

## Research Article

## Comparison of the World's longest swimming marathons in terms of economic benefits and destination potential: The case of Yumurtalık-İskenderun, Turkey

### Dünyanın en uzun yüzme maratonlarının ekonomik fayda ve destinasyon potansiyeli açısından karşılaştırılması: Türkiye Yumurtalık-İskenderun örneği

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#### **Abstract**

In this article, the opportunities offered by the Yumurtalık-İskenderun Open Sea Swimming Marathon in terms of economy and sports tourism are examined as the region's potential to become an essential centre among international swimming destinations. The study compares the Yumurtalık-İskenderun swimming marathon in Turkey with other world-renowned swimming marathons such as the English Channel between France and England, Capri-Napoli in Italy, Kalamata-Koroni in Greece and Lake Ohrid in Macedonia-Albania. These comparisons are based on economic benefits, geographical features, historical context and ecological sustainability. First, a literature review was conducted, and then the results obtained by comparative analysis of the destinations were written. The marathon's economic, environmental and social impacts are examined in detail, and regional advantages are evaluated. In addition, the contribution of international swimming destinations to the local economy and tourism is investigated, and the future potential of the Yumurtalık-İskenderun marathon is emphasised. The results show that the Yumurtalık-İskenderun Swimming Marathon, with its 39-kilometre course, has the potential to be an attractive international destination thanks to the strategic location of İskenderun port, the region's natural beauties, historical richness, calm sea conditions and cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** Destination, Local Development, Sports Tourism, Swimming Marathon

**JEL Codes:** L83, O18, R11, R58

#### **Öz**

Bu makalede, Yumurtalık-İskenderun Açık Deniz Yüzme Maratonu'nun ekonomi ve spor turizmi açısından sunduğu fırsatlar incelenmiş ve bölgenin uluslararası yüzme destinasyonları arasında önemli bir merkez haline gelme potansiyeli değerlendirilmiştir. Çalışmada Türkiye Yumurtalık-İskenderun yüzme maratonunun, Fransa-İngiltere arası Manş Denizi, İtalya'da Capri-Napoli, Yunanistan Kalamata-Koroni ve Makedonya-Arnautluk Ohri Gölü gibi dünya çapında tanınan yüzme maratonları ile karşılaştırılması yapılmıştır. Bu karşılaştırmalar ekonomik faydalar, coğrafi özellikler, tarihsel bağlam ve ekolojik sürdürülebilirlik gibi parametreler üzerinden yapılmıştır. Yöntem olarak öncelikle literatür taraması yapılmış ve daha sonra destinasyonların karşılaştırmalı analizi yapılarak elde edilen sonuçlar yazılmıştır. Maratonun ekonomik, çevresel ve sosyal etkileri detaylı olarak incelenerek bölgesel avantajları değerlendirilmiştir. Ayrıca, uluslararası yüzme destinasyonlarının yerel ekonomiye ve turizme katkıları araştırılarak, Yumurtalık-İskenderun maratonunun geleceğe dönük potansiyeli üzerinde durulmuştur. Sonuçlar, 39 kilometrelik parkurıyla Yumurtalık-İskenderun Yüzme Maratonu'nun İskenderun limanının stratejik konumu, bölgenin doğal güzellikleri, tarihi zenginlikleri, sakin deniz koşulları ve kültürel mirası sayesinde uluslararası cazip bir destinasyon potansiyeline sahip olduğunu göstermektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Destinasyon, Yerel Kalkınma, Spor Turizmi, Yüzme Maratonu

**JEL Kodları:** L83, O18, R11, R58

## **Introduction**

Marathon swimming is an open-water swimming event over long distances, with the unofficial minimum distance considered 10 kilometres (6.21 miles) (Belmonte, 2024; WOWSA, 2011). International swimming marathon races form an essential part of sports tourism and contribute significantly to the economic and social fabric of the destinations where they are organised. Socially, they promote cultural exchange and create strong ties between local people and international participants. They also support sustainable tourism, raise awareness to protect local ecosystems and encourage communities to take environmental responsibility (Çetin, 2023). It also serves as a source of inspiration for young athletes and promotes healthy living habits (Hutchings, 2014). With these aspects, international swimming race marathons can become a sporting event and a strategic tool for destinations' economic and social development (Wilson, 2006).

