

# The Religious Tourism as a Competitive Advantage of the Prefecture of Pieria, Greece

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The scope of the present paper is the research of whether the prefecture of Pieria comprises an attractive destination for religious tourism and pilgrimage. For this reason, the use of questionnaires takes place which aims to realizing if and to what extend this form of tourism comprises a comparative and competitive advantage for the prefecture of Pieria. The research method of this paper is the qualitative research and more specifically the use of questionnaires with 13 questions in total. The scope was to research whether the prefecture of Pieria is a religious-pilgrimage destination. The sample is comprised of 102 participants, being Greek residents originating from other Greek counties, the European Union, and Third World Countries. The requirement was for the participant to have visited the prefecture of Pieria. The independency test ( $\chi^2$ ) was used for checking the interconnections between the different factors, while at the same time an allocation of frequencies was conducted based on the study and presentation of frequency as much as relevant frequency. Due to the fact that, no other similar former researches have been conducted regarding religious tourism in Pieria, this research will be able to give some useful conclusions. These conclusions will lead us to more specialized knowledge on the tourism of the under study prefecture.

*Keywords:* religious-pilgrimage tourism, competitive advantage, Pieria

## Introduction

Tourism is defined as a complex phenomenon in which one is observed temporary movement of people from one place to another for the purpose of meeting their tourist or entertainment needs. The one dimension is related to the temporary movement of tourists and is called tourist demand, while the second has to do with the reception and service of tourists and is called a tourist offer. According to World Tourism Organization,

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tourism includes the activities of people traveling and staying in one place other than their place of residence and their stay lasts more than 24 hours. In recent years there has been a shift of tourism from mass to of special interest, i.e., new forms of tourism. Such a category is also religious tourism. Regional development presents positive elements thanks to its contribution religious tourism, as according to Polyzos (2017) there are several areas in Greece that typically show less development. Although these areas belong to the regions, they do not present the characteristics of urban centers, resulting to be considered as underdeveloped.

The religious phenomenon made its presence with the appearance of man on earth. All people have shown some form of religion, after all man is a religious creature and needs to believe in supreme powers. According to Moira (2003), religion plays an important role in the spiritual and social life of everyone, because in this way it manages to influence and shape human culture. In recent years, religious tourism has been an important goal of Greek tourism policy. Tourists traveling either exclusively for religious reasons or in part dedicate some time to additional tourist attractions and thus contribute to the economy of the places they visit.

The prefecture of Pieria, which we are going to study, belongs to Central Macedonia and has an area of 1,516 km. According to the 2011 census, its population amounts to 126,698. Its economy is based mainly on the primary sector and tourism. It is an area rich in attractions of great historical and archaeological interest to the visitor.

In recent years, an effort has been made by the prefecture to combine its comparative advantages and to support several forms of alternative tourism. Pieria is also mainly known for its natural coastline. Remarkable, however, are its archaeological sites and traditional settlements such as Paleos Panteleimon, Palea Skotina, Paleoi Poroi, and Paleo Elatochori. Thus, an attempt was made to record five points, with which it differs and constitutes comparative advantages of the prefecture. (1) Sun and sea: The prefecture of Pieria has natural coastlines of 70 km with a variety of services, infrastructure, and destinations offered. (2) Culture and religion: One of the most important archeological sites of Dion is located in the prefecture. The castle of Platamonas and the ancient Pydna are some remarkable monuments. (3) Authenticity: In the mountainous areas there are traditional settlements. (4) Natural environment: Pieria combines mountain and sea. There are coastal wetlands (the delta of the river Aliakmonas, the Aliki Kitrous, wetland of Nea Poros) and mountainous nature (Olympus, Pieria Mountains). (5) Sports and adventure: The prefecture gives the opportunity to those who wish to be active in water sports, touring, and mountaineering tourism.

One point where Pieria stands out is the religious element and, in this way, contributes to the development of an alternative form of tourism: religious tourism. Pieria combines natural beauty with remarkable temples and monasteries, but also offers secular opportunities. The peculiarity of the prefecture lies in the fact of the short kilometer distance from prefectures with great religious interest such as Veria, Thessaloniki, and Meteora. The short distance of the prefecture from Mount Athos can benefit someone who can visit it in a short time.

