Supporting the Development of Transnational Thematic Tourism Strategy for Rural Regions in Europe

The Escape2 project involves the rural regions of nine European countries, territories united by a low level of economic growth, despite the presence of rich cultural and naturalistic heritages. These are therefore areas with a strongpotential, however up to now undervalued and little used for the development of the territories themselves.

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Escape2

ABSTRACT

It is increasingly evident that niche tourism constitutes a strategic line of development for European rural areas.

The Escape2 project involves the rural regions of nine European countries, territories united by a low level of economic growth, despite the presence of rich cultural and naturalistic heritages. These are therefore areas with a strong potential however, up to now undervalued and little used for the development of the territories themselves.

The project partners are:

- **Bulgaria - Tran Region - Agritour**
- **Greece - Boeotia - Athens Institute for Lifelong Learning**
- **Ireland - Leitrim Region - Momentum**
- **Italy - Monti Dauni Region - Meridaunia**
- **Portugal - Region of Ria Avairo and Baixo Vouga Lagunar - Aproximar**
- **Romania - North West Region - EASI**
- **Slovakia - Central and Western Region - New Edu**
- **Spain - Ribera Region - Consortia de la Ribera**
- **Turkey - Edremit region - K- GEM**

One of the most suitable sectors for the growth of these connoted areas is niche and sustainable tourism.

The rural areas of the countries involved in Escape 2 have common characteristics that we wanted to analyze and whose study defined this relationship.

In general we can say that all the destinations examined have:

1. **Poor development of tourist services**
2. **Few policies aimed at the growth of the tourism sector**
3. **A low level of awareness on the part of local populations on the present heritage**
4. **Poor and inadequate training of people working in the tourism sector**
5. **Non-existent or poor definition of the market segments to attract (types of visitors)**
6. **Low incisiveness of tourism brands (poor reputation, non-existent or ineffective communication, etc ...)**
7. **Lack of cooperation between local actors / stakeholders / policy makers**
8. **Lack of professional construction of tourism products adapted to the market**

These are places whose tourist vocation collides with significant obstacles, from placement in consolidated and engulfing tourist contexts to the lack of a structured and effective tourist proposal, from contexts almost completely without a tourist market to poorly qualified services, etc … .

This paper intends to summarize the situations that can be united in order to be able to formulate responses to identified needs and problems.

The following analysis forms the basis for the development of a common strategy that integrates all countries participating in Escape2 and allows for an effective impact on local communities and the economy.

The project activities are aimed at achieving the objectives and the main expected results and have involved actors through local meetings who often do not have access to knowledge and information and therefore need to be strongly informed, trained and supported to design and adopt a tourism strategy. innovative in which they can play an important role.

The final objective is to outline guidelines for a common methodology for sustainable rural tourism (respectful of places, cultural and natural heritage), valid for the cross-border network created by the project and focused on the development of quality rural tourism.

Introduction

INTRODUCTION

Why the ESCAPE2 Project?

The project ESCAPE2 involves rural regions of nine European countries : Bulgaria, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Spain and Turkey. We can say that there are a lot of territories in these countries with a lower level of productivity and employment but rich in landscapes and heritage. Unfortunately, this potential is not fully exploited. The main reason is the current economic situation of the rural and mountain areas of the European countries which remain, in many cases, basically marginalized. No elaborated thematic product exists, especially in the less visited areas of the south and east of Europe, so far excluded by the market. This project addresses specific needs detected in these rural areas:

- relatively scarce or non-existent experiences of rural tourism with integrated strategies and integrated development policy/territorial focused on tourism as a key element for economic growth;

- low level of awareness about the economic potentiality of rural areas and added value tourism chains; - lack of quality facility or service for tourists;

- need of a high level of engagement and stronger communication by all stakeholders at all level (within the whole tourism chain)

- lack of cooperation among local actors/stakeholders/policy makers;

- lack of clear definition of the market segment to be attracted (kinds of visitor);

- lack of efficient marketing activities and integvrated communication plan targeting potential tourists/beneficiaries, lovers of fitness activities and outdoor sports for the health, physical shape and to escape from the daily routine.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a lot of changes in our lives. Not only our everyday decisions were affected but also our vision for spending holidays and our lifestyle in general. More and more people feel the need to spend quality time in nature, exploring rural tourism opportunities and discovering beautiful destinations on a regional or national level. Even though the COVID-19 crisis is global, the impacts are territorially different. Because of the spread of the virus, many companies encouraged remote working. People were forced to stay at home and tried to do as much as possible from there : working, doing sports at home, cooking and having dinner, "travelling" via virtual city tours for example and many many other activities which

they used to do before the pandemic. A great number of people decided to move to their holiday houses or to buy a house in rural areas, as big cities were literally closed because of the lockdowns.

In theory, COVID-19 has lower transmission in rural areas. As kindergartens and schools were closed for a long time, families needed to escape from the big urban areas and big cities. Rural areas have to become more attractive by providing the necessary conditions for a pleasant experience.

The project ESCAPE2 analyzes the current market situation in every country and then proposes new visions and new perspectives for developing rural areas. This said, the main objective of the project is to develop a common STRATEGY that integrates all participating countries and allows for an effective impact on local communities and economy. This strategy will be created confronting local situations, sharing best practices and finding common needs of rural tourism.

Why the report?

Reports play an important role in every project as they communicate information which has been compiled as a result of research and analysis of data. This report will be helpful for all partners in order to have a common definition of rural tourism and the existing types of rural tourism. First, we will define rural tourism and its evolution, policies and programs in the EU. In the second part of this report, we will define the concept and characteristics of the rural tourism market. Every different type of rural tourism will be described in this report.

During the first Intellectual Output of this project, all partners made a market analysis through different surveys. The main stakeholders (cultural and natural heritage, hospitality and accommodation and touristic guides) were examined through specific questions. The results of these surveys are synthesized in the last part of the report. In order to create a common market strategy, it is important to cross check the PoI (Points of Interest) and to make a cross analysis of the existing situation in all areas of partner countries. At the end, this report will clarify the strengths and weaknesses of rural areas in order to adapt the common strategy as well as possible.

Aims and objectives of the report

The main purpose of this report is to lay the scientific basis for the definition of a shared strategy for the development of rural tourism. The operation is carried out thanks to an extensive analysis of the situation in each rural area involved in the project, with the direct involvement of local stakeholders. All the documents of IO1 converge in an OVERVIEW REPORT which will serve as the basis for the definition of IO2, which involves among other things the definition of the training course.

The second and third outputs will then translate into tools specifically produced to achieve the overall Strategy. The project will develop content and curricula based on the results of mapping and correspondence and will test and try the training for 3 months by organizing online courses delivered through the project platform. The main objective of the report is to help develop a common STRATEGY of participating countries to make effective the impact on local communities and the economy, to encourage transnational cooperation and networking of all actors with local / regional authorities and nationals with expertise in tourism. This transnational network will allow the opening of the local dimension to the national

Importance of a comparative research/study/report

The comparative study is required as all the collected information is analyzed and then put together in order to find the differences and similarities. This method improves the quality of the report as it gives a wider picture of the situation. It can be done through quantitative or qualitative research.

Roadmap of the report

The common transferable methodology for the preparation of this report consists of several phases, all aimed at defining the state of affairs of the tourism sector in the various rural destinations considered.
The fundamental steps of the methodology are:

-   Outline of questionnaires divided by type (hospitality, tourist services, managers of cultural and

    naturalistic assets)

-   Identification of local good practices (successful and conservable examples)

-   Distribution of questionnaires to an adequate number of operators

-   Extrapolation of the data obtained from the compilation of the questionnaires

-   Identification of the strengths and weaknesses of the tourism systems

-   Identification of the needs underlying a coherent and sustainable tourism development

The questionnaires, divided by type of operator they are intended for, present questions that serve to identify key elements of the local tourist proposal, such as the services offered, the accessibility of the same, the costs, the type of communication and promotion carried out, the opening hours. openness, complementary services offered, current customers, cost ranges of services, languages spoken by staff, use of the Internet and social networks, etc. The goal is to have a clear picture of the actual situation.

The identification of good practices instead serves to highlight the successful and sustainable experiences already carried out, which also indirectly indicate which are the tourist vocations of a destination and which markets have already been intercepted, whose interest can be expanded.

Rural

1. Rural

1.1. Definition

The etymological origin of the word "rural" is "rus", a Latin term that indicated the cultivated countryside. The term "rural" mainly indicates what is typical of the countryside or more generally of non-urbanized areas. In the semantic area of this adjective we find words such as country, cross-country, agricultural, peasant, georgic, rustic, bucolic, terms that all indicate a productive and social system based mainly on the use of natural resources.

We can consider 'rural areas' all the territories with a vocation to agriculture or more briefly to the economic use of natural and agricultural resources. It is also possible to define rural areas as opposed to the concept of "urban": areas located outside the "urban agglomerations" (groups of contiguous cells of the grid of 1 km² with a density of at least 300 inhabitants per km² and a minimum population of 5 000).

It is consequential that the rural areas are characterized by a low population density and a low presence of anthropic artifacts (buildings, infrastructures, …), with a prevalence of natural element.

The nomenclature of territorial units for statistics (NUTS) is a geographical system, according to which the territory of the European Union is divided into hierarchical levels. The three hierarchical levels are known as NUTS-1 (population between 3 and 7 million inhabitants), NUTS-2 (population between 800,000 and 3 million inhabitants) and NUTS-3 (population between 150,000 and 800,000 inhabitants). This classification enables cross-border statistical comparisons at various regional levels within the EU.

Rural regions (NUTS 3) are classified according to the share of their population in rural areas:

- 'Predominantly rural' if the share of the population living in rural areas exceeds 50%

- 'Intermediate' if the share of the population living in rural areas is between 20% and 50%

- 'Predominantly urban' if the share of the population living in rural areas is less than 20%

The size of the urban centers present there is also decisive in the definition of rural area.

A predominantly rural region that contains an urban center hosting at least 25% of the total population should be considered intermediate. An intermediate region that contains an urban center hosting at least 25% of the total population should be considered predominantly urban.

It is clear that we cannot simply reduce the definition of rural to statistical data or in an even more reductive way as opposed to the concept of urban. The rural area has intrinsic connoting characteristics. Rural areas therefore have their own characteristics that have little to do with local population density or proximity / distance from large urban centers.

In a nutshell, the elements that help us define an area as rural are:

- the prevalence of the natural landscape over the urbanized one

- the presence of small inhabited centers, whose urban characteristics and housing typologies are

  determined by the prevailing activity (present or past) of the local agricultural economy

- outside the inhabited centers the rarefied and widespread presence of real estate assets

- the pre-eminent territorial agricultural vocation

- the permanence of knowledge linked to local agricultural production traditions

- the low impact of the industrial sector on the local economy

- the configuration of most of the territory as a result of agricultural activities.

1.2 Evolution and new paradigms

The concept of rural and rural innovation is taking on ever new and more complex meanings.
Starting from the second half of the 19th century, various processes of transformation of the economic and socio-cultural structure took place in our countryside, due to the fact that in areas previously dominated by agricultural activities, appear other extra-agricultural activities, sometimes antagonistic to the agriculture itself.

Agricultural activity itself has changed its face with the introduction of forms of mechanization of production processes, the introduction of intensive crops to replace traditional crops for reasons of profitability and optimization of production.

Often the term rural is associated with the concept of backwardness, while the new definition deals with a natural environment characterized by the predominance of green space over built-up, a reserve of cultural values and traditions.

As already explained, among the most widely used definitions of rural is the one that considers the extensive use of the territory and therefore the low population density. This is a very simple system to follow and therefore widely used, but it is not able to grasp the modern complexity of the rural world, as with it only depopulated areas would be defined as rural.

More recently, various factors, attributable to the umbrella concept of globalization, have brought about other profound changes to the rural world, leading to unusual and unexpected evolutions: from the ever greater determination of production choices based on the demands of a market that is no longer local (net of local products for proximity markets) to new forms of digital marketing. The peasant of today is therefore not the nineteenth-century boor, but an entrepreneur who must keep up with the times.

The rural therefore seems more and more a literary, ideal concept, far from the current reality, but which materially continues to materialize in the countryside element, understood as a residue of rurality.
The rural has always been the place where man takes refuge to have contact with nature. It is no coincidence that the need for reconnection with nature becomes preeminent with industrialization and sudden urbanization at the end of the 19th century, followed by urban planning interventions in the new European metropolises whose most distinctive features will be urban parks.

Today the desire to immerse oneself in nature and isolate oneself from what is defined urban takes on unprecedented sociological meanings, due to previously unidentifiable needs and contingent factors that have accelerated a sort of process centered on the countryside (not least the Covid- 19).

We are therefore witnessing a partial return to the countryside by the population who once preferred the urban context, as well as the new figure of "country user" (the one who increasingly seeks refuge in nature) has developed.

It should also be considered that the concept of rural, and rural innovation, is going through a positive period, thanks to the occurrence of several joint phenomena:

- the rediscovery of the countryside as an economic place

- the rediscovery of traditions as moments of social aggregation

- the rediscovery of traditional and typical cultivars of the territory as a healthy and correct diet

- the ever increasing attractiveness of the naturalistic outdoor activities

The rural has almost begun to take on the connotations of modernity.

Agriculture is attracting many young people due to new awareness such as the quality of life (from the point of view of health) that the countryside allows and the increasingly widespread passion for a genuine life and work in contact with nature. To this we must add the new working conditions allowed by technological evolution that simplifies, speeds up and makes agricultural work less tiring.

We are on the threshold of a phenomenon that we could define as "Agriculture 2.0" where the rural areas are affected by many changes:

- rediscovery of typical cultivars

- increase in the appeal of rural life

- diversification of rural activities (elements related to social services, environmental education, tourism, sport, digital detox, etc …)

- introduction of more and more efficient technological instruments (robotics) to support production activities

- use of new forms of social communication applied to corporate marketing (agricultural storytelling ….)

1.3 Rural in EU: policies and programs

Rural areas are often affected by the following negative phenomena:

- physical discomfort (problems of physical connectivity with urbanized areas and intangible connectivity

with the rest of the world - digital gap)

- socio-economic disadvantages, due to the low profitability of agricultural and non-agricultural activities

The European Union, aware of the strategic nature of rural areas, has for some time started policies aimed at their sustainable development. Rural development is a vast and complex subject which includes a wide range of topics and areas of interest. To promote understanding and dissemination of these issues at European level, within the ENRD (European Network for Rural Development) expert "working groups" have been set up. These groups work on the analysis of rural development issues which have a strong European dimension, with the goal to promote greater knowledge and increase the effectiveness of the implementation of rural development policy of the European Union.

The rural areas of Europe differ from each other for a number of geographical, environmental, physical, productive, socio-economic and institutional factors.

Rurality is considered one of the greatest resources of Europe, supported by the EU rural development policy, which is implemented through EU funds for the development of rural areas, in particular those penalized by specific criticalities, which result in specificities and diversified territorial needs.

Rural development is the "second pillar" of the common agricultural policy (CAP), strengthening the "first pillar" of income support and market measures by strengthening the social, environmental and economic sustainability of rural areas.

The CAP contributes to the sustainable development of rural areas through three long-term objectives:

- promoting the competitiveness of agriculture and forestry;

- ensure sustainable management of natural resources and climate action;

- achieve balanced territorial development of economies and rural communities, including the creation and

maintenance of employment.

The CAP's contribution to the EU's rural development objectives is supported by the European agricultural fund for rural development (EAFRD).

At the base of the rural development policies promoted by the EU are the Rural Development Programs (RDP). RDPs are co-financed by national budgets and may be prepared on either a national or regional basis.

 Each RDP must work towards at least four of the six priorities of the EAFRD:

- fostering knowledge transfer and innovation in agriculture, forestry and rural areas;

- enhancing the viability and competitiveness of all types of agriculture, and promoting innovative farm

technologies and sustainable forest management;

- promoting food chain organization, animal welfare and risk management in agriculture;

- promoting resource efficiency and supporting the shift toward a low-carbon and climate resilient economy

in the agriculture, food and forestry sectors;

- restoring, preserving and enhancing ecosystems related to agriculture and forestry;

- promoting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas.

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Rural tourism

2. Rural tourism

2.1. Multifunctional agriculture and diversification

Since the last decade of the twentieth century, the concept of Multifunctional Agriculture has been gaining traction in developed countries, especially in Europe, due to the growing concern with both food safety and quality, and the environment (Todorova & Ikova, 2014). Multifunctional agriculture is, as the name suggests, agricultural activity that goes beyond the role of just producing resources for consumption.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) provides an operating definition of multifunctionality; according to this organism, the key elements of multifunctional agriculture are: "the existence of multiple commodity and non-commodity outputs produced jointly by agriculture; and the fact that some of the non-commodity outputs feature the characteristics of externalities or public goods, with the result that markets for these goods do not exist or function poorly" (Aguglia et al, 2009). With this, the organization means that, as a result of agricultural activity, more diverse outputs than the ones that are a direct result of farming land should be created and that some of these outputs should be thought of as positive externalities.

The main idea is that agriculture should have societal and environmental functions, such as biodiversity conservation, contribution to a more sustainable future for rural areas, helping to strengthen the economic fabric of these areas etc. Since it touches on these issues, multifunctional agriculture has been identified as a key path for rural development (Renting et al., 2009), helping farmers to diversify their subsistence means, through the development of other activities, as well attracting new audiences, either to invest or visit rural areas.

According to Van Huylenbroeck et al. (2007) multifunctional agriculture has four functions, categorized in colors: "green" functions (landscape and biodiversity management); "blue" functions (water resource management and flood control); "yellow" functions (vitality of rural areas, historical and cultural heritage, rural amenities); and "white" functions (food security and safety).

The importance of multifunctional agriculture for rural areas and, consequently, for rural tourism is inestimable. When agricultural production is combined with societal and environmental preoccupations it creates synergies between the natural world and people, thus creating opportunities for developing sustainable tourism activities and attracting new visitors.

2.2. Rural tourism: concept, definition, and characteristics

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) understands Rural Tourism as "a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's experience is related to a wide range of products generally linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle / culture, angling and sightseeing. Rural Tourism activities take place in non-urban (rural) areas with the following characteristics: i) low population density, ii) landscape and land-use dominated by agriculture and forestry and iii) traditional social structure and lifestyle" (UNWTO, 2021).

Thus, rural tourism is based on personalized and hospitable service and on the traditions of the regions where it is developed – gastronomy, history, folklore, craftsmanship etc. Rural tourism entails a comprehensive and diversified product that integrates accommodations, restaurants, and leisure activities. Also, rural tourism presents a diversified portfolio that integrates diverse types of activities such as hunting and fishing activities, fairs, festivals etc. Given this, one of its most prominent characteristics is the potential to battle the seasonality associated with other types of tourism (such as Sun and Sea Tourism), and to be a true asset to the regions where it is developed. It is also important to highlight that another of its main characteristics is its adaptability, i.e. its malleability to different kinds of audiences and needs. For example, rural tourism can offer stimulating activities both to children - summer camps and adventure walks - as to seniors – bird watching, nature walks, connecting back to old traditions etc.

Given the pandemic situation that unfolded in 2020, rural areas were much more exposed to the consequences of the social and economic crisis that resulted from the lockdowns and restrictions. It is therefore of the utmost importance to tend to them. Rural tourism represents an invaluable opportunity to do so.

2.3. Rural tourism market

There is a growth trend in the demand of rural tourism, which was heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic, as tourists look for non mainstream destinations, to avoid crowds that are usually associated with some well established touristic locations. Further to this, rural areas also offer many activities that can be developed in nature, i.e. outdoors, which means that the risks of COVID transmission are minimized (UNWTO, 2020).

The target public are well educated tourists, with an above average economic power, who demand quality, but also search for genuineness in their experience (Maria-Irina, 2017). Thus, the growing levels of education of the European population explain the growth trend mentioned previously. Despite this, rural tourism, due to its multifaceted approach, has been attracting many other types of tourists such as families, who wish to take advantage of the many leisure activities offered, combining them with the calmness and safety of rural areas.

2.4. Rural tourism: integrated strategies and development - key element for economic growth

Rural tourism can foment the growth and transformation of local communities, due to the integrated services and activities it attracts, leading to job creation and better welfare for these communities. According to the UNWTO (2020), the four main pillars for tourism development are: education, investment, innovation and technology. These are not separate spheres of a possible solution, they are in fact intrinsically connected as the sustainability of rural tourism will only be achieved using a comprehensive and multifunctional approach.

Regarding education, Predag et al. (2014) refers to the importance of educating and training local populations in order to develop rural tourism. The investigators defend that only by educating and directly involving local populations will the growth be sustainable and the activities will maintain its authenticity, otherwise foreign actors will take advantage of the growing opportunities, which can lead to the decharacterization of rural areas.

Investment should not be solely focused on providing infrastructures for tourists; investment in rural areas should have a holistic perspective that puts rural communities as the main stakeholders. As defended by the UNWTO, "national, regional and local governments should place tourism as one of the strategic pillars of rural development policies, better recognising the role the sector can play as part of a diversified rural economy and putting in place active policies to promote it" (UNWTO, 2020). Obviously, when talking about investment, we are not only addressing public investment; private investment should also look at rural area's potential and take advantage of their strengths regarding not only tourism but also all the other complementary and related services.

