tourism offer, foster innovation, and enhance the competitiveness of the destination in the global tourism market.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to examine the role of destination management companies (DMCs) in the development of adventure tourism in Split-Dalmatia County, as a potential factor contributing to the reduction of seasonal concentration of tourist demand and the promotion of sustainable tourism development within the destination.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition and conceptualization of adventure tourism

The concept of adventure tourism has undergone significant evolution in recent decades, and its definition remains a subject of debate within the academic community. In earlier theoretical approaches, the central element of the definition was linked to the notion of danger. Meier (1978) emphasized physical danger as a fundamental feature of adventure tourism, while Hall (1992) interpreted danger through the prism of risk that is perceived, but also controlled by the expertise of tour operators. A study by Sand and Gross (2019) analyzed previous definitions and found that risk and uncertainty constitute central themes in the adventure tourism literature (Rantala et al., 2016). The excitement that arises from such experiences is often interpreted as an “artistic commodification of fear” (Cater, 2006), and the core elements identified by Weaver (2001) as risk, physical effort, and specific skills, are still considered relevant today.

In recent approaches, however, there is a broader understanding of the term. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2014) adopts a definition that differs from traditional approaches, based on the Adventure Travel Association (ATTA) definition. According to ATTA, adventure tourism includes any trip that includes at least two of the three elements: physical activity, stay in the natural environment and cultural immersion. Such determination includes the so-called soft adventures that do not require elements of risk, physical effort or specific skills, such as culinary courses or traditional food tastings in different cultural contexts (ATTA, 2018). Additionally, the newer concept of slow adventure emphasizes deep, authentic, and immersive experiences that do not necessarily involve physical challenge or risk (Jenkins, 2019).

The growing diversity of adventure tourism forms makes it difficult to define it explicitly. Jenkins (2019, p. 4) points out that “the breadth of adventure tourism poses a challenge to a definitive definition”, as new experiences change the perception of adventure. Studies show that modern tourists often value the activity itself more than the element of risk, which indicates a change in market values and expectations.

Despite numerous studies, the concept of adventure tourism remains unclear and complex. Rantala et al. (2018) call for its reconceptualization and more precise definition of its core features, emphasizing that the global growth of supply and demand further complicates its understanding (Rantala et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2019). As a result, the “umbrella term” of adventure tourism has been adopted in academic and professional literature (Rantala et al., 2018), encompassing experiences ranging “from walking through the countryside to flying into space” (Swarbrooke et al., 2003).

One of the most widely accepted definitions, jointly formulated by ATTA and George Washington University (Janowski et al., 2021), defines adventure tourism as any travel that includes at least two of the three elements: interaction with nature, interaction with culture, and/or physical activity. Nevertheless, the classification of activities into soft and hard forms of adventure remains inconsistent and often problematic (UNWTO, 2014). Soft adventures typically involve low or perceived risk, guided activities, and minimal skill requirements (Sand & Gross, 2019), while hard adventures involve high risk, advanced skills, and physical commitment.

The boundaries between these categories, however, are not rigidly defined, as the intensity of the adventure experience depends on several factors: environmental conditions, technical equipment, level of guidance, experience, and psychological characteristics of the participants. Therefore, soft and hard adventure tourism can be understood as a continuum of experience intensity, rather than as strictly separate categories (Janowski et al., 2021).

METHODOLOGY

DMCs play a key role in the development of adventure tourism by connecting local resources, stakeholders and visitors through innovative, sustainable and experiential tourism products. Thanks to their in-depth knowledge of local natural and cultural resources, professionally trained staff and wide network of business contacts, DMCs can design and deliver high-quality services and organize activities that emphasize the authenticity of the destination and responsible use of the environment. By leveraging their negotiating power and developed relationships with local service providers, DMCs ensure a cost-effective, but also highly personalized offer, which is particularly important in the adventure tourism segment, where tourists seek unique, safe and extraordinary experiences (Gjurković & Matošević Radić, 2020).

