

Peculiarities of regional development of cruise tourism in the Mediterranean

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Abstract: This article examines current trends in the global cruise market, the development of "green corridors" and "responsible tourism", analyzes current issues in the Mediterranean cruise region, and proposes directions for its future sustainable development.

Keywords: AQUATIC ECOSYSTEMS, "GREEN CORRIDORS" CONCEPT, MULTIMODAL TRANSPORT, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY, RESPONSIBLE TOURISM, ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY.

Introduction. Cruise tourism is one of the fastest-growing and most investment-attractive segments of the international tourism market. The popularity of the cruise sector is based on the diversity of offerings from cruise companies (tour operators), the ever-increasing demand from cruise customers, and, consequently, the economic results achieved in this type of business. To maximize profits, cruise companies constantly seek new initiatives to increase their clientele, develop original strategies to address current and emerging challenges, innovate in passenger service and entertainment, offer various discounts and special offers, and utilize the cultural, historical, natural, and recreational potential of a particular region.

Today, the Mediterranean region ranks second globally, after the Caribbean, in popularity and volume of sea travel, yet its potential remains untapped. This highlights new opportunities and promising vectors for the development of this segment, and underscores the **relevance** of this study. The **aim** of this article is to identify the impact of current cruise industry trends on the dynamics of cruise tourism in the Mediterranean region and to identify promising areas for its further development.

Analysis of the state of the problem and its research

Today, the cruise industry is one of the most successful, financially dynamic, and in-demand sectors of the economy, reaching new heights. With its high profitability, it is able to attract

and implement the latest advances in science and technology, redefining cruise voyages and thereby stimulating active cross-industry collaboration and partnerships with local and international ports, land and air transport, the hotel and restaurant business, tourism organizations, shipbuilding companies, and numerous financial, trade, cultural, medical, design, and other companies.

In the development of the cruise activity in recent years, a number of trends have emerged that indicate the industry is confidently moving toward scale, sustainability, and new travel formats. The trend toward "gigantomania" has not lost its popularity. Mass-market cruises, operated on enormous ships resembling "floating cities" or entire "floating resorts", with their own streets, parks, theaters, spas, swimming pools, and cultural and entertainment centers [7], remain popular among travelers. Giant new-generation ships are appearing on the cruise market, surprising potential travelers with new dimensions, exclusive services, and entertainment.

The emerging trend of "boutique cruises" – cruises as works of art, where style and content, rather than scale, are paramount – is gaining increasing popularity among tourists. Elite vacations are developing, offering unique, unconventional offerings for a limited number of discerning, high-budget travelers. An example of this is the innovative 2026 project: a cruise on a liner shaped like the 220-meter sailing ship Orient Express, inspired by the golden age of the French Riviera.

Table 1: Modern megaships.

Ship	Year of construction	Ship Yard	Length (m)	Width (m)	Speed (knots)	Number of passengers	Number of crew	Number of decks
Freedom of the Seas	2006	Aker Finnyards Inc. a New Shipyard	339	56	21,6	4370	1360	15
Oasis of the Seas	2009	STX Finland Cruise Oy	360	47	22,6	6880	2200	18
Allure of the Seas	2010	STX Finland Cruise Oy	362	60	22	6400	1690	18
Harmony of the Seas	2016	STX France	362	47,42	22	6780	2100	18
Icon of the Seas	2024	Meyer Turku	365	48,47	22	7600	2350	20
Legend of the Seas	2025	Meyer Turku	365	65	22	7600	2350	20
Star of the Seas	2025	Meyer Turku	364	66	22	5610	2350	20
MSC Word America	2025	Chantiers de l'Atlantique	333	47	22,7	6762	2138	22
Disney Adventure	2025	MV Werften	342	46	23	6700	2300	20
Norwegian Aqua	2025	Fincantieri	322	41	22	4300	1597	16
Mein Schiff Flow	2026	Fincantieri	333	42	22	4000	1535deks	19
MSC Word Asia	2026	Chantiers de l'Atlantique	333	47	22,7	6762	2138	22
Norwegian Luna	2026	Fincantieri	322	41	22	4200	1597	21

Note: The table was compiled based on data from a sources [1; 2; 3; 5; 6; 9; 10; 11; 12]

In recent years, more and more cruise companies have been emphasizing environmental friendliness as a competitive advantage for cruise transport. Cruise ships are currently under intense scrutiny due to their environmental impact. Greenhouse gas and pollutant emissions, waste and litter generation, air and water

pollution, and other factors negatively impact the planet's ecosystem.