Innovation is essential when thinking about the sustainable future we have to build, of which rural areas are a vital component. We can not rely on outdated solutions for contemporary problems. Innovation should be directed to the creation of sustainable practices in resource using, income distribution, heritage preservation, etc. Technology is intrinsically connected with innovation and it is especially important that rural areas are not left behind when it comes to accessing it. Technology should be used to better plan, measure and manage touristic activity and all that is connected with it.

To conclude, an integrated approach to rural tourism that develops these four pillars can be a powerful instrument in bringing a new life, full of opportunities, to rural communities, who are facing issues such as desertification and low incomes. Nevertheless, sustainable rural tourism can maintain and preserve what is unique and essential to rural life and rural values, either be it tangible or intangible heritage. It is in the mix of the modern and the tradicional that the power of an integrated rural tourism strategy lies.

2.5. Good practices collection

Some studies proved that tourism activities induce several positive impacts on rural areas, such as economic growth, economic diversification, demographic stabilization, an increase of economic value for food products and stimulation of agricultural development, improvement of socio-economic wellbeing, and creation or growth of new local enterprises. Tourism also contributes to an increase in overall quality of life for residents and supports rural sustainable development and reduction of outgoing migration (Ibănescu, Stoleriu, Munteanu, Iatu, 2018). All these positive impacts were a result of different initiatives and programs from which the local actors can learn and apply within their work.

Rural tourism promotes the uniqueness of the place with the pursuit of tourist attractions made for relaxation, traditional culture, and escapade from cities' crowds. This activity involves local development as economic activity to increase the social, economy and environment impact in the community. Nowadays, rural tourism involves multi-faceted issues and in some countries there are the differences between the territories, such as inland or coastal areas (IVONA, 2021).

Rural tourism was seen as a challenge for rural areas, but it was taken to its full advantage to prepare the infrastructure for full-year tourists, with minimal additional resources, so the tourism providers improved their productivity and incomes. Moreover, rural tourism provides types of alternative tourism, such as "special interest tourism" or "responsible tourism" which give emphasis on the contact and understanding of inhabitants' way of living.

The types of attractions in rural tourism are various, from heritage tourism, agricultural tourism or "the act of visiting a working farm, agricultural, horticultural or agribusiness," nature-based tourism or ecotourism (IRSHAD, 2010). These are the types more documented, but according to each community, the type of rural tourism can go beyond the well-defined structure and the tourists can enjoy several activities in the community.

Examples of good practices regarding rural tourism are visible in all the countries, and each area will implement diverse types of rural tourism activities, based on the priorities, natural heritage, and innovation that the people around will bring. Within the latest regulation since COVID-19 crises started, the inland tourism in all the countries increased considerably and people started to reconsider the natural areas from their countries as main points for their holidays or escapes during weekends. Well, it is known that the wheel cannot be invented several times, but it can be used as it is in several conditions. Like this, the good practices that had an impact on various communities and have the power to be replicable should be further used.

To integrate good practices in a new environment it is important to have a sustained mapping of the areas which can include the needs of the local community regarding tourism, as well as the services and products that can be provided to tourists. Based on this mapping, a strategy for rural tourism development for the specific village or area with a focus on local objectives and natural or cultural heritage. The good practices that can be replicable should be carefully monitored and studied, to have the same power in the new community. It is recommended to pay attention to all the details because as each context and background of the community varies, the practice could be or not totally replicable. Moreover, the good practices could be used as examples from which new ideas can arise and become the foundation for innovation.

Escape2 project had an activity to collect good practices from each partner' country to create a report with a variety of approaches that reinforce the local and rural tourism. Each partner had the occasion to observe some actions taken to develop rural tourism in their countries and include the good practices built on them in the catalog. These practices are described with a focus on taken actions and the benefits for each community, collected from several fields that can be found in rural communities, such as cultural itineraries (religious, historical, etc.), rural activities (fishing, biking, hiking etc.), restorations, digitalization, widening the sphere of activities.

Most of these practices showed a common element, the cooperation and collaboration among various stakeholders who worked together to reach their objectives. In addition, through this collaboration, several workplaces were created, and the power of retention was increased in the work field.

2.6. Networking and cooperation

It is known that in the rural tourism industry, there are plenty of small companies in which the lack of trust and cooperation is high and it is visible through the need for technical assistance to rural organizations to develop management strategies. Rural tourism faces the need to create cooperation networks that favor competitiveness and the complementarity of the companies. Through cooperation, the local stakeholders can support their expectations and reinforce the rural services providers to transform their genuine resources and skills into solid tourism offerings. To understand the role and impact of cooperation within rural areas is essential to innovate and create business systems that interfere and respond in a competitive way one to each other.

The benefits of rural tourism are foreseen in several areas of the society, starting with job creation and retention, by providing additional income for farmers, small entrepreneurs or any other local who provide some services or products. Moreover, rural tourism includes new business opportunities through developing close relationships with tourist facilities and opportunities for youth by the fact that rural tourism is often promoted as exciting and suited to the energy of young people.

All these actions lead to preservation of rural culture and heritage, increase of arts and crafts sale, as many craftsmen come from rural areas and conservation of the landscape, by raising awareness about it among tourists. Moreover, in some areas, the historical environments may receive rehabilitation and increase their lifespan (IRSHAD, 2010).

At the European level, cooperation for rural development is encouraged and there is a public policy created in this direction. The European network for rural development outlines the common aims of the European community regarding rural development, with a focus on rural tourism. This highlights the differences between each community and the importance of the preservation of this uniqueness. This network is based on international cooperation and collaboration for better integration of good practices that could increase rural tourism.

At the national levels, there are some State policies that regulate the development of small-scale partnerships for cooperation among more villages from one county. Through these partnerships, the local stakeholders approach a common strategy to develop the region based on several pillars, including tourism.

Furthermore, the rehabilitation of natural and cultural heritage and their preservation or conservation include several costs that could be covered from several types of fundings or sponsors. The substantial amount of heritage boosts the conservation costs and hinders the constancy of conservation projects, increasing the number of tourists as well (IVONA, 2021).

In conclusion, the cooperation among local stakeholders within one community is fully encouraged for a sustained development regarding local tourism. The collaboration foreseen different ideas for increasing the touristic possibility of the area and several stakeholders have benefited from this, including small enterprises, local authorities, tourist agencies, accommodation or other service or product provide.

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CHAPTER 3
Type of rural tourism

3. Type of rural tourism

3.1. Forms of rural tourism

● **AGROTURISM**

Agrotourism is the most widely accepted and widespread form of rural tourism, and the one with the longest tradition, a fact that has contributed to confusion as the term agrotourism is frequently used to refer to rural tourism. Agro-tourism itself constitutes another typology within the sphere of rural tourism, characterized by the provision of accommodation and/or catering services on farms.

This type of rural tourism is located on active farms (farm tourism), making it possible for tourists to participate in the different agricultural activities. It is an innate condition of the term agrotourism that the agricultural activity and the tourist activity of the entrepreneur are always related, the latter being a complement to the agricultural and livestock income. It is not possible to separate the agricultural dimension from the tourist dimension; the farmer offers the service without the main activity ceasing.

Possibility of establishing relational links with the local population.

The demand is motivated by the agricultural character of rural life, by the fact of being local, and by the possibility of establishing relational links with the local population.

It is therefore one of the forms of tourism that most allows the tourist to get in touch with local traditions, and other elements connoting the destination, such as typical products, crafts, events, popular culture, etc ....

● **ECOTOURISM - ECOLOGICAL TOURISM**

In 1983, Héctor Ceballos Lascuráin, architect and author, defined ecotourism (or ecological tourism) as a form of responsible tourism. He defined it as the fact of traveling through natural areas without disturbing them, in order to enjoy, appreciate and study both their natural attractions (landscapes, wild flora and fauna) and the cultural manifestations that can be found there.

In this sense, the term should be further developed in order to differentiate it from other types of rural tourism such as nature tourism.

To be considered ecotourism, it must involve:

1. Minimal impact on the environment.

2. Active participation in local communities.

3. Conservation education (environmental education).

4. Maximizing positive synergies in the host community.

In the year 2000 the WTO (world tourism organization) provided the following definition: ecotourism is used to designate forms of tourism with the following characteristics:

1. any form of nature-based tourism in which the primary motivation of tourists is the observation and appreciation of nature or of the traditional cultures dominant in natural areas; it includes educational and cultural elements of nature-based tourism.

2. It includes educational and interpretative elements.

3. it is usually, but not exclusively, organized for small groups by specialized companies. Service providers collaborating at the destination tend to be small, local businesses.

4. Seeks to minimize negative impacts on the natural and socio-cultural environment as much as possible.

5. It contributes to the protection of natural areas used as centers of attraction for ecotourism.

We are talking about tourist activities where the priority is the conservation of the natural space where it is developed, and whose best known examples are: birdwatching, fauna observation, and botanical tourism.

● GREEN TOURISM:

This is a type of rural tourism that involves a direct link between the tourist and the environment, like the previous typology, but unlike this one, it is not based on the positive synergies that the activity itself generates in the reference environment. Green tourism, or nature tourism, has the landscape as its main reference, and its objective is the integration of the tourist in the natural environment.

It is a type of rural tourism especially linked to the environment and contact with nature. We include in this typology activities such as hiking, interpretative walks, horseback or bicycle rides, scenic routes, etc.

● ADVENTURE TOURISM

This is based on the use of the natural environment to produce sensations of discovery and adventure in its participants. The tourist participates actively in getting to know the local environment. This type of tourism involves sporting activities classified as risky (active tourism, risk tourism) such as: rafting, climbing, paragliding, bungee jumping, 4x4, survival, orienteering, canyoning, windsurfing, etc.

The main motivation of the tourist consists in the living of a unique, stimulating, exciting experience...

"experiencing the adventure", and not in the discovery of the natural environment in which the activity is carried out, which appears as a secondary motivation (although intrinsic to the event itself).

● SPORTS TOURISM

A type of rural tourism based on the development of special sporting activities where the spectacle and the sensation of risk are fundamental. These are activities that take place in the open air and away from roads, where, as a general rule, the overnight stay is in places set up for this purpose (campsites, open-air nights, shelters, hostels, etc.). Some of these activities can be: canoeing, skiing, hunting, fishing, sailing, motocross, etc.

This modality can sometimes be confused with other modalities such as adventure tourism, or nature tourism; in some cases they appear together: sports and adventure tourism, nature and adventure tourism, etc.

The main motivation of the tourist is to practice sport.

● SPA TOURISM OR HEALTH TOURISM

This refers to rural tourist areas characterized by the existence of thermal centers, either by the presence of free-flowing thermal waters, or by the presence of spaces equipped for thermal enjoyment - known as spas.

The main motivation of the spa tourist is related to health and relaxation criteria.

In the case of historic spas, this element also has cultural value.

● RURAL - CULTURAL TOURISM

This type of tourism is found in those rural centers that arouse tourist interest due to their rich historical and artistic heritage, based on the presence of important monuments, traditional architecture, unique festivals declared of cultural interest, the presence of works of art, ethnographic museums, etc.

The main motivation of the tourist is the knowledge of the local culture, from all points of view: gastronomy, culture in general, traditions, festivities, ways of life, architecture, etc.

It is therefore a matter of both material and immaterial cultural heritage.

Often the material cultural heritage in rural areas is widespread, with some concentration in the villages.

● EVENT TOURISM

This is a recent type of rural tourism, which has traditionally been more closely linked to the urban environment. However, changes in demand have led event tourism to move out of the urban space and into the rural environment.

It refers to the organization of events of a very diverse nature that result in the presence of tourists in the rural environment, who are generally motivated by the experience of a singular event in a place defined by special characteristics that distinguish it from others.

Within this typology we can include religious tourism, tourism linked to the celebration of fairs, traditional events, historical events and commemorations, festivals, etc.

● SCIENTIFIC TOURISM

A type of rural tourism that is deeply rooted in Latin America, whose life motiv lies in the presence of tourists pushed by scientific reasons, motivated by the knowledge of what is foreign, new and exotic, which leads them to travel to unique areas, generally far from human settlements and lacking in hotel infrastructure and associated services.

These tourists, who are tourists to a certain degree, more often travelers, are motivated by discovery and knowledge. It is a form of tourism closely linked to ecotourism and nature tourism, which is distinguished from these forms of tourism by its scientific nature.

This type of tourism can be said to have a strong tradition, associated with the expeditions of European travelers in the 19th century.

● VILLAGE TOURISM

This refers to the development of a tourist or holiday practice in a rural municipality. Generally, there is a link between the tourists and the village: family relations, or second homes.

In one way or another, the overnight stay is made in the property of the tourist, which is why in some sectors this type of activity is not considered as a form of tourism, despite the fact that it generates income and contributes to the dynamization of the economy of the places of destination.

Return tourism is part of this kind, it's found in inland areas that have experienced strong migration to urban areas, which in holiday periods generate flows of people returning to their places of origin.

● COMPLEMENTARITY OF THE RURAL ENVIRONMENT WITH COASTAL AREAS

This is the type of rural tourism that takes place in rural environments close to the coast that receive daily flows of visitors, who do not usually stay overnight, from large coastal tourist centers. This type of tourism is typical of the Spanish Mediterranean coast.

Tourists are motivated by the search for peace and quiet, and to get to know the local culture of these areas: gastronomy, popular festivals, ethnography, etc.

● RURAL COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM

This type of rural tourism has been developed fundamentally in Latin America and the Caribbean by community-based organizations with the financial and technical support of international cooperation agencies and non-governmental organizations.

According to Guereña (2004), tourism activities linked to community-based rural tourism are managed by local organizations: cooperatives, producers' associations, conservation associations, women's groups, foundations, committees, etc.

The same author points out up to six characteristics that define this activity (undp 2005):

1. It integrates the natural wealth and the daily life of the rural community.

2. It promotes sustainable productive practices within the tourism offer.

3. The tourism experience is adapted to rural dynamics, preserves the peculiarity, rusticity, coziness and

comfort that characterize the rural regions of a country or region.

    4. It is based on local management and participation, while strengthening local organization, involving several families or the whole community.

    5. It integrates the local population in this entrepreneurial activity, distributes the benefits equitably and supplements the income of rural families.

    6. Promotes land tenure for local people.

Tourists who practise Community-based Tourism are motivated to participate and collaborate in the development of the host communities (indigenous peoples, rural communities at risk of extinction, remote communities, etc., which generally present development difficulties), are involved with rural development and sustainability criteria, are cooperators or collaborators with non-governmental organizations, and are interested in learning about and discovering the local culture and customs, as well as actively participating in them.

3.2. Activities of rural tourism

By rural tourism we mean a complex of activities of hospitality, reception, catering, organization of leisure time (experiences) and the provision of any other complementary service aimed at the tourist enjoyment of the naturalistic, environmental and cultural assets of a rural territory.

Rural tourism is therefore defined by the area in which tourists carry out their activities and only consequently by the content of the activities that make up the tourist experience itself, so that the basis of this type of tourism is the rural environment in a broad sense.

The rural context is generally characterized by an interesting naturalistic, historical-cultural and architectural heritage, able to arouse the interest of people who usually live in urban areas and who are willing to spend part of their free time to reconnect with nature or simply to get away from their usual lifestyle.

Rural Tourism includes any activity that takes place in rural and natural areas, compatible with the sustainable development of the same, with optimal use of resources, integration of the local population, conservation and improvement of the environment, as opposed to the concept of maximum profitability, connected to mass tourism.

It is the most important element of niche tourism, which displaces tourist flows from the consolidated destinations of seaside and maritime tourism, tourism in the great cities of art, entertainment tourism. It is evident that the target of rural tourism is ontologically different from that which the tourism of large numbers aspires to; to put it in marketing terms, rural tourism is in the so-called long tail.

In recent years, rural tourism has undergone extensive development, thanks to the increasingly conspicuous development of accommodation facilities located in rural and naturalistic contexts. This development has certainly slowed down in the last two years (like all forms of tourism by the way) due to the health emergency due to the covid-19 pandemic. However, this crisis situation has helped to root in the average tourist the idea that places not besieged by large flows are the safest, the most easily accessible and often the cheapest, highlighting the strengths of rural tourism.

Over time, rural tourism has consolidated its position within the market thanks to a wide and varied offer, with products ranging from the simplest to the most elaborate.

Among the strongest forms of rural tourism, which allow the greatest opportunities for experiences and activities, we find:

1) Agritourism: it is associated with the provision of accommodation, local gastronomy services and / or activities related to agricultural activity in which the tourist can actively participate. (Eg: making jams, milking cows or goats, making cheeses, making sausages, making olive oil, harvesting, winemaking processes, beekeeping, etc.).

2) Sports tourism: it is focused on the practice of any sport or outdoor training, in woods, countryside and areas of high naturalistic value and in rural areas. (Ex: trekking, cycling, archery, yoga, body weight, orienteering, running, etc.).

3) Adventure tourism: it uses the environment or the natural environment as a resource to produce sensations of discovery, so its fundamental objective is to be able to convey these sensations, consequently requiring spaces that are not very frequented. (Ex: spartan race, parkour, rafting, acrobatic routes, paragliding, hiking, climbing, survival, boating, surf, etc.).

4) Cultural tourism: it is based on the knowledge and direct experience of local traditions connected to popular and peasant culture - from the religious feeling to the rites connected to the passage of the seasons and to the productive cycles of nature. (Eg: traditional agri-food production methods, participation in traditional events and festivals, visits to museums and monuments, visits to symbolic places of rural civilization, study of local languages and cultures, historical circuits, visits to sites of architectural or archeological interest, etc.) .

5) Food and wine tourism: it is based on the direct and experiential knowledge of raw materials, typical products, culinary tractions of a place (Eg: guided visits to agri-food companies, gourmand tourism, cooking lessons, visits to cellars and tastings, tastings of products from oven, oil tastings, traditional pastry lessons, etc.)

6) Ecotourism: it is a less invasive and more sustainable form of rural tourism, defined as tourism segment in which the conservation of the natural space in which it takes place is a priority, therefore its design considers the natural environment first of all and therefore its conservation, compared to any other activity. "(Eg: environmental education, outdoor workshops on ecosystems, observation of flora and fauna, birdwatching, search for animal tracks, etc.).

It is clear that the range of activities made available by rural tourism makes this particular form of tourism the one that allows the greatest "immersion" of the tourist in the places visited.

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3.3. Rural tourism and networks

Rural tourism is an economic activity complementary to agriculture, which allows small producers or production units to diversify and expand their source of income, thus reducing their dependence on agricultural production and processing itself. For the development of this tourism to take place, it is essential to train and organize the inhabitants of a community in the creation of permanent jobs and self-employment.

Rural tourism is characterized by the conscious practice of using the natural and cultural resources of a territory, as well as by respecting the local heritage; it is a product with a low environmental and socio-cultural impact, which aims to carry out coexistence and interaction activities with a rural community, organized in a network, in such a way as to allow them to learn about social, cultural and productive expressions.

Rural tourism is characterized by being a tourism desired and controlled by the local populations who develop it, it is therefore a meeting place and where the life experiences of the community are shared, and therefore it is a tourism that promotes:

- The local initiative

- Local management

- The diversification and increase of the income of small agricultural producers

 - The enhancement of local culture

- The care and maintenance of the environment

- The care and maintenance of architectural artifacts

- Collaboration between local operators

- The interaction between local population and tourists

The strength of rural tourism lies largely in the aspects related to the ability of the rural dweller to interact with tourists: to be hospitable, to explain their world and their roots, to communicate their knowledge, to promote their activities.

CHAPTER 4

Existing situation analysis (ESA) and points of interest (POI)

4. Existing situation analysis (ESA) and points of interest (POI)

BULGARIA
TRAN REGION - AGRITOUR

Characteristics of the area

The market analysis was done in the rural area of Tran, which has an approximate population of 2400 people. It is a small town in Pernik Province, western Bulgaria, located 15 km from the border with Serbia. This region is very rich in cultural heritage as a lot of museums, churches, natural heritage parks and rivers are located there. The rural area is very appropriate for ecological tourism and different touristic activities. The area is characterized by beautiful mountains, hills, rivers and ancient churches which are only a small part of all the spots to visit in the area of Tran. Our market analysis confirmed all these statements and showed us once again the big potential of the rural area. Tran is an old, medieval settlement, founded in the Middle Ages. The existence of the settlement during this period is attested by the medieval cemetery church "St. Petka" from the discovered late medieval furnace for ceramics and from the buildings, discovered at the beginning of the newer construction in the town.

Rural Tourism: policies, programs and governance

A strategy for the preservation of the cultural heritage of the municipality of Tran for the period 2021-2027 was presented at the beginning of this year. The main goal of this Strategy is the creation and construction of a system for protection of the cultural heritage of Trun municipality and creation of preconditions for becoming a factor for sustainable development of the municipality and the formation of cultural capital with economic and social value.

Cultural and natural heritage

The main type of the analyzed assets are cultural assets : 30% museums, 20% libraries, 10% educational farms, 10% national parks, 10% churches or monasteries, 10% historic buildings and 10% outdoor sports sites (adventure parks and others). Almost the majority of them confirms that their location is good, instead 30% of them consider the accessibility to the site is not so easy and the road signs are insufficient. Unfortunately none of them is accessible to people with disabilities. Only two of the interviewed cultural assets indicate opening hours from 9:00 am to 17:00 pm. The rest are closing later – at 18:00, 19:00 or even 20:00 pm. Regarding the weekly closing days 20% of the sites are closed during weekends, which has certainly a negative impact on tourist flows. A very small part of the analyzed assets use audio guides or other interactive stands for information. Most of them, 70%, have only information stands and paper leaflets/flyers with information about the place. The staff of 90% of the assets speak English and 30% of the staff of the assets speak one more foreign language. The price range is between 2 BGN (1 EUR) and 19 BGN (8 EUR). The main target groups for all the sites are families and foreign tourists.Only 10% of the assets has a partnership with another organization. Half of the interviewed sites are involved in a promotional network as voucher websites, radio advertisements and tour operator websites. 70% are using their own website and social media for promotion.