For example, the English Channel crossing between France and the UK and the Kalamata-Koroni swimming marathons in Greece are two important examples of the global impact of sports tourism. The English Channel, with its variable weather conditions and challenging currents (Tofd.org.tr, 2024), is considered one of the most prestigious swimming marathons in the world and attracts many international athletes to the UK every year for this historic crossing (Arda, 2012). The Kalamata-Koroni swimming marathon in Greece is organised on the calm but long course of Messiniakos Bay (Munatones, 2010). It highlights the region's cultural heritage and natural beauty (Oceanman, 2024). Both events provide unforgettable and exciting experiences for participants and spectators, increase tourism revenues in the regions where they are organised, and provide economic benefits to local communities. These organisations offer financial benefits and raise environmental and social awareness. The English Channel crossing draws attention to environmental protection and marine pollution (Apari, 2022), while the Kalamata marathon offers a cultural experience emphasising traditional Greek hospitality (Discover Greece, 2024).

Italy's Capri-Napoli Swimming Marathon is another prominent example of sports tourism with its clear waters of the Mediterranean Sea and historic coastal scenery. The gruelling 36-kilometre swimming race, organised by the local committee since 1954, extends from the island of Capri to Naples and allows participants to test their mental and physical endurance (Deniz Bülten, 2024). The competition hosts swimmers and spectators worldwide annually, contributing economically to the region's catering, hospitality and transport sectors. On the other hand, it offers the opportunity to promote Italian culture and the Mediterranean lifestyle to participants and spectators. The marathon is a sporting event and supports sustainable tourism and environmental awareness. The route between Capri and Naples, with its historical and natural heritage, attracts the attention of participants and visitors, offering them the opportunity for an unforgettable experience. The various celebrations organised during the competition promote cultural exchange between locals and visitors. The Capri-Napoli swimming marathon race can also symbolise the sport's economic and social impact (Water World Swim, 2024).

The Lake Ohrid Swimming Marathon between Macedonia and Albania is important in international swimming competitions due to the region's natural beauty and historical texture. This competition, which started in 1954, offers athletes from around the world a challenging race experience in Ohrid, one of Europe's oldest and deepest lakes, with its 25-kilometre course. Swimmers compete against the backdrop of Ohrid's beautiful shores and the mountain landscapes close to Albania. This swimming marathon is also of great importance in terms of tourism. This marathon supports the region's economic development and contributes to local tourism, revitalising sectors such as restaurants and accommodation facilities. The Lake Ohrid Swimming Marathon also contributes to raising awareness of environmental protection. The race helps participants and spectators raise awareness about the protection of the lake and provides opportunities for cultural interaction between local people and international athletes. This organisation grows and develops yearly and is more than a sporting event. It also plays a vital role in establishing sustainable tourism and environmental protection awareness (Macedonia Timeless, 2024).

İskenderun-Yumurtalık Open Sea Swimming Marathon is a remarkable event that is a candidate to contribute to local development by combining the natural and cultural richness of the region with sports tourism. The 39-kilometre course offers an attractive challenge for professional and amateur swimmers with the clear waters of İskenderun Bay and the favourable conditions provided by the Mediterranean

climate (Ajansspor 2022). The marathon can bring economic vitality to the region through accommodation, transport and other services for participants and spectators, as well as having the potential to increase the recognition of İskenderun and Yumurtalık in tourism. Such organisations can increase the international awareness of the region and attract more tourists in the long term. This activity can emphasise environmental and social responsibility. Emphasising sensitivity to the Gulf ecosystem and marine conservation awareness can make the local people and visitors more sensitive to the environment. The internationalisation of the marathon may encourage cultural exchange among athletes and spectators and make it stand out as a concrete example of the contribution of sport to economic and social development.

