

## A KEY TOURISM DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

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### THE OVERALL PROJECT OBJECTIVE

Raising, or indeed creating, a Tourism profile for Gjirokastra is an essential element in revitalising the Old City. Without the old buildings having economic purpose there is little prospect of either the state or individual owners having the resource or the desire to continually support the buildings conservation; as conservation without purpose is a luxury that Albania can ill afford.

It is proposed that in the first instance the following strategy is adopted to assist in creating this necessary tourism market and creating the capacity to serve that market.

We consider that there are a number of inter-dependent strands to this development:

- a. The creation of a hotel – in a key historic building – that exemplifies good conservation and hospitality practice and which establishes standards that can be promoted and adopted more widely throughout the town.
- b. The creation of a tourism office within the Bazaar, again to assist in conserving an otherwise redundant building and to provide a place where the visitor and (as importantly) the foreign tourist professional can obtain accurate information about what is available in Gjirokastra for the visitor.

The creation of a facility – co-located with the Tourist Office – to provide training and support to local individuals wishing to establish businesses to serve the burgeoning tourist market and which actively identifies opportunities for such businesses in its own right.

- c. Improving the overall ambience of the old town by supporting the community-led street improvement initiatives order to eliminate the ever-present feeling of neglect. These projects will demand a parallel programme to support volunteerism.
- d. Improving the facilities and interpretive value of the Castle.

It is anticipated that to establish these strands will demand an overall initial budget allocation of 918,000 Euro for the first three years<sup>1</sup>. This sum will enable each of the strands to gain some economic momentum and hence will assist in increasing the real commercial wealth of the town. Additionally, the Zekate House and Tourist Office project should become largely operationally self-supporting by the end of the third year.

### PROJECT ONE – THE ZEKATE HOUSE

The Zekate House is arguably the finest large domestic property in Gjirokastra and has been subject to a number of restoration projects to consolidate its fabric and to restore its traditional

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<sup>1</sup> It is anticipated that these funds will be provided by a combination of Albanian Government, Packard Humanities Institute, Municipality and others.

interior. This fine building must now be put to use if it is not to once again decay and need further grant-funded restoration. Effectively it must be given an economic purpose.

It is proposed that the house is converted into a hotel, which exemplifies traditional Southern Albanian interior design and hospitality, albeit in a modified form to suit current standards of comfort.

Essentially the project comprises the following elements:

- a. The leasing, at a nominal rent (say 1,000e per annum) of the Zekate House, by the state, for an initial period of three years, renewable there after at five yearly intervals with an agreed percentage of gross rentals paid to the property owners.
- b. The completion of the remaining works to the structure as directed by an expert conservation architect. (25,000 euro)
- c. The sympathetic and fully reversible installation of modern comfort facilities, including WC's, bathrooms, heating, lighting and glazing. These facilities will be carefully detailed and located so as to minimise their impact on the buildings ambience and to demonstrate (exemplify) that such works can be undertaken both economically and sympathetically (25,000 euro).
- d. Local crafts people will be employed to produce suitable furniture and furnishings for the building that are either accurate reproductions of traditional types or which play homage to those traditions in a 'modern' manner (20,000 euro).
- e. An Albanian National, with international experience of the hotel industry will be employed to run the hotel, to provide training for its locally employed and volunteer / trainee staff and to assist in its wider promotion to the international tourist industry (funded by project two).
- f. The hotel, once operational, will be used as a training tool and will, consequently, have a rotating pool of volunteers / trainees involved in all aspects of its day-to-day operations. Surpluses from its operation will be partly paid to the property owner(s) with the remainder being used to further strengthen the wider tourist offer.

Each of these work elements will be managed by the Gjirokastra Conservation & Development Office [GCDO] in conjunction with the Municipality and appropriate departments of Central Government (Tourism and the Institute of Monuments [IofM]) via the Board. This project will assist in creating new skills for the emergent tourist industry.

A key objective of this project must be to create an innovative 'hip' budget hotel<sup>2</sup> that has an international profile built on its uniquely Albanian characteristics – historic and contemporary.