Hospitality and accommodation

Home stays (guest houses) are the most popular through the interviewed assets. The market analysis for hospitality and accommodation contains as follows : homestays, hotels, apartment, bungalow, B&B, pubs, taverns and restaurants. Half of them, 50%, are located in a rural region or countryside and have defined the accessibility and road signs as poor or insufficient. Only 10% of the interviewed sites consider the infrastructure and transport options as sufficient. Parking areas are available for only 60% of them, and only 20% are adapted to people with disabilities. The majority of the investigated assets are present on social media. Foreign tourists and families are the target audiences for all of them. The tourist flow is seasonal for 10% of them. Card payments and online payments are not available in 65% of the sites, so the tourists have to pay cash. Only three of the interviewed stakeholders are part of a promotional network (Booking.com). The average price for a one night stay for one person is 26,55 EUR. None of the facilities is included in a tourist route or itinerary.

Touristic guides and associations

Only two of the interviewed touristic guides don't have a license or certification. Half of the touristic guides which participated in our surveys are also hiking guides or other outdoor sport guides. 50% of them have already collaborated with other organizations or associations. Between the different services they are providing we can find : mountain bicycle riding, environmental workshops, flora/fauna watching, cultural tourism, trekking trail, yoga, caving, orienteering and hiking. Half of the touristic guides offer an insurance policy to cover the risk of injury of participants. All of them speak at least one foreign language, Russian and English are the most common. Only one guide offers the possibility to pay his services by card or bank transfer. Respectively he uses e-commerce tools for his business.

Escape2

The rest of the guides accept payments only in cash. The average price for a half day is 81,16 BGN (= around 40 EUR). Most of them consider that the best advertising they could have is upon recommendations. Although the majority of the interviewed guides use social networks and other e-channels for promoting and communication.

Good/Best Experiences - Good/Best examples

We have chosen five good practices that are an example for the preservation of the local traditions. The first example of a good practice is " Zoo Alice". A family living in a village in our rural area decided to farm and look for different animals like : ponies, black swans, rhinos, alpacas, bird species and others. Their house is located in a quiet place at the end of the village, near Borova gora. There is a large yard with a children's playground with a slide, swings and a sandpit. All visitors can see the animals, touch and pet them. All the animals are in their house yard. The second good example is the "Festival of the rose", as Bulgaria is one of the biggest producers of rose oil in the world. This kind of event helps families to discover the heritage of their country and to educate children about traditions, local folklore and cultural activities. It is a socio-cultural event with a positive effect on economy. The Museum of yogurt is our third choice for a good example. This is a great way of preserving this invention, as it is not only a big contribution to culinary but also a heritage for the whole world. Our forth best example is Surva International Masquerade Festival, which comes from ancient times and is preserved to this day as part of the Bulgarian folklore tradition. The last example that we have selected is a guest house called "Zelenigrad" located in the region of Trun. It is surrounded by the biggest monuments and cultural heritage sites of the region. The house is held by a family and helps growing the local tourism.

CONCLUSION

- **Strengths**

Bulgaria has big potential in developing rural areas. The country has a very diverse nature with a four season climate which is favorable for different types of tourism. The region of Trun is a municipality with a rich cultural and historical heritage, inhabited since ancient times. One of the significant advantages of the municipality is the availability of natural mineral water in the village of Bankya.

There is also a concentration of minerals of economic importance (like golden trachyte, quartz and others). The region is rich in clay and huma which both have an application in cosmetics and medicine.

There are a lot of tourist attractions included in the list of "The 100 tourist sites in Bulgaria" like the rock-hewn church Sveta Petka, the museum of ceramics, the museum of yogurt, the river Erma, the Eco trail of Trun. The well preserved and restored cultural monuments and sites related to the history of the region are one of the biggest strengths of the region. The lack of criminal acts are also a positive point.

- **Weaknesses**

Bulgaria needs to invest in marketing and advertising, as lots of the businesses are not even present on the Internet. The region lacks a network of contacts with media, sponsors, advertisers, etc. for the

purpose of active promotion and advertising of the cultural and historical landmarks in the area, local gastronomy, folklore and traditions. The high level of unemployment and the bad road conditions and infrastructure are also a weakness of the area.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for Cultural and Natural Heritage

Only 10% of the investigated cultural/natural heritage monuments consider the accessibility and types of transport to reach it as excellent. This said, the first recommendation we could provide is to demand from the municipality (mayor or other person related to the local governance) improvements of the accessibility. Although we are conscious that the roads in rural areas are often not in the best conditions. The second recommendation is to ensure a sufficient amount of road signs leading to the place. This is essential if they want to attract more foreigners.

In connection with the deducted data, all the investigated facilities should improve the access to people with disabilities. The World Health Organization states that approximately 15 percent of the world's population have a disability of some form. We recommend thinking about installing ramp access, adequate bathroom facilities, automatic entrance doors and others. To ensure the access of people with disabilities means to improve the access for everyone, as ramp access for example is also needed for families with baby strollers or bicycle riders.

We are living in a digital world and new technologies are becoming more and more present in our everyday life. Thus said, 40% of the interviewed cultural/natural places don't have a website. We recommend spending some budget for the digital presence of the business. Social media are nowadays the easiest and faster way to consult a business, place, hotel, restaurant etc.

As the working week for most of the people in Bulgaria is from Monday to Friday, we recommend to ensure that the days off of the staff are not during the weekend and to maintain open during Saturdays and Sundays. Local residents are certainly more able to visit the facility during weekends. Also, we recommend keeping the opening hours from later in the morning 10h30 – 11h to later in the evening 20h – 20h30.

Any additional support in order to ensure the access to the facility is highly recommended. You could provide interactive stands, mobile applications for reservations of a guide or providing useful information about the facility are key factors for a nice experience. We consider the possibility of paying cashless important, so the use of digital methods of payment (by credit card, by apps, through website) are a big advantage. The average price of a single standard ticket is 8,42 BGN (which is around 4 EUR) . We recommend raising the price of the ticket by 10%. This additional money will be very useful to complete part of these recommendations.

It is advisable to take part in different promotional networks in order to grow the business. Nowadays, lots of platforms and websites for gift vouchers or networks are available. There are many ways to expand and to find new customers. It is important to promote the cultural/natural heritage facility through different channels. Offline promotion is certainly not enough. We recommend the development of a territorial marketing plan and of an effective plan for the implementation of monthly activities that will lead to attracting more tourists.

Recommendations for Hospitality and accommodation sector

The role of Hospitality and accommodation is major for tourism. This is why this sector needs to improve its performance each day. Customers are becoming more and more demanding and their needs become different, especially after COVID-19. Tourism and hospitality industry features large numbers of small accommodation businesses which take various forms such as B&B, home stay, guesthouse, farm stay, camping and others.

The main recommendations that we would like to provide to the Hospitality sector in Bulgaria are related to the accessibility and road signs, parking facilities, partnerships and promotion of the businesses. Taking into consideration the collected data, we would recommend to :

Improve management skills and implement software/systems for better organization of the stay of the guests;

Assure the accessibility for people with special needs and disabilities;

Invest in customer relations and marketing of the business;

Create "packages" with different physical activities, workshops for traditional food or cultural visits;

Serve local food from local farmers and create a promotional network between guests and local producers;

Provide an authentic emotional experience to the guests, by organizing folklore programs or other entertaining activities;

Provide parking areas near the accommodation/restaurant;

In many rural areas there is a problem with the coverage of the mobile operators and respectively with the Internet providers. Nowadays, in order to attract tourists, we must provide the conditions for the use of smart devices, communication technologies, etc. Without this, no tourist would come for more than a few hours;

To research about related European or National projects for potential subsidies in order to improve the sites and the region.

The synergy between culture, history, traditions and local products will contribute to making the territory of the municipality a preferred destination for quality rural and cultural tourism.

Recommendations for Touristic guides and associations

Tourist guides are like a mediator between people and nature/rural areas. In Bulgaria, very often the role of a tourist guide is underestimated. Taking into consideration our market analysis, we would provide the following recommendations :

- To actively promote the services they are providing through different channels (social medias, direct promotion with hotels, museums and travel agencies);
- To offer an additional insurance to cover the risk of injury;
- To diversify their services by adding interesting activities like : hiking, mountain bike, dog sled during winter, horse riding, yoga in the mountain, mushroom picking;
- Create special itineraries with stops at a museum, at a tavern with local food, at a shop with traditional food to buy or souvenirs;

- Invest time and a small budget for certifications and additional tourism courses;
- Offer tea or something else for free in order to make pleasure to the tourists and welcome them.

GREECE
BOEOTIA REGION – A.L.L.I

Characteristics of the Area

In Greece there are many rural destinations with indescribable natural beauty and important cultural background. However, not all of them are promoted to the same degree and as a result they do not constitute famous tourist destinations. One of them is Boeotia and it is the main reason for the selection of this region for the Escape2 Project.

A market analysis was conducted on the rural area of Boeotia, one of the regional units of central Greece that covers an area of 2.954 km2 and has 120,432 inhabitants. It is one of the richest and most fertile rural areas of the country due to its significant percentage of lowland cultivated areas, mainly the plains of Kopaida and Thebes, while it is known for its cultural heritage as a lot of archeological museums, churches and famous monasteries are located there. The fir-covered slopes, the internationally renowned paths, the waterfalls, as well as the unfathomable flora of a unique ecosystem are just some of the things that make this destination so unique. On top of that, Boeotia is located very close to Athens and it is easily accessible by tourists which makes it a very appropriate destination for ecological tourism and alternative touristic activities. In terms of the market analysis research, a few specific rural areas in Boeotia were chosen as cases that could be transformed into possible popular tourist destinations; The Municipality of Thebes comprised of the city of Thebes and 16 other communities, the Municipality of Livadia comprised of the units of Livadia, Davlia, Koronia, Kyriakiou and Heronias, the Municipality of Distomo which constitutes of the units of Distomo, Arachova and Antikyra and the Municipality of Orchomenos comprised of the units of Orchomenos and Akrefnio.

Rural Tourism: policies, programs and governance

"Private projects for the support of the local development in Boeotia through LEADER" were introduced from 2014-2020 as a development project in the area of Boeotia. The specific project proposed 12 sub-actions which aimed to support training programmes and investments in various economic sectors such as processing, marketing and/or development of agricultural products, tourism, service provision, cottage industry, forestry technologies, food, and business partnerships in rural tourism. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that both national and European development initiatives in the region have been limited and sporadic.

Tourism data

The analysis that follows results from a research based on questionnaires answered by stakeholders that participated from the area of Boeotia. Out of 367 stakeholders reached from this area, 41 questionnaires were answered by representatives of the tourism sector. More specifically, there were 15 stakeholders from the cultural and natural heritage sector, 13 from the hospitality industry, and 13 from the tourist guide's sector.

Cultural and Natural Heritage

Most of the analyzed assets are cultural assets: 5 museums, 4 churches and monasteries, 4 educational farms, 1 library and 1 historic building. Many of these assets are found in rural areas (6 out of 15), some are located at mountainous rural areas (3 out of 15), others at urban settings (5 out of 15) and one is located in an ancient city of a rural area. Regarding accessibility and transportation, all stakeholders mentioned that the public transportation and road network were overall satisfactory and safe.

The main comment of the respondents was that road signs were clear and explicatory. Moreover, 10 out of 15 buildings are accessible to people with disabilities, which is a satisfactory number. Museums are open all year long, 3 open at 08:00 and close at 22:00, one opens at 09:00 and closes at 16:00 and the other one opens at 11:00 and closes at 18:00. An important positive aspect is that most museums are open during holidays, which gives families the opportunity to visit and enjoy their vacation there. Almost all assets provide tourists and visitors with leaflets, books and illustrated booklets, while one of them also offers illustrated brochures, interactive material (audio, visual) and video panels. Furthermore, the representatives and employees of this asset possess sufficient language skills and all of them speak English. The most frequent payment method used by the assets is cash, however, 4 out of 15 answered that they also offer the option of debit or credit card. The main target groups of all the sites are locals, families and tourists, and 7 out of 15 belong to a network. Regarding communication and promotional activities, most of the institutions have their own websites and social media pages (Facebook and Instagram), printed material (brochures, magazines, newspapers, and leaflets), TV/radio commercials or they participate in exhibitions and events.

Hospitality and Accommodation

According to the market analysis for hospitality and accommodation, the most popular assets are restaurants (7), hotels (4) and last but not least cafés (2). Most of them are located in rural regions (9 out of 13), 3 are found in mountainous areas and one in the city center. The participants were overall satisfied with accessibility and transportation to these areas, however, 3 mentioned that even though the quality of roads is good, the signs are neither sufficient nor clear. It is worth mentioning that 11 out of 13 assets are accessible to people with disabilities.

Regarding the parking areas, most of the assets offer parking spaces for their customers (8 out of 13). Restaurants, except their main services, also offer: Wi-Fi, hall/reception, excursion planning, tasting events, parking space, smoking areas, garden. The average price for restaurants is around 16-20 Euros per person. Hotels offer cafeterias, restaurants, parking spaces, smoking rooms, Wi-Fi, TV, conference rooms, excursions, dry cleaning and ironing services, room cleaning services and garden. The average price for hotels is around 36-40 Euros per person. All assets offer tourists the possibility to pay by cash, debit and credit card. Restaurants, hotels and cafeterias target families, tourists, locals and young people. Most restaurants are open between 12:00-00:00 and hotels operate 24/7, all year long. Unfortunately, only 2 of the interviewed assets cooperate with other organizations. Likewise, only 3 of them have a quality network. Regarding their promotional activities, 5 out of 13 do not use any, mostly hotels use Booking to attract customers and visitors. Furthermore, the most common communication method is social media (Facebook and Instagram). Only 4 of them use e-commerce tools. A positive aspect is that all participants stated that their staff speaks English. There is only one asset where staff speaks Spanish and French as well.

Tourist Guides and Associations

Most tourist guides and associations aim to promote and improve the area, mainly through cultural events and environmental activities. More precisely, the majority engage in the following: cultural and environmental activities, sports, volunteering, strengthening local arts, theatre management, music workshops and management of sports facilities. Some of them also provide tours, hiking guides, excursions, flora and fauna observations, hiking trails and theater visits. Among them, only two have a license or certification (ISO quality certificate) and only two cooperate with other businesses and associations.

Only 3 guides offer an insurance policy to cover the risk of injury for participants, which is a negative aspect, especially for those offering extreme sports activities. All of them speak English, while one of them also speaks French and German. Regarding the payment methods, only two accept credit/debit cards. To promote their activities they mostly use websites, social media platforms (Facebook & Instagram), hard copy advertising and radio/TV advertising. Finally, only one of them uses e-commerce tools.

Good/Best Experiences - Good/Best examples

The following good practices exist in the area of Boeotia:

1. The first one is "Parnassos National Park", which is supervised by the Ministry of the Environment, Energy, and Climate Change and includes the villages of Delphoi, Arachova, Agoriani, Amfikleia, Polydroso, Ano Tithorea and Vargianni. More precisely, the Parnassos National Park Management Body is responsible for the maintenance, protection, and management of Parnassos National Park, one of the oldest National Parks in Greece, founded in 1938. The main objectives of the Management Body are:

   - Conservation of natural resources, biodiversity and the general protection of the entire region.

   - Promotion and implementation of information and awareness programs.

   - Attraction of visitors and promoting the values of the protected area.

   - Sustainable use of the protected area's ecosystems, and, in general, compatibility with the protection and conservation, social, economic and cultural development of the region.

   - Development of partnerships with universities, research centers and NGOs.

   Their actions are divided in two categories. The first one, Science Activities – Promotion, includes workshops, seminars and other activities, while the second category, Environment, includes general information (environmental awareness in schools, pupil workshops and ranger training) and volunteering activities (e.g., volunteering clean-up, tree planting etc.).

2. Another good practice in the area of Boeotia is the **"Lake of Muses, Entertainment and Escape Park"**, which consists of 40 acres of beautiful and unique land; a real gem in Boeotia, created especially for families who want to spend a day in nature, away from any distractions. An hour away from Thebes, Livadia and Athens, the park together with the surrounding area are an ideal one-day getaway to nature. Moreover, the Lake of Muses provides opportunities for sports

activities. It has a safe area for children and adults to play and ride horses. Advanced riders may as well attend riding lessons. The Park may also organize school trips, tour guides, and events, as well as the hosting of weddings, christenings or any other social and professional event customers' desire.

3. Another outstanding good practice is the **"Skydive-Athens"**. It is the only one that runs its service all year round and as its name suggests it is close to Athens. It is a skydiving center which has the ability to fly a turbine 18-seated aircraft to 14.000 ft (4.200 m) in only 12 minutes. The nice setup and ambient facilities provide a relaxed but professional environment that invites visitors to spend a lot of time there. Its main services include a large and grassy landing area and a turbine aircraft with fast climbing time.

4. Lastly, **the activity of paragliding** in Plataies, gives to visitors a unique experience of flying above the area of Boeotia in a paraglider. Training schools with skilled pilots and the necessary equipment, provide to visitors a ride in the skies as comfortably and safely as possible. This activity can be considered a good practice for tourism activity in the area of interest.

CONCLUSION

- ### Strengths

It is commonly acknowledged that Greece is one of the most popular tourist destinations. Because of the country's popularity and its economy relying on tourism, strategies and initiatives that take into account the needs of international and local visitors have already been designed and implemented. Boeotia is a region rich in landscapes and natural heritage. It is a location that combines the possibility of visiting both the mountains and the valley, therefore serving all tastes and a potential four-season travel destination. Many organizations offer sport activities in the mountains, such as hiking, horse riding, paragliding and skiing. One of the region's significant advantages is the cultural and historical heritage, it is particularly famous for its large number of churches and monasteries that facilitate the development of religious tourism, while there are also museums reflecting the region's past. Another positive asset is that it is very close and easy to access from Athens, the capital of Greece.

- ### Weaknesses

One of the main weaknesses of this area is that the inhabitants of the area have become complacent over the rich agricultural production and overlook or rather do not take advantage of the opportunities that the tourism sector provides. The area has a great touristic potential that could reveal both the historic and present image of Boeotia and the beauty that it has to offer. Additionally, there is an urgent need for investment in promotional strategies through marketing and advertising tools. Lastly, the region lacks an organized network of contacts with media, investors and advertisers which would probably promote the cultural and historical landmarks, the traditional activities and its natural beauty.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for the Cultural and Natural Heritage sector

A major recommendation we could make to the assets of the Cultural and Natural Heritage Sector that answered the questionnaires is the use of contemporary promotional and marketing methods that could support their attracting new customers. Nowadays, everything is being advertised through online platforms and social media. The old tools that most respondents use, such as Printed material

(brochures, magazines, newspapers, leaflets) or TV/radio commercials are moderated and do not attract new customers, especially the youth.

Another proposal is to change the payment methods. Most stakeholders answered that they only accept cash as a payment method, which is problematic since many tourists are used to buying products and services using their debit, credit card or even mobile phones to pay in international settings. If museums designed a mobile application or even an online platform through which customers could easily buy tickets, it would positively affect customers' satisfaction. The Internet and social media are gaining more and more popularity and it is essential to be fully updated on the newest trends. There are many ways to promote the cultural/natural heritage sector through different platforms, and the designing of an effective marketing plan is vital for the functioning of organizations belonging to this sector.

Recommendations for Hospitality and Accommodation sector

Hospitality and accommodation play an important role in attracting new visitors in underdeveloped areas. In order to attract new customers, representatives from the hospitality and accommodation sector need to increase and improve their customer service skills and be more aware of ways to offer an organized package and luxury experience to their customers.

The main suggestions we would propose to the Hospitality sector in Boeotia is to interact and cooperate with similar organizations in order to exchange good practices. This would allow them to expand their network, while facilitating information and knowledge exchange. Additionally, quality circuits are also an important factor that could improve the hospitality and accommodation services, since visiting and staying in a safe and clean environment is what most costumers seek. At the same time most of the tourists visit the country for family vacation, and the safety of their children is a top priority to them. Another recommendation would be the active involvement in social media through marketing tools. Nowadays, most tourists choose hotels and other types of accommodation based on comments and critiques they find on the Internet and many of them book them directly through online platforms. Furthermore, active interaction through social media properly informs customers about the services provided.

Regarding restaurants and cafes, we would propose that they promote the local culture through the inclusion of local, handmade and traditional food and products in their menus, as visitors usually seek to experience every aspect of a place, including the traditional cuisine and local quality products. Last but not least, being part of a promotional network of the area would be a positive aspect for this sector.

Recommendations for Tourist Guides and Associations

Regarding the sector of Touristic guides and associations, there is a tremendous need for an insurance policy that covers the risk of injury of participants. Tourist associations offer sport activities, such as hiking trails and excursions in nature and they must provide their customers with safety policy measures and insurance. Another important step would be the existence of a license or certification for their services. Furthermore, it is essential to provide customers/visitors with the choice of credit/debit card payment. Finally, a necessary action to be taken is the effective promotion of their activities and services. Tourist guides and associations need to be more interactive through social media and online platforms, giving their customers the opportunity to pay or reserve a seat in advance.

