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The Impact of Culture on Tourism

CASE STUDY OF PORTUGAL

**European Network of Village Tourism
Evora, Portugal**

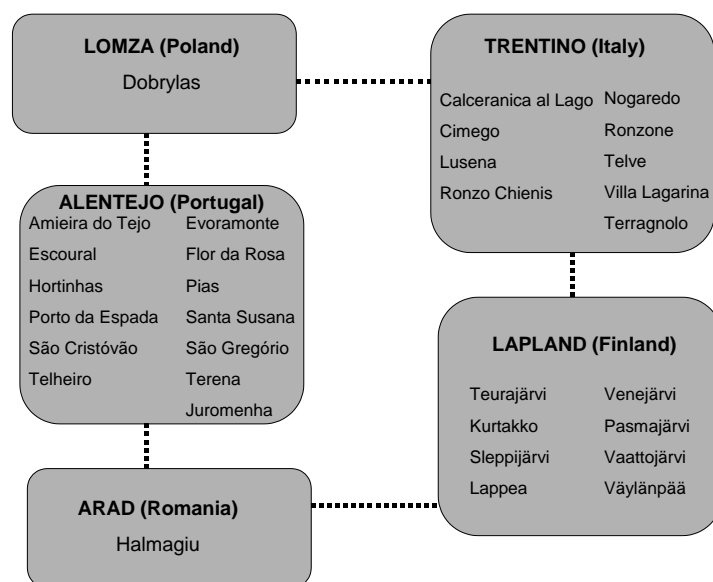


Centre for
Entrepreneurship,
SMEs and Local
Development

Networks in Rural Tourism and their Impact on Sustainable Destination Development: European Network of Village Tourism

The first European regions involved in this project: Alentejo (Portugal), Lapland (Finland), Trentino (Italy), Arad (Romania) and Lomza (Poland), are confronting difficulties resulting from the existing conditions of rural zones situated in the marginal areas of Europe.

Figure 2: Regions and villages of the European Network of Village Tourism



Although these regions are clearly different in terms of geographic, cultural and social characteristics, they have in common the fact that most of them are located in European rural marginal areas facing great limitations in terms of development, caused by an increase in isolation, degradation of economic activities and the consequent increase in unemployment. In addition these regions are suffering from the phenomena of an aging population and human desertification, as well as other factors that negatively influence their development process. Many of those born in these regions are unwilling to remain, resulting in migration of the inhabitants to the larger centers. Since it is further difficult to attract new residents, a growing depopulation is the consequence, leading even to the disappearance of some communities. In order to stem this tendency, it is necessary to promote initiatives that contribute towards the sustainable development of these regions. In spite of the constraints, these regions show strong potential in areas such as environmental preservation and the richness of the cultural and ethnographical heritage which may be used for this purpose.

It is in this context that the European Network of Village Tourism has been developed, using tourism as a catalyst for integration and sustainability, by promoting endogenous and tourism development in the villages involved and by creating a sustainable structure for European cooperation in this domain. The partnership working approach is based on a solid networking system not only at the international but also at the regional and local level, combined with a bottom-up approach in the development of the activities with the communities involved.

Since the endogenous development within these regions cannot be achieved without a profound knowledge of the local realities, it was agreed that the elaboration of Village Plans (Local Development Plans) was essential for the establishment of the Network and all the activities to be developed in each village integrated into the network. Additionally, a tourism activity plan for the Network was considered relevant in order to consolidate this new tourism product as well as to establish an information and promotion strategy. Another aspect considered important was the promotion of training and professional qualification, in order to give local communities and their citizens the skills for improving their human capital. In this sense, this project put together a local development plan, complemented by a training analysis, so as to provide the basis for a training plan as well as a tourist activity plan. The activities of the project seek the development of the concepts of "Village Tourism" and "Tourism of the Imagination", as part of the tourism activities in the regions involved. "Tourism of the Imagination" refers to the discovery of the territory by means of a narrative shaped by the material and immaterial culture of its people. The first five regions involved explore different themes, such as Megalithism in the Alentejo, Shamanism in Lapland, witchcraft in Trentino, the Palm Tree in Lomza and Mountain Tales for the Arad region. Within each theme diverse activities are developed, like the "Mountain Trail Network of the Imagination", seminars, cultural and other events, expositions, street theatre "A walk along Evoramonte with the Encantada Moorish, workshops, amongst others.

As a basis for developing activities within the project, a guidance document was initially elaborated for deepening the concept of Village Tourism, establishing the criteria for the selection of villages, the Village Plans for each integrated village and a Strategic Plan for the development of the Network, which defined the statutory framework, and the model for management and financing, as well as providing marketing strategies. Along with the development of these documents, an analysis of the profiles of the potential final users of the tourism product was carried out, not only in the villages and regions involved but comparing them with other types of experience throughout Europe. These documents serve as the basis not only for setting up the Network, but also for giving direction to informational and promotional activities, as well as to the activities related to training and qualifications.

A brand was also created, enhancing the distinctive image of the common project, which was named "Genuineland". At the same time, stimulating tourism products were also created with the theme of "Tourism of the imagination", which led to the involvement, on a voluntary basis, of local communities in activities such as recreating historical events, booking excursions, organizing the tourism offer and joint activities and exchanges with the other villages.

A continuous effort of stimulating and energizing the Network was further developed throughout between 2003 and 2007, based on meetings involving representatives from all of the partners, both assuming the partnership perspective and being implementing by it. Meetings took place in each of the regions participating in the project, yielding a range of objectives: coordination and giving direction to the global project; learning about and exchanging experiences; seminars to deal with specific questions within the framework of the processes involved in the local development of partners. In addition, these meetings were a means of discussing and evaluating the guidance documents, and of preparing the organization of the regional networks, as well as promotional activities and action directed towards professional training. The informational work directed inside the Network started with the setting up of a website reachable through the following address: www.genuineland.com.

