

THE JOURNEY OF THE NATIONAL TOURISM AGENCY WITH SIPPO ALBANIA & NEW DEAL EUROPE

INTRODUCTION

Over ten million foreign tourists visited Albania in 2023, ranking it at the top of the World Tourism Organization classification for Europe.

The Swiss Import Promotion Program (SIPPO) has supported the Albanian National Tourism Agency (NTA), a Business Support Organization (BSO) to improve its export promotion services. This case study highlights how SIPPO cooperated with NTA, focusing on participation in the New Deal Europe (NDE) tourism B2B event organized in hybrid in-person and virtual format. The case study was developed based on interviews with the SIPPO Albania team, National Tourism Agency, Visit Gjirokastra, and Albanian Trip, a tourism exporter.

"Albania is one of those small and diverse destinations that can offer a bit of everything to everyone" Tine Murn, co-founder of New Deal Europe, in [The Guardian](#).

SUPPORTING THE NATIONAL TOURISM AGENCY

SIPPO has supported the National Tourism Agency since 2017 to improve their export promotion services. The main support has been to help NTA prepare for successful participation in global trade fairs such as ITB Berlin, WTM London and other B2B events such as NDE London. SIPPO has engaged international experts to build the capacities of key staff at NTA and VistiGjirokastra DMO, identify regional, global and niche markets, present Albania as a sustainable tourism destination for international audience, and to prepare tourism exporters for effective participation. In 2018, SIPPO worked with NTA to develop an inventory of sustainable tourism providers in Albania, and supported NTA to facilitate several workshops on sustainability in tourism.

After the pandemic, SIPPO supported NTA to develop a Communication and Marketing Strategy, which NTA used as response to recover the sector. The strategy promotes Albania as a safe destination which offers natural, cultural, sun and sea tourism. SIPPO provided capacity building activities on digital marketing, digital events and participation in virtual B2B events, market intelligence and development of digital tools like newsletters.

SIPPO's support led to three key changes in NTA's operations. First, NTA enhanced its cooperation with tourism exporters, supporting them to better prepare for global trade fairs, beyond covering only their financial costs of participation. Second, NTA developed the capacity to promote Albania as a sustainable tourism destination aiming the orientation toward Sustainable tourism markets such as Western Europe, UK and North America. Third, NTA has gained expertise and know-how on market trends and international market needs, reflected in their communication and promotion strategies.

NEW DEAL EUROPE

The journey of NTA with New Deal Europe demonstrates the role that SIPPO has played as a facilitator, knowledge-broker and promoter with NTA.

New Deal Europe (NDE), founded in 2018, is the only trade event dedicated to promoting tourism in South-East Europe for English-speaking markets. SIPPO realized the potential of a collaboration between NTA and NDE in promoting Albania as a sustainable tourism destination. Therefore, in April 2022, during NDE's second in-person event in London, SIPPO joined other market actors to ensure a headline representation of Albania. NTA, SIPPO, and RisiAlbania, a project of Swiss Development Cooperation, agreed for coordinated support in organizing participation in NDE London 2022 event and supporting tourism exporters. For the first time, NTA presented the destination alongside a regional Destination Management Organization (DMO), promoting Albania and presenting a specific offer on one regional destination. In addition, NTA organized useful B2B meetings with media, big tour operators and influencers. As a result, the director of NTA is cited in this [article](#) promoting Albania destination. Other articles in prestigious magazines followed: [The Guardian](#), [Qantas Magazine](#), [Financial Times](#).

Building on the momentum of NDE, SIPPO facilitated meetings with line ministries to align the role of NDE in promoting Albania destination and facilitated contact between NDE and Albanian trade fair exhibitors. This led to the organization of New Deal Europe in Albania, their first event outside of UK. This event introduces an innovative exhibition model in Albania, featuring a platform for B2B meetings of international buyers with tourism exporters and market players (called B2Balkans Marketplace) and familiarization trips of buyers, media and influencers to learn first-hand about the destination.

INNOVATION, NEW BUSINESS MODELS AND GROWTH

NTA's work with New Deal Europe has had a broad impact on tourism exporters and destination management organizations.

Albanian Trip is a tour operator with more than 16 years of experience in cultural, authentic, sustainable tourism. Elton Caushi, the co-founder, explained that participation in these global trade fairs, supported by NTA, has been crucial in their business growth. In NDE London 2022, Albanian Trip conducted around twenty B2B meetings, and signed a contract with Intrepid Travel, a global champion in sustainable tourism. Since then, Albanian Trip has doubled its sales. They estimate that participation in trade fairs and B2B events accounts for 65% of their turnover. The company has hired new staff throughout the year, and brought benefits for farmers, boutique businesses, and local communities, i.e. farms and shepherds in Albania. Media visibility has been another highlight. This upcoming September Albanian Trip is organizing a press trip with 10 international tour operators in Albania, a result of connections and visibility in New Deal Europe.

Visit Gjirokastra is a destination management organization (DMO), comprised of tourism businesses, that promotes and lobbies for tourism in the Gjirokastra region. In 2022, it participated and presented alongside NTA at New Deal Europe London. Kristina Fidhi, its executive director, highlighted that their participation revealed the need for Visit Gjirokastra to take a new approach. Despite interest from international buyers, they were unable to enter cooperation agreements due to their not-for-profit status. Consequently, they decided to create Visit Gjirokastra DMC (Destination Management Company), an innovative, for-profit, online platform that highlights the tourism offer of Gjirokastra region. Kristina attributes this change in business model to participation in New Deal Europe London 2022, which generated business ideas such as the need to combine the regional offer to create new products with a focus on experiential tourism. Visit Gjirokastra is now working on building expertise for complying with the requirements of these new markets, which is leading to increased quality.

A SUCCESS STORY WHICH NEEDS TO REINVENT ITSELF

This case study emphasizes the pivotal role that SIPPO Albania has played in strengthening the role of National Tourism Agency to improve their export promotion service portfolio. It establishes the important role that participation of tourism exporters in international trade fairs plays in generating and growing business, diversifying and enhancing offers, impacting communities and promoting Albania as a sustainable tourism destination.

In 2023, NTA changed its strategy and went through major staff changes which have impacted support capacity, institutional memory of the agency and its cooperation with tourism exporters. The Ministry of Tourism and Environment is taking a more leading role in promoting Albania, reducing participation in these trade fairs from exporters. The new Promotion Strategy of the Ministry of Tourism focuses on strengthening public and media relations to attract tourists, rather than supporting B2B exhibitions. Both tourism exporters and NTA representatives expressed concern that this could be a shift in vision from sustainable to mass tourism. Advocacy from tour operators and tourism business bodies has led to a slight modification of the new strategy, and in this upcoming ITB Berlin 2024, NTA will participate together with tour operators and tourism businesses.

Amidst these changes, SIPPO Albania is challenged with reinventing its cooperation with NTA to continue to improve their export promotion service portfolio, lobby tourism foreign associations and organizations, impart expertise, network, and make available financial resources to tourism exporters. These changes create an opportunity for SIPPO to apply the learnings of these past years and support a stronger National Tourism Agency, while exploring potential cooperation with other private BSO(s), to bring value to tourism exporters.

“Presence of tourism exporters in international trade fairs is essential, and it needs to be under the same logo as National Tourism Agency, because it shows prestige, preparation and generates more business and better promotion of the country. Buyers at trade fairs are interested in tangible offers, which NTA alone cannot offer” Alina Starova, Head of Marketing, NTA.