IRELAND
LEITRIM REGION – MOMENTUM

Characteristics of the Area

The market analysis was done in the rural area of Leitrim located in the North West of Ireland touching the Wild Atlantic Way (WAW), Irelands Hidden Heartlands and is on the border of Northern Ireland. It is known for its beautiful landscape (that is quite different to other areas of Ireland), numerous lakes, rivers and canals, attractive small towns and villages, innate friendliness, festivals and events, quality accommodation, activities, heritage and culture, and enthusiastic tourism stakeholders. It is known for its water-based activities, slow adventure, culture, ecotourism, unspoilt and scenic countryside, music, festivals, Blueways, cruising, hospitality, the pace of life and land-based activities (walking, cycling, hiking etc.)

Throughout this report, you will see how Leitrim remains a rural 'Hidden Gem' facing numerous positives and challenges due to its location. Some of these examples that are unique to Leitrim as a tourism destination is that it needs to build cooperation and collaboration across the region and with other neighboring regions, build experiences that are aligned with target market needs and motivations, need to be visible through various continuous marketing and communication campaigns and channels when tourists search and try to book a holiday in Leitrim.

Leitrim has the smallest population in Ireland of approx. 32000, is located in the Northwest of Ireland on the coast and is part of the UK border region. Leitrim is the 26th largest of the 32 counties in Ireland, its capital is Carrick on Shannon and it is a relatively small area. It is bordered by counties Donegal, Roscommon, Fermanagh, Cavan, Longford and Sligo. It is known for its lakes, rivers, mountains and famous glacier valley Glenade. Glenade is known as one of the finest glacier valleys in Europe. Outside of the capital Carrick on Shannon, it has 9 other small towns and villages dotted throughout the county.

Touristic data

Culture and Heritage Attractions include the famous Parke's Castle, Manorhamilton Castle, Sean MacDiarmada Homestead, Lough Rynn Castle, O'Rourkes Castle, Cavan and Leitrim Railway,

Dromahair Abbey. More examples and information

Hospitality/Accommodation and Restaurants include Ard Nahoo, Glenview Self Catering Cottage, Bush Hotel, Ardvarney Lodge, W8 Village, Cryans Hotel, Landmark Hotel, Bluebell Cottage, Tawneylust Lodge. More examples and information on accommodation. For all eateries and food options Taste Leitrim is a dedicated website informing those who want to eat in Leitrim information and inspiration to travel through and learn about its food and restaurants, locally inspired menus and locally sourced foods. Here you will find over 70 eateries and 30 producers spread throughout the region.

Tour Guides are available to take visitors on so many different trails and walks from hiking, historical/forest walks/canal and lakeside/looped/linear/town and village/long distance walks. The main tour guide providers include Muddy Souls and Leitrim Walking Guides.

Accessibility is mainly through Dublin/Belfast and Knock Airports, trains and public buses.

Visitors

Leitrim's overseas and domestic visitors come mainly from the UK, Britain and Germany 27%, domestic 49% and Northern Ireland 20%.

- GB are mainly Culturally Curious, Great Escapers or Irish Diaspora

- US and Canada are Culturally Curious and Irish Diaspora

- Germany Great Escapers

- Domestic and Northern Ireland are Connecting to Families, Footloose Socialisers and Indulgent Romantics

Respondents stated that 79% of visitors come mainly to connect with nature and people; 89% come for gentle outdoor activities in scenic nature; 67% come to wander off the beaten track and explore; 87% come for peace, tranquility and breath in the fresh air; 46% come for the unique local festivals and culture; 71% come for good food and friendly service with authentic Irish menus; 89% enjoy meeting the locals and friends and family; 73% enjoy coming to see and explore the history, heritage and discover their roots.

All those interviewed are located in the rural countryside areas of Leitrim and some on border counties e.g., Arigna Mining is on the Leitrim/Roscommon border. All respondents can be found on the official Leitrim Tourism website.

Accommodation/Hospitality hotels, guest houses, B&Bs, restaurants (fine dining, speciality, casual, family restaurants, pubs/restaurants etc). The 14 Irish Respondents include The Mill Masters House, Tawnylust Lodge, Old Rectory Apartments, Parkview Cottage, Leitrim Quay Self Catering, Ardnahoo Eco Retreat, Cottage Restaurant, Riverbank Restaurant, Ardvarney Lodge, Beirnes of Battlebridge, Clancy's of Glenfarne, Alder Cottage and Stanfords Inn and Village Tearooms

Culture and Heritage respondents include castles, gardens, museums, art galleries, heritage, mining etc. The Irish 13 survey respondents were Arigna Mining Experience, The Shed Distillery, Glenview Folk Museum, The Cavan and Leitrim Railway, Rose of Innisfree Tour Boat, Rainbow Ballroom of Romance, Hook Lighthouse, Lough Rynn Castle, Sean Mac Diarmada Cottage, Famine Village, Music Center, Sligo Folk Park, Leitrim Heritage Tours.

Tour Guides invited and responded offer experiences to go walking, hiking, trekking, natural excursions, provide environmental workshops, flora and fauna, foraging, cycling, history tours, boating. The 11 Irish respondents included Grace Perrott, Walking Ireland Tours Northwest, John

McGroary, Pasquale Corvasce, Graham Robertson, Maria Spinelli, Siobhan Quigley, Donncha Sheeran, Jim McCormack, Paul Rooney/Muddy Souls and Leonard Cooke.

Of all the tour guides interviewed they are part of Walking Tours Ireland, on the Approved Tourist Guides of Ireland List and are qualified certified walkers and guides. Each has Public Liability insurance but must keep to marked trails. Approved Tourist Guides Ireland (ATGI) are certified through intensive training and assessments through a recognised official training authority and can be recognised by their ATGI issued ID card. With almost 450 members at the National and regional levels, ATGI members can provide a range of tour guiding services in over 20 languages. This depends on the guide you chose, where they are from and if they can speak additional languages.

Product Investment and Infrastructure

From analyzing the results of these surveys and the discussions and feedback from respondents it is an evident need for capital investment in tourism in both physical assets and in other areas that provide a lasting improvement in the overall quality of the visitor experience and product offering. For Leitrim to create and deliver outstanding holiday experiences, the product base on which holiday experiences are built must be outstanding in all that it delivers particularly in the categories identified in these surveys; hospitality, restaurants, pubs, accommodation, culture, heritage, natural landscapes and tour guides.

There is room to further develop existing and new products in these areas but they need the right infrastructure so that they are 'market-ready or near market-ready.

Leitrim's key selling points and products with market-leading potential are related to the survey categories and will add value to the overall regional tourism offering. They need capital investment in physical assets e.g. walkways, cycle paths, signage, internet etc. Public investment in infrastructure and facilities will create opportunities for private sector investment. For example, growing visitor numbers to the Northern Glens experience will spur investment by the private sector in accommodation in the area, growing use of the Blueway will encourage additional or increased capacity in activity providers to cater for customer demand.

They also need to align the physical assets and existing product base with existing external strong branding strategies and campaigns to succeed.

According to all respondents from the Leitrim region, 80% said there is an urgent need to invest further particularly in the Market Readiness of the

- Shannon Blueway and Cruising is aligned with the Lakelands proposition

- Northern Glens Experience so that it is aligned with the Wild Atlantic Way proposition

- Investment into Signage to key attractions and Accessible Infrastructure is required throughout the country.

- Investment into Broadband and Internet remains a problem for 78% of the respondents this affects their ability to capitalize on online bookings, tap payment systems e.g., SumUp, frustrating to visitors trying to organize their trips and itineraries etc

83% of respondents said there is an investment required to gain Market Leading Potential for product and infrastructure development in

- Angling and Eco-Tourism to regain market-leading status

- Walking, Cycling, Adventure Tourism and Genealogy to capitalize on market demand
- New products e.g. Lough Rynn rowing facility, Taste Leitrim, Wellbeing Tourism to secure market-leading status

67% say there is a further need to invest in Adding Value to Key Selling Points in Festivals and Events,

Heritage and Culture and Business Tourism.

98% said gaps remain in key supply and demand areas such as Accommodation, particularly in self-catering, hotels and B&Bs. This is largely evident in the further northern and southern parts of the county. Respondents reported there is approx. 465 bed stock across hotels, guest houses and B&Bs with 80% of domestic bed nights domestic and overall accounted for 65% of total bed nights. Guesthouse rooms account for 21%, B&B rooms account for 12%, self-catering 8% and the remainder hotels.

Operations & Seasonality

Seasonality: Most of the businesses open seasonally from March to November. Their busiest season is April to September, this is the summer season. September is when all the kids go back to school and the weather begins to change and nights get shorter.

Payments: 78% of respondents had access to an online payment system e.g. SumUp but the tour guides used prepayment methods e.g., pay online via PayPal, credit card, Revolut or similar. Hotel Accommodation providers said 56% of the time their bookings were pre-paid either online via the website or booking.com.

Opening Hours: Most eateries (72%) open from 5 to 9 pm, pub/restaurants serve 11 am to 9 pm and all opened up for the majority Thursday to Sunday with exceptions to pubs/restaurants opening 7 days a week. Owners usually take Monday off but generally work 6-7 days a week during the busy season. Hotels check-in is usually 3 pm, self-catering and guest houses can be anytime after 12 pm but check out for all accommodation providers is 12 pm.

Partnerships, Networking and Collaboration

In terms of collaborating with networks and other tourism and business partners, 82% said they had a relationship with their LTN Local Tourism Network e.g., Leitrim Tourism and Leitrim Tourism Network.

75% said they worked with Failte Ireland the representative industry and quality standards organization, 65% said they worked with regional branding bodies i.e. Hidden Heartlands, Wild Atlantic Way and Discover Ireland. These brands are the key government-led brands driven by Tourism Ireland and Discover Ireland in all National tourism marketing campaigns.

62% said they had a relationship or were known by an awarding body or organization that was nationally recognized for quality standards and status e.g., Georgina Campell and Irish Restaurants Awards for the food sector.

68% said that strategic marketing partnerships between trade and agencies and public bodies are imperative to driving growth. There is still a lot of gaps and work to be done for the domestic market, existing partnerships can work better together especially with other counties to progress regional development e.g., intercounty public bodies can play a role in developing, implementing and delivering tourism strategies. For example, for Leitrim, it would include Leitrim County Council, Roscommon Tourism, Donegal Tourism, Leitrim Tourism, Failte Ireland, Waterways Ireland, Inland

Fisheries Ireland, Coillte, National Parks and Wildlife Service, Ireland West Airport Knock, local authorities in neighboring counties. Then branching to a national level to work with Tourism Ireland inbound and market-based tour operators, international travel writers and social media content generators.

81% said they found working collaboratively with their communities and LTNs was essential to their survival. With 72% opening seasonally from March to November (closed Nov – Feb) they rely heavily on the Leitrim Tourism Growth Alliance and the communication between stakeholders essential to generate bookings and trust towards common goals. They also said working with other stakeholders and tourism providers in other counties were very important.

Over half of the respondents (53%) said they also work with niche groups e.g., Lough Rynn Rowing Facility, Leitrim Genealogy Center, Slow Adventure Tourism Leitrim and Leitrim Landscapes Guided Walks.

Social Media, Sales and Marketing

All of the respondents have a website and at a minimum use Facebook and Instagram. There is a lack in terms of content creation, frequency of posting and reach. 43% use other social media platforms such as Twitter, Linked In and Tik Tok.

Less than 12% have an online booking platform for booking attractions, reserving a table at a restaurant, booking accommodation or a guide experience.

They all use some form of print material (brochure, flyer or booklet) but 34% have a relationship with a tour operator or package with a local tourism provider, only 6% attend trade and consumer shows and exhibitions.

Given that nearly 92% of international and domestic visitors who come to Ireland use direct channels and online platforms there is an evident gap that future decision making should include online booking capability, increased social media exposure and reach, increased emphasis on the importance of using data about target markets and their needs and behaviours. There is huge potential for existing providers to work together to promote and package with each other from all 3 target groups: Accommodation/Hospitality/Restaurants, Tour Guides and Cultural and Natural Heritage.

It was also mentioned that there is a need to build the regional brand identity, develop content (videos, images etc.), prioritize website SEO and Social Media Strategies, further develop marketing potential and cooperative advertising with Lakelands, Hidden Heartlands and Wild Atlantic Way and implement research and survey feedback mechanisms.

Languages and Communication

It was identified by 64% of the respondents that there is a need to invest in wayfinding and interpretative signage particularly when it comes to different languages. Currently, all signage is in Irish and English. All respondents only spoke English bar 4 spoke another language, mainly because they were originally from that country i.e., German, Spanish, French and Dutch.

Respondents said there is a need to provide websites in the 4 main target markets foreign languages, they have found it difficult to do this due to lack of resources. 34% of respondents said they have their website available in at least one other language. The same is needed for package and brochure development. All respondents said they would be interested in taking a course in learning another language and keywords or hiring a foreign language employee to help them build on their language

skills.

Accessibility and Inclusivity

Many of the respondents said they have accessibility put in place or can work with people with disabilities and in wheelchairs. The Tour Guides said approx. 33% of their walks are wheelchair accessible, 67% of accommodation providers main reception area, bedrooms and restaurant/bar are accessible and 15% of culture and heritage attractions are accessible by wheelchair. Some have interactive headsets for those who are blind and others have brail translated information points or signage for those who are visually impaired.

Opportunities

Accommodation Capacity: Increase the capacity across all the different accommodation categories and distribute across the county; B&B's, hotels, self-catering, Air B&B (very few), guest houses etc.

Regional Brands: Build on working with the existing regional brands Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland's Hidden Heartlands, Lakelands. Also, work with the National tourism brand representative better Tourism

Ireland. Work with Tour Operators, attend trade events and exhibitions and work with travel writers.

Online Accessibility & Languages: Become more accessible to both domestic and international markets in terms of online book ability, website/marketing collateral in different languages, signposting and wayfinding, interpretation for those who speak different languages

Collaboration and Engagement: Increase engagement with each other as stakeholders, tourism businesses and with other regions/counties. This includes working with Failte Ireland and its membership and quality standards. Work with each other to build packages, develop cooperative advertising campaigns and itineraries. Communicate more with those directly or indirectly involved with tourism including niche groups; pool resources, knowledge exchange, advice tips, collaboration projects, package and product development building. Develop Communication and Marketing Strategies that all can work with include and target different partnerships and relationships to build and leverage; Trade and Industry Partners, Coillte, Parks and Wildlife, Ecotourism Ireland, Failte Ireland etc. (e.g., package together, diversify experiences together, organize familiarisations, work on development policies together, workshops etc)

Sales and Marketing: Work on countywide messaging and reach e.g., develop messaging boards, brand identity, promotional campaigns, develop content e.g. images, videos and marketing messages that are consistent and available to use by all. Example of a message Leitrim is renowned as an authentic, friendly tourism destination. Compelling experiences, rooted in natural beauty, are delivered by people who are proud of their county's unique strengths. Build and fine-tune online presence and work with influencers, content developers and social media marketers.

Infrastructure Investment: Invest in accommodation providers, wayfinding signage, information points, infrastructure but primarily internet and broadband infrastructure.

New Products and Experiences: Build on existing, new and developing experiences and products and particularly the brand and marketing aspect e.g. Wellbeing Tourism, Slow Adventure Tourism. Link these experiences in with market-leading potential brands and complementary existing products e.g. Blueway, Lakelands, WAW, angling, cycling, Northern Glens, cruising, culture, eco-tourism and Irelands Hidden Heartlands.

Northern Ireland Market Potential: Now that Brexit has occurred the growth and demand from

Northern Ireland has been impacted. The currency fluctuates but there is potential to maintain and grow this market in the future once it stabilizes.

New Market Potential: there is also the potential to develop, grow and access new markets such as Asia and India. However, there is a need to understand and align with these markets better to determine growth and strategy options how Leitrim fits into these travelers needs and motivations.

Build on Key Markets and Target Groups: this includes those who come for the culture, heritage, natural landscapes; The Culturally Curious, Great Escapers, Irish Diaspora, Friends and Families, and Footloose Socialisers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Prioritize future developments e.g., Shannon Blueway, Slow Adventure Tourism and new SNLR Sligo Leitrim and Northern Counties Greenway to incorporate essential infrastructural developments of existing and new walks, cycles and trails e.g., pathways, signage, roads, broadband. Connect all those villages, towns and villages that are already within these regions, waterways and hubs through the cycleways, drives, itineraries and routes e.g., Carrick on Shannon Blueway Leitrim Village to Acres Lake and Drumshanbo. This 30-minute electric bike route joins rural villages and attractions along the beautiful Shannon River, a key waterways resource and beautiful natural heritage attraction.

Build on existing relationships, networks and collaboration by setting up regular meetings and workshops, coming together online either via zoom, a closed Facebook or a community platform. All stakeholders must work together to build their brand, packages, itineraries and engage in a proactive approach across all agencies to identify, support, develop and fund new and existing tourism experiences. Services and facilities should also be considered i.e., gaps, weaknesses, strengths and opportunities; adventure operators, equipment storage and hire, interpretation and information, bike hire etc.

Work with other complementary operators and providers e.g. cruise hire operators, hotels, airports,

restaurants, fisheries etc so everyone is informed and promoting each other, possibly packaging and

 selling together. E.g., heritage and culture seekers want to stay, eat, see and do things that are strong in culture and heritage. Build a package and driving itinerary around all those elements of a holiday they will need.

Rural tourism businesses to work with policy developers by providing key data and decision making information. So those driving policies understand the gaps, potential and opportunities e.g., heritage and culture could outline with Heritage Ireland the need to develop an annual Heritage and Culture Festival to cater to market appeal (e.g., The Gathering), tour guides could highlight with Coillte and Leitrim County Council the need for facilities and wayfinding on trails and walks.

Initiate and build on relationships with other regional and external brands e.g. Northern Glens Experience, Wild Atlantic Way and Irelands Hidden Heartlands. Investigate and collectively invest in marketing and promotional capacity building to ensure they consistently deliver the brand promise and ensure interaction, connection and exposure to potential visitors. Develop a destination Marketing and Communication Plan to prioritize campaigns, communicating experiences and promote the Leitrim Brand ists values, essence and story in a consistent manner across all platforms and all stakeholders. Work on marketing partnerships with other neighboring counties to build on regional tourism development optimize targeted marketing. Ensure that all imagery, language and messaging is tailored to each segment's motivations and needs.

Work with trade and influencers, travel writers by engaging and stakeholder engagement, sending catalogs, packages, itineraries and all the relevant collateral they need to sell and promote Leitrim.

Work with their distribution channels and trade events so they can represent you best. Organize meetings, regularly communicate, and keep in touch.

Develop specific Strategies for fishing, cycling, walking, hiking etc. e.g., Leitrim Walks & Trails Strategy, Leitrim Fishing Strategy to ensure these resources are used optimally and managed well e.g., are they sustainable, environmentally friendly and where upgrades are required.

Examine and build on niche or new products e.g., Wellbeing Tourism, Slow Adventure and Eco-Tourism. Explore the opportunities and determine the priorities, what is existing and what is missing. Implement a representative network for each of these products and implement a proactive approach to their future development with key agencies and existing tourism enterprises and local tourism networks. Investigate potential funding and delivery mechanisms.

Invest in marketing and develop better management of the ESCAPE categories Culture, Heritage, Hospitality, Accommodation, Restaurants and Tour Guides. Prioritize investment and focus on their product development and identify future trends, demands and market behaviors to optimize their development. Develop a visitor experience program that includes packages, itineraries, online booking, hospitality program, marketing collateral and content (e.g., storytelling videos and VR walkthroughs) developed tailored to these categories. All aspects of future development need to work with key agencies e.g., Leitrim Tourism Network, Leitrim County Council and Leitrim Tourism throughout each process.

Use digital technologies and platforms where possible to ensure connectivity and to be easily found and experienced. Being online in remote areas is critical to sustainability and success; for communication, managing bookings, awareness building, collaboration, payments systems, sharing information, sharing resources etc. SEO, Google Ads, VR, MR, 360 imagery, social media platforms suited to the target markets are so important. Businesses should invest in digital technologies and platforms and build them tailored to the needs of their customers e.g., a 360 live video of a mountain bike going through a Leitrim trail and uploaded for website and social media usage can prove to be a very valuable selling and promotional tool. Start with what tools you already use and learn how to use them so that you maximize usage. For example, to maximize the digital technologies available through Facebook, investigate how to use stories, live streaming, booking buttons, videos, voting polls, links to specific web pages etc. Devise training and workshops to educate and assist tourism providers to be able to adapt their offering into different languages (e.g., website, signage, brochures), inform on ways they can implement accessibility and inclusivity, how they can be sustainable and resourceful as a collective, gathering data and customer feedback…etc. Invite specialist social media agencies to design, teach and advise on how to implement a cohesive social media campaign involving relevant stakeholders and relevant content across important social media platforms to support the development of existing and new experiences to drive tourists to trade and business websites and generate bookings and sales.

ITALY

MONTI DAUNI – MERIDAUNIA

Characteristics of the area

Meridaunia scarl is a Local action group of Monti Dauni area that includes 30 municipalities: the smallest with less than 150 inhabitants (Celle di San Vito), the largest with 31.593 inhabitants (Lucera).

