

Black smoke billows from the front of the bus. With no air-conditioning besides the sympathetic wafting of a folded map from another passenger, I'm five hours into a bus journey from Tirana to Sarandë. Has the engine exploded? I'm not too sure. But judging by the groans of the driver and other passengers, this is far from ideal.

For many visitors, this is the reality of travelling in Albania. Buses and car hire are the primary methods of transportation – so incidents like these are pretty regular. The only two cities accessible by international flights are Tirana and Kukës in the north, leaving mid and south Albania fairly inaccessible unless travelling by bus or car. However, Albanian transportation is shifting. Flight routes to Albania are increasing, and not everyone is happy about it.

Vlora international airport is scheduled to open in April 2024, and Ryanair has announced 17 new routes to Tirana, including flights from Stansted and Manchester. The tourism sector will welcome these developments – previously, the budget way of reaching Tirana was via bus from Montenegro. And Vlora airport will allow holidayers to fly directly to Albania's coastline for resort holidays on the Adriatic Sea, potentially boosting development and tourism revenue. But sustainability-wise, there are many questions to be asked.

Taulant Bino represents the Albanian Ornithological Society, one of two national NGOs behind a lawsuit against the Albanian authorities over the construction of the airport. The organisation aims to protect places of conservational importance and says it has seen a pattern in the exploitation of state-owned protected areas – particularly in coastal regions. The airport borders – or encroaches on, depending on your stance – Narta lagoon, renowned for birdlife and home to up to 3,000 flamingos. The accusations are damning, including queries over whether the airport even holds a valid construction permit to have begun works.

"As an NGO, we are not against airports in general. It has to make sense and unfortunately, from different perspectives, Vlora airport makes no sense. It is a protected area, a wetland of crucial importance [and] an important bird area," Bino says. "On the other hand, it's close to the Tirana airport. It makes no sense because the airports are very close to each other, so other proposals should be taken into consideration", he continues.

Annette Spangenberg, head of conservation at Euronatur, a European nonprofit conservation foundation, echoes Bino's concerns and questions why a fast-train option from the existing Tirana airport was not provided, especially considering Vlora and Tirana's airports are just two hours apart by car.

"There is a current boom to build hotel resorts along the coast – at first glance – it may

seem like the more promising option and provide more money,” she says. However, “Constructing an airport so close to a undeveloped stretch of the coast clearly hints towards plans to further develop tourism in the area”, she adds.

The prime minister, Edi Rama, is a leading supporter and driver of the project, previously voicing hopes that the new airport would prompt exponential tourism growth. Vlora airport is expected to host direct flights from around the globe, with some estimating that it would create thousands of new jobs, reduce fare prices and turn the airport into the most important tourist gateway of the region.

The benefits are clear, but the real conversation seems to be at what cost. There is a risk that the airport may create another unsustainable resort bubble that fails to entice tourists to inland destinations.

Mirela Kumbaro, Albania’s minister of tourism and environment, previously promised to seek high-end eco-tourism, in a move away from package beach holidays. The current plans seem to be moving in a different direction.

For visitors who want to have a positive impact on the country, Spangenberg advises seeking out small-scale, local tourism offerings. “It is good to be curious,” Spangenberg advises, “to go with open eyes through the world.” For those with the luxury of having time to slow travel to [Albania](#), the options of ferry crossings and buses remain. Similarly, Bino suggests avoiding large, sprawling developments that have been built in protected areas, warning of their disastrous impact on nature and lack of longevity for tourist despite initial, quick boosts. “The impact goes beyond generations,” he says.

Source: The Guardian