In this article, the potential of the Yumurtalık-İskenderun Gulf Crossing, which has the longest swimming course in the world with its 39 km course, to become a destination centre is discussed by comparing it with other classes.

## **Method**

This article will analyse the document using the literature review method (Randolph and Seyitoğlu 2018). A literature study focusing on the subject was conducted within the research scope, and then general information about the Yumurtalık-İskenderun Bay 39 km Swimming Marathon was presented. Subsequently, a comparative analysis of the Yumurtalık-İskenderun, English Channel, Capri-Napoli, Kalamata-Koroni and Ohrid routes was conducted. In the conclusion section, inferences were made based on the findings obtained, and recommendations were presented.

## **Literature review**

Swimming marathons are not only a sporting event but also important for tourism. Many studies show that large-scale organisations significantly strengthen the tourism image of host cities and contribute to their economy.

In a study by Wilson (2006), it was revealed that it is widely recognised that sporting events can act as a 'catalyst' for economic development. It was found that there are potential financial benefits from hosting major sporting events and that even small-scale local swimming events can make significant monetary contributions to host communities. The study also found that a large proportion of expenditure was on commercial accommodation, followed by spending on food and beverage, shopping and souvenirs.

Banović and Banović's study analysed the effects of the Bar Swimming Marathon in Montenegro on local tourism. In the study, it is emphasised that the marathon increases the tourism potential of the city of Bar and contributes positively to the social and economic structure of the town (Banovic and Banović, 2009).

According to Sun et al.'s study, major sporting events can directly affect local tourism, and participants' sporting experiences significantly shape their motivation to participate in the event (Sun et al., 2011). This finding suggests that the regions where swimming races are organised contribute to recognising the region as a destination by becoming a centre of attraction for participants and spectators.

The attractiveness of the regions where swimming competitions are organised in terms of sports tourism is closely related not only to the motivations of the participants but also to the contributions of the events to the local economy. Han et al. emphasise that major sporting events such as the Olympic Games allow host cities to strengthen their national and international image (Han, Sun, Dong and Le, 2011).

However, although large-scale sporting events increase the tourism potential of host cities, they can also bring some challenges. An and Zhao (2011) examined the opportunities and challenges of major sporting events in cities such as Zhanjiang. The study emphasised that while such events contribute positively to local tourism, they can cause various problems in terms of infrastructure and service quality. Therefore, it is essential that the routes where swimming races are organised are planned and managed to minimise such difficulties.

The case of New Orleans provides significant findings showing how cities where sporting events are organised can stand out with the attractiveness of the events. (Chighizola 2012) stated in his research

that the city's vibrant and unique touristic atmosphere and infrastructure facilities, such as large stadiums and convention facilities, make New Orleans a preferred destination for sporting events.

Another study by Gibson and colleagues stated that small-scale sporting events could be a suitable model for sustainable tourism development (Gibson, Kaplanidou and Kang, 2012).

In a study conducted by Üngören, Kaçmaz and Yetkin (2015), it was revealed that sports events organised in Alanya instilled a sports culture in the local people, strengthened social interaction by increasing the brand value of the destination and provided economic contribution to the region.

The study by Çimen (2017) stated that Turkey's geographical structure offers favourable conditions for extreme sports. It was emphasised that approximately 20% of tourism revenues are obtained from sea tourism, the most demanded type. It has been stated that Turkey has an advantageous position in marine tourism due to its long coastline, clean sea, sandy beaches and natural and historical attractions. In addition, the fact that the sea water is at a temperature suitable for swimming for 8-10 months of the year, combined with natural and historical beauties, increases the interest in open water swimming races. In addition, the low risk of natural storms and shark attacks makes the organisations safer and more participant-friendly. It was also reported that the first open water swimming competition in Turkey was organised in 1955 between Anadolu Kavağı and the Maiden's Tower with the participation of 26 athletes.