This last urbanization, although it has numbers of a city, has a large agricultural territory, as well as the villages of the Monti Dauni.

Monti Dauni region covers an area of 2.275 km², with a population of about 90,000 inhabitants.

The Monti Dauni are characterized by the presence of: villages of medieval origin, with intact historic centers and enriched by monumental buildings such as churches and castles; naturalistic areas of community interest (SIC), protected natural areas, with woods, high ground pastures, streams and valleys; the highest peaks of the Puglia Region (the highest Monte Cornacchia); numerous archeological sites from the Daunian, Roman and medieval eras; many archeological and sacred art museums; an intangible cultural heritage made up of peasant traditions and knowledge, ancient rituals and festival; an amazing culinary culture.

The Monti Dauni are located in Apulia Region, in south of Italy; Apulia tourism has strongly grown in the last years, thank to extraordinary work of communication and brand position in the national market and i the foreing to. The main local touristic products are: sea, culture, gastronomy, rural.

The Monti Dauni are the "Unexpected Puglia", with a very different landscape from the rest of the region, characterized by valley, hills and mountains, and with no sea; it is made by vegetable gardens, orchards, wheat fields, olive groves, vineyards and woods and pastures, perfect for excursions and outdoor activities.

Rural Tourism: policies, programs and governance

The Monti Dauni have known various programmatic activities for the development of local tourism.

The "Get Local" project (PIT n. 10 - POR Puglia 2000/2006) saw the creation of a series of visitor centers, with a programming of tourist activities and experiences within them. Often these were recovered historic buildings.

Another important project for the enhancement of tourism resources was implemented in 2015 with funds from the Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Tourism. As part of the Eccellenza dei Monti Dauni project, promotional materials were created and actions were carried out on the southern Via Francigena.

Today the tourism strategy of the Monti Dauni is traced back to the "Integrated Tourist Services of the Monti Dauni" project of LAG Meridaunia (POR PUGLIA - FESR_FSE 2014-2020 AXIS VI, ACTION 6.8) which includes:

- creation of a tourist product based on proposals of local operators

- creation of a tourist operators network

- communication of the destination (photos, videos), via media and social networks

- sale of tourist products (experience, accomodations, weekend, etc..)

- b2b and b2c actions

- incoming activities for tour operators, travel agencies, etc...

- realization of a web portal with booking services for accommodation, experiences, e-commerce products, etc ...

- press tours

- creation of gadgets with "Monti Dauni" brand

- realization of the Rural Tourism Festival (IV editions)

Touristic data
Methodology

As part of the market analysis of Monti Dauni tourism sector conducted by Meridaunia, 231 subjects (sample equal to about 38,5%) of the total were identified in a range of about 600 operators, divided as follows:

a) cultural (8) and naturalistic heritage (12): for a total of 20 subjects interviewed, 4 of wich replied to the online questionnaire, the rest on paper

b) hospitality and accommodations – restaurant and catering (60), accommodation facilities (62) : for a total of 122 subjects interviewed, 38 of which replied to the online questionnaire, the rest on paper

c) tourist guides (37) and associations (52): for a total of 89 subjects interviewed, 18 of which replied to the online questionnaire, the rest on paper.

Cultural and natural heritage

20 subjects replied to the survey on cultural and natural heritage, of which 47% related to cultural heritage and 53% to environmental heritage; 29.5% of the public sector and 70.5% of the private sector.

47% of resources correspond to educational farms, 23.5% to museums, 11.8% to historic buildings (castles and towers), 5.9% to historic oil mills, 5.9% to ancient underground mills , 5.9% to adventure parks.

The totality of the cultural heritage investigated is located within the urban context and as regards accessibility, 87.5% of it is considered easy to access, the remaining 12.5% very easy to access. The data on accessibility for wheelchair users are less good: 50% of the assets are inaccessible.

37.5% of the assets are accessible by reservation only, the rest for the whole year. All of them offer guided tour services.

Only 12.5% have technological information systems, such as audio guides or videos. the curious fact is that only 62.5% have toilets.

Only 12.5% have no staff who speak foreign languages; the most widespread language is English (87.5%).

In 75% of cases the entrance is free and some paid services; the largest flows occur in the summer.

As for the natural heritage, it is mainly located in the countryside (91.7%) and in the mountains (66.7%). Access to goods is good and its totality is fully or partially accessible to people with disabilities.

Given the nature of the goods, their opening period is reduced and is affected by the seasons. All properties offer guided tours, only 16.7% self-guided visits. 91.7% of goods have complementary services, such as toilets, spaces for laboratories, picnic areas, etc ...

All offer didactic or recreational-sporting activities and in all the staff or at least one foreign language (the most widely spoken is English).

58.3% provide for paid admission, the rest have free admission and paid activities.

TYPE OF ASSET	there is a substantial parity of thrust between culture, nature and food and wine, with an evident need for growth in services, especially for the first two
LOCATION	attractors and assets are distributed in a widespread manner, inside and outside the villages
ACCESSIBILITY	many cultural assets have poor accessibility, due to their location and historical nature; naturalistic assets seem to have greater appeal; connections are poor
OPENING	the opening periods of the cultural heritage suggest that they have little weight in the touristic offer; the naturalistic ones are dictated by the seasons and the weather
SERVICES OFFERED	these are almost always basic; few realities propose distinctive activities; we are far from the maturity of the tourism product
ORIGIN OF TOURISTS	this is local tourism; the proposal is still too little relevant to that from outside the region and from abroad; it indicates that the notoriety of the destination is low
BELONGING TO NETWORKS AND CIRCUITS	many villages belong to circuits on sustainable and quality tourism; their attractors are therefore included in itineraries and circuits. This circumstance does not seem to be relevant for the implementation of the local tourism system
COMMUNICATION AND PROMOTION	often do-it-yourself activities, resulting in low impact

Hospitality and accommodation

The Monti Dauni have a type of non-hotel accommodation, i.e. consisting mainly of accommodation facilities (holiday homes - 41.9%, b & b - 27.4%, farm holidays - 12.9%, etc ...) with less than 6 rooms. The catering offer, on the other hand, is mainly made up of (restaurants - 41.7%, farmhouses 18.3%, trattorias 13.3%, ...)

Our survey was answered by 122 operators: 62 from the hospitality sector and 60 from the restaurant sector.

Most of the accommodation facilities are located in an urban (66.1%) and hilly-mountain (88.7%) context. Their owners consider access to their facilities mostly "good" or "very good" (91.9%).

46% of the structures are inaccessible to disabled people, 21% are partially accessible and only 32.3% are totally accessible.

25.8% is open only at certain times of the year. A foreign language is spoken in all the structures and the most widespread is English (83.9%). As for special needs: 27% have services for the disabled; 46.8% for food allergies / creeds; 43.5% for pets.

The cost range of the rooms is medium to low (with an average of 70 euros per double room).

The highest flows are recorded in the summer and the promotion channels are websites and social networks. 58% 1 use online booking and sales services.

as far as catering services are concerned, they are also concentrated in the urban area (65%) and in the hilly-mountain context (75%).

90% of managers consider their facilities easy or very easy to access.

86.7% of the facilities are fully or partially accessible to the disabled and 93.3% of them are open all year round.

70% offer traditional cuisine and 48.3% use only local products. Only 6.7% of cases do not speak a foreign language and the most widespread is English (90%).

As for special needs: 73.3% have products for people with allergies or particular religious and philosophical beliefs, 60% accept pets.

The average cost range (excluding wines) per meal ranges from 20 to 35 euros. The flows are more homogeneous, with an increase in the summer.

Only 25% use online booking systems.

TYPE OF ASSET	the accommodation facilities are largely non-hotel type; accommodation facilities and restaurants are often small and family-run, with little professionalization of services
LOCATION	most of the services are concentrated in the villages, but there is a good presence in the countryside
ACCESSIBILITY	accessibility is good but can be improved, especially in relation to people with walking difficulties or in wheelchairs (the gap is more serious for accommodation facilities)
OPENING	the opening periods are longer for restaurants, which suggests that they work mainly with the locals and therefore suffer less from the low season
TARGET AUDIENCES	the target audience is varied, but overall it is noted that the target is mainly local and / or proximity; few tourists from other areas of Italy and from abroad
FACILITY EQUIPMENT AND SERVICES OFFERED	the type of accommodation offered is mostly of the type B&B / holiday homes / farmhouse, with services in line with the type; the restaurants mostly offer local cuisine and basic services
BELONGING TO NETWORKS AND CIRCUITS	many villages belong to circuits on sustainable and quality tourism; few structures inserted in quality circuits
COMMUNICATION AND PROMOTION	some use of apps for booking services

Touristic guides and associations

As regards the analysis relating to tourist guides and associations, 89 subjects replied to the questionnaire, including 37 tourist guides and 52 associations.

the services offered are: tourist guide (91.9%), tourist accompaniment (51.4%), naturalistic and hiking guides (8.1%) and sports instructors (2.7%).

In the majority (73%) of cases, tourism is a secondary occupation for the operator. 68.8% of the guides are cultural, 56.3% naturalistic.

The most popular outdoor activities include trekking (50%), yoga (18.8%), cycling and orienteering (12.5%).

35.1% do not speak any foreign language.

VACATION AND MOTIVATION	relaxation, culture and art, food and wine, environment and nature
PROPOSAL	generic, not yet well structured and diversified
WOW ELEMENTS	not due to the construction of the proposal, but to the richness of the heritage

For a better understanding of the data collected, the reader is invited to read the attached document (annex)

Good/Best Experiences - Good/Best examples

Five good practices were chosen in the field of rural tourism in the Dauni Mountains. These are experiences of various kinds, conducted by public and tried subjects and in various sectors.

The first example is the creation and management of an adventure park called DauniAAvventura owned by the Municipality of Biccari and managed by a private entity. Located inside a wood and in a naturalistic area with a strong visual impact, the park is mainly made up of acrobatic routes suspended between the trees, differentiated for adults (5) and children (2). The complex is equipped with a viewing point, picnic areas, tree houses for accommodation, and offers services of nature guides, mountain biking, archery, educational workshops for school groups, etc …

The second proposal concerns the entrepreneurial experience of the most famous cook of the Dauni Mountains: Peppe Zullo. The "peasant" chef (as he likes to call himself) has founded his fortune on the ability to enhance the local culinary tradition by renewing it, on his media skills and on the constant desire to get involved: a restaurant, two reception rooms, two charming B & Bs, one cellar and many products (wine, preserves, etc ..) with his signature that are often on national televisions and around the world.

The third experience concerns an event of the popular tradition whose peculiarities have made it the most important appointment of the Dauni Mountains: the Fucacost and cocc priatorjie (bonfires and heads of purgatory). This is an event of the 1 November of the village of Orsara di Puglia of pagan origins. Traditionally, the night is celebrated when the dead return to visit their living loved ones and feast with them in the streets lit by bonfires. The event attracts up to 40,000 tourists per edition.

The fourth example concerns the promotional activities of some of the villages of the Monti dauni which, thanks to their policies and their characteristics, have achieved certifications relating to tourist quality. Monti Dauni count: 9 orange flags of the Italian Touring Club (Alberona, Biccari, Bovino, Orsara di Puglia, Pietramontecorvino, Rocchetta Sant'Antonio, Roseto Valfortore, Sant'Agata di Puglia, Troia), 4 most beautiful villages in Italy (Alberona, Bovino, Pietramontecorvino, Roseto Valfortore), 2 slow cities (Orsara di Puglia and Sant'Agata di Puglia) and numerous authentic villages.

The latest example consists of a tourism promotion project by the LAG Meridaunia in progress. Drawing on CLLD funds, the project involves the construction of integrated tourist services, their marketing promotion, communication and incoming activities, b2b, b2c, events, a website for booking services (Visitmontidauni), communication materials (gadgets, guides, videos, etc), events,

press tours, etc .

The project was recently selected (together with 4 others) by the Italian Rural Network as an example of best practice in the tourism sector.

CONCLUSIONS

- **Strengths**

  - variety of elements characterizing the offer: nature, culture (art, architecture, villages), food and wine
  - widespread presence of cultural heritage
  - many villages belong to circuits on sustainable and quality tourism
  - presence of a good natural heritage
  - widespread hospitality and non-standardized accommodation facilities (variety of the offer)
  - extensive food and wine heritage (local products) and a good level of local cuisine
  - authenticity of the destination

- **Weaknesses**

  - generic and unstructured proposal
  - lack of tourist management of most of the cultural heritage
  - poor accessibility of cultural assets (architectural barriers and openings)
  - basic tourist services, few realities offer distinctive experiences
  - poor appeal of the destination (the notoriety of the destination is low)
  - lack of tourism entrepreneurship and poorly trained operatives
  - digital divide and technological gap
  - poor knowledge of foreign languages

RECOMMENDATIONS

1) continue the action undertaken to accompany private operators in the creation and promotion of their products

2) initiate specific training actions for tour operators (guides, accommodation, catering, etc ...)

3) create innovative tourist services

4) create highly appealing tourist experiences for specific targets (food and wine, relaxation, sport and nature)

5) identify forms of support for the management of cultural heritage (castles, museums, etc ...)

6) continue the communication and promotion of the tourist destination

7) carry out a reasoned planning of tourist attraction events

8) implement the offer relating to entertainment (events, shows, nightlife, etc ...)

9) enhance the visibility of the visitmontidauni logo and its products (website / app)

10) initiate contacts with new stakeholders (tour operators, travel agencies)

11) expand communication / promotion strategies (communication services of instagram influencers, celebrities, etc ..)

12) increase the actions to create sustainable mobility circuits, cycle paths, paths, etc ...)

13) increase physical connections with airports and railway stations

14) increase the capacity of public transport with the provincial capital and between neighboring villages

PORTUGAL

RIA AVEIROAND BAIXO VOUGA LAGUNAR - APROXIMAR

Characteristics of the area

The Ria de Aveiro and Baixo Vouga Lagunar region extends for more than 11,000 ha and has around 45 km of length and 8,5 km of width (Fidélis, 2001). It is comprised by the municipalities of Águeda, Albergaria-a-Velha, Anadia, Aveiro, Estarreja, Ílhavo, Murtosa, Oliveira do Bairro, Ovar, Vagos and Sever do Vouga.

The region is located approximately 250 km away from the capital, Lisbon, and 70 km away from the second biggest city, Porto. Despite this proximity, as referred to in the Plano Diretor Municipal of 2019 (PDM 2019) for this region, the accessibilities to the city of Aveiro are very satisfactory, but there is a considerable discrepancy when it comes to accessibility of rural areas of the region. According to the PDM 2019 there is a need to "promote universal accessibility in the region, as a factor of inclusion and social justice" (PDM, 2019, p.9).

The formation of this area goes back to the 16th century, as a consequence of the retreat of the sea and the accumulation of sand and sediments. These natural phenomenons lead to the creation of natural lagoons which, together with the River Vouga, formed many water canals. The combination of these natural phenomenons makes the Ria de Aveiro e Baixo Vouga Lagunar a region of beautiful landscapes and enormous biodiversity, classified as Zona de Proteção Especial (Zone of Special Protection).

It is a diversified landscape with both mountains and valleys, sea and rivers, which facilitate the emergence and growth of a multiplicity of leisure and touristic activities. This way it is possible to take advantage of natural reserves, lagoons, maritime beaches, fluvial beaches etc., but also of cultural sites such as museums, churches, architectural patrimony etc.

Nevertheless, according to Albuquerque et al. (2017), "these characteristics should be used for sustainable tourism development and for the design of marketing strategies" (p.165). It is essential that a clear strategy is drawn, in order to preserve the region and for it to keep its unique features.

In 2019, the Center Region, of which the Ria de Aveiro and Baixo Vouga Lagunar region are part of, had the best year yet in terms of number of guests and profits: it received 3895.612 guests, an increase of 5,9% compared to 2018. If a five year period is considered (2015-2019), then there was an increase of 43,2% which clearly illustrates the growing interest in the area. Regarding profits, there was an increase of 59,6% when comparing 2015 with 2019 (INE, 2020).

Despite this positive evolution, the COVID-19 pandemic took a massive tool on the region, as displayed in the tables below:

Table x: Percentual variation of Tourist Accommodations in the Aveiro Region, broken down by municipalities, in 2019 and 2020

Territórios		Alojamentos turísticos		
		Total		
Âmbito Geográfico	Anos	2018	2019	2020
NUTS III	Região de Aveiro	-	22,0	-14,3
Município	Águeda	-	11,1	-10,0
Município	Albergaria-a-Velha	-	42,9	0,0
Município	Anadia	-	7,1	-33,3
Município	Aveiro	-	18,2	-7,7
Município	Estarreja	-	0,0	0,0
Município	Ílhavo	-	18,2	-15,4
Município	Murtosa	-	-33,3	0,0
Município	Oliveira do Bairro	-	0,0	0,0
Município	Ovar	-	66,7	-13,3
Município	Sever do Vouga	-	44,4	0,0
Município	Vagos	-	60,0	-75,0

Source: Por Data (2021)

Table 1: Number of guests in the Aveiro Region, broken down by municipalities, in 2019 and 2020

Territórios		Turistas		
		Total		
Âmbito Geográfico	Anos	2018	2019	2020
NUTS III	Região de Aveiro	-	10,0	-49,6
Município	Águeda	-	51,1	-49,7
Município	Albergaria-a-Velha	-	20,2	-35,3
Município	Anadia	-	3,9	-59,4
Município	Aveiro	-	5,6	-51,9
Município	Estarreja	-	6,5	-50,3
Município	Ílhavo	-	20,1	-39,2
Município	Murtosa	-	-9,9	-41,3
Município	Oliveira do Bairro	-	8,1	-32,8
Município	Ovar	-	6,5	-50,0
Município	Sever do Vouga	-	39,4	-32,0
Município	Vagos	-	53,4	-57,7

Source: Por Data (2021)

The Aveiro region registered a decrease in the number of tourist accommodations, as shown in table 1. This was most noticeable in the Vagos municipality, while other municipalities, such as Sever do Vouga, Oliveira do Bairro, Murtosa, Estarreja and Albergaria-a-Velha were able to maintain the same number of tourist accommodations. There are no studies conducted on why these municipalities' accomodations were able to prosper yet. Regarding the number of guests, as depicted in table 1, there was an abrupt decrease in all municipalities, as expected.

Despite this negative trend during the pandemic period, the positive evolution shown in the past give us clear indication of the touristic potential of the region and highlight the need to have a clear, structure and strong strategy to tackle the challenges and grab the opportunities in the Ria de Aveiro and Baixo Vouga Lagunar Region.

Rural Tourism: policies, programs and governance

The current touristic strategy for Portugal is delineated by the Portuguese Government, namely through the Estratégia Turismo 2027 which approaches the main lines of action to be implemented and developed until 2027. Its goal is to create a strategic frame of reference . Specifically regarding rural tourism, the plan refers as its main objectives:

- "Development of nature tourism and tourism in rural areas via projects that add economic value and active management of natural and rural heritage(...) namely with regard to promoting the Natural.PT brand.

- Infrastructure and services that support nature tourism and/or tourism in rural areas, signing and interpretation information for environmental tourism.

- Operations that revitalize and invigorate the economy of villages and rural centers with a vocation for tourism (...) such as Shale Villages, Historic Villages and Wine-Growing Villages.

- Actions that improve tourism and promote lakes and inland waters, rivers, reservoirs, springs and hot springs resorts." (Turismo de Portugal, 2021)

Complementary to this strategy, there is the Plano Turismo +Sustentável 20-23, in which Rural Tourism has a more preponderant position. The plan's goal is to position Portugal as one of the most sustainable, competitive and safe tourist destinations, through planning and developing sustainable tourism activities. Therefore, Rural Tourism plays an invaluable role in achieving this goal (Turismo de Portugal, 2021).

Not exclusively directed to tourism, but that also includes it, the portuguese government launched in 2021 the PAPN – Programa de Apoio à Produção Nacional (Support Program for National Production), with the goal of stimulating national production, especially of micro and small enterprises. PAPN has allocated 235.000€ to micro and small enterprises that operate in the tourism sector in the Aveiro region (NML Turismo, 2021).

In the Aveiro region, the municipality of Sever do Vouga has initiated, in January 2021, a Strategic Plan for Tourism and Local Development, in which the goal is to set a clear structure for this sector, on that is aligned with what the territory has to offer and build on the differentiated elements of the region (Região de Aveiro, 2021).

Notwithstanding the plans and programs described above, there is no known plan or program explicitly designed for rural tourism in the Ria de Aveiro and Baixo Vouga Lagunar region as a whole; there are programs and plans in place for Rural Tourism and for a municipality within the region (Sever do Vouga), but none that takes into account the characteristics and vicissitudes of the whole region's rural tourism potential.

Touristic data

Businesses and organizations that operate in the tourism sector in the region of Ria de Aveiro and Baixo Vouga Lagunar were inquired in order to paint a clear picture of the weaknesses, strengths, challenges and opportunities of this area. Through the insights of cultural and naturalist heritage sites, hospitality services and associations and touristic guides, it was possible to map the touristic

activity in the area, as presented in this section.

Cultural Heritage and Naturalistic Heritage

This region is rich in both cultural and natural heritage. Despite this, most tourists visit this region to enjoy its natural landscape, such as the Ria de Aveiro with its Moliceiros' boat tours.

During the interviews' phase, which collected the answers of 10 respondents, 8 of the heritage sites interviewed were cultural sites, due to the fact that they were more accessible to reach by phone and email, i.e. many natural sites do not have any form of contact associated with it, while 2 were natural sites. The latter were situated in rural areas, while the former were evenly divided between rural and urban areas.