Cruise companies are actively investing in alternative energy sources – LNG, biofuels, hydrogen, and electricity. This not only reduces emissions but also promotes a "clean" travel

image. After all, cruises of the future should be not only luxurious but also environmentally "responsible". They should combine high technology, comfort, and environmental friendliness.

Cruise companies are equally actively investing in fleet modernization. Fleet renewal is becoming a necessity: modern liners generate higher revenues and allow them to maintain premium prices. Therefore, large corporations are gradually decommissioning or selling off obsolete vessels. Having found new operators, some of the vessels from the obsolete fleet and the so-called "idle fleet" are being returned to service after undergoing repairs and renovations at shipbuilding companies' docks (see Table 2).

In recent years, fierce competition and the desire to attract customers with unique offerings have pushed cruise

companies beyond the boundaries of established itineraries. Travelers are increasingly seeking unique experiences, not mass-market vacations. This includes both little-known regions and logistically challenging but impressive destinations. Arctic routes, Greenland, the South Atlantic, the African coast, and the rivers of South America are particularly popular with cruise tourists. Striving for uniqueness, cruise companies are forced to adapt itineraries to seasonal changes, climate change, and even geopolitical circumstances, resulting in the emergence of hybrid itineraries that combine sea and land, cruise and safari, north and south. Personalized itineraries, tailored to the interests of specific travelers, are increasingly the choice.

Table 2: Cruise ships that underwent renovation in 2025-2026.

Ship	Year of construction	Ship Yard	Length (m)	Width (m)	Speed (knots)	Number of passengers	Number of crew	Number of decks
Disney Magic	1998	Fincantieri	294	32	21,5	2713	950	11
Carnival Legend	2002	Kværner Masa-Yards	293	32	22	2680	930	12
Norwegian Gem	2007	Meyer Werft	294	32	23	2873	1070	15
MSC Poesia	2008	Aker Yards	294	32	23	2550	1039	16
Valiant Lady	2021	Fincantieri	278	38	20	2770	1160	17
Brilliant Lady	2025	Fincantieri	278	38	20	2762	1150	17

Note: The table was compiled based on data from a sources [1; 2; 3; 5; 6; 9; 10; 11; 12]

Despite numerous positive trends emerging in the global cruise industry and reflected in the Mediterranean market, a number of issues remain that negatively impact the development of cruise tourism and the regional tourism industry as a whole. The escalation of armed conflicts is causing significant damage to the cruise industry. MSC Cruises and Costa Cruises have announced adjustments to their travel plans due to the ongoing conflict in the Middle East. For example, passengers on the "MSC World Europa" have been offered a flexible alternative: they can transfer their bookings to other MSC Cruises itineraries or cancel their trip entirely with a refund. The liner itself will be relocated to the Caribbean [4].

Due to the protracted military conflict, the Black Sea route is also hampered in its development. The Azov-Black Sea basin is part of the Mediterranean Sea's maritime infrastructure. The tourism and recreational potential of seven states, once part of the Azov-Black Sea basin maritime complex [8] could form the basis of a promising alliance as a sustainable cruise destination with a unified strategy for **attracting global cruise fleet operators**. The Azov-Black Sea basin is essentially part of the Mediterranean cruise market, and therefore, this project would undoubtedly have a positive impact on the cruise business and the socioeconomic development of the region as a whole. In the current situation, cruise companies are focusing their attention on alternative destinations, as well as the river cruise segment.

Vectors of cruise tourism development

Today, the need for sustainable development is a major trend in the cruise sector. An innovative concept in the maritime and river industry is "green corridors" – designated shipping routes between ports created to facilitate the use of zero- or low-emission shipping solutions. This is a process of coordinated efforts across the entire value chain, involving ports, ship operators, fuel producers, and governments. Implementing the "green corridors" model requires developing a practical, structured path beyond disparate efforts, ultimately enabling the development of a holistic strategy for both sustainable transport and "responsible" tourism.