In particular, on the borders of the Holy Diocese of Kitros, Katerini and Platamonas, there are 103 parish or cemetery churches, and 51 chapels. The metropolis also includes nine monasteries which are: (1) the historic Monastery of Agios Dionysius on Olympus gathers many people throughout the year. It has a remarkable treasury, where there is a plethora of relics. You can find out the Old Monastery, situated at a height of 900 m some 18 km from Litochoro. It is built in a natural hollow between two small streams which run into the Enipeas. The new Monastery which is located 3 km from Litochoro was built by young monks who founded a new brotherhood in 1987; (2) the Holy Monastery of Saint Ephraim of Syros in Kontariotissa, which was

founded in 1983 and is a nunnery; (3) the Holy Monastery of Panagia Makryrrachis was founded in the 10th or 12th century as a male, Stavropegian Monastery and from 1993 it was transformed into a nunnery; (4) the Holy Monastery of Agios Athanasios Kolindros dates from 1860; however the information about the church comes only from oral tradition; (5) the Holy Monastery of Saints Theopatores Joachim and Annie also belongs to Kolindros; (6) the part of the Holy Monastery of Profitos Elias in Livadi Kolindros; (7) the Holy Monastery of Holy Trinity Vrontous which is a building of the 14th century on a rock at a height of 420 m; (8) the Holy Monastery of Agios Georgios Ritinis, which is a building of the 14th century; it is a post Byzantine monument with outstanding wall paintings. According to witnesses and folk history, it was the hiding place of the soldiers during the Macedonian Struggle; (9) the Holy Monastery of Presentation of the Virgin, of Petra Olympus, dates from the 11th Century, where it was a base for the liberation struggle of 1821. The Monastery of the Presentation of the Virgin Mary is to be found within the grounds of the sanatorium at Petra.

Other worth visiting monuments are the church of Agios Nikolaos in Palea Vrontou. Dates from 1700 and is constructed out of wood. It was restored as a stone structure in 1879. It is a three aisled church, built in the Byzantine style with a tiled floor. It includes a wooden screen, hand carved. The icons date from 1931. The church of Agia Paraskevi, Ano Milia is a 17th century church in the style of a Basilica. The church of the Slumber of the Virgin Mary, located in Kontariotissa, dates from 11th century. The church has a dome and two chapels on the west aisle. Also, the church of Agios Athanasios, Ano Skotina dates at the same century.

In recent years, efforts have been made to promote religious tourism in the prefecture. Specifically, in collaboration with the Municipality together with the Holy Diocese, an office of Pilgrimage Tours was created, in order to enhance the differentiation of the tourist name of the prefecture and to create an opportunity for the opening of the incoming pilgrimage tourism. For the better promotion of the religious monuments, information leaflets were written and the creation of a bilingual documentary about the Pilgrimages of Pieria is completed.

### **Literature Review**

The reasons for the existence of religious tourism are (a) the faith, (b) the religious holidays, (c) the importance of the monuments (Moira & Piraeus, 2008). Religious tourism or spiritual tourism as mentioned by Haq and Wong (2010) is divided into two subcategories. First is the pilgrimage, that is, the journey for religious and spiritual purposes. Pilgrimage is a journey with spiritual or religious motives, observed since antiquity and in many of the world's religions (V. W. Turner & E. L. Turner, 2011). The second category mainly concerns the visit of religious monuments and sights (Rinschede, 1992). Religious monuments can attract a variety of interests, such as religion, art, architecture, history, or even personal background. People can find sacred places interesting and moving, whether they are religious or not. Some monuments, such as the churches of Italy, offer excellent architecture and great works of art. Some places are important for the world's religions. Jerusalem for example is central to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Others may still be picturesque and important to a religion, such as the Camino de Santiago in Spain; others have been adopted by non-religious people as a personal challenge and even as a journey of self-discovery.

Thus, religious tourism is not seasonal tourism and is addressed to a wide range of ages in social and economic level. Religion and tourism are interrelated (Stausberg, 2012), as this is the cause of travel and the source of traditional culture and faith that attracts different visitors (Henderson, 2011). The term religious tourism is not considered acceptable in the religion of Islam. In this religion, every believer has the obligation to perform a pilgrimage once in his life without including entertainment (Moira & Piraeus, 2008).

As a type of tourism, religious tourism aims to profit and increase job opportunities. However, the most important thing is the contribution it offers to the development of the economy. A large portion of tourism researchers consider better research or objectivity for tourism-related percentages necessary (Vukonic, 2002). Many times the official statistics on religious tourist destinations are based on numbers taken as key economic indicators (Vukonic, 2002). The World Organization for Religious Tourism observes that religious tourism generates 15 billion annual turnovers worldwide and affects 300 million travelers worldwide each year. Travel agencies offer tourism products at a rate of 35%. In addition, the World Tourism Organization estimates that some 16.3 million tourists travel each year for religious reasons. It is worth noting that the number of religious tourists has increased by about 5% since 2007, a time of economic crisis. In Greece, there are almost 280 points of religious interest as recorded by the World Tourism Organization. 85% of the religious tourists in the country are Greeks and 300,000 are foreign tourists (mainly Serbs, Romanians, Russians, and Cypriots).