- Regarding accessibilities, all respondents considered that the accessibility to the sites were comfortable, but 2 referred to the lack of signs that lead to the location. Despite this, only a minority of the sites is accessible to people with disability, being this a major area of improvement.

- Most heritage sites were open all year, but some, especially smaller house-museums, were only open through bookings made beforehand. Of the 8 respondents that were open all year, 6 closed on Sundays and Mondays.

- Regarding the services offered half of the respondents provide only guided tours, while the other half provide both guided and free tours. The guided tours are offered not only in Portuguese, but also in other languages, mainly English and Spanish.

- In terms of the tourists that have visited the sites, respondents referred that they came from all over the country and that they also had visitors from other countries in Europe, namely Spain and France.

- In what concerns networks and circuits present in the region, seven were part of networks such as the Portuguese Association of Museum-Houses or the National Network of Small Museums.

- Most cultural and heritage sites did their communication and promotion online: all had social media (Facebook) and half had their own website. Despite this, promotion through flyers, magazines, newspapers and brochures was also prevalente, with 6 respondents saying that they usually use these means. 5 respondents also said they used to participate in tourism fairs and events before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hospitality Services

The testimonies of 10 hospitality and accomodations sites were collected during the interview phase. All are located in rural areas, with different types of landscapes, from mountains to valleys.

- All accommodations receive guests all year long, but identified the biggest inflow of tourists during the summer months (June to August). The guests were characterized as mainly older couples or families with kids, who want to enjoy nature and engage in activities such as hiking, birdwatching and nature sports.

- Most accommodations did not have clear signs or indications that lead to the premises and they referred to this as a point of improvement, but also commented on the bureaucracies around having these signs on the road. 4 respondents considered that they have limited infrastructures in terms of accessibility to the site.

- Regarding extra services, what stood out is that most offered bicycle sharing services and all offered Wifi connection, which shows the importance of connection even in rural and nature sectings. On the other hand, none offered workshops or touristic visits, which signals a clear opportunity for diversifying the services offered, creating partnerships with other associations of the sector and creating a strategy to attenuate the seasonality of the influx of visitors.

- In terms of networks and circuits, none of the respondents was included on touristic routes or itnerarie, but two were included in quality circuits such as Biosfera - Turismo Sustentável, which distinguishes tourism operators, accommodations etc. that engage in or promote sustainable practices

- Similarly to what was referred previously for the natural and cultural heritage sites, hospitality services also referred to social media and their own website as the main vehicles for promotion.

The activities of associations and tourist guides

In order to assess the prevalent activities of associations and tourist guides in the Ria de Aveiro and Baixo Vouga Lagunar, 10 interviews were conducted.

- All of the respondents identified their mission as both cultural and environmental and one respondent even went further saying that touristic operators, no matter the services they provide, have an inherent mission of raising awareness for natural and cultural preservation and protection.

- The majority of associations and tourist guides who answered the questionnaire concentrated their operations solely on the Ria de Aveiro and Baixo Vouga Lagunar region. All offered the activities and tour guides in other languages (predominantly Spanish and English) and referred that they received several transnational tourists. The activities that most respondents offer are: trekking, canoeing, orientation, birdwatching and mountain biking.

- 8 of the respondents had collaborated with other touristic guides and associations or did so on a regular basis, with one respondent clarifying the reasoning behind this collaboration with the need to offer specialized services to customers, which his association could not provide (example: paintball).

- Most promoted their activities through social media, while some had their own website. Clearly online promotion was preferred when compared to traditional channels, such as flyers, radio or TV advertisement and fairs and events. None used e-commerce tools in their business.

Good/Best Experiences - Good/Best examples

Five best practices of the region have been identified, which aim to promote the region and improve both the experience of tourists as well as of inhabitants.

a) Há Festa na Aldeia (There is a party at the village), at Vilarinho de São Roque

Vilarinho de São Roque is a very small village located in Albergaria-a-Velha. Similarly to other rural areas it has seen a steady decrease in its population and, consequently, a degradation of its infrastructures. In situations like this, the local population starts to feel disenfranchised from the village and the community. Developed by ATA - Associação do Turismo de Aldeia (Village Tourism

Association), the program Há Festa na Aldeia stimulates and promotes tourism in small villages in Portugal, at the same time preserving their rurality and their inhabitants' quality of life. The activities are both directed to the local populations, due to the fact that they make use of the local traditions and resources, and to tourists, by giving them a feeling of authenticity. Examples of these activities are Magusto (traditional festivity in the Fall), but with the village philharmonic band playing and the locals organizing traditional games. Há festa na Aldeia's main mission is to organize these events based on a methodology that involves the villagers in the decision made regarding the type of event, activities developed, food served etc.

b) App "Sentir Estarreja"

Estarreja is a municipality situated in the Baixo Vouga Lagunar area, which is mainly rural, surrounded by the wetlands that composed the Ria de Aveiro. Estarreja has had difficulties in diversifying their touristic offer, since most visitors are Portuguese and come at a very specific time of the year, which is during Carnival (this is one of the most popular Carnival parties in Portugal). These tourists end up staying only for a short period of time and not enjoying all that this municipality has to offer. The Municipality of Estarreja created the free App Sentir Estarreja (Feeling Estarreja) which allows the user to explore the region in an interactive and intuitive way. It is available in four different languages – Portuguese, Spanish, English and French – in order to reach out to different audiences. The app allows the user to explore local restaurants and provides many options of trails and walks in nature.

It also has a feature that allows the user to rate the experiences and locations and to earn points when doing so, which are translated in a classification present in the app. The users then can share their experiences on other forms of social media social media

c) Casa do Moinho-Ovar

The trade of "moleiro" (those who work in traditional mills, i.e., millers) is one of the oldest trades and traditions in the area of Ovar and mills are a vital component in the region's landscape. Since the extinction of this occupation many mills and miller's houses have been abandoned, which represents a loss to the patrimony and heritage of the region.Casa do Moinho has recuperated the mill and the house of the moleiro (moleiros had their houses right next to the mill, or often they slept inside the mill), maintaining the stone walls and recuperating some of the furniture.

d) Comur Museum

Since the XIX century, the canning food industry has been one of the biggest contributors to Portuguese exports, and Portuguese canned food, especially fish is known and appreciated all around the world. The Ria de Aveiro area is essential in this industry, being this industry is a symbol of the region. Despite this, the industry has suffered a "image problem", being often associated, in Portugal, with cheap and low-quality food. The old Comur factory was transformed into a museum, where visitors can explore the history and development of the Portuguese canning industry. The museum also shows the complete process of canning production, from the moment the fish arrive to the time the cans are shipped. Special attention is paid to the quality requirements and to the traditional role

of the "Murtosa fryers": women who worked in the canning industry in Murtosa, which was and is known for its eels. The eels were fried and preserved in pickled sauce by the women who sold them at local fairs. The museum store also allows the visitors to buy the products they saw being assembled during the visit.

e) Comboio Histórico do Vouga (Vouga Historic Train)

The area of Ria de Aveiro is a protected area with a rich history and heritage. The Comboio Histórico do Vouga is a perfect medium to explore it, although it was discontinued for some years, due to economic hardship. In 2021, it started circulating again. The Vouga historial train circulates during the summer months between Aveiro and Macinhata do Vouga. It allows the traveler to experience a voyage in a historical train, given it has five carriages from the early XX century, and to enjoy the landscapes. Further to this, there is a full day program, that includes a performance by musicians from the region and a small fair with traditional products in Macinhata do Vouga (the destination) and a visit to the Train museum in this village, in the round trip. In the return trip, passengers can enjoy a one and half hour stop at Águeda, and taste the local cuisine, before returning to Aveiro.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The main conclusions reached through this research and inquiries is that there is a need to improve the promotion of the region and of the businesses and organizations that operate in the tourism sector. As described, most businesses already have adequate procedures in place - e.g., are open all year long and offer different types of activities - and the trained staff - e.g. most businesses have staffers that speak languages other than Portuguese - but there is a clear need to improve communication and marketing strategies. This offers an adequate point of direction for the development of the Escape2 project: there should be a strong focus on strategies of promotion, communication, marketing but also of networking so that rural areas can cohesively build their brand and be inspired by the best practices of other stakeholders in the region, with the goal of attracting and developing sustainable tourism solutions.

Nevertheless, there is also the need for Public Investment, especially when it comes to the accessibility to rural sites and adequate signalization of touristic activities in the area.

ROMANIA
NORD-EST REGION OF ROMANIA – EASI

Characteristics of the area

This region is guided by the principles of sustainable development, respect for traditions and history, natural and built heritage, and the enhancement of its ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity, with an area of 34,160 km² and 2.730.132 people living here.

The region Nord-West is one of the 8 key Romanian regions, and it is formed from 6 counties. The poles of economic development in the area are represented by large cities, such as Cluj-Napoca, Baia-Mare, Oradea, Zalău, Satu Mare and Bistrița.

Some key information

LABOUR MARKET (situation in 2015): 28.16% of the employed persons were in the agriculture domain, 23.04% in industry, 13.02% in trade and 6.48% in construction.

ECONOMY: International trade exports by sector ranged from machinery and mechanical tools, electrical equipment, audio, and video recording devices, which accounted for 34% of the region's total exports, to miscellaneous articles and furniture, base metals, textiles and clothing, and plastic and rubber articles, which totalled 6%.

HIGHER EDUCATION, RESEARCH, AND INNOVATION: Only 3.49% of the country's population has higher education. This region is the second in Romania in terms of the number of RDI – Research, Development, and Innovation units (2013). The proportion of innovative companies has decreased considerably, from 27% of the total number of companies in 2004-2010 to only 12% in 2012, ranking last at national level.

TOURISM: Tourism is a huge attraction in the region, with visitors coming to see the wide variety of museums, castles, fortresses, and religious landmarks, as well as urban architecture. With 14 certified resorts, medical centers and spas, health tourism is another major attraction, while rural tourism is also flourishing in the extensive protected nature areas of the Maramureş, Apuseni and Munţii Rodnei (mountains).

According to a study conducted by Ionel Marian, from „Ovidius"University of Constanta, Faculty of Economic Sciences, the Romanian village is an original tourist product that generates tourist flows because it is based on (Nistoreanu et al, 2003, p.208) a wide range of natural and cultural resources, various tourist facilities and tourist experiences and traits of the specificity and uniqueness of our country: people, history, culture, traditions and customs.

In Romania, rural settlements with a tourist function, namely tourist villages, are not homologated and legalized by legislation, therefore they have not been identified, organized, arranged, and promoted. In the rural area only the rural tourist boarding houses are promoted, without mentioning the ethnographic area it belongs to (Glavan, 2006, p.143). Therefore, in many rural areas, rural tourist boarding houses were built without respecting local specific architecture and without the use of environmentally friendly building materials. This is very dangerous for rural tourism because it leads to the loss of local identity and the transmission of specific elements of urban settlements. For maintaining the characteristics specific to Romanian rural tourism, a set of measures must be taken to preserve unaltered and to protect the natural and cultural resources specific to rural areas. At the same time, it is important to establish strategies at central and local level for the promotion of rural tourism and agro-tourism, both internally as well as internationally.

Rural Tourism: policies, programs, and governance

During the period 2014-2020, this region was integrated in a local strategy of development, elaborated on the European norms, in which the rural area was approached as well by describing the pillars for its development. Through this strategy, for the development of rural area it was proposed the competitive development and implementation and support of new enterprises.

The tourism in this area is characterized by 7 types of touristic sights: historical sights, religious placements, monuments, natural and artificial lakes, cultural attractions, ethnographic and folkloric attractions of each region. Besides the collection and presentation of statistical data regarding the types of touristic places, this strategy contains 7 general measures to increase the touristic specifications of the area. Unfortunately, at this moment, does not exist a public study on the impact of this strategy and the measures that were implemented.

The Nord-West region in Romania attracts tourists in unusual locations – based on local legends, spooky stories, adventure tourism, or international tales (such as Dracula). Unfortunately, these types of unusual tourist attractions, even if they are described in touristic offers, are retained in infrastructure development and complex touristic offers in the area.

Recent research conducted in Romania presents a series of recommendations for rural tourism in the area of Cluj Napoca, based on the local findings and realities. For a sustained development of Romanian rural tourism, it is needed to have dense and different programs that will involve tourists in more types of activities, and not only in culinary experiences. There are also some negative aspects regarding Romanian society which lead to a decrease of tourism, which are based on poverty and places not suitably adapted.

The protected areas from this region could be fully integrated in strategies of promoting eco-tourism, which is the most acceptable form to protect the environment. For medium-term development (until 2021), this research promotes the save from degradation of cultural buildings, such as religious ones. For the unusual attractions, it is recommended to develop a structure to attract more tourists as thematic parks, specific sports exploitation (golf), inclusion of the attraction in international routes, developing of personalized touristic package and multiplying the existing targeted resources (spa and wellness, salt caves, thermal water, etc.)

Regarding the accommodation, there are regions where it is inexistent, according to national statistics, especially in rural areas with a high potential for tourism, in North Transylvania. In addition, the road access is not as satisfactory, with few numbers of high-routes or speed routes in the area.

Moreover, this research continues with some recommendations for the sustained rural tourism development: national strategy to increase the number of accommodation places, promoting new areas for tourism to create more spaces and attractions, increase the functionality of Info-Points and promote several types of activities which will lead to the acquisition of more nights of accommodation. (Bibliography: Tourism in Nord-West Region: there are tourist attractions, but without infrastructure. What are the solutions?, sociological research made by University Babes-Bolyai, Cluj: https://transilvaniareporter.ro/actualitate/turismul-in-regiunea-de-nord-vest-marile-lipsuri-principalele-puncte-forte-si-potential-de-dezvoltare/)

Touristic data

The European Association for Social Innovation applied in Romania the surveys built within the ESCAPE2 project and managed to reach 30 local and national stakeholders from touristic areas in order to check the national situation of tourism, focusing on the rural one. The research was divided in

3 areas of action: hospitality and accommodation, cultural and natural heritage and touristic guides and tourist agencies. For hospitality and accommodation, 12 persons fulfilled the survey, for cultural and natural heritage there were 8 answers and 10 for touristic guides and tourist agencies.

The target group for this research was constituted by a low number of participants, randomly selected, so the results do not represent the national situation in Romania, only a starting point for further action within this project.

Cultural and natural heritage

For the cultural and natural heritage, EaSI faced the biggest reluctance among individuals who are responsible for this type of organizations, reaching only 8 entities that showed an interest in the ESCAPE2 survey. They are being situated mostly in mountain or hill areas. The answers were collected from 1 citadel, 3 museums, 1 national society (for salt caves) and 1 local association for promotion and development of tourism - 2 being situated in urban areas, 2 in old towns and 4 in rural areas. Within these 8 answers received, there are representatives of: historical building (1), historical garden (1), archeological museum (2) and other types of museums which include old churches as well (4).

The accessibility does not seem to be an issue among the respondents, having 6 answers as good roads until the site and 2 as not so comfortable. We could not reach any correlation between the road state and the road signs, the answers being mixed with good roads, but insufficient signs, or sufficient signs with not so comfortable roads. There is one visible correlation from these answers, between the state of roads and the accessibility for people with disability (especially motor disability) – those who declared that the roads are not comfortable declared as well that there are accessibility issues for people with disabilities.

The majority of these entities are closed on Mondays, being considered an administrative day, and during the National Holidays. 1 entity mentioned that they are changing the schedule within the seasons, and all of them declared that the period April-October is the busiest one.

2 of these sites don't have any tour available, 2 are with guided tours and the rest of 4 provide the option to choose for a guided tour. The tourists received are local, national or foreigners from a higher distance than 50 km and they are welcomed with brochures in 5 places, graphic leaflets in 3, interactive stands in 3, and in one site with audio guide.

These sites are foreigner friendly as well, providing support in different languages: 6 in English, among which 2 are in French.

Another topic, it seems that public funding is not so accessible to all, which is why 3 out of 8 said they did not receive a grant in the last 10 years. EaSI noted that some of these organizations have received support from the City Council for restorations (site including old churches as cultural heritage or museums) or tourism development. In addition, one entity has received funding from the Ministry of Research and one from the European Commission, both archeological museums.

All the respondents are promoting their site on a dedicated Facebook page or on their own website. One entity is integrated in international brochures which are distributed in airports and Embassies and 2 are integrated in national offline promotion as local tourist markets, newspapers, or brochures. Besides, one site is not included in any touristic itineraries or promotional circuits.

All these sites need a valid ticket to enter where the price is about 2 to 8 lei (0.4 and 1.6 euro). 5 of them can receive only cash payment, and 3 can receive both cash and card. Moreover, 2 respondents positively answered for e-commerce, mentioning phone apps.

Hospitality and accommodation

12 representatives from the HORECA domain provided answers to our questionnaire, randomly distributed throughout Romania. Among these answers, we can find 6 agritourist places, 2 café and 4 other types of entities, located mostly in rural areas (5 in villages and 4 in rural region or countryside), from hill or mountain areas. Among these entities, we registered various type of accommodation, by the following: 3 bed & breakfast, 1 eco glamping, 2 homestays, 1 apartment, 1 hotel and 2 other types.

Regarding the access to their sites, the majority declared that the roads are satisfactory and the road signs sufficient. One respondent from the village area stated that the roads are insufficiently accessible, with insufficient road signs, while another one mentioned that the roads allow limited access. Regarding the accessibility to these sites, people with disabilities (especially motor ones) are poorly taken into consideration for the arrangements of the places, with 8 negative answers for accessibility. Moreover, there were 4 positive answers for road accessibility and all of them are from sites from rural areas.

All the respondents representing the accommodation and hospitality domains are open all year, receiving all types of tourists, national or internationals.

Generally, the tourists can benefit from restaurants on site for the "interviewed" locations and the majority offer local or ethnical dishes, while 3 can provide international cuisine as well. For the local kitchen, one of these locations included various types of fish dishes in the menu, due to the fish farming arranged on site. One of the answers was for an open kitchen, where tourists can cook by themselves, while 2 of them don't have this facility at all.

In terms of available facilities, 10 out of 12 entities mentioned the existence of a lobby or reception 7 have playgrounds, 8 have green spaces, 11 have Wi-Fi and 8 have TVs in their room; in 4 places, tourists have access to laundry facilities, while 4 entities can offer excursions and 3 tasting experiences.

The prices mentioned ranged from less than 15 euros to a maximum of 40 euros, as follows: 5 entities with prices less than 15 euros, 3 between 21 and 25 euros, and 2 between 36 and 40 euros per night. The 2 with higher prices are being located in the mountain area. From 12 entities, only one declared that the payment can be made just cash, while the other 11 have both ways available (cash and card). Also, one respondent said they do not use e-commerce, but they accept card payment within the unity.

Generally, the entities that answered to our questionnaire did not mention partnerships with other stakeholders or organizations. Only 3 stated that they are partners with other businesses, including with national providers for holiday vouchers. Regarding the types of partnerships, we can add the promotion circuits, and it can be observed that 1 entity is not included in promotion networks or platforms and 7 are not included in tourism circuits. Following this questionnaire, 4 HORECA managers mentioned that their tourism website can offer climbing trails or tasting experiences.

The majority of the respondents are promoting their business online on touristic websites such as Booking or other national platforms (TravelMinit), or on social media.

In terms of foreign languages, the people who answered to this questionnaire are speaking English (7 out of 12) among which, 2 have other language for support, such as French or Hungarian. Besides, 3 respondents stated they only speak 1 foreign language, which is not English, but: Hungarian (in northern side of Romania), Spanish and French.

Touristic guides

EaSI collected 10 answers for this category, with a wider distribution in Bucharest, among which all of them are national tourist guides, 3 providing hiking guided tours and 2 other types of tourism (unmentioned). All of them collaborated with some other businesses or organizations, like the large-scale touristic Romanian agencies.

Among these 10 respondents, all speak English and 6 have a second language to provide their services, German or French. Regarding the services that they provide, 4 are offering environmental workshops, 1 cultural tourism, 1 leisure trips and 3 natural excursions.

5 respondents declared that they are not using e-commerce. Among the collected answers, 4 declared that they receive only cash payment. 2 respondents who receive just cash are among those who don't use e-commerce as well. The average prices for 4 hours of touristic guide is around 70 euros and for other services beside touristic guides, the prices can reach 150 euros for 4 hours, respectively 250 euros for the whole day. At this price, the tourist can enjoy other types of experiences, such as trekking trails for bikes.

The channels used for promotion are their own websites, the social networks such as Facebook or Instagram, and one mentioned the print advertising. One respondent added that the social studies increased its skills to better understand the communities found in its traveling on 4 continents.

Good/Best Experiences - Good/Best examples

1. Căsuțele din vie – The houses in the vineyard, Gorj, Romania

A family from a village from Gorj county succeeded through European funds to develop a project for rural tourism by placing 6 little wooden houses (for 2 persons) in a vineyard, organizing a place for relaxation, a play-yard, and a place for dinner outdoors. The tourists can come with a camper van or to rent a tent. These entrepreneurs have preserved and restored the old cellar specific to wine-growing areas and transformed them in a museum with local objects.

