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Reducing Seasonality in Inbound Tourism through Off-Season Programs and Itineraries

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Abstract: The article examines the problem of smoothing seasonal fluctuations in inbound tourism through the design and implementation of specialized off-season programs and itineraries. The relevance of the study derives from the fact that the temporal concentration of tourist flows intensifies the phenomenon of overtourism, undermining the economic resilience, social well-being, and ecological balance of destinations. This paper attempts a critical analysis of desezonalization strategies in the cases of Cyprus, Malta, and Georgia by extracting some universal factors that guarantee success. The novelty introduced here is by making a comparison between mature and developing destinations through their market structure, stakeholder coordination capacity prism, and an application of big-data analytics to air accessibility management. In methodology, it undertakes a systematic literature review. It processes official statistics on tourist arrivals for the years 2017 and 2023, in addition to comparing national strategic documents on product diversification, market development, transport infrastructure, and institutional governance. The main findings are: (1) without a paradigmatic shift from quantitative growth to higher revenue per tourist and quality of experience, formal diversification of supply does not work, (2) in mature destinations, political will and an embedded mechanism of inter-agency coordination decide, as evidenced by Malta that reduced the seasonality coefficient to 1.53, (3) developing markets can rapidly curb seasonality when they depend on data-based expansion of air networks and targeting market with reverse seasonality as demonstrated by Georgia, and finally (4) key barrier still

lies within the implementation gap manifested through business model inertia and insufficient incentive for year-round operation. On this basis, a cyclical model of seasonality management is proposed, integrating long-term strategic planning, big-data analytics, and public–private partnership. The article will be helpful to researchers of sustainable tourism, designers of national and regional strategies, and destination marketing practitioners seeking to reduce seasonal dependence.

Keywords: tourism seasonality, overtourism, sustainable tourism, diversification of the tourism product, event tourism

Introduction

Seasonality is defined by the time concentration of tourist flows within one calendar year. It is one of the most intractable problems (Zvaigzne et al., 2022). At the same time, it does present itself as a rather simplistic issue at face value, but in essence strikes at myriad dimensions of consideration for the global tourism industry. That means high swings of demand and supply translate into systemic economic, social, and ecological destabilizing impacts within any given host destination. Among other things, infrastructure ranging from airports to accommodations, utilities often run at over full occupancy during some peak periods, leading to a quick decrement in quality-of-service provision and an equally swift reduction in enjoyment by visitors (Bisht et al., 2025). Much capital investment in tourism facilities goes unutilized during most seasons; this translates into potential income that has gone unutilized, resulting in reduced returns on investments. The labor market effects generate highly precarious employment, whereby massive labor demand for temporary workers occurs only within several months of the year and is then accompanied by general unemployment for the rest of the year.

In the last couple of years, academic and policy discussions have increasingly framed seasonality not as an economic problem but rather as the leading root cause of over-tourism. Overtourism—understood as a situation in which visitor inflows exceed the carrying capacity of a destination—arises directly from the temporal concentration of demand (Alsharif et al., 2025). Its most destructive consequences are revealed in peak periods: degradation of natural landscapes, erosion of cultural heritage, increases in real-estate and staple prices, and heightened social tensions between visitors and residents, up to overt expressions of tourism phobia. Thus, seasonality and overtourism represent two sides of the same coin: excessive concentration of demand in time inevitably translates into excessive concentration in space, generating a complex of challenges that threaten destinations' long-term viability. Consequently, managing seasonal fluctuations ceases to be a merely tactical task of optimizing occupancy and becomes a key element of strategic governance for the sustainable development of tourist territories.

The purpose of the article is to conduct a comprehensive analysis and comparative assessment of the effectiveness of strategic approaches to reducing seasonality in inbound tourism through the development and implementation of specialized off-season programs and itineraries.

To achieve this goal, the study sets the following tasks:

1. Systematize theoretical approaches to the causes, consequences, and management methods of seasonality in an analytical review of modern scientific literature.
2. Study primary tools of tourism product diversification, such as developing niche forms of tourism and event organization, as foundations for generating demand in low and shoulder seasons.
3. With empirical data, make a comparative analysis of strategies and outcomes of desegregation policies between three destinations: Cyprus, Malta, and Georgia. These countries represent different stages in market maturity as well as strategic priorities.
4. Identify the key success factors and barriers that hinder effective implementation of seasonality-reduction strategies and, on this basis, develop a generalized model for managing seasonal fluctuations.
5. Formulate evidence-based practical recommendations for public tourism authorities and the private sector on designing and implementing effective off-season programs.