Religious tourism can be considered as not a form of tourism with an exclusive purpose. When combined with other types of alternative tourism, it contributes to the local development of the areas (Polyzos, 2017). The religious tourist after completing his religious needs reacts like a normal tourist who needs accommodation, meals and to satisfy all the needs that a tourist would have (Vukonic, 1996). So, although the purpose of his trip is specific, in this way he also contributes to the local economy, without being limited to the place he visited.

Religious tourism, like all forms of tourism, increases during the summer months, but does not show seasonality. Religious tourism can also be developed in less peak periods (Polyzos, 2017) and thus is differentiated from mass tourism. Thus, the various functions that take place during the year due to holidays contribute to the extension of religious tourism throughout the year and therefore to the extension of the tourist season.

Despite the obvious and self-evident benefits from the development of religious tourism, such as the economic development of tourist destinations, some frictions due to it are becoming more and more apparent. It is observed that there is often a risk of altering the character of religious events and disturbing the sacred atmosphere of the places from their secularization (M. L. Nolan & S. Nolan, 1992; Pfaffenberger, 1983; De Sousa, 1988), while basic principles of religious behavior are often violated by ignorance and unconsciousness (Vukonic, 2002).

### **Methodology**

The scope of the research was to record the views of visitors to the prefecture of Pieria, regarding the comparative advantages of the area for tourism and the evaluation of pilgrimage tourism opportunities to visitors. A total of 102 people participated in this research, with most of them belonging to the female sex (54 people—52.9%). In terms of age, the majority (44.1%) are 36-50 years old.

For the needs of the research, a questionnaire with a total of 13 closed-ended questions was used. Also, interviews were conducted for the investigation. The scope was to provide the possibility to interviewers to express their opinion. More specifically, the main forms of tourism are mentioned, followed by specialization in the existing forms of religious tourism in the area of the prefecture of Pieria. The possible development of this, its relation to the environment, is combined with the role of regional and tourist development of the region, as well as the benefits and prospects of this type of tourism are deleted.

Participants' responses were assessed using discrete variables. In addition, frequency distribution tables were used for the demographic characteristics (independent variables) of the sample and their description and

analysis. The conclusions are based on the level of significance of 5% (Halikias & Lalou, 2015). The results of the correlations were obtained using the independence test  $\chi^2$ .

### Result and Discussion

At the religious-pilgrimage level, the prefecture of Pieria offers several activities of particular economic, social, educational, cultural, and even tourist importance. As the most popular monument of Greek Orthodoxy (Table 1), a remarkable pole of attraction for visitors to the area, the participants declared the Holy Monastery of Agios Dionysios of En Olympus (56.9%). They are followed by the Holy Church of Agios Panteleimon P. Panteleimon of Pieria (20.6%), the Holy Monastery of the Entrances of the Virgin Petra Olympus (11.8%) etc. As it can be seen, the most notorious religious destination is the Holy Monastery of Saint Dionysius en Olimpo, which was to be expected due to the fact that the local community recognizes the importance of the monastery as well as of the saint.

Table 1

*Distribution of Frequencies Based on the Most Famous Religious Monument in Pieria*

	Frequency	Percentage
Holy Monastery of Saint Dionysios	58	56.9%
Saint Panteleimon	21	20.6%
Holy Monastery of Presentation of the Virgin, Petra	12	11.8%
Saint Georgios, Korinos	4	3.9%
Other	3	2.9%
Monastery of Prophet Ilias, Livadi	2	2.0%
Holy Monastery of Saint Athanasios, Kolindros	1	1.0%
Holy Monastery of Theopatores—God Grandparents, Saint Joachim and Anna	1	1.0%

As can be seen from Table 2, religious tourism in the area is characterized by insufficient visibility of the monuments, which may have additional effects on the overall tourism development of the prefecture. Regarding the way of information about the religious and pilgrimage monuments of Pieria, most stated that they are informed by the social media (48%), 32 people from friends who live or visited the area (31.4%) and 13 participants from internet search engines (12.7%).

Table 2

*Distribution of Frequencies Based on the Way of Information About the Religious and Pilgrimage Monuments of Pieria*

	Frequency	Percentage
Social media	49	48.0%
People who live or have visited the prefecture of Pieria	32	31.4%
Search engine (Google, Yahoo)	13	12.7%
Travel agencies	4	3.9%
Other	3	2.9%
Participation on tourist exhibition	1	1.0%

One of the limitations in the prefecture of Pieria is the lack of infrastructure on issues involved in tourism development as there is no organized information plan for visitors to the area. The following Table 3 shows the sample data for the first search agency for information on with religious tourism. Of these, it appears that 47

people would seek information from the tourist kiosk in the city center; however the city does not have a corresponding infrastructure, 41 people from an ecclesiastical body and 13 participants would go to local agencies (municipality, region).