Managing the river as a single basin will allow for more effective solutions to various problems. Cross-border cooperation in river cruise shipping will help secure significant economic, social, and environmental benefits, as well as overcome potential

obstacles that often arise in multinational river basins due to political, economic, and operational differences. Cross-border cooperation in tourism aims to enhance the competitiveness of various entities, stimulate the effective integration of resources, and develop joint tourism products. This type of interaction will foster stronger cultural ties and economic growth across territories, as well as support sustainable development through the joint management of natural resources and cultural heritage. The success of cross-border cooperation depends on the speed with which legal and cultural barriers are overcome, as well as the coordination of government agencies, businesses, and local communities.

In this context, strategic alliances in the tourism sector are particularly important. Such associations of tourism entities offer significant benefits, including increased competitiveness, access to new markets and knowledge, collaboration on large-scale projects, infrastructure development, and much more. The multinational Danube-Black Sea region is ideally suited for this initiative, as it offers numerous advantages necessary for attracting tourists (natural and climatic resources, historical and cultural monuments, etc.). All of this will facilitate the expansion of tourism and recreational infrastructure, attract investment, and enhance the region's economic significance. It will also address a number of regional challenges, including the fragmentation of tourism products along the Danube River and the western Black Sea coast, the lack of well-established logistics, and logistical isolation from key tourism markets.

DANUBE-BLACK SEA CRUISE ALLIANCE: a strategic framework for sustainable regional integration and tourism development (preview fragments)

This paper presents a comprehensive conceptual framework for the creation of the Danube-Black Sea Cruise Alliance (DBCA) – a multinational cooperative initiative designed to position the Danube-Black Sea region as a unified, premium, and sustainable cruise destination. It argues that the historical fragmentation and logistical isolation of the region's tourism market can be overcome through a structured, multi-tiered alliance model.

DBCA Structure:

- institutional integration
- infrastructure harmonization
- cross-border product development
- joint marketing

The project outlines the alliance's strategic goals, key objectives, specific projects, and a phased expansion plan.

A key innovative component is the "AQUA-NEXUS" pilot project, which proposes a seaplane network to integrate the Danube Corridor with the Adriatic Sea, thereby solving a critical logistics challenge and creating a unique competitive advantage.

The report concludes that the DBCA model serves as a replicable template for transforming regional logistics and political challenges into synergistic opportunities for sustainable economic growth, improved connectivity, and pan-European tourism integration.

The **purpose** of the study is to present the conceptual framework for the DBCA as an innovative model of regional cooperation designed to overcome regional challenges.

The study's **main contribution** is the presentation of a comprehensive strategic plan aimed at addressing specific regional challenges using the innovative DBCA model, including a highly innovative pilot project ("AQUA-NEXUS"), which can be considered a benchmark for cross-border integration in tourism and transport.

Problems Addressed:

- **Strategic Coherence:** it provides a unified vision that transcends national borders and sectoral silos (tourism, transport, environment), which is often lacking in real-world regional planning efforts.

- **"AQUA-NEXUS" as a Benchmark:** the "AQUA-NEXUS" pilot project serves as a conceptual benchmark for demonstrating practical, cross-border integration.

- **Integrated Logistics:** it would likely model a seamless transport solution, potentially linking a Danube port directly to a Black Sea coastal route via efficient, sustainable multimodal transport (e.g., high-speed rail or upgraded inland waterways), thereby overcoming the "logistical isolation" problem.

- **Sustainable Tourism Model:** the project would likely integrate "blue economy" principles, showcasing how cruise and general tourism can operate sustainably while protecting the region's sensitive aquatic ecosystems. It would align with the real-world "Water-Energy-Food-Ecosystems" approach used in transboundary basins to maximize efficiency and reduce trade-offs across sectors.

- **Scalability and Replicability:** the paper would argue that the successes and lessons learned from the "AQUA-NEXUS" pilot project could be replicated and scaled across the entire Danube-Black Sea region, providing a practical model for future EU-funded initiatives.

The **project's value** is in creating a detailed, aspirational framework that combines existing best practices and theoretical models into a single, comprehensive, and potentially fundable strategy for sustainable regional development.

