



# The UNWTO Western Silk Road Exploratory Study – Maximising the Potential

## What is the UNWTO Western Silk Road Initiative

The Western Silk Road Exploratory Study is the first step of an innovative initiative created by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) in cooperation with the Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs (DG GROW) of the European Commission (EC). It is being implemented by the UNWTO Silk Road Programme.

The Western Silk Road Tourism Development initiative aims to strengthen and diversify the tourism offer of the countries located along the Western link of the Silk Road through an innovative and strategic approach to transnational tourism.

It is comprised of several interlinking activities:

- An Exploratory Study
- Stakeholder workshops, the first of which took place in Greece in April 2017 and the second in Bulgaria at the end of June 2017.
- Western Silk Road Working Group aimed at engaging Western Silk Road tourism stakeholders eager to develop a transnational tourism initiative based on shared Western Silk Road heritage.

By bringing together relevant tourism stakeholders, both from the public and private sector, it is planned that the implementation of a Western Silk Road brand will support economic development, especially for the SME sector, and increase length of visitor stay, regional dispersal and greater visitor spend across the region.

## Western Silk Road Study Methodology

UNWTO prepared this research study in order to achieve a greater understanding of the existing Silk Road potential in Europe; to firstly comprehend what is available throughout Europe in terms of Silk Road heritage and, secondly, to propose a new tourism development plan for the revitalisation of that heritage.

In order to collect the required data and reach the highest level of participation, a research method was created that could take into account the different policies and levels of engagement, from international to local, involved. The data collection methods were both quantitative and qualitative in nature, including: an online survey; semi-structured interviews; SWOT analyses on a national level conducted by universities; and focus group reports. The participants were carefully selected regarding their involvement in or attachment to the Silk Road as a tourism development initiative.

The online survey aimed to collect mainly quantitative data, although some open-ended questions were included to collect more extensive or personalised responses. It was circulated to strategically selected participants. A total of 71 responses were received.

Universities of participating countries were contacted to develop Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats/ SWOT Analysis focused on their country's Western Silk Road tourism potential.

In addition, seven Focus Groups were organised at an inter-regional, national, regional and organisational level. The aim of the Focus Groups was to achieve qualitative data of greater depth, especially in terms of creative tourism approaches, relevant case studies/ best-practice examples and possible insights regarding cooperation among Silk Road tourism stakeholders.



**The UNWTO Silk Road Programme is a collaborative initiative designed to enhance sustainable tourism development along the historic Silk Road route. It aims to maximize the benefits of tourism development for local Silk Road communities, while stimulating investment and promoting the conservation of the route's natural and cultural heritage. Additionally, it is working to foster greater co-operation between Silk Road countries and regions, with the established aim of creating a seamless and memorable Silk Road travel experience.**

## A Snapshot of the Online Survey Results

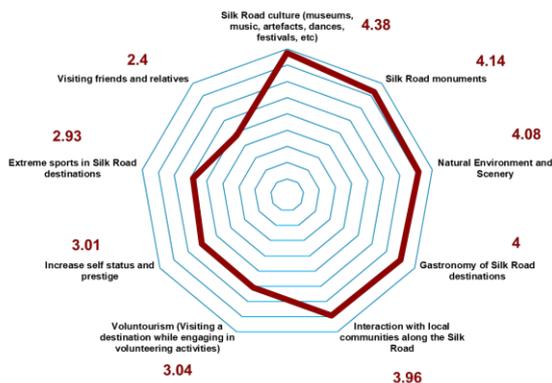
The following illustrates a sample of the key results of the online questionnaire

In total, 71 stakeholders split across the public, private and NGO sector from 21 countries shared their insights and ideas. The highest feedback was received from Croatia, closely followed by Greece, Spain and Albania. France, Bulgaria and, to a lesser degree, Italy and Turkey, were among those countries who quantitatively contributed the most.

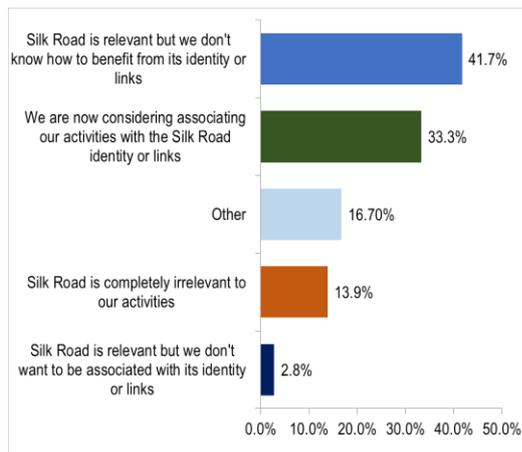
The respondents were The Survey looked at the **Perception and Awareness of the Silk Road and associated destinations**, with questions that ranked initial thoughts when considering the Silk Road:



The **Motivation** of Silk Road Travellers was examined:



