



SUCCESS STORY

Local Tour Operators Put Kosovo on the Adventure Travel Map

Mountain views, 2,000 hiking trail among country's offerings



With a company philosophy based on Uta Ibrahim's passion for the mountains, Balkan Outdoor Experience employs five other seasonal staff members – including a yoga teacher for her popular hiking/yoga trips.

Photo by: USAID EMPOWER Private Sector



Biking was originally a way for Sali Shoshi to easily get between the historical buildings he was restoring. Now, with his company Catun, biking also provides an opportunity to preserve Kosovo's cultural heritage by sharing its stories with visitors.

Photo by: USAID EMPOWER Private Sector

"There are no politics up here – the mountains bring people together."

—Uta Ibrahim, Founder of Balkan Outdoor Experience

September 2016 – Though only slightly larger than the state of Delaware, Kosovo has a lush mountainous perimeter that boasts over 20 peaks above 2500 meters – offering spectacular panoramic views to those willing to make the climb.

Due to its tumultuous history, the country's rugged mountains and breathtaking vistas have largely been a secret kept by the traders and shepherds that have called them home for centuries – until recently. A group of local tour operators are working to spread that secret, promoting Europe's youngest country as its newest adventure travel destination.

"I only started hiking about six years ago, but I was immediately hooked," explains Uta Ibrahim, who recently left her career in marketing to launch tour company Balkan Outdoor Experience. "I want to share the same passion for these mountains with my guests that were first instilled in me. There are no politics up here -- the mountains bring people together."

Ibrahim is one of 40 Kosovo mountain guides and tour operators to go through the two-part AdventureEDU training course provided by the Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA) in 2015. Participants learned how to access the international adventure tourism market and how to best prepare and promote safe tour packages. The course was sponsored by the USAID EMPOWER Private Sector.

"The training really pushed me to think creatively, so I restructured my existing tour offerings and expanded my knowledge of adventure sports," says Sali Shoshi, founder of tour company Catun. An architect with over 15 years working in preserving Kosovo's cultural heritage, his most popular tours pair mountain biking with visits to restored 18th century stone houses, known as *kullas*, for guests to learn about western Kosovo's traditional way of life and cuisine.

Shoshi had only just launched his company before ATTA first came to Kosovo to host AdventureWeek in August 2014, which intro-

duced a select group of buyers and journalists to the Balkan region. In May 2016, he presented his company at the trade association's 300-person conference in nearby Ohrid, Macedonia. And in September 2016, USAID sponsored Shoshi to attend ATTA's Adventure Travel World Summit in Alaska alongside 700 other operators, buyers, and journalists.

"The fact that Kosovo is not a traditional destination for leisure travelers makes it that much more intriguing for the adventure tourism community," explains ATTA Executive Director for Europe Chris Doyle. "We see Kosovo's potential and are committed to continuing our work alongside USAID to help the country's dedicated tour operators develop further."

In addition to its partnership with the ATTA, USAID is focusing its regional tourism efforts on developing and promoting the 2,000-kilometer Via Dinarica mega-hiking trail and cultural corridor that follows the Dinaric Alps from Slovenia to Macedonia. In Kosovo, this means training and equipping local operators to join the alliance of well-established adventure tourism companies in the region. Since completing the trail markings in the fall of 2016, Via Dinarica Kosovo has already seen its first 100 visitors.

The five-year USAID EMPOWER Private Sector project, which is also funded by Sida, has been working since July 2014 to stimulate large-scale job creation by elevating the competitiveness of Kosovo firms in the growth-ready sectors of apparel, wood processing, ICT, renewable energy, tourism, and metal processing.

To date 70 individuals from 24 different companies benefited from 14 various activities, including trainings, fair participation, B2B events, and other promotional.