The innovative pilot project: AQUA-NEXUS

A current innovation is the AQUA-NEXUS project, which aims to create a seaplane network connecting Danube river transport with the Adriatic Sea. This multimodal logistics aims to increase the speed of transporting tourists and cargo, as well as integrate digital technologies to create immersive tourism experiences that engage local communities.

The project proposes the creation of a seaplane network integrating transport from the Danube to the Adriatic Sea. This innovative solution complements the cruise program by offering rich, themed excursions using digital technologies such as augmented reality and engaging local communities, supporting the principles of the "blue economy" and sustainable development.

The conceptual "AQUA-NEXUS" pilot project is considered a "game-changer" as a potential blueprint for a

seamless, multimodal transport and tourism corridor linking the Danube region and Black Sea with the Adriatic Sea. This project addresses logistical isolation and promotes sustainable, integrated transport solutions that could act as an economic catalyst for underserved regions and demonstrate successful cross-border cooperation.

The project is expected to open new economic opportunities for underserved regions and serve as a testament to the concept of comprehensive multinational cooperation in tourism and transport.

The conceptual "AQUA-NEXUS" pilot project aims to integrate with cruise tourism to create new "experience" class excursions by providing multimodal connectivity and focusing on rich, thematic content, thereby moving beyond traditional, fragmented port calls. This framework would facilitate deeper, more immersive, and personalized interactions through thematic excursions, augmented reality integration, and engagement with local communities.

Expected results:

1) Successful cooperation is expected to foster mutual understanding, strengthen stability, and enhance trust between neighboring communities and countries.

2) The project will be implemented using a phased expansion model. Bulgaria and Romania are invited to cooperate and integrate to form the core of the alliance and its Joint Governing Board, with subsequent expansion to other EU countries.

3) The governing structure designed to resolve political issues and cross-border problems will be the **Joint Council** of representatives of the participating countries.

Thus, the proposed "Danube-Black Sea Cruise Alliance" is a conceptual framework designed to integrate tourism and transport in the region by creating a seamless, innovative and environmentally responsible logistics network. The Alliance will function as a multilateral platform uniting governments, research institutes, private businesses (cruise and road transport companies, tour operators, travel agencies, excursion and information and advertising agencies), and local communities across the region. Within this framework, a formal cooperation mechanism will be established for policy exchange, regulation, and cross-border governance, necessary for navigating the complex geopolitical landscape of the Black Sea and Danube regions.

Conclusion

A study examining the development of cruise tourism in the current climate revealed that the cruise industry is confidently moving toward scale, sustainability, and new travel formats. The trend toward larger cruise liners, which implies the development of mass-market cruises, currently coexists successfully with the trend toward boutique cruises – elite travel for a select group of high-budget travelers where scale is not a concern, but rather an atmosphere of privacy, elegance, and deep immersion in the culture of each itinerary. "18+ cruises" – cultural and intellectual cruises that stimulate personal growth and spiritual development – are gaining particular popularity. Modern companies compete on the technical level and design of their ships, the standard of amenities, cultural, entertainment, and spa services, the implementation of high technologies and "green programs", and the development of original itineraries and exclusive offers.

However, in addition to positive trends in the cruise tourism sector, there are also negative ones that are hindering the development of the industry. In recent years, the Mediterranean cruise market has experienced uneven growth. Due to the unfavorable geopolitical situation in both the Middle East and the Black Sea, the maritime tourism industry has been experiencing fragmented growth and is not experiencing stable growth. Political instability, the inability to predict the situation and guarantee the safety of passengers and crews, have led to an imbalance in the regional cruise market's supply and demand.

Changes in cruise logistics for companies operating vessels in the Middle East are resulting in financial losses. In addition to paying numerous compensations and offering various alternatives to affected tourists, companies are forced to expend significant effort and resources to remove their expensive liners from the conflict zone and deliver them to safe ports. Cruise programs in this region are often cancelled for the entire season, with vacationers being offered alternative destinations. Consequently, the Middle East is no longer a stable or promising destination for the tourism industry, and the Black Sea-Azov Sea route is completely closed to tourists.

Thus, the creation of the Danube-Black Sea Cruise Alliance as a single, integrated brand will position the designated region as a unified, promising, and sustainable cruise destination, with significant potential for the creation of an innovative cruise product capable of integrating into the Mediterranean cruise region.

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