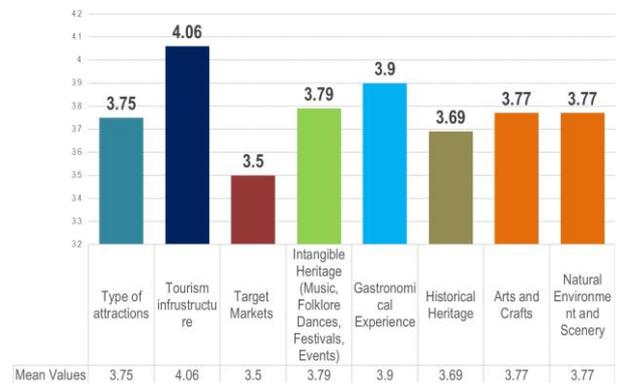
The **Existing Use of the Silk Road Brand** was examined and the reasons for not currently including it in marketing activities were:



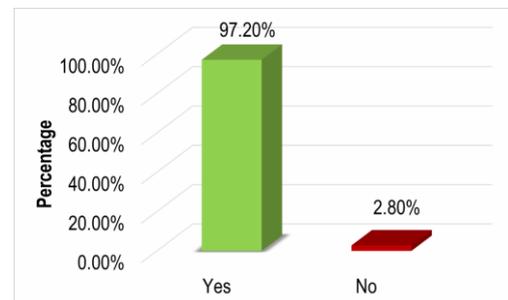
Those that use the Silk Road in marketing activities identified the following **benefits**:



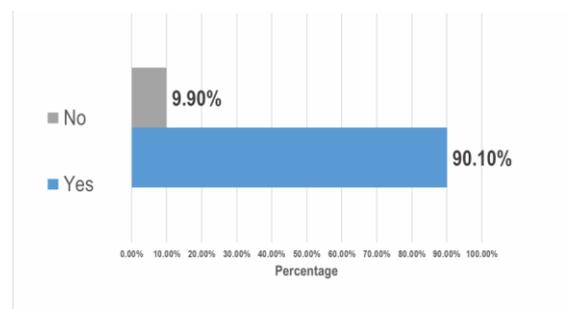
The **Perception of differences between the Western and Classic Silk Road** was examined:



The **Desire for the creation of a Western Silk Road Brand and Tool kit** was investigated:



Along with **willingness to be involved in future activities**:



More detailed information is available at:

<http://silkroad.unwto.org/project/western-silk-road-tourism-initiative>

## The Western Silk Road SWOT

### Strengths

Most respondents felt that overall and within their regions there was a sufficient strong wealth of relevant culture and heritage to justify the brand development.

The Western Silk Road is seen as a way of rediscovering an alternative history of existing Western tourism destinations and would bring opportunities for creating new and unique visitor experiences, and improve the status and awareness of existing tourism destinations.

The new brand and product development would provide a way linking East and West and showing the connections between cultures. It would especially bring opportunities in the sectors of intangible heritage – food, arts and crafts, festivals and events.

The Western Silk Road has a greater strength in accessibility compared to the Classic Silk Road, in terms of transport connections and other aspects of travel facilitation.

Along with a perception of better infrastructure and higher standard destinations, this can make the Western Silk Road more attractive for less adventurous, less experienced, physically limited and time poor travellers who may avoid the more demanding Classic Silk Road destinations.

The creation of a Western Silk Road brand is seen as a powerful tool for sustainable economic development. By promoting lesser known destinations and bringing the higher spending cultural tourists, it could stimulate weaker local economies and bring employment across the value chain.

### Opportunities

One of the greatest opportunities is the power of the Western Silk Road in linking East and West and showing the connections amongst cultures - an excellent lever for product development and a marketing tool for opening lesser known destinations and promoting intangible heritage.

The East-West connection is seen as a strong opportunity with regard to the high desire amongst destinations to capture the major Chinese cultural tourism market. It is perceived that Chinese visitors would find attractions that highlight the linkages between China and Western Silk Road destinations to be highly desirable

The promotion of shared heritage can contribute to a wider goal of promoting mutual understanding across cultures and diffusing the growing mistrust present in today's world.

There was a perception that a Western Silk Road product and identity would be beneficial in linking the West and East in a manner that could neutralize the current wave of exclusivist discourses.

At destination level, it would enable Western destinations to showcase local Muslim legacy and also to promote Halal tourism from Arab and Central Asian countries to visit their European heritage.

Western Silk Road highlighted positive opportunities for the creation of a new brand and a modern image for the Silk Road.

The innovative nature of a Western Silk Road brand will drive creative methods to marketing and online marketing tools.

A common opportunity is the potential of attracting new tourism segments and expanding the market. At the same time a Western Silk Road brand could popularise significant, but unknown destinations, cultural and historical sites.

The new innovative approach would stimulate potential for the diversification of tourism types on the relevant markets (religious, business, ecological, rural, sport and extreme).

The increased opportunities to maximise the value of both tangible and intangible heritage will give greater strength to conservation and preservation.

Reviving silk heritage is both a means of strengthening the creative industries sector and protecting lesser valued industrial heritage infrastructure. The new revised focus on silk related products could provide a driver to revitalise dying skills and tradition.

Events and festivals were seen as a strong attraction for Silk Road tourists. Encouraging local events and festivities based on silk traditions is seen as an excellent opportunity to raise awareness on the Western Silk Road and revitalize traditional arts and crafts.