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2 Hip Hotels Guide – [www.hiphotels.com](http://www.hiphotels.com)

## PROJECT TWO – TOURIST SERVICES

Tourists need to feel comfortable when visiting. An essential element of this comfort is having good direction and information as to what to do, where to stay (if they are independent travellers), where to eat and who offers accredited or quality services in each of these areas.

It is essential that a Tourist Office is developed to serve this need. Most obviously this could be a new build on the main approach to the Old Town. This is not to be recommended, as it is far preferable to use a building that is either grossly under-utilised<sup>3</sup> or one that is near ruinous. However, such a building must lie immediately on the route to the neck (despite the majority of buildings along this route being in relatively good repair).

The building acquired (via a compulsory long lease if needed) needs to have a street presence for a small Tourist Office and must be connected by a new staircase to the upper floor, which might extend over two or more ground floor units, to provide a space for administration and training. It is anticipated that this space will cost 50,000e to create and furnish.

It is also intended that the creation of the new staircase (within a rear courtyard) will demonstrate the practicality of re-using such redundant spaces.

The office will fulfil the following functions:

- a. To promote Gjirokastra in partnership with the Municipality and Central Government via the creation and issuing of a range of promotional materials and by attending international tourism industry events<sup>4</sup> etc.
- b. To provide a service to international tour agencies enabling them to be confident that their clients visits to Gjirokastra will be professionally managed and delivered to a good (agreed) standard (20,000 euro per annum<sup>5</sup> for 'a' and 'b').
- c. To answer enquiries and provide assistance to visitors in planning their visits and to then serve the visitor on arrival in Gjirokastra.
- d. To create and maintain a database of what is on offer in Gjirokastra and to assist those offering a service (accommodation, guiding, driving etc) in ensuring their service meets an agreed quality standard (defined with the office) and that suitable promotional materials are provided (3,000 euro per annum).
- e. To assist entrepreneurs in establishing tourism related businesses, whether accommodation, guiding, crafts, arts / entertainments or support services by providing

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3 Typically, the upper floors of buildings in the bazaar are not used as they were deliberately sealed off during the communist period. This lack of use, consequent of there being no access greatly exacerbates the feeling of neglect and lack of ownership.

4 It is essential that these works are highly professional and supported at the highest levels by the Albanian Government. Gjirokastra must show it is a World Heritage Site and must sell itself as such.

5 Wherever annual support is indicated it is assumed to be made available for three years in the first instance.

training and where appropriate micro loans or use of facilities (incubator suites) within the tourism office (10,000 euro per annum).

- f. To identify buildings (single or groups) that might be acquired for tourism developments at a future date and which could be developed by commercial partners in a sympathetic manner<sup>6</sup>.

It will need to be led by a tourism professional, who must be Albanian (or at least speak Albanian) who will also be responsible for the strategic management of the Zekate House Hotel. Additionally, the office will (ultimately) require 5 further directly employed staff, each of whom must bi-lingual and trained in some key function of a Tourist Office's business – monitoring quality standards, assisting visitors, preparing promotional materials etc. Thus the staff are likely to cost c.75,000e each year.

To ensure the office is effective it will also be necessary to provide training for them and for the 'entrepreneurs' by external experts. A Budget for this involvement is also needed of c.20,000 euro each year.

It is a requirement of this office that over time (by the end of the first 3 years) its dependency on grant or Governmental support is reduced. This can be achieved by:

- a. charging fees for providing information to tour operators
- b. it acting as a central booking facility and taking a published percentage of the monies generated for reinvestment in further projects<sup>7</sup>
- c. licence fees
- d. the repayment of loans or investments made by the office
- e. it directly operating guiding services etc.
- f. its operation of the hotel.

From the outset this principle must be established and be shown to be an effective means of providing support to the burgeoning tourist industry. However, its key role must always remain to attract tourism expenditure to Gjirokastra.