Materials and Methodology

The study is based on a multi-level analysis of theoretical and empirical sources, integrating academic literature, statistical data, and strategic documents in the field of tourism. The theoretical foundation comprises works addressing the causes, consequences, and management of tourism

seasonality (Zvaigzne et al., 2022; Bisht et al., 2025), with particular attention to the nexus between seasonality, overtourism, and the sustainable development of destinations (Alsharif et al., 2025).

The empirical component draws on official inbound tourism statistics for Cyprus, Malta, and Georgia for 2017 and 2023, published by national statistical offices and sectoral agencies (Orphanides, 2018; Cyprus Police, 2024; NSO Malta, 2018; MTA, 2022; GeoStat, 2018; Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia, 2023). These data enabled the calculation of seasonality coefficients and the identification of dynamics in the distribution of tourist flows across the year.

Methodologically, the research combines a comparative analysis of strategies applied in the three destinations with an assessment of their effectiveness. To this end, national strategic documents and sectoral initiatives were collated (Kuyalis, 2017; Government of Malta, 2021; GRA, n.d.; Mabrian, n.d.) and classified along four dimensions: product diversification, market development, air connectivity and infrastructure, and governance and marketing.

Results and Discussion

Developing effective strategies for seasonality management presupposes a deep understanding of its fundamental determinants. The academic literature traditionally classifies these drivers into three principal groups: natural-climatic, institutional, and socio-economic.

Seasonality in tourism is primarily conditioned by natural-climatic factors: air and water temperature, the number of sunny days, and snow cover. The classic sun and sea model is tied to the summer months, whereas ski resorts peak in winter. Climate change makes this factor more dynamic: extreme summer heat can shift demand into the shoulder seasons, and when there is less snow cover in winter, it undermines the winter lowland tourism, thus there is a need for destination authorities to carry out continuous monitoring as well as adaptive management.

Institutional factors are also made up of the rules and conventions of society. In most countries, the academic calendar and public holidays or mass vacations from workplaces synchronize the timing of leisure, thus creating seasonal peaks. Unlike the weather, these parameters can be adjusted by public policy- for example, through floating or regionally differentiated holidays- though practical implementation is complex and often contentious.

Socio-economic and cultural factors encompass income levels, relative prices, and exchange rates that affect the affordability of travel, as well as fashion in leisure activities, religious practices, and major sports and cultural events. Psychological dispositions—habit and inertia to travel in set periods—also entrench existing seasonal patterns and complicate desezonalization.

Seasonality has complex economic, socio-cultural, and environmental consequences. Economically, it produces inefficient utilization of capital-intensive infrastructure in the low season, seasonal unemployment, lost potential revenue due to under-capacity, and price distortions: inflation at the peak and discounting in the trough. Socially, it heightens strife with dwellers because of strained amenities and raised costs, prompts more trade and a drop in cultural relevance, and leads to gentrification. On the environmental side, peak times go beyond the support limit of the ecosystem, leading to more resource use and waste, as well as harm to natural and cultural wealth; meanwhile, in the off-season, complete healing does not take place. The approaches in managing seasonality can be organized along three axes: demand, supply, and institutions. Demand is stimulated through price differentiation, diversification of source markets, and targeted marketing toward audiences with flexible schedules. Supply is transformed from the notion of extending the season to creating new seasons: developing alternative forms of tourism (cultural, MICE, wellness, gastronomic, rural, sports), saturating the off-season with event programs, and building all-weather infrastructure independent of climatic conditions. Institutional measures include coordinating school and vacation calendars, public–private mechanisms for infrastructure, transport subsidies, joint marketing, and tax incentives for year-round operations. The best outcomes arise from combining these strategies with sensitivity to destination specifics.

A shift from reactive management of seasonal troughs to proactive creation of year-round demand is impossible without a fundamental rethinking and

enrichment of the tourism offering. Product diversification is the core of this process, allowing destinations to reduce dependence on a single dominant tourism type (typically beach tourism) and to form a portfolio attractive to different segments at different times of the year (Gkarane et al., 2025).