To examine the role of DMCs in the development of adventure tourism in the Split-Dalmatia County (SDC), primary empirical research based on the quantitative data collection method was conducted. The research was conducted in the spring of 2025 using a structured survey intended for representatives of active DMKs in the SDC. The research encompassed DMCs operating in SDC that are officially listed in the agency directory of the Split-Dalmatia County Tourist Board. A structured survey questionnaire was developed for the purposes of the research, consisting of closed and semi-open questions. The questionnaire was designed in three thematic units: general information about DMCs, perception of adventure tourism and role of DMCs in destination development in SDC.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research results presented in this chapter provide a deeper understanding of the attitudes of destination management companies toward the development of adventure tourism in SDC and constitute a foundation for formulating recommendations aimed at enhancing the future development of adventure tourism in SDC.

In the initial phase of the research, DMCs were asked to assess the relative importance of adventure tourism within their business operations. The findings indicate that 39,1% of respondents reported that adventure tourism accounts for more than half of their overall offer, while 26,1% stated that its share ranges between 20% and 50%. The remaining 34,8% of DMCs indicated that adventure tourism represents less than 20% of their total portfolio.

Regarding the perceived importance of adventure tourism, most respondents (43,5%) rated it as highly important to their business (score 5 on a five-point scale), followed by 17,4% who rated it 4, and 13% who rated it 3. Only a small proportion (4,3%) considered adventure tourism to be of little or no importance. These results suggest that most DMCs in SDC recognize adventure tourism as a strategically significant component of their operations.

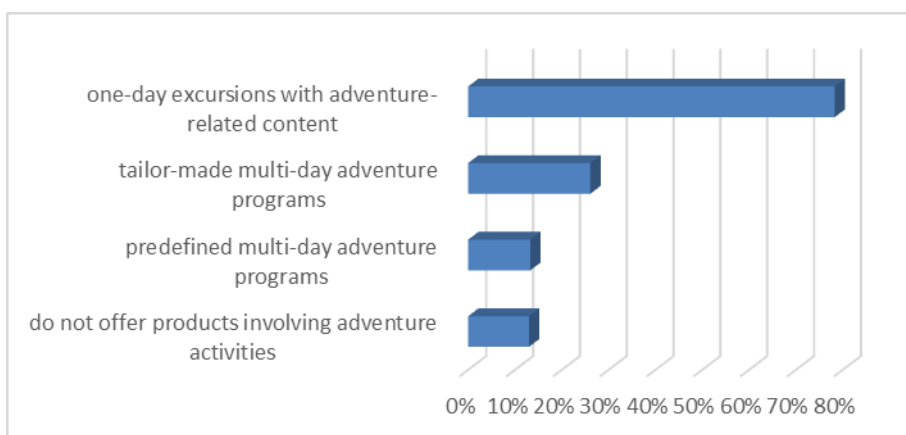


Fig. 1. Structure of adventure tourism product of DMCs in SDC

Asked to determine the types of adventure tourism products that are included in their offer as well as the types of adventure activities, as can be seen from the data shown in the above Figure 1 among all DMCs that participated in the study, only 13% reported that they do not offer products involving adventure activities, while 78,3% indicated that they organize one-day excursions with adventure-related content. Furthermore, 26,1% of the agencies offer tailor-made multi-day programs featuring adventure elements, and 13% provide predefined multi-day adventure programs.

In terms of specific activities, DMCs in Split-Dalmatia County most commonly offer rafting (82.6%), kayaking (73.9%), and ziplining (60.9%), followed by quad biking (56.5%) and cycling (26.1%). Activities such as canyoning, paintball, and rock climbing are considerably less represented. This structure indicates a clear orientation toward popular and commercially sustainable forms of adventure tourism, which are most frequently implemented through one-day programs.

The results indicate that DMCs in SDC recognize adventure tourism as an important segment of their business and actively incorporate it into their offerings, most commonly through one-day excursions with adventure-related content. The most frequently offered activities (rafting, kayaking, and ziplining) suggest an orientation toward accessible and commercially sustainable forms of adventure tourism. This structure of supply highlights the key role of DMCs in diversifying the tourism product and fostering sustainable tourism development in SDC.