### **PROJECT THREE – IMPROVING THE AMBIENCE**

A third group of projects must comprise ones, which can be originated by, and delivered by local people with few resources and which offer rapid and tangible results. Effectively, these projects must assist in creating a new pride in the community. In those instances where the ability to undertake these projects has only arisen from, or been aided by grants for materials etc this should be made clear to the local community, in order to show support is being provided from Government and others and that Gjirokastra is not alone.

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6 For example Holiday Property Bonds [HPB] who are developing Trulli in Alberello (World Heritage Site), Italy

7 There are excellent examples of this mechanism at World heritage sites throughout SE Asia.

## Working with the community

A series of local advisory / leadership groups have already been established to create local ownership and activity. These currently comprise:

1. a community / society group
2. a business group
3. a press and promotions group

These groups are being tasked / used to create and promote a range of low cost, modest and community led projects with the express purpose of improving the ambience for visitors and residents to the Old Town alike.

Examples include:

- a Hoardings on unused buildings designed by artists and schools throughout the bazaar area
- b Flowers and planting on unused / derelict sites to beautify the streets and to create personal ownership of spaces via the constant need to water and garden the plants
- c Improving (or closing) the public toilets at the foot of the Castle and persuading the Municipality or a sponsor to maintain and clean them.
- d Recycling teams to remove rubbish that has some worth – e.g. shells of derelict cars
- e Minor road and pavement repairs directed by a works gang operating (and funded) under the office following consultation concerning priorities and methods with the community and IoFM.
- f Removing derelict cars and debris from the streets. A specific instance ought to be the rubble accumulated around many half ruined buildings and that, which has simply been tipped into gullies throughout the town.
- g Whitewashing (or, with agreement, colour washing) and cleaning building facades using approved chemical treatments
- h Teaching people about urban design aesthetics, in particular:
  - i Roller shutters and canopies
  - ii The choice of materials (and colour selection) for shop fronts
  - iii Shop window displays – whatever the product the shop sells or service it offers – to create interest
  - iv The use and type of advertising and shop signage – neon or not?
  - v The positioning of air-conditioning kit
- i The positioning and removal of externally mounted wiring etc
- j Street lighting styles, location and power

Ideally, each of these will lead to small community-led projects being delivered with grants being given by the GCDO and/or Municipality (as appropriate) for the purchase of materials. The match

funding is expected to be the community's time. The projects must be seen to be community led and delivered. In the first instance a budget of c.5,000 euros each year will suffice.

### **Directional signage**

Working with local designers and having access to historic research and the overall interpretive masterplan a series of signs should be created to inform residents and visitors alike. These signs should address three main tasks:

- a. Provide directional and locational information
- b. Give interpretive / explanatory information
- c. Inform people as to what is happening – to buildings etc

In this instance the GCDO ought to lead the delivery of the signage in order to create a 'common' style that is approved by the community. Ideally, the strategy and approach will be developed with the community's assistance. Given local design costs etc. a budget of 5,000 euro will suffice for this task.

### **Street Paving**

Gjirokastra's paving plays a central part in creating its unique ambience. Indeed, it is specifically mentioned in the World heritage Award statement of significance. Consequently, it is essential that it be maintained. Unfortunately, it has suffered wear and the increasing levels of technology and traffic are both increasing the rate of wear.

It is suggested that a dedicated team is created to ensure that the stone pavement, associated retaining walls and other stone elements in the public realm are adequately maintained. A budget for this team is needed which should initially be set at 30,000 euro per year.

### **Approaching Gjirokastra**

The main approach to the old town is very poor and is undoubtedly a dissuading factor to potential independent visitors. It must be improved. This demands that street signage is improved, that the roads are improved and given proper edges and that the large derelict buildings on the climb into the square at the entrance to the Old Town are demolished, or at least properly consolidated. Effectively, the Municipality and central Government must invest in, and enforce, their own planning and traffic management strategies. The scale of this task and the fact that UNDP's 'Beautiful Gjirokastra' project has already undertaken some small projects related to these issues, suggests that this task lies outside the funding remit of the GCDO.