The best approach to draw tourists during the low season is by creating and promoting those niche products that are less dependent on weather conditions. Cultural and gastronomic offers comprise museums, monuments, and UNESCO sites whose visitation is better preferred in fair weather; besides wine-gastronomic tours, master classes, and festivals tied to harvests. Business and MICE tourism have reverse seasonality, filling shoulder periods with conferences and exhibitions during spring and autumn seasons; investments in congress infrastructure are attractive for high-spending segments. Wellness (spas, thermal baths, retreats) is demanded year-round, with many preferring autumn–winter months for restorative programs. Rural and eco-tourism (trekking, cycling routes, birdwatching, agritourism) peak in spring and autumn and require networks of marked trails and basic active-recreation infrastructure.

Successful diversification is not a scatter of isolated activities but the integration of products into thematic itineraries and packages—for example, an autumn gastronomic tour or a spring wellness retreat with yoga and trekking. These formats create synergy and redistribute flows to the off-season. But for such formats, high-level hotels, restaurants, wineries, museums, transport providers, and guides must work together. The task shifts from a product one to an organizational-managerial one.

Event tourism is the most powerful tool in the hands of managers fighting seasonality. Short-term events accurately tied to time create local peaks of demand and powerful reasons for traveling at a particular time despite the weather. Sports events—marathons, cycling races, triathlons, regattas, golf tournaments—are especially effective, typically held in spring and autumn, attracting not only participants but also entourages, spectators, and media; destinations with mild winters can also position themselves as bases for professional training camps.

Cultural events—music, theatre, film and arts festivals, as well as gastronomic feasts and carnivals—effectively fill the low season and shape the image of a year-round cultural hub. Maximum impact is achieved through professional planning, community engagement, high-quality marketing, and integration of events into the overall tourism strategy.

A central task of the present study is to move from a theoretical overview of strategies to an appraisal of their practical effectiveness. Accordingly, a comparative analysis was conducted for three destinations—Cyprus, Malta, and Georgia. The selection is deliberate: they represent three distinct models of seasonality management conditioned by the maturity of their tourism markets and the specificity of their national strategies. Cyprus and Malta are mature Mediterranean destinations dominated by the sun and sea model, yet display sharply different outcomes in their struggle with seasonality. Georgia represents a developing destination deploying flexible and targeted approaches to cultivate year-round demand.

The analysis rests on comparing declared strategic objectives (Table 2) with the actual dynamics of tourist flows (Table 1). The baseline for comparison is 2017 as a representative pre-pandemic year with stable flows, and 2023 as the assessment period reflecting post-pandemic recovery and the outcomes of strategies implemented in recent years.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of the seasonality of tourist arrivals (compiled by author based on Orphanides, 2018; Cyprus Police, 2024; NSO Malta, 2018; MTA, 2022; Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia, 2023; GeoStat, 2018)

Destination	Year	Q1 (Jan–Mar)	Q2 (Apr–Jun)	Q3 (Jul–Sep)	Q4 (Oct–Dec)	Total per year	Seasonality coefficient (Q3/Q1)
Cyprus	2017	262,469	1,147,023	1,598,387	644,194	3,652,073	6.09

Cyprus	2023	333,845	1,226,380	1,573,111	712,316	3,845,652	4.71
Malta	2017	425,892	782,176	927,358	617,814	2,273,837	2.18
Malta	2023	550,191	661,142	839,968	930,175	2,981,476	1.53
Georgia	2017	1,101,700	1,474,500	2,425,900	1,480,700	6,482,800	2.20
Georgia	2023	1,208,462	1,651,655	2,706,863	1,505,240	7,072,220	2.24

At the same time, the countries used different strategies to reduce seasonality, as summarized in Table 2

Table 2. Key strategies for reducing seasonality in Cyprus, Malta, and Georgia

Strategy category	Cyprus	Malta	Georgia
Product diversification	Emphasis on alternative forms: cultural, religious, rural, sports (golf, cycling), MICE, and gastronomic tourism. Rebranding toward a year-round destination (Kuyalis, 2017).	Emphasis on quality and niches: development of cultural (Brand Valletta), gastronomic, diving, wellness, and MICE tourism. Positioning Gozo as a distinct quality destination (Government of Malta, 2021).	Emphasis on authenticity and new experiences: development of wine, mountain, adventure, and cultural tourism. Creation of personalized itineraries oriented toward cultural immersion (GRA, n.d.).
Market development	Diversification of source markets to reduce dependence on the UK and Russia. Improved brand recognition in new markets (Garanti & Berjozkina, 2022).	Expansion of marketing geography: attracting tourists not only from traditional European markets but also from long-haul markets (Asia, the Americas). Focus on higher-spending segments (Public Service of Malta, 2025).	Aggressive targeting of new markets: focus on Gulf countries and India, which have different seasonal preferences and strong growth potential—active use of digital marketing (Mabrian, n.d.).
Air connectivity and infrastructure	Improving air connectivity is a key yet problematic task. Infrastructure development for special forms of tourism (e.g., marinas) (Garanti & Berjozkina, 2022).	Optimization and assurance of year-round air connectivity. Development of MICE infrastructure (national congress center) and cultural venues (Government of Malta, 2021).	Strategic development of air connectivity as the chief driver: a data-driven approach to selecting new routes and carriers. Subsidies and partnerships to open routes oriented toward the low season (Mabrian, n.d.).