A study by Li and Wei (2021) revealed that ecological sports tourism increases people's interaction with nature and offers opportunities to do sports and be intertwined with nature. In this context, it was emphasised that the organisation of swimming races in areas with natural beauty can attract both participants and spectators and increase the touristic attractiveness of these areas.

Ekizoğlu (2023) stated that swimming is as old as human history. He noted that the paintings were discovered due to archaeological studies in caves in Libya, and they are known to date back to 9000 BC, proving that people have been swimming since ancient times. He also stated that Lord Byron's swimming from Europe to Asia in 1810 is considered the beginning of history's first open-water swimming competition. However, he noted that the race organised in an open pool in Liverpool in 1828 and the international swimming race held in London in 1837 are accepted as the history of official swimming competitions.

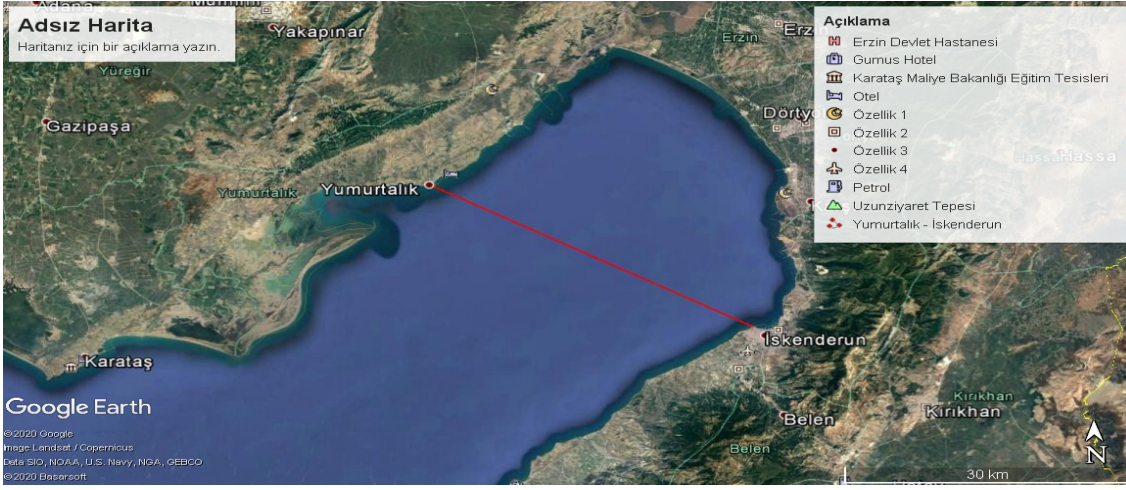
### **Yumurtalık-İskenderun Bay crossing (39 km) swimming marathon**

Start Yumurtalık-İskenderun Bay Open Sea Swimming Marathon was first organised in 2021 and has become an annual event. (Boğaziçi Olimpik Yüzme, 2024).

Organisation: The event is organised under the leadership of Boğaziçi Olympic Swimming Sports Club with the contributions of the Turkish Swimming Federation, Governorship, District Governorship, İskenderun Municipality, Coast Guard Command, District Directorate of Youth Sports and other volunteer organisations. The marathon aims to promote Turkey and İskenderun Bay in the international arena with its different characteristics (Boğaziçi Olimpik Yüzme, 2024).

Race Processes: Both individual swimmers in the solo category and relay teams participate in the competition. In the individual category, solo swimmers swim the distance of 39 kilometres alone. In the race held in 2024, athletes completed this 39 km course in an average of 11 hours and 41 minutes. Relay teams swim in one-hour periods (Karaçay, 2024).

Future Potential: The Turkish Yumurtalık-İskenderun swimming course has the potential to become an essential international destination centre. It is planned to open the organisation to international participation as of this year. This will allow the competition to become a sporting event and a tourism attraction centre thanks to the region's natural beauty and historical richness (Ajansspor 2022).



Picture 1: Competition Route

Source: (Boğaziçi Olimpik Yüzme), 2024



Picture 2: Solo Transition (2021)

Source: From the archive of Ahmet Selami Vanlı, one of the authors.