2. Construction of a multisport field at Plenita Village

Currently, in Romania, the agricultural activities make up around 85% of the local economy. The local entrepreneurship is also predominantly related to primary agriculture, fruit growing and fishing/aquaculture. However, it has been noticed that by increasing the attractiveness of the area - improving the local infrastructure and publicizing local cultural events (e.g. the annual ceremony of the peony, some traditional and religious events) – Plenita is becoming more and more attractive for diversification, innovation and attracting businesses.

3. The Flourishing Destinations approach - communities in Romania, Flanders (Belgium) and Scotland worked collectively to create a model for community-led sustainable tourism development

The Flourishing Destinations approach is one where people come together to create and develop a thriving community that benefits visitors and locals alike. The participating areas wished to grow their tourism activities in a way that could be mindful of the community and natural capital of their areas. The main achievement has been to support the local tourism communities and to focus them on joint cooperative, sustainable development of their area. Increased numbers of local actors are now more engaged in wider community and rural development considerations and have used the project to profile their work at regional and national level. The personal development of the people involved,

acquired from being engaged in funded and structured networking activities.

4. FishNat, "Fishing – cross-border tourist opportunity / product and sustainable use of natural heritage and resources", a Romanian-Bulgarian project

This idea started from the desire to promote the cultural local heritage near the Danube in both countries and to stimulate the local development by promoting fishing as a tourism increased potential. The project has been focused on the organization of workshops for the joint development of entrepreneurship and for the local population in the areas concerned with recreational tourism (opportunities for accommodation, eating places, camping sites, travel, and entertainment). At the end of the project, it has been organized a FISHNAT Festival – an event considered as a touristic package for 3 days, with an estimated of 3000 participants.

5. Setting up a botanical garden and providing training to young farmers

A small county in Romania used EAFRD support to restore and promote its local landmark: a botanical garden (created in 1971), and designed a training programme on environmental aspects for young farmers. EAFRD support was used to restore the infrastructure and vegetation of the garden and link it with other similar establishments at national and international levels. Additionally, the funding allowed to set up an educational programme for young farmers focused on environmental issues such as applied environmental protection, ecological storage of livestock waste, water consumption economy, drip irrigation in fields and greenhouses.

*Data have been retrieved from the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) website - https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/projects-practice/_en?f%5B0%5D=sm_enrd_eu_countries%3ARomania

CONCLUSIONS

In Romania, based on the data that EaSI collected, we could observe an openness to receive local or foreign tourists and for the managers of touristic activities it has been noticed an interest in improving their skills and outcomes to prepare a better welcome for all the tourists who visit their sites (from all 3 domains on which EaSI focused the research). Usually, in each entity someone speaks English, but it is not a rule and in some places the tourists may be in the position of finding a host who cannot communicate in an international language - resulting in an issue for increasing the international tourism.

Many tourist services providers mentioned that there is an accessibility problem since the road signs that provide information about touristic sites are not sufficient to send the tourists to more destinations and the roads situation differ from one area to another. One observation that can be pulled out of this research is that tourist receivers in Romania are poorly prepared to welcome persons with disabilities (especially with physical disability), except the cultural institutions who stated that they are more prepared in terms of accessibility matters.

Based on the answers received in the survey, there can be noticed that when it comes to discuss about partnership, the entities from HORECA and cultural organizations have the tendency of not being open to collaborate so much in their field with other local or national businesses but rather have an internal network and being more self-oriented businesses. Moreover, e-commerce is a tool scarcely used at a large scale, with less than 50% of respondents who stated this type of tool. In Romania, most of the respondents uses online marketing tools, such as social media or own websites on which they promote their services, so potential tourists can find them easier.

Having in mind that national or European funds were not accessed on a large scale by the local stakeholders from the 3 fields that were consulted, it may be important to increase the awareness and the information among national actors from the touristic fields, especially from rural areas about

national and European funds. These grants can help them increase the visibility and bring more tourists who can benefit from cultural/nature related benefits in the rural area.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the input received from the Romanian respondents the main recommendation would be to increase the cooperation among local and national stakeholders, that will be leading to the development of high-quality strategies, in which the competition among actors is encouraged, therefore the prices and services become competitive as well.

The Romanian actors in tourism could get involved in applying for national or international funds for developing their region. There are several types of fundings in which the collaboration between small communities is fully encouraged, so they must assure firstly a basic level cooperation to reach them.

Moreover, for the international rural tourism development, the recommendation is to outline the specificities of the area through international promotion, welcome tourists in more foreign languages and offer opportunities to exploit different areas that have the potential to become touristic attractions. This would also offer the chance to increase job opportunities in less developed counties and increase people's quality of life.

As an external recommendation, withdrawn from the research made by University Babes-Bolyai, for the sustained rural tourism development it is necessary to have a national strategy to increase the number of accommodation places, promoting new areas for tourism to create more spaces for attractions, increase the functionality of Info-Points and promote several types of activities which will lead to acquisition of more nights of accommodation.

SLOVAKIA
WEST AND MIDDLE OF SLOVAKIA – NEW EDU

Characteristics of the area

The market analysis was done in the rural areas mostly focused on the west and middle Slovakia.

This region has an approximate population of 3,15 million people and covers not only rich cultural and historical heritage, but also natural heritage – national parks of Mala and Velka Fatra, High and Low Tatras, rivers Danube, Vah, Hron and Dunajec. There are very good conditions not only for traditional touristic activities, but also for an ecological tourism and agritourism. Huge potential is recognized because of traditional food and vines.

Rural Tourism: policies, programs and governance

The strategy of the Slovak Republic for the development of sustainable tourism until 2030 is the main strategic material that determines the direction of the industry for the next ten years. Its essence is to create a set of tasks for the central state administration body responsible for the development of the tourism sector, the fulfillment of which in cooperation with stakeholders will lead to an increase in the level of the sector and its contribution to the national economy. The focus of this strategic document was set to support the fulfillment of tasks arising from the Program Statement of the Government of the Slovak Republic, Agenda 2030 and considering the need to build a unified presentation of the landscape and the appropriate use of natural and cultural resources.

Touristic data

Cultural and natural heritage

Slovakia is a country with huge cultural and natural heritage. In our survey we did not focus on the well aware location such as High Tatras, Fatra mountains or another National parks (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_national_parks_of_Slovakia), or castles and chateaus (https://www.hrady-zamky.sk/zoznam-hradov/) but we focused on local producers of local food/drinks/products. These "other" places covered 67% of interviewed locations in our survey, while museums and historical parks/gardens/ orchards – each 16,67%.

As a very positive fact must be highlighted that all of interviewed subjects are open during the whole year, just the museums have Monday as "sanitary day" or "day off". Most of them are opened from 10am till 6pm. Only one has opening hours from 10am till 4pm. Almost all of them confirm that their location is good with the sufficient quality of road and signs. Only 16,7%, located in the mountains such as Stiavnicke vrchy, mentioned that the roads are not optimal especially during the winter. Because all of interviewed subjects do not belong to the "traditional points of interest" only one uses audio guides or other interactive stands for information (museum Lisov). All of them use the paper leaflets/flyers with information about the place,67% offers to the customers different books or brochures and 50% have graphical information stands.

The staff of 50% of the assets speak English and only for 17% of them is possible to pay with Debit/Credit card. The main target groups for all the sites are families and local tourists. Almost 70% of the interviewed bodies have closed contract about the cooperation with the local quality mark, e.g.,

"Local product Hont" www.produkthont.sk.

For promotion, 67% of respondents use offline forms of communication, such as leaflets, journals, brochures; 50% of them take participation on different fairs and exhibitions; 33% use social networks and websites; 17% participate also on different project activities in the frame of Erasmus+.

Hospitality and accommodation

Restaurants and Agrotourism (both 33%) were the most popular categories through in the interview and, as we focused on the rural areas, all of them are in a rural region or countryside. As the west and middle Slovakia region is well developed, most of the interviewed participants, 83%, consider the infrastructure and transport options as sufficient. 67% of facilities consider route signs as sufficient, and 33% as excellent. Parking areas are available for all of them, as well as adapted to people with disabilities.

Almost all of the investigated facilities are present on social media (67%), mainly Facebook and the same amount of them use services of global/local guiders (www.booking.com and/or www.restauracie.sme.sk). In addition, all of the facilities are included in tourist routes and/or itineraries, e.g. www.produkthont.sk/regionalne-produkty/, www.travelguide.sk, www.sdetmi.com, etc.

Card payments and online payments are available for all the interviewed sites. The average price for a one-night stays for one person, including breakfast, is 55 €, but it relatively widely varied in dependence of the tourist attractiveness of the region.

Touristic guides and associations

In this section we focused on the independent touristic guides, associations, and offices. If the organization focuses on "Hiking guide", the license is necessary. For other activities – "Tourist guide" and "Outdoor sports activities instructor" the licenses are not required. All interviewed bodies offer services related to the "Local tourism" and "Natural excursions"

Between other services they are providing we can find hiking, environmental workshops, flora/fauna watching, cultural and history tours but also digital detox. All interviewed bodies offer English speaking guides, 33% of them also in other languages – mostly German, French and Spanish.

All guides offer the possibility to pay a service by Debit/Credit card or Cash payment. Respectively he uses e-commerce tools for his business.

Most of the interviewed bodies used website and print advertising as a tool for promoting their activities. Social networks and local campaigns are the less used (only 10%).

Good/Best Experiences - Good/Best examples

We have chosen five good practices that are an example for the preservation of the local traditions.

We have chosen four good practices that are an example of the exploitation of the local traditions,

historical, cultural, and natural heritage in Slovakia.

The first example of good practice is "Lišov Museum". Lišov Museum operates as an innovative community organization providing educational tourism in a small village of Lišov. It provides touristic educational activities and services in its three buildings; the first is a traditional folk house of Lišov called "Lišovská Izba" and represents typical local and regional architectural features with a room furnished in a folk-country style; the second is a replica of a Celtic dwelling; and the third is a Gallery of Masks in which is a small shop with hand-made products from local craftsmen, artists, and farmers. Museum currently works on the reconstruction of the house from 1887 where original materials such as clay, stone, and wood for the renovation are used. In the future, this house is planned to be a café. Museum actively participates in educational activities funded with the ERASMUS+ program and several foreign exchange stays per year were managed through this grant scheme.

Second good practice represents woman-farmer Janka and her Rozniak Farm. The Roziak Farm roots in traditions, in ancestors who lived here. Janka decided to stay in the house of her ancestors and beautify their work - the farm itself and shepherding as well.

The third one represents the business, specifically textile design. MODROTLAČ RABADA fabric designs are processed by the traditional techniques of blueprinting, inscribed on the UNESCO list of Intangible cultural heritage. Blueprint production is a combination of printing and dyeing crafts. The finished fabric is delivered to customers, or it is further processed into clothing under the brand MODROTLAČ RABADA.

Last, but not least, good practice represents AgroHouse in Papradno, which is set in a beautiful natural countryside surrounded by unspoiled mountains offering waymarked country walks and mountain bike trails of various difficulty levels.

The AgroHouse offers three facilities:

- Guest House "Agropenzion Grunt"
- Hut "Koliba Papradno"
- Farm.

The Guest House was built in 2001 by reconstruction of an old sewing workshop. The primary idea was to promote rural tourism and the sale of local products from sheep's milk that we produce at our farm. A few years later the owners built up an outdoor horse-riding arena. The Hut Papradno was built in 2008 and the accommodation part was completed in 2017.

CONCLUSIONS

- **Strengths**
  - Cultural, historical and natural heritage and potential
  - Attractivity during the all 4 seasons
  - Good infrastructure, roads, internet connection
  - Language skilled people (especially young)
  - Well preserved and restored object and monuments
  - Lot of touristic attractions are mentioned in the regional/national/international list of heritage (e.g. UNESCO)

- **Weakness**

    - Weak promotion, advertising and PR

    - Focus on the local target groups

    - Support of the local entrepreneurships (Project AGATA, www.agata-project.eu try to change this weakness)

    - Attention of tourists very often takes "Wellfamous", such a touristic centers in the mountains, castles or wellness/spa)

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Recommendations for Cultural and Natural Heritage sector in Slovakia

The world around us starts to be more digital connected and the generation of Millennials will very soon represent significant part of economically active social groups, so communication and advertising must be adjusted to their preferences. It means, digital presence, e-commerce and digital marketing is crucial for successful business. Social media and touristic portals are MUST HAVE in every business.

Secondly, the conceptual strategy/vision for further development of the area is necessary. This is task for the local policy makers, but also, as the Slovakia is the country with relatively big centralisation, for national governments and representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. As a example of good practice, how the collaborative and inclusive development of rural areas can work is the Slovak pilot in the H2020 project Polirural (www.polirural.eu and www.atraktivnyvidiek.sk).

At last, but not least, the managers for the rural tourism should graduate at the Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra, as this is unique tertiary education organization acting in the fields of agriculture and rural development.

2. Recommendations for Hospitality and accommodation sector in Slovakia

Considering a progress in this sector during last a few years, the significant improvements can be saw. Especially, in 2020 and 2021, because of COVID-19 limitations to travel abroad, Slovak people found the potential of Slovakia.

For the Hospitality and accommodation sector we can highlight the same points as for the cultural and heritage sector – improving the marketing and advertising. Activities should focus on the local traditions and quality of local products – food, drinks, and culture. Big emphasis must focus on the quality of the services and balance with the prices.

3. Recommendations for Touristic guides and associations in Slovakia

Tourist guiding is a sector that is not in spotlight. Except the guiders for hiking, tourist information offices in the cities and touristic centers such as High Tatras there is a lack of these services. Considering the collected information and findings from the interviews, we can recommend:

- The local touristic providers should invest in the guidance and guide, not only for hiking, but also to provide the information about the location, its history, cultural heritage and traditional products.

- The role of guide should take citizen(s), even a retired person, who has lived there for years, has a very good knowledge about the area and knows the "specialties". There should be significant additional value of the service provided e.g., by the hotel or touristic center.

- To create a "Adventure trip" with stops at the important points that are linked with e.g., history, good food, traditional products shop etc.

SPAIN

LA RIBERA – CONSORCI DE LA IBERA

Characteristics of the area

The Consorci de la Ribera is a supra-municipal entity that integrates the municipalities of two associations of municipalities: La Ribera Alta and La Ribera Baixa. Thus, the market analysis was carried out in the regions of La Ribera Alta and La Ribera Baixa.

The region of La Ribera Alta covers an area of 970.1 km² and is made up of 35 municipalities, with a population of more than 220,000 inhabitants. In turn, the county of Ribera Baixa covers an area of 280.36 km², has 12 municipalities and a population of 80,356 inhabitants. The study has not taken into account the municipality of Cullera, as it is not part of the Mancomunidad.

In these counties, which are structured by the River Xúquer, we can find magnificent natural and urban beaches, ideal for sunbathing or water sports, mountains, caves, springs and ravines for hiking. It has a unique landscape of orange groves, vineyards and rice fields that invite you to go on walks or bike rides.

Inhabited since prehistoric times, the Ribera de Xúquer preserves traces of Iberian, Roman and Arab settlements in the form of castles, fortifications with walls and numerous towers. Hermitages, churches and monasteries complete the architectural landscape.

Rural Tourism: policies, programs, and governance

In 2017 a Strategy for the creation of tourism products in the Ribera de Xúquer was presented. The main objective of the study was the development of an action plan for the creation, implementation and evolution of "real", unique, competitive and fully marketable tourism products.

The data from the survey carried out within the framework of the European project in 2021 will serve to complete the information from the previous study.

Touristic data
Cultural and natural heritage

As a whole, the territory under study has 395 tourist resources. Of these, 70% are related to cultural heritage of an architectural nature (military, civil, religious, popular, industrial, gastronomy, festivals, events, museums, recreational areas). Likewise, the presence of natural resources (reliefs, hydraulic elements and protected natural spaces) is also very important, accounting for 30% of the tourist resources.

The survey referring to cultural and natural heritage was answered by 22 entities, 95% from the public sector and 5% from the private sector. 38% of the resources corresponded to natural parks, 6% to churches, 31% to historic buildings, 13% to gardens and urban parks and 13% to museums. Regarding accessibility, 60% consider that the infrastructure is sufficient in terms of access routes, 26% say that there are sufficient transport options, 3% say that the infrastructure is limited. The municipalities that responded to the survey have important communication routes and have a railway line that connects

them to the most important urban center in the province, Valencia, which has an airport. In general, access to the less populated municipalities and access to the natural heritage is difficult by public transport. In terms of signposting, 67% of those surveyed said that it was sufficient and 19% said it was not. 71% of respondents said that the resources are accessible to people with disabilities. Regarding the opening of the resource, 68% are open all year round and 14% are open by appointment. 61% of the resources offer guided and free visits, 17% offer guided visits only and 22% offer unguided visits. 65% of them have an information stand, tourist info and information leaflets and 8% have an interactive stand and audio guide. In terms of language skills, 60% have knowledge of English, 26% have knowledge of French and 13% have knowledge of another language. 87% of the resources are free of charge and of the paid resources, 60% accept payment by credit card and the rest only in cash. 56% of the resources are promoted via the website and social networks, 17% through participation in fairs and 16% through brochures and magazines.

Hospitality and accommodation

According to the Municipal and Regional Tourist Offer data published by the Agència Valenciana del Turisme (2016), the 46 municipalities that make up the Consorci de la Ribera have a total of 6,580 places of regulated accommodation. Most of these regulated places are offered by campsites (65%), whose offer is concentrated in the municipality of Sueca (3 campsites with 4,300 accommodation places. After the campsites, hotels and flats are the types of accommodation with the greatest volume of supply. The 17 hotels distributed in 9 municipalities of the territory concentrate a total of 1,250 bedplaces (19% of the regulated bedplaces).

According to data provided by the Agència Valenciana del Turisme (2016), the 46 municipalities that form part of the Consorci de la Ribera have a total of 471 restaurants offering a total of 29,766 seats.

The vast majority of the restaurants are third category (97%). In this sense, the territory only has 14 second category restaurants: 5 restaurants in Alzira; 2 in Carcaixent, Sueca and Villanueva de Castellón; and one restaurant in Carlet, Favara and Llombai. Finally, the only two first category restaurants in the territory are located in the municipalities of L'Alcúdia and Alzira.

Sueca and Alzira are the municipalities with the largest restaurant offer (6,531 and 6,081 places, respectively). The rest of the municipalities with more than 1,000 restaurant places available are Alginet, Almussafes, Algemesí, Carcaixent, Benifaió and Carlet.

The survey conducted in the framework of the ESCAPE2 project was answered by 12 actors, 75% of which were restaurants and 25% hotels. All of them are located in an urban context. Regarding the accessibility of both types of facilities, 75% of them commented that they have sufficient transport options (all participants are located in municipalities with access to the railway line with connection to Valencia and the airport). This is not the case for smaller municipalities for which it is very difficult to access by public transport. With regard to signposting to the establishments, only 25% indicated that it was poor or non-existent. All establishments indicate that they are accessible for people with disabilities and half of them indicate that they lack parking spaces. With regard to the services available, only 18% of them have free wifi. With regard to the command of other languages apart from the premises, 60% of them speak English and 27% speak French. As for the method of payment, all of them accept payment by credit card. Regarding the average price in restaurants, 25% of the restaurants are above 50 €, 25% have a price between 21-25 € and another 25% are below 15 €. The average price in accommodation is between €36-40. Regarding associationism, 64% of the establishments are members of a business association. As for the form of promotion, 73% do so through social networks and websites and 27% do not have digital dissemination.

Touristic guides and associations

The Valencian Association of Rural Tourism Xúquer, is the only tourist association in the area of La Ribera and is of recent creation, it was founded in 2020. This association participated in the survey. They offer guided tours both on foot and by bicycle and run environmental workshops. They have language skills apart from local languages in English, French and German. The average price for 4 hours of work is approximately 34€. The Association promotes itself through social media, website and participation in events.

Good/Best Experiences - Good/Best examples

Five best practices have been chosen as examples to promote rural tourism in La Ribera. These actions are being carried out by the County Councils, which bring together 46 municipalities or in collaboration with them.

The first example is the creation of a Tourism Product Club. This is a planning and management tool whereby a group of companies and organizations agree in a public-private framework to work together in an organized way, with the aim of developing new products for a specific market segment or increasing the value of existing products. A new rural tourism association has been created with a total of 20 companies and tourism products have been designed between the companies. The second example is Gastro Ribera Km0. It consists of an event in which, throughout the month of November, various actions are carried out related to local products, gastronomy and gastronomic tourism. The third proposal is Entrecomarques. This is a pioneering tourism programme organized by various associations of municipalities in the province of Valencia with the aim of joining forces to make the most of all the tangible and intangible tourist attractions of historical, artistic, cultural, traditional and gastronomic interest as a tourist attraction in order to generate rural tourism. The different attractions of the municipalities are explained by the staff of the municipalities, including historians, chroniclers, technicians and even councilors and mayors of the municipalities themselves. The fourth best practice is PARATGES. It is a programme that was created with the aim of protecting the natural heritage of La Ribera through the knowledge and promotion of the different natural parks of La Ribera. The natural parks are sometimes completely unknown by the citizens of the municipality. For this reason, guided visits are offered to the natural sites in which, as well as walking around the area, the history linked to the natural site is explained. The last proposal is RIBERANA, the "Heritage Digitisation" department of the Ribera Alta County Council, where they have created, for preservation purposes, a web portal that includes a large database and a number of digitized cultural heritage objects (virtual tours, videos, 360º, 3D images) that provides access to local heritage. This material is open access (CC) and can be reproduced and used for promotional purposes.