### **PROJECT FOUR - THE CASTLE**

The Castle is the jewel in Gjirokastra's crown and needs to be treated as such. Thus a series of projects are needed which promote it, conserve it and make it (and its collections) a more pleasurable visitor experience.

Whilst the Castle is improving in terms of its offer, a coordinated plan for its development, which must encompass many significant and highly emotional elements of Gjirokastra and Albania's political and social history, is needed. It is clear that whilst some activities to conserve the fabric have been undertaken and consequently the quality of the displays of the art collection and parts of the weapons display have improved immensely, the full potential of the Castle is not being exploited. If the castle is to be adequately conserved, accessed and interpreted, a number of key areas of work that must be included within the overall Gjirokastra plan (not least because they are considered to be Best Practice):

- a. Conservation Management Plan (CMP) to draw together information on significance of Castle, its collections, features and its environs, the state of fabric/structures, and to produce Conservation Policies. This will include information to inform the interpretation strategy. This will demand an international team
- b. A Development Plan for the Castle (CDP), including:
  - i. Business Plan
  - ii. Review of the operations and opportunities of the Castle e.g. using the arches, infrastructure
  - iii. Events (festivals/others)
  - iv. Museum
  - v. Arts
  - vi. Access, Audience and Marketing Plans
  - vii. Tourist experience review
  - viii. Major developments to realise potential
  - ix. Outline interpretive masterplan for the castle as part the overall IM
  - x. Expert advice relating to the artillery/weapons collections
  - xi. Human Resources and Staff Development
  - xii. Grounds Maintenance Strategy.

These two elements 'a' and 'b' are likely to cost c.120,000 euro and are largely intangible, though they will set the future direction of all developments at the Castle. Thus, to show progress, some immediate short-term projects need to be undertaken.

- c. Short term projects (incremental steps as part of vision) delivered by volunteers / paying conservation tourists:
  - i. Visitor surveys - tourist office staff led
  - ii. Vegetation clearance – 10,000 euro per annum – I of M
  - iii. Professionally led consolidation/recording – 25,000 euro per annum – I of M
  - iv. Litter - municipal budget
  - v. Entrance improvements – shop, ticketing, signage (directional / information), and parking - 10,000 euro
  - vi. Welcome and comfort services for visitors – WC's etc – 5,000 euro
  - vii. Lighting of artillery collection – 5,000 euro
  - viii. Visitor services within the “arches” – 5,000 euro

- ix. Basic Grounds maintenance – municipal budget.
- d. Consolidation of structure to prevent water ingress is a priority, as there is a danger that the fabric may be in danger as a result of ingress, and due to poor maintenance of water supplies. An initial area over the galleries should be undertaken to test techniques and to develop a wider strategy for this vital issue. A budget for this test area of 20,000 euro should be sufficient.
- e. A comprehensive re-display of the Arms Museum to interpret the weapons, housed in the cabinets, and in so doing to attach stories to them i.e. provide a context and thus create further interest. The first phase of this project should be provided a 5,000 euro budget.
- f. A reconfiguration of the stage area and its environs to increase its accessibility and improve its technical facilities – 20,000 euro.

These projects will assist in conserving and promoting the castle to visitors and will enable the Gjirokastra Folk festival to be developed.

## **SUMMARY**

The ultimate aim of all works in Gjirokastra must be to create a purpose for the conservation of what is currently commonly perceived as a liability. Effectively, the economic role of the old town must be reinvented by the removal of legislative blocks, the use of community activism, international funds and partners.

The focus of this new purpose will be two fold – education and tourism, the second of which has been examined in this note. These two strands will support and enhance each other and provide the best means of sensitively re-using / exploiting the old town and in so doing demand its conservation.

The Board and GCDO's work is to position Gjirokastra as the key example in Albania of culture, conservation and learning based economic regeneration delivered by a visionary and multi disciplinary partnership of government, academia, business, and NGO's and for this approach to become known to the world at large.

The projects outlined will assist in this task.

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