The following section presents the results related to the frequency of clients' interest in adventure tours. The data indicate that most DMCs estimate that their client's express interest in adventure activities occasionally (30,4%) or frequently (26,1%), while a smaller proportion report that their clients always seek such experiences (21,7%). On the other hand, 17,4% of the DMCs state that interest is expressed rarely, and only 4.3% report that it is never expressed.

Regarding market research and the assessment of tourist preferences related to adventure tourism, the results show that most DMCs conduct such activities irregularly. An equal share of respondents (30,4%) reported that they never or only occasionally engage in market research, while 34,8% do so rarely. Only a very small number of DMCs (one in each case) indicated that they conduct research frequently or consistently. These findings suggest that most DMCs do not systematically employ market research as a tool for designing and adapting their adventure tourism offerings.

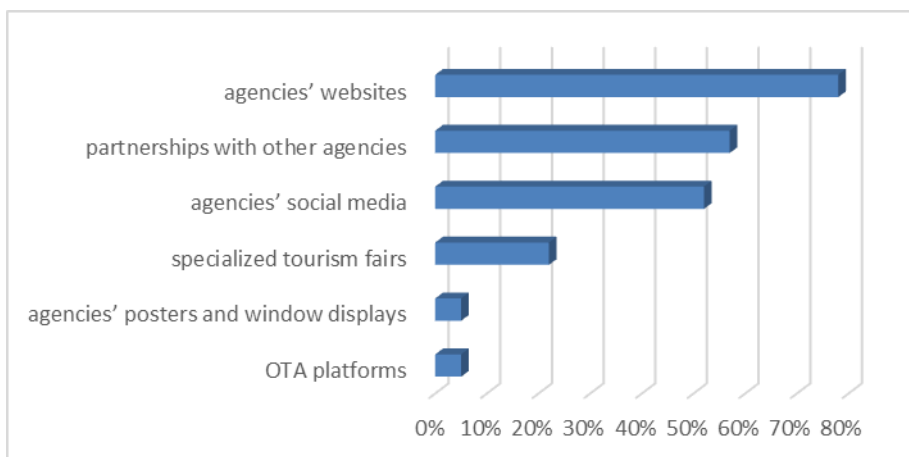


Fig. 2. Promotion channels for adventure tourism products of DMCs in SDC

The promotional channels used by DMCs for marketing products featuring adventure activities are presented in Figure 2. The results indicate that promotion is predominantly conducted through the companies' own websites (78,3%), confirming the crucial role of digital presence and direct online communication with potential clients. Partner agencies (56,5%) and social media (52,2%) also stand out as important promotional channels, while specialized tourism fairs are used considerably less frequently (21,7%). Traditional forms of promotion, such as printed materials (e.g., posters and window displays) and OTA platforms, are marginally represented, being used by only 4,3% of the surveyed agencies.

Furthermore, the findings indicate a highly positive perception among DMCs regarding the potential for developing adventure tourism in SDC. More than half of the respondents (56,5%) rated this potential with the highest score, while an additional 34,8% assigned a score of 4. Only a small share (4,3%) provided neutral or negative evaluations, suggesting a strong consensus on the region's attractiveness and opportunities for further development of adventure tourism.