Governance and marketing	Formulation of a comprehensive national strategy through 2030. Nonetheless, issues of implementation and stakeholder coordination are noted (Kuyalis, 2017).	Implementation of the Recover, Rethink, Revitalise strategy with a clear focus on shifting from quantity to quality—strong coordination via the Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) (Government of Malta, 2021).	Flexible data-driven governance. Strong public–private partnership wherein the NTO (GNTA) sets direction and private firms (such as Guide of Georgia) execute effectively at the micro-level (Mabrian, n.d.).

At the strategic level, Cyprus demonstrates a deep understanding of the seasonality problem. The national tourism development strategy to 2030 clearly declares the need to transition to a year-round tourism model. The document sets goals to develop a broad spectrum of alternative products—including cultural, rural, sports, and MICE tourism—as the basis for attracting visitors in the off-season. However, as the figures in Table 1 indicate, despite some reduction in the seasonality coefficient from 6.09 in 2017 to 4.71 in 2023, the gap between the peak summer quarter and the first quarter remains extremely large. This evidences a persistent dependence on the sun and sea model and points to a substantial implementation gap between ambitious plans and practical execution.

The academic literature reveals several key reasons for this gap. First is the high inertia of the entrenched market structure (Karyopouli & Koutra, 2012). Cyprus's tourism industry has historically been organized around servicing mass summer flows brokered by several large international tour operators. Their business model is oriented toward maximizing peak-season load factors and does not presuppose significant investment in developing and promoting off-season products. Second, the effectiveness of public administration and stakeholder coordination is found wanting (Berjozkina, 2022). Despite the presence of a strategy, consistent and coordinated action is often lacking—for example, in incentivizing hotels to operate year-round or ensuring stable winter air services (Garanti & Berjozkina, 2022). Limited air accessibility in the low season is among the principal barriers to developing alternative forms of tourism. Cyprus thus exemplifies a destination that has correctly diagnosed the problem and formulated an appropriate strategy but faces systemic barriers during implementation.

Malta, a mature Mediterranean destination similar to Cyprus in climatic conditions and scale, exhibits a markedly more successful model of seasonality management. Table 1 shows that Malta initially had a more even seasonal profile (coefficient 2.18 in 2017) and went on to improve it, reducing the coefficient to 1.53 by 2023. This attests to the effectiveness of targeted and consistent desezonalization policy.

The foundation of Malta's success is the strategic document Recover, Rethink, Revitalise (2021–2030), which signifies a deliberate departure from the pursuit of quantitative indicators in favor of elevating the quality of tourist experience and sustainability. Unlike Cyprus, where diversification often remains at the declarative level, in Malta it is embodied in concrete, well-promoted products. A salient example is the development of cultural tourism under the Brand Valletta umbrella, including major international events such as the Valletta International Baroque Festival in January (Low Season Traveller, n.d.). Gastronomic, diving, and MICE tourism are actively developed (Government of Malta, 2021).

Key factors of Malta's success include strong political will, consistency in executing a long-term strategy, effective coordination by the national tourism office (MTA) across stakeholders, and successful marketing that positions the country as an attractive destination for short breaks and cultural travel year-round (MTA, 2019). Malta demonstrates how a mature destination can successfully reconfigure its development model, shifting the emphasis from quantity to quality and achieving a more balanced distribution of tourist flows.

Georgia represents a developing destination that, unburdened by the inertia of a mature market, has applied flexible and highly effective strategies to cultivate year-round demand. Rather than attempting to restructure existing flows, Georgia's strategy focused on creating new ones—by aggressively entering markets

with different seasonal preferences (Mabrian, n.d.).