## Comparative analysis of Yumurtalık-İskenderun, English Channel, Capri-Napoli, Kalamata and Ohrid routes

The organisation of swimming races and the participants' performance can be affected by many factors. In particular, the climate of the geographical areas where swimming races are held, water temperature, currents and the sporting culture of local communities are some of the most critical factors affecting the races.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis Table of Yumurtalık-İskenderun, English Channel, Capri-Naples, Kalamata and Ohrid Routes

Competition Route	Distance (km)	Start Year	Distinguishing Features
Turkey / Yumurtalık-İskenderun	39	2021	Calm sea conditions, natural beauties, historical and cultural richness
France-Britain / English Channel	36-40	1875	Complex currents and variable weather conditions
Italy / Capri-Napoli	36	1954	Warm and calm water conditions, historical and touristic richness
Greece / Kalamata-Koroni	30	1991	Local culture and traditions
Macedonia-Albania / Lake Ohri	25-30	1992	Lake ecosystem and environmental sustainability

Source: Created by the authors (Openwaterpedia, 2024).

The Channel Sea swimming marathon between France and England is known for its challenging weather conditions and water currents (MySwimPro, 2022). These races provide a platform that tests participants' endurance and strategic thinking skills. The challenging conditions of the English Channel are an essential factor affecting the athletes' performance.

The Capri-Napoli swim marathon in Italy offers participants mostly warm and calm water conditions under the influence of the Mediterranean climate (Openwaterpedia, 2024). This can positively affect the performance of the athletes.

The marathon of the Kalamata-Koroni swimming competition in Greece is organised in a way that is intertwined with the culture and traditions of the local people (Openwaterpedia, 2024). This race can be considered a sporting event and an event supporting economic development and regional tourism.

The Macedonian-Albanian Lake Ohrid swimming marathon, on the other hand, offers an opportunity to measure the endurance of the athletes as well as to promote the historical and natural beauties of Ohrid (Openwaterpedia, 2024). This international event has become a sport and a tourism activity for Macedonia. The race is organised in the natural beauty of Lake Ohrid and attracts both local and international swimmers every year.

The open sea swimming marathon between Yumurtalık and İskenderun in Turkey is quite remarkable regarding the richness of the region's marine ecosystem (Özyurt et al. 2019) and the historical richness of the region in question. To summarise briefly, Alexander the Great's Victory of Issos took place in this region during the Hellenistic period in 333 BC, and the region witnessed essential events during the Crusades in 1098. Again, the Mongol War in 1268 and the Ottoman-Memluk War in 1516 took place in this region ((T.C. Hatay Valiliği 2024). In addition, the events in which the apostles of Jesus Christ invited people to the belief of monotheism took place in Antakya in this region (Bahadır, 2013). In Samandağ, another district of Hatay very close to İskenderun, another event of religious and cultural significance, such as the story of Hızır-İlyas, has left its mark on the history of the region (T.C. Samandağ Kaymakamlığı, 2024).

These swimming marathons are events that occur internationally in different geographical and cultural contexts and reflect the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sport. Comparative analyses of these races can provide opportunities to understand sports performance and local communities' cultural and economic dynamics.

## **Conclusions**

Swimming competitions are among the oldest and most widespread sports and have an essential place among individual and team sports. These competitions allow participants to showcase their endurance, strategic thinking skills, and physical abilities (Arıkan and Culha, 2023). In this context, the Turkey Yumurtalık-İskenderun Bay open sea marathon, the France-UK English Channel crossing, the Italy Capri-Napoli swimming marathon, the Greece Kalamata-Koroni swimming marathon and Macedonia-Albania Lake Ohrid swimming marathon, are noteworthy as essential events held in different international geographical and cultural contexts. In this study, a comparison of these five swimming races was made.