CONCLUSIONS

- **Strengths**

La Ribera (Valencia) has an average tourist potential based on a wide variety and dispersion of resources that can be used for tourism, in terms of architectural cultural heritage and festivals, two of which are Intangible Heritage of Humanity. Likewise, the presence of natural resources (reliefs, hydraulic elements and protected natural spaces) is also very important, with a Natural Park. The catering offer is well developed, with online promotion, card payment and adapted for the disabled. Road and rail communications to the main cities are good.

- **Weaknesses**

The development of the accommodation offer is very limited, especially in terms of rural and hotel accommodation. Campsites and flats are located on the coastline. Public transport to access the municipalities that do not have a railway line is very poor. Likewise, private vehicles are necessary to access the natural sites. There is a lack of tourist guides in the area and there is no tourist brand properly positioned in terms of demand.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Promotion and accompaniment with tourism service companies for the creation of tourism experiences in the territory that include transport, accommodation, restaurants, activities, visits and tours.

- Promoting the business network through the Valencian Association of Rural Tourism to create employment in the tourism sector in the territory.

- Creation of a dissemination programme for the main routes designed in La Ribera: Cultural Routes such as the Modernist Route, the Water Route, the Iron Bridges Route, which integrate different elements that different municipalities in the area have in common.

- Promotion of the network of cycle tourism routes in La Ribera where there are natural routes along the banks of the river Xúuqer, Magre and the Acequia Real with hiking, cycling and equestrian itineraries.

- Positioning of the Ribera del Xúquer brand.

- Promote Ribera de Xúquer Sports Events and Trials that bring added value to the municipalities, developing joint promotion strategies.

- Promote and design a Regional Sustainable Mobility Plan that promotes public transport services on demand that connect the smaller municipalities with the main railway lines.

- Promote that all actions carried out are in line with sustainable tourism.

- Training and education of tourism service companies to align them with the strategy of sustainable tourism.

- Raising awareness among the population of the existing tourist resources in La Ribera and their potential for exploitation as a tourist activity.

Characteristics of the area

Edremit, where thermal, mountain and sea tourism are experienced together, has become a district with a population of 150 thousand, with Balıkesir province being a metropolitan city. The fact that there are international scheduled international flights from Koca Seyit Airport in our district, where it is possible to reach by land, sea and air, has expanded our vision as a district and opened our doors to the world.

Edremit-Altınoluk coastal region, with its wide coves, beaches and blue flag sea, hosts tourists from all over the world during the summer period. Ida Mountains (Kazdağları), which is a perfect travel option for history and nature lovers, is a paradise where mountain tourism is experienced with various activities throughout the 12 months of the year. Edremit is also very rich in terms of geothermal resources and has very healing hot spring waters. Edremit district is at the forefront of thermal tourism in all seasons of the year, with its quality thermal hotel and timeshare facilities consisting of modern units.The oldest settlement traces identified in Edremit Bay and its surroundings go back to 50,000 BC. The most important place that played a role in the enlightenment of the prehistoric culture of our region is 8 km from the town of Havran. southeast of İnönü caves. The findings unearthed during the excavations in the Dark Cave, the largest of the caves on the southern slopes of Kocaçal Hill, go back to the Chipped Stone Age.

The second cleanest air in the world is in Kazdağları. The fact that these mountains represent Mount Ida in mythology increases the interest in the region. It is necessary to strive to provide better tours to the Ida Mountains and its surroundings, and to create rest and accommodation opportunities in the highest quality facilities. Areas such as waterfalls, streams, historical sites, national parks, and museums also constitute places where care is taken in this context. Edremit district is also in the Mediterranean climate zone.

Rural Tourism: policies, programs, and governance

Countries need development policies in order to sustain themselves in a changing and developing world. The tourism sector has become an important actor in Turkey's development policies with globalization. In particular, the effective use of rural development tools by local governments in the country creates the potential to be an important tool in promoting rural development as well as the region. Considering rural development in this context and using local governments effectively by other stakeholders will contribute positively to the economic development of the country locally and indirectly. Today, people are moving away from the cities to get away from the stress of city life, and they have turned to spending their time in rural areas. This situation contributes positively to the revival of rural tourism.

In order to make such short-term visits to the city more and to be more attractive, local gover provide any kind of income desired to be obtained from tourism in a region can be achieved by adopting the policies and plans to be implemented by local governments, non-governmental organizations, professional organizations and the people in that region. Especially considering that tourism activities take place in the interaction of people, it is possible for local governments to provide various services not only to their own people but also to tourists who come to visit the region.

Edremit town center does not have a coast on the Aegean Sea. On the way to Çanakkale;

* Zeytinli

*Akçay

*Güre

*Altınoluk

*Avcılar

*Narlı are the most important holiday centers.

Kazdağı National Park is a national park that was separated as a national park on 17.04.1993, covering an area of 21,463.0 hectares, located in the south of the Biga peninsula, within the borders of Edremit District of Balıkesir Province.

Kazdağı, which separates the Aegean Region and the Marmara Region from each other and was known as "Ida Mountain" in ancient times, is the highest mass of the Biga Peninsula. Deep valleys and canyons extending in the north-south direction on the mountain create abundant oxygenated air currents. For this reason, Kaz Mountains have been determined as the place with the best oxygen in the world.

In the region known as Mysia in ancient times and where the Mysians, Kars, Trojans, Lelegs, Lurians, Lids, Alexander the Great, the Kingdom of Pergamon and the Roman Empire were settled; There are also ancient cities such as Thebe, Astria, Anderia, Antandros, Adremytteion, Killa, Krysa, Lyrnessos and the Ethnography Museum in Turkey's only village in Tahtakuşlar Village. In addition, Sarıkız Hill, where the Sarıkız legend takes place, and the Sutüven Waterfall and Hasanboğuldu Pond, where the Hasanboğuldu legend takes place, are also within the borders of the National Park.

There are still 2 day-use areas in Kazdağı National Park, namely Pınarbaşı and Sutüven (Hasanboğuldu).

Zeytinli Town and Avcılar Village (Kışladağ Gate) are used as entrances to Kazdağı National Park. Certified local guide guides can be obtained from the entrance gates or from Zeytinli town or Avcılar village.

Kazdağı and its surroundings are covered with dense forests. These forests are less frequent on the southern slopes of the main mass, which we call Babadağ, facing Edremit Bay, and more frequent in the northern part facing Bayramiç due to climatic reasons. Towards the west of the main mass, the structure of the land around Assos, Babakale changes and acquires a volcanic feature. Maquis, one of the plant communities unique to the Mediterranean, can be found especially in stream beds and some rural areas. The laurel, arbutus, myrtle, spring oak, gorse and wild olive trees that make up these maquis communities are identified with the climatic characteristics of Kazdağı. There are a wide variety of tree species in Kazdağı. Kazdağı Fir, which we can see in the special protection area, is one of the most valuable of them. This tree species, which is found only in Kazdağı in its natural environment, spreads on the northeastern slopes of Babadağ and at an altitude of 1000-1500 m. It is a decorative tree with a narrow and conical crown, pyramid-like, that can grow up to 25-30 m. They have long cones like corn cobs. This area was declared as 'Kazdagi Fir Nature Protection Area' with a law enacted in 1988 and was taken under special protection.

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Touristic Data
Cultural and natural heritage

The organizations that are the subject of our research here are generally 40% ancient city, 10% art galleries, 40% museums, 10% national parks. Institutions and businesses that are the subject of our research stated that they have not had any problems with transportation. We observed that some of them is not suitable for disabled. Museums and art galleries from 10:00 to 17:00. National Parks are open everyday, others are closed on weekends. On national and religious holidays, museums and art galleries are closed, and parks are open. Direction signs are in all of them. It has been understood that there is a problem in the places of some sign boards. They have promotional brochures. All of the museum and gallery staff, and 20% of the staff speak a foreign language. The target group is local and foreign tourists. Entrance to Art Galleries and Museums is maximum 10 Euros on average. Entrance to the national parks is around 5 Euros. Internet pages and social media accounts of all organisations are actively used.

Hospitality and accommodation

The organizations that are the subject of our research here are generally 40% luxury thermal hotels, 30% hotels, 10% small hotels and 30% cafe-restaurants. Organizations and businesses that are the subject of our research stated that they did not have any problems with transportation. We observed that they are suitable for disabled use. Hotels work 24 hours the whole year, Cafe-Restaurants work between 07:00-23:00. All organizations are open on weekends and national-religious holidays. Direction signs are in all of them but not very sufficient for all of them. They have promotional brochures. 50% of hotel staff and 10% of staff in cafe-restaurants speak a foreign language. Parking spaces are generally available. The target group is local and foreign tourists. Average accommodation in hotels is 20 Euros. In Cafe-Restaurants, the average account is 10 Euros. Internet pages and social media accounts of all organizations are actively used. Hotels and cafe-restaurants take reservations from their own pages or over the phone. In addition, hotels receive reservations from the ranks of tourism agencies.

Touristic guides and associations

Tourist Guides, which are the subject of our research here, generally consist of people who tour the Touristic Towns. As unlicensed guidance is completely prohibited in Turkey, all respondents are licensed guidance counselors. Some guides work with tourism companies and some guides work as freelancers. The guides speak at least two foreign languages. Guides working with tourism companies accept payments through banks, and freelancers accept cash against payment receipts. The fee varies according to the guide and region. The average cost of a guide is around 50 EUR per person. The web

pages and social media accounts of all guides are actively used. They take reservations from their own pages or over the phone. In addition, the Guides also receive reservations from the pages of tourism agencies.

Good/Best Experiences - Good/Best examples

Çamlıbel village, which was turned into a culture and art center by a humble peasant family, is 17 km from Edremit, 5 km from Akçay, 2 km from Balıkesir - Çanakkale E-24 Highway, connected by asphalt road, in natural beauties, with 130 households and 600 kilometers. It is a cute and populated village. This gallery, which was opened in 1991, is Turkey's first PRIVATE ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUM (Legal name GALLERY) and an art gallery that was opened in 1992 and was established in a village for the first time in Turkey.

Interesting and unique cultural assets, clothing, household goods, tools, carpets and tents of the nomadic Turkish tribes who migrated from Central Asia to Turkey in the ethnography gallery, and all kinds of works of art in the art gallery are exhibited throughout the year. If you want to spend your holiday with unforgettable memories, stop by this gallery, which has gained an international reputation and quality. Here you will get to know the core culture of nomadic Turkish tribes and learn about KAZDAĞI (former name IDA Doğu) and legends nearby. We will be happy to host you.

Award List of Tahtakuşlar Special Ethnography Gallery (Museum)

- UNESCO (support) 1994

- Balıkesir Citizens' Union Association

- Rotary (Edremit branch) Club

- Turkey Travel Agencies (TÜRSAB)

- Aegean Army Command Staff Spouses

- Göztepe (Izmir) Rotary Club

- Trojan Folklore Studies Association Prof. Dr. Pertev Naili Boratav Folklore Award

- Turkey National Olympic Committee Fair Play Council 2002 Grand Prize

CONCLUSIONS

- **Strengths**

  - Climate, natural resources and unspoiled environment suitable for alternative tourism

  - Being suitable for cultural tourism due to its historical and cultural richness

  - The presence of several thermal sources and places for thermal tourism

  - Having a potential suitable for natural tourism

  - Collection of purchases suitable for thermal tourism, especially for tourists with a high income group in the region

  - Finding facilities and congress centers suitable for congress tourism in hotels

  - Existence of National Park with features that can be used for tourism purposes

- Finding areas suitable for eco-tourism and rural tourism

- There are many streams suitable for river tourism (swimming, walking)

- Proximity to tourist-sending markets due to its geographical location

- Diversified products compared to competitor countries

- Being an undiscovered destination for transcontinental markets

- Inclusion of touristic product diversification in the country's tourism marketing policies

- Revitalizing domestic tourism by diversifying touristic products (summer tourism, thermal tourism, etc.)

- Kazdağları has a high value in terms of mountaineering and mountain tourism. flora fauna.-Intensification of interest in nature, history and culture tourism, where region's competitive power is high

- Adequacy of transport facilities

- To include alternative tourism in projects that the European Union provides financial support

- The delicious and organic nature of agricultural products such as olives, the ability to offer products such as olive olive oil.

- **Weaknesses**
  - Local administrations show insensitivity to alternative products

  - Insufficient promotional and marketing budgets allocated for alternative tourism

  - Inadequacies in tourist health and safety

  - The gradual deterioration of the natural environment due to the irregular and distorted construction of certain regions

  - Insufficient protection of cultural and historical heritage

  - Turkey's image of the country and touristic product is negative for western World

  - Low seasonality and capacity utilization rates

  - Insufficient investment incentives for alternative tourism

  - The chronic high inflation problem of the Turkish economy

  - Foreign tour operators do not include enough alternative tourism opportunities in Turkey in their sales catalogs

  - Being adversely affected by the wars and political instability in the immediate environment due to its geographical location

  - The policies of the European Union to support intra-union travel

  - As a result of horizontal and vertical integrations, businesses can be listed as offering the products they want

  - Competing EU member countries to increase their competitiveness rapidly by benefiting from the information and financial support of the union

  - The infrastructure has not been developed at the desired level for alternative tourism opportunities

  - Insufficient funding

  - The society's awareness of alternative tourism is not developed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Rural tourism is a natural environment, where the construction is less, open space activities and individual activities are intense, consisting of local and small businesses, the holiday period is generally short, the farms and forests are concentrated, the local architecture, traditional buildings and the local atmosphere are intense. It is a type of tourism that consists of relationships and is generally affected by seasonal factors (Ahipaşaoğlu et al. 2006). In rural tourism, where local people are generally employed with an amateur tourism management approach, there are also local business owners. From this point of view, rural tourism is seen as a development tool for rural areas. It is the place where tourism activities are most intense in Turkey. In addition to known tourism activities, rural tourism is an important way to bring the natural, cultural and historical values of the region to tourism within the traditional texture and without spoiling the traditional lifestyle is happening. Natural beauties, streams, lakes, plant communities, caves, local architecture, historical values, cultural differences, local organizations, village life, handicrafts, traditional culinary culture, agricultural activities, local tastes, many more should be promoted as brands and brought into rural tourism. It should be promoted in different languages, especially on the internet, to reach wider audiences. In our world where people are in search of different tourism, Turkey should be able to benefit from these blessings and be able to benefit from these blessings at the highest level with a voice in the economic field.

Report
Conclusion

5. Report Conclusions

The data relating to the rural regions of the individual project partners made it possible to define the summaries reported in chapter 4 of this document.

By reading the data it is therefore possible to trace, net of the contingencies typical of each reality examined, situations characterized by common elements.

It seems clear that rural areas located in countries where the tourist industry has been developing for years, are not in the same condition as those located in contexts where structured forms of tourism have recently formed. For destinations in countries where tourism is already developed, there is in fact the possibility of a "pull effect".

In the same way, contingencies relating to the geographical position, accessibility, social, economic and political stability of the countries must be considered separately, as they are perceived by public opinion and the international market.

However, it is possible to outline a common framework relating to the present spotlights and current problems.

STRENGTHS

1) remarkable historical and cultural heritage

2) widespread presence of cultural heritage

3) good state of conservation of the monuments and villages

4) presence of a good natural heritage

5) variety of elements characterizing the offer: nature, culture

6) vast food and wine heritage (quality and healthiness of typical products)

7) direct contact with local culture (customs, traditions, ways of life, ...)

8) presence or possible development of sports or outdoor tourism activities

9) presence or possible development of cultural and religious tourism

10) considerable number of tourist attractions or with tourist potential

11) widespread hospitality and non-standardized accommodation facilities (variety of the offer)

12) possible construction of diversified tourism product with respect to competitors

13) places perceived as quiet and safe

14) ability to disconnect from busy life

15) destinations perceived as authentic (not built products)

16) non-existence or irrelevant local criminal activity

17) cost-effectiveness of services (compared to consolidated tourist locations)

18) development of experiential tourism

Escape2

WEAKNESSES

1) poor appeal of the destination (the notoriety of the destination is low)

2) generic and unstructured proposal

3) basic tourist services, few realities offer distinctive experiences

4) poor marketing tools and strategies

5) little push from local policies

6) lack of tourism entrepreneurship and poorly trained operatives

7) lack of tourist management of most of the cultural heritage

8) low investment in marketing (both public and private sectors)

9) lack of integrated tourism products and channels for their sale

10) poor accessibility of places for people with disabilities

11) poor condition of the infrastructure

12) digital divide / technological gap, scarce use of the internet for the marketing of products

13) language gap (few operators truly speak a foreign language)

14) inadequately trained staff (catering and accommodation)

15) inadequacy of road signs and indications for attractors

16) low propensity for collaboration of private subjects

17) extreme diversification of the quality level of the accommodations

18) poor accessibility of destinations - insufficient public connections (trains, buses, etc ...)

The resulting picture is of destinations with a high growth potential, however blocked by restraining factors that can be mitigated by investments and adequate development policies.

6. Final Recommendations

The analysis carried out on each project partner country has led to results that highlight common strengths and weaknesses for each of them. It is precisely starting from these that it is possible to outline a series of needs and requirements to be answered in order to develop sustainable forms of rural tourism.

The conclusion of the report therefore consists of an examination of what should be the actions to be implemented and which could be the basis of a common strategy.

Evidently, the factors that unite the various areas investigated have been taken into account, aware that there are also specific needs that each reality has.

Below are the recommendations relating to concrete operations to be developed for each area of rural tourism.

Public sector: policies and governance.

The focal point of the analysis conducted is the clear perception of the need to effectively distribute economic resources in multi sectoral areas (infrastructures, investments, business aid, marketing, communication etc.), to improve and increase the services available on territories.Let's see them in detail:

1. create a territorial tourism marketing plan, which has among its purposes the interception of tourist catchment areas

2. improve the infrastructural network in rural areas

3. ensure effective road signs

4. increase physical connections between rural areas and airports, railway stations

5. increase the capacity of public transport

6. create a sustainable mobility network through cycle paths, itineraries and nature trails (trekking / (hiking / Nordic walk)

7. design and manage a communication plan to convey and position the territorial tourism brand

8. work on marketing partnerships with other neighboring areas to take advantage of the development of regional tourism

9. increase and diversify the types of accommodations available

10. improve the standard of services complementary to accommodation

11. launch specific training actions for tour operators (guides, accommodation, restaurants, etc ...)

12. in countries where absent: specific training courses and license or certification for guides

13. overcome the digital gap (operator skills and mobile phone coverage 7 internet)

14. increase information systems aimed at tourists (with particular attention to information

technologies and digital)

15. create and manage a destination website, with an app integrated with information and the possibility of booking services for customers

16. form the network of local tourism entrepreneurs

17. carry out training and education actions for operators and tourist service companies

18. implement awareness-raising actions for the local population in order to increase awareness of the resources and opportunities present (awareness)

19. carry out actions to improve the accessibility of tourist resources and attractions

20. tourism for all - making relevant places accessible to people with special needs and disabilities*

*installation of access ramps, maps and tactile models, sound guides, adequate toilets, automatic entrance doors.

Private sector

As for private operators, these are often subjects who do not have adequate professional training or who carry out tourism as a secondary activity. It is clear that an economic development of the sector would involve a radical change in the quality of the professionalism and services offered.

Hospitality and accommodation - catering

In summary it must:

1. improve the quality of the services offered (both essential and complementary)

2. guaranteeing a balance between the quality of the services offered and their cost

3. improve their managerial and organizational skills

4. implement technology and software use

5. ensure accessibility for people with special needs and disabilities

6. enter into the perspective of continuing education

7. push for the professionalization of collaborators and employees

8. invest in the marketing of the company

9. guarantee your business a digital presence, e-commerce and digital marketing

10. aim at the enhancement of local made in the gastronomic proposal

11. focus on local traditions and the quality of local products: food, drink and culture

12. provide guests with the possibility of experiences such as excursions, outdoor sports, cultural guided tours, workshops on food and wine, etc… (cooperation with other operators).

Tourist Experiences (companies for tourist services, guides, associations, etc …)

It emerged that in many rural areas the role of the tour leader or tour guide, as well as the value given to feasible experiences, are widely underestimated. In some countries there is not even a professional qualification necessary to carry out the role of cultural guide (however, at the moment it is scarcely required by the market).

Taking into account that rural areas do not have top attractions such as cities of art or seaside resorts, for a coherent development of tourism it is necessary to leverage the experiential value of tourist proposals (the "doing" that goes beyond the "seeing "). Therefore, the role of operators offering experiences is fundamental

and strategic.

How to improve the current situation:

1. create a business reality for tourism services

2. create new attractions (adventure parks, cooking schools, entertainment venues, etc ...)

3. specific continuous training depending on the scope of the service offered (cultural guide, hiking guide, naturalist guide, sports instructor, etc ...)

4. quality assurance of the service offered

5. guarantee of safety of the service offered (insurance policy that covers the risk of injury to participants in the experiences)

6. create tourist experiences of great appeal for specific targets (food and wine, relaxation, sport and nature)

7. develop relationships and collaboration with other operators (to build packages, itineraries, etc…).

8. offer customers an "adventure trip" (with the introduction of WOW elements)

9. ensure a balance between the quality of the services offered and their cost

10. improve their managerial and organizational skills

11. implement technology and software use

12. create experiences for people with special needs and disabilities

13. push for the professionalization of collaborators and employees

14. invest in the marketing of the company

15. guarantee your business a digital presence, e-commerce and digital marketing

Escape2

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