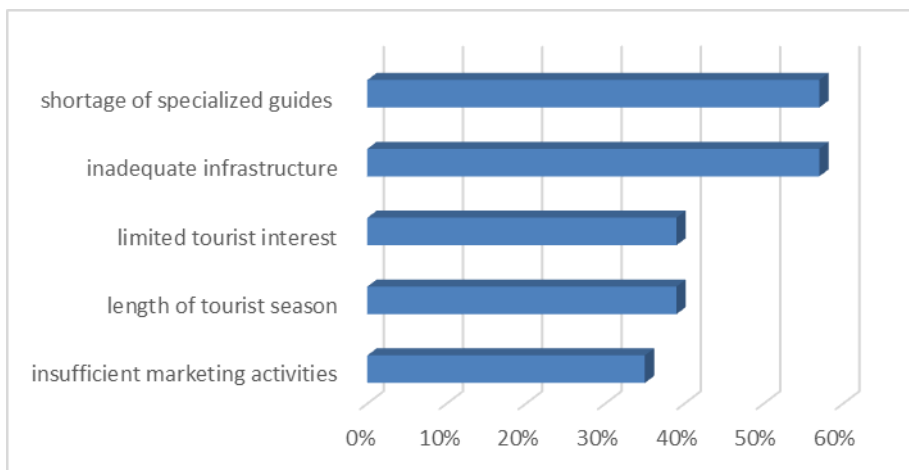


Fig. 3. DMCs' key challenges in the development of adventure tourism in SDC

Figure 3 shows DMCs' key challenges in the development of adventure tourism in SDC. The most frequently cited barriers include the inadequate infrastructure and shortage of specialized guides (56,5%), followed by seasonality and limited tourist interest (39,1%), as well as insufficient marketing activities (34,8%). Additional challenges relate to tour organization, safety and logistics, adapting products to diverse tourist profiles, and maintaining competitiveness in an increasingly saturated market.

Destination management companies identify the lack of infrastructure and specialized guides as the main obstacles to the development of adventure tourism in SDC, highlighting the need for investment and professional training. Seasonality, limited tourist interest, and insufficient marketing further restrict growth, emphasizing the importance of product diversification and off-season development. Additionally, issues such as unfair competition and unregulated low-cost tours underline the necessity of stronger coordination and regulation to ensure sustainable and high-quality adventure tourism development.

The survey also examined the collaboration of DMCs with destination management organizations (DMOs). Most respondents reported collaboration through strategic alignment for adventure tourism development (43,5%), participation in trade fairs (21.7%), and co-financing promotional activities (13%), while individual initiatives accounted for a smaller share (4,3%).

A notable 13% indicated no collaboration. Satisfaction with collaboration was moderate, with most ratings at 3 (30,4%) or 4 (34,8%), and only 4,3% giving the highest rating of 5, indicating room for improvement.

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are proposed to support the further development of adventure tourism in SDC. To enhance adventure tourism, DMCs should develop seasonally extended products such as hiking, trekking, and cycling tours, as well as multi-day expeditions that combine various adventure activities. The integration of thematic tours highlighting local heritage and digital tools (e.g., GPS apps, trail information) can further enrich visitor experiences. Certified guides and safety standards are essential to ensure quality and trust.

Strengthening collaboration among DMCs, tourist organizations, and the local community is crucial. Active involvement of local stakeholders in tourism activities, the creation of coordination platforms, and shared online tools can improve visibility, sustainability, and efficiency. These measures collectively support a diversified, innovative, and sustainable adventure tourism offer in SDC.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the significant role of Destination Management Companies (DMCs) in the development of adventure tourism in Split-Dalmatia County. Adventure tourism constitutes a strategically important segment for most DMCs, primarily offered through one-day excursions, with rafting, kayaking, and ziplining being the most frequently organized activities.

While client interest in adventure experiences is generally moderate to high, most DMCs do not systematically conduct market research, which limits the potential for tailored product development.

The research identified several challenges preventing the growth of adventure tourism, including limited infrastructure, a shortage of certified guides, high seasonality, insufficient marketing, and regulatory gaps in the competitive environment. Collaboration with destination management organizations exists but remains moderate, indicating potential for improvement in strategic alignment and joint promotional efforts.

Based on these findings, it is evident that expanding the range of adventure products, particularly multi-day and thematic experiences, integrating digital tools, and ensuring certified guides and safety standards, can enhance the tourism offer and extend the season. Furthermore, strengthened collaboration among DMCs, local tourist organizations, and the community is essential to promote sustainable, innovative, and diversified adventure tourism. Collectively, these measures can contribute to reducing seasonality, increasing destination competitiveness, and fostering a higher quality and more sustainable tourism experience in Split-Dalmatia County.

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