Table 3

*Frequency Distribution Based on the First Search Agency for Information on Religious Tourism*

	Frequency	Percentage
Touristic Kiosk	47	46.1%
Archdiocese-Metropoly	24	23.5%
Church	17	16.7%
Municipality	8	7.8%
District	5	4.9%

Therefore, in order to determine an integrated tourism policy, it is necessary to investigate an effective and integrated form of tourism, which concerns the particular characteristics of the study area, which are complementary and mutually supportive. The offer of complementary forms of tourism is shown in Table 4 giving us a first picture of the prospects for the development of tourism in the prefecture of Pieria in general. From the answers of the survey participants, it seems that the majority prefer general tourism (33.3%). In order of preference, archaeological (22.5%), sports (12.7%), and family tourism (11.8%) follow, while marine-fishing, cultural, and other forms follow with less rate.

Table 4

*Distribution of Frequencies Based on the Offer of Additional Forms of Tourism in the Prefecture of Pieria*

	Frequency	Percentage
Tourism	34	33.3%
Archaeological tourism	23	22.5%
Athletically tourism	13	12.7%
Family tourism	12	11.8%
Maritime tourism	8	7.8%
Cultural tourism	6	5.9%
Conference tourism	2	2.0%
Ecotourism	2	2.0%
Geotourism	1	1.0%
Educational tourism	1	1.0%

Statistically significant differences in relation to gender were found only in terms of the way of information ( $\chi^2 (101, N = 102) = 8.89$   $p = 0.012$ ) with most women turning to friendly persons (26 people—48.1 %) in contrast to most men who choose online information (35 people—74.5%).

Based on the questionnaires answered, the fact that religious tourism indeed takes place in the prefecture of Pieria is safely concluded. As it can be seen, eight monasteries in the area are known and have been visited from the questionnaires, although, the insufficient exposure of the religious element of the area is deemed negative for the area as a whole. Based on the literature, the promotion of an area and one of its unique elements for competitively differentiating it from other areas is deemed necessary. Moreover, while the necessity of the existence of a touristic Kiosk is proven, so that the tourist can receive information from, the prefecture of Pieria does not operate one. Thus, based on the answers 48% replied that they get informed by

social media. Finally, setting as a foundation the fact that a comparative advantage of a prefecture could be the variety of entertainment forms besides the pilgrimage, it is concluded that the prefecture of Pieria is notorious for the number of choices it offers regarding entertainment, which can be attributed to the prefecture's locale.

From the interviews it came out that the collaboration between the municipality with the Holy Diocese of Pieria is trying to establish and promote the religious-pilgrimage tourism in the prefecture. However, one thing that they did not emphasize is the fact that not all the visitors are Orthodox worshippers. Many of the tourists want to learn about the history and architecture of the religious monuments in general.

Due to the fact that, no other similar older researches have been conducted regarding religious tourism in Pieria, this research will be able to give some useful conclusions. These conclusions will lead us to more specialized knowledge on the tourism of the prefecture. More specifically, the prefecture of Pieria offers a lot of activities of significant economic, social, educational, cultural, even touristic importance, although, the religious tourism in the area consists of insufficient promotion of the monuments which comes as a result of the lack of infrastructure.

### Conclusions

Tourism is an important means by which regional development of a place can be helped. For the best use, however, it is judged necessary a design that will emphasize its limitations tourism activity and the possible effects that will be caused in environment but also in society. Tourism can contribute to development of a place's economy; however it can also cause significant problems for the place. For this reason, alternatives are now preferred forms of tourism and one of them is religious tourism. Regional development expresses the degree of development of an area with specific features, the ways and means by which the area will be brought to a better standard of living.

This is how the prefecture of Pieria was studied. The prefecture was chosen as a feature of the area to utilize its religious monuments in order to stand out from the other areas with a comparative advantage of religious tourism. A form tourism, although it has existed for a long time, made its appearance recently. Thus, the institutions of Pieria collaborated to highlight the monasteries, the Byzantine churches.

To promote the development of religious tourism in the prefecture a strategic plan is needed, with the consent of local actors with respect in religious elements.

As it came out, county of Pieria is an area which combines different types of tourism. A place mostly known for the opportunities offers to visitors who can combine activities both on sea and mountain. The primary objective of this paper was to find out if and to what extend religious tourism is the competitive advantage of the prefecture of Pieria. The results show that religious-pilgrimage tourism is important for the prefecture, but this is not a comparative advantage. Tourists prefer to combine religious-pilgrimage tourism with other types of tourism and not to travel with scope only worship. Besides the prefecture of Pieria is notorious for the number of choices it offers regarding entertainment. It is deemed necessary for the local and religious institutions to strategically plan the promotion of religious tourism having as a drive force the promotion of the prefecture under the contemporary conditions of COVID-19.

A potential research that could be conducted in the future would have to be addressed to solely religious tourists and thus, specific conclusions about religious and especially pilgrimage tourism and its development could be drawn, so religious tourism can finally become the competitive advantage of the prefecture.

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