Turkey Yumurtalık-İskenderun 39 km swimming marathon can be an event that can stand out with the economic development and geographical and cultural characteristics of İskenderun district and can become an attractive destination centre for international swimming marathons with its long course. While the 36 km English Channel Crossing between England and France is known for its challenging currents and variable weather conditions, Iskenderun Bay can provide a different experience for athletes by offering calmer sea conditions. While the 36 km Mediterranean course of the Capri-Napoli Ultra Marathon attracts attention with its historical and touristic richness, the Iskenderun Gulf region's natural beauties and cultural texture may create a similar attraction.

The 25 km race in Lake Ohrid may stand out because it emphasises the lake ecosystem and environmental sustainability. At the same time, the biodiversity and clean sea of Iskenderun Bay may provide a suitable backdrop for an environmentally friendly marathon. The 30 km race in Kalamata Bay could offer a sporting event combined with historical Greek culture. In contrast, the Iskenderun Bay region could provide a similar advantage with its rich Ottoman and regional history.

Compared to all these organisations, the Yumurtalık-Iskenderun swimming marathon can attract attention with its course length, historical richness and natural features. In this context, the Turkey Yumurtalık-İskenderun Bay 39 km Swimming Marathon may gain a firm place among international swimming destinations. It can be an event that can rival the swimming marathon routes organised in other parts of the world. The Mediterranean's natural beauty and cultural heritage can offer a unique

experience to the participants. The region can provide an ideal environment for open-water swimming athletes with its favourable climatic conditions, calm sea water and natural diversity. With these features, the Turkey Yumurtalık-İskenderun Bay swimming marathon can gain a brand identity unlike other swimming marathons.

The Turkey Yumurtalık-İskenderun Swimming Marathon can also significantly contribute to the economic development of İskenderun. This international event can increase the logistics potential of the region (Çapar, 2020) by contributing to the worldwide promotion of İskenderun Port (Tuna, 2024). The recognition of the port can enable the expansion of trade volume and the establishment of new business connections (Dış Ticaret Kursu, 2023). It can strengthen Iskenderun's position as a global hub, especially in maritime transport.

It can also attract more tourists thanks to Hatay's rich historical and cultural heritage (T.C. Hatay Valiliği 2024). The marathon could provide an opportunity to promote local stories such as the historic Victory of Issos, the call of Jesus Christ's apostle to monotheism dating back thousands of years, and the parable of Hızır-İlyas in Samandağ. Tourists coming to the region can stimulate the local economy and contribute to an increase in income in the accommodation, food and beverage and tourism sectors. Thus, sports tourism and economic and cultural development can go hand in hand.

Thousands of competitors, the organisational structures that support them and local and national audiences have participated in the Channel Swimming marathon (Channel Swimming & Piloting Federation, 2025). This intense participation brings economic vitality to the region in many sectors, such as travel, accommodation and food and beverage. The popularity of the competition directly contributes to the region's economy (Sen, 2004). Similarly, the Bosphorus Swimming Race, organised in the Bosphorus Strait in Turkey, is a marathon-like event with a length of 6.5 km and the participation of thousands of competitors from 78 countries. It is recognised internationally as one of the 'World's 100 Best Open Water Swimming Races' by the World Open Water Swimming Association (WOWSA) (Boğaziçi Olimpiyat, 2024). In terms of tourism revenues, such events create critical economic resources for the region where they are organised. As in the case of the English Channel and the Bosphorus Swimming Race, the Yumurtalık-İskenderun Bay Crossing Marathon has a similar potential in the future and could make positive economic contributions at both local and national levels.

Considering the sportive, economic and cultural impacts of the Turkey Yumurtalık-İskenderun Swimming Marathon, it may contribute to the literature to examine the effects of the event on regional development, environmental sustainability and marine ecosystem through more comprehensive interdisciplinary studies in the future.

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The study does not require approval from the ethics committee. The main idea and organisation of the article belong to the authors. Generative artificial intelligence summarised the sources and made grammatical corrections in paragraphs. Since this study was carried out for the first time in the field, the websites of local and international internet resources were utilised.

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