With regard to the creative industries sector, the Western Silk Road has a much higher opportunity to provide access to modern arts and crafts, influenced by the heritage of the ancient Silk Road, as opposed to the Classic Silk Road destinations often focus on 'traditional' products.

A similar interpretation could be applied to food or gastronomy tourism. Western Silk Road countries have taken Eastern recipes and products, which journeyed over time along the ancient routes of the Silk Road.

The creative and gastronomy tourism development will stimulate opportunities for utilization of local products that will both bring economic benefit and enhance visitor experience.

Due to the developed nature of many Western Silk Road destinations, they tend to offer a higher standard and concentration of existing visitor attractions. This makes them more attractive to tourists – especially those looking for short city break type trips.

The Western Silk Road Tourism Initiative is seen as a valuable tool to disperse tourists away from saturated destinations. There is an opportunity to develop a gateway approach promoting the dispersal of tourists to rural or less known destinations.

Experience-based tourism can be used as an example of an extremely relevant area for product development and an effective tool for engaging tourists.

The Western Silk Road, being developed as a network, opens up opportunities to promote new cross-border and business cooperation that could widen collaboration and bring benefits to all.

## Threats and Weaknesses

The greatest threats and weaknesses centred on two key areas: the issue of creating a new brand alongside already existing destination brands, and the challenges of co-ordinating stakeholders across many different countries. As the main research points out, both of these concerns could be addressed by choosing the correct approach to brand positioning and by agreeing upon an appropriate management structure.

The greatest threat perceived regarded issues relating to co-operation, coordination and transnational development of a tourism product based upon shared identity. The issue of having two complementary Silk Road brands, which could potentially generate confusion amongst stakeholders, were repeated quite strongly. This potential weakness was also mentioned in connection with a lack of economic/financial resources to promote the brand at multiple levels, both national and international.

Lesser concerns focused on the political instability and the current threats of terrorism, either real or perceived. While security related issues have to be taken seriously, it is worth noting that none of the potential components of the Western Silk Road are located in close proximity to a major conflict

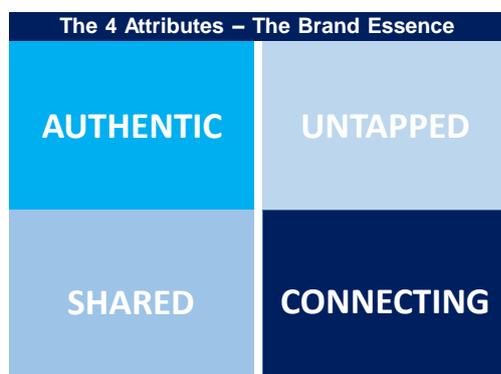
## Building a Brand

The creation of a Western Silk Road brand is seen as a powerful tool for sustainable economic development. By promoting lesser known destinations and bringing the higher spending cultural tourists, it could stimulate local economies and bring employment across the value chain.

Regarding brand development, this study has reviewed various data sources and proposed a relevant brand model utilising best practice tools as recommended in the UNWTO Handbook on Destination Branding.

The Brand Essence – the DNA of the Western Silk Road was distilled down into 4 words – has been defined as: Authentic, Untapped, Shared, and Connecting.

The study provides clear recommendations for creating the brand visual identity and for proactive first steps in promoting the Western Silk Road brand.



Vardzia, a cave monastery site in southern Georgia;  
© Georgian National Tourism Administration (GNTA)

## Untold Stories and Untapped Potential

The study was also an excellent mechanism for auditing the potential Western Silk Road destinations. Apart from the comprehensive list of relevant heritage included in the annexes, the overall report contains detailed background information on 8 focal destinations: Armenia, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Russia, Spain and the Vikings Silk Trading Route.

In highlighting lesser known Western Silk Road destinations, it particularly brought to light Silk Road connections beyond the obvious Caucasus, Turkey and the Mediterranean basin links. The Russian segment of the Silk Road and the Vikings connection with the Silk Road are relatively unknown but present immense tourism potential. Greece, Italy and Spain presented a diversity of less known connections with the Silk Road which should be further uncovered in future.

The diversity of intangible heritage – traditional and modern – is the real strength of the Western Silk Road. Within the creative industries sector, the Western Silk Road provides access to modern arts and crafts and generally to creative industries, whereas the Classic Silk Road destinations often focus on ‘traditional’ products.

Another valuable area of Silk Road heritage that has high potential is gastronomy. The Western Silk Road countries have adopted Eastern recipes and products, which journeyed over time along the ancient routes of the Silk Road and offer good tourism development opportunities.

The Western Silk Road has a greater strength in accessibility compared to the Classic Silk Road, both in terms of transport connections and other aspects of travel facilitation (especially for Western travellers) and regarding the issues of ‘access for all’. Along with a perception of better infrastructure and higher standard destinations, this can make the Western Silk Road more attractive for less adventurous, less experienced, physically limited and time-poor travellers who may avoid the more demanding Classic Silk Road destinations.

## For more information visit::

<http://silkroad.unwto.org/project/western-silk-road-tourism-initiative>

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