A key thrust was attracting tourists from Gulf countries and India, for whom Georgia's mild autumn and winter offer an appealing alternative to the hot climate at home (Georgia Today, 2025). Central to this strategy was the development of air connectivity grounded in data analysis. Illustrative is the case of launching routes from Abu Dhabi: analysis of demand, fares, and schedules enabled the selection of an optimal partner and launch window. Consequently, in less than two years, a 2,000% increase in seats on the route was realized, with 64% of passengers traveling during the low months (September-May). This translates to over 62,000 extra tourists visiting the destination during the off-peak period, amounting to an economic impact of USD 62 million (Mabrian, n.d.). This in itself is vivid enough to prove how decisively targeted investments based on data in logistics can play a hand in altering the seasonal composition of inbound flows.

Synergy between the state and the private sector plays a vital role in executing the national strategy. At the macro level, the Georgian National Tourism Administration (GNTA) identifies strategic markets and facilitates air-route development. At the micro level, private companies become the drivers of implementation. Using modern digital marketing tools, creating personalized tours, and emphasizing high service quality (95% customer satisfaction), such firms effectively attract and serve target segments from new markets (GRA, n.d.). This example shows how entrepreneurial initiative and a quality focus at the firm level secure the practical realization and success of the nationwide strategy.

The comparative analysis of the three cases suggests that there is no universal recipe for reducing seasonality. Success depends less on the inventory of tools and more on their fit with destination maturity and market structure. Mature destinations with inert market structures, such as Cyprus, face serious barriers to change. Malta proves that under such circumstances, it is not only product diversification but a fundamental shift in the development paradigm that changes toward quality and sustainability. On the other hand, for destinations in the process of development, such as Georgia, there is an opportunity to apply rapidly attained results through focused, data-driven strategies expressed in new market creation and logistical infrastructure establishment.

Therefore, conditions for success that are capable of reducing tourism seasonality fall under four broad interrelated categories. The first speaks to the need for an integrated strategy over the longer term by all key players, ensuring continuity of policy beyond political cycles. Secondly, management should be predicated on big data from search queries and booking dynamics to airfares and even social-media activity in identifying markets to target more precisely, as well as evaluating campaign effectiveness in real time. Third, public–private partnership is decisive: the state sets the framework (infrastructure, low-season transport subsidies, image marketing), while the business creates a competitive product adapted to the off-season. Finally, the strategic focus shifts from volume growth to higher revenue per tourist and increased satisfaction of visitors and residents, which attracts segments less dependent on season and mitigates overtourism risks.

Based on the synthesis of theoretical approaches and empirical results, a comprehensive cyclical model of seasonality management comprising five interrelated stages can be proposed (Figure 1).

Fig. 1. Comprehensive model of tourism seasonality management

The recommendations converge on building a resilient anti-seasonal ecosystem: at the level of NTOs and governments—invest in big-data analytics for monitoring and rapid evaluation of measures; introduce flexible incentives (low-season air-transport subsidies linked to actual load factors, and tax benefits for year-round facilities); establish inter-agency coordination across tourism, transport, culture, and education (including a calendar of major events); and simplify visa regimes for target off-season markets. At the level of regions and business associations, develop clusters (hotels, restaurants, wineries, museums, crafts) with integrated thematic products and joint off-season marketing, and invest systematically in year-round staff training to retain talent and ensure stable service quality.

Conclusion

The study confirms that seasonality is one of the industry's most complex systemic problems, yet its mitigation is achievable given a comprehensive, consistent, and context-adapted approach. This is not about a silver bullet but about a strategic model that unites long-term planning horizons, managerial discipline, and data-driven decision-making.

The effectiveness of measures depends on destination maturity: for developing destinations (the example of Georgia), the highest returns arise from targeted creation of new markets and logistics development, above all, air connectivity; for mature markets (Cyprus, Malta), the key lies in transforming the entrenched structure of supply and demand. The Cyprus–Malta comparison shows that formal diversification is insufficient without a shift in strategic intent—from volume expansion to quality, sustainability, and increased revenue per tourist—which enabled Malta to smooth seasonality.

Success requires synergy between macro- and micro-levels: state policies to open markets and routes work only with active, innovative responses from business. The principal barrier is the implementation gap, as in Cyprus: inertia of business models, weak stakeholder coordination, and infrastructural constraints slow change. Ultimately, desezonalization is not a technical but a strategic managerial task that demands political will, long-range vision, structural reforms, and decisions grounded in objective data.

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