This project gave rise to the development of an intense collaboration and it allowed, through intensive exchanges of experiences, the consolidation of the bases of cooperation, permitting the dissemination of results of the most important experiences in each community in terms of sustainable development. It will also allow the development of promotional and professional training activities, aimed at quality management of local products and particularly of the Village Tourism supply based in the cultural tourism under the theme “Tourism of the Imagination”. Finally, it has created material support for publicity and for enquiries (website, written promotional support, etc) helping the Network to be known as a quality tourism product.

The project finally results in the creation of a European Network of Village Tourism ready to function by its own means mobilizing the public interested in another type of tourism, namely those seeking village tourism based on the traditions of warm welcome, regional products and on popular culture, and serving as a vehicle for the dissemination of good practice in sustainable development, and also as the hub of a European way of life, comprising multiform experiences, based on different local realities.

Last year the project was awarded by the United Nations World Tourism Organization with the Ulysses 2007 Award which granted innovation in tourism. The Network generated interest in other regions and adding to the initiators five regions coming from Italy, Belgium, Greece and Slovenia are getting involved during this year.

Alentejo Network of Village Tourism

The Network involves 43 villages of which 14 come from Alentejo, the region which created and lead the project from the beginning. This project seeks the involvement of the whole community in the process of development of the two concepts of the Network, the Village Tourism and the “Tourism of Imagination”. These involvement increases the sense of community and their responsibility in the development of the project.

The integration of the 14 villages in Alentejo passed through an intense analysis based in the criteria selection, where the last one involves a meeting extended to the whole community but where the relevant stakeholders have to be present, stakeholders such as tourist providers, cultural and other associations, producers of regional products and public authorities. This meeting is the final test

to evaluate the interest of the community including local and regional public authorities to embrace the project has it owns and will support and contribute for its development.

In Alentejo the communities involved felt and increased their sense of community, something that was being lost year after year. The participation of residents and other stakeholders in cultural activities as supporters and volunteers increased strongly and a new way of living their traditions, their culture is becoming a reality.

The benefits that this project is generating in its regions are growing and above are 3 tables where is possible already to evaluate the Alentejo reality.

Table 1a: Benefits provided with the implementation of the Network of European Village Tourism in Alentejo concerning learning and exchange

Learning and exchange	Knowledge transfer	Working meetings during intra- and inter-regional visits, training sessions with exchange of trainers between Alentejo and the other regions.
	Tourism education process	Training activities and sessions of sensibilization of residents about sustainable tourism where the social, economic and environment issues had equal treatment.
	Communication	Combined strategy of internal and external communication.
	Development of new cultural values	Development of skills of cooperation, dignification of culture and identity through the concept of “Tourism of Imagination”, recognizing the importance of sustainable development and valorisation of the environment. Some lost traditions are being discovered.
	Accelerating speed of implementation of support agency initiatives	Implementation of activities within the scope of “Tourism of the Imagination”, like footpaths, cultural events and other initiatives.
	Facilitation of development stage of small enterprises	The increased visibility of the villages/ region led to correspondingly increased interest in investing in new and improving existing enterprises, thereby contributing to their sustainability, to the maintenance and creation of new employment. The integration in a professional network, transference and sharing of knowledge all help to improve the performance of each single actor.

Table 1b: Benefits provided with the implementation of the network of European Village Tourism in Alentejo concerning the business activity

Business activity	Co-operative activities, for example, marketing, purchasing, production	Product organization and promotion is undertaken in a cooperative way, not only regionally, but also internationally. For product development all local actors intervene, with synergies and complementarities being developed amongst all, something that had not existed before the Project.
	Enhanced cross-referral	Recommendation of other members of the network (national and international) that are rather viewed as friends than as competitors.
	Encouraging needs-based approaches, for example, staff development, policies increased visitor numbers	Development of skills of local suppliers in terms of marketing, cooperation and new product development, through training activities, business visits and benchmarking, considering the most urgent needs of affected collaborators as well as the identifiable needs of visitors. The strategy developed with these suppliers aimed at increasing the visibility of the regions involved and at the development of high quality products, implying the simultaneous goal of diminishing seasonality: the Autumn/ Winter season and the week period.
	Best use of small enterprise and support agency resources	One of the strategies followed was benchmarking, looking for the best practices in companies and regions (for the development of tourist packages and other capacities needed at the community level) and disseminating them amongst entrepreneurs and villages. Taking advantage of the network permits further synergies, a better use of territorial resources in the creation of a complex destination product, based on complementary efforts provided by a combination of small enterprises that are coordinated by a central agency in Alentejo.
	Extension of visitor season	The activities associated with “Tourism of the Imagination” attract visitors all year long.
	Increased entrepreneurial activity	One of the goals of the project is the development of entrepreneurial skills in the villages and regions involved. For this purpose, village plans, seminars, workshops and training activities were used in Alentejo.
	Intergrading within network	Suppliers within the Network recommend each others’ services.
	Enhanced product quality and visitor experience	The creation of “Tourism of Imagination” yielded the development of a differentiated quality product, so as to improve the visitor experience. This is based on learning with continuous experiences, namely through personalized tourism experience where hosts interact directly with guests, eventually becoming friends and exchanging ideas about the experience and how it could be improved. Also the internal network discussions with other agents of supply and of the central agency help finding always new product ideas.

Opportunities for business development interventions	Successful cooperative business approaches with shared experiences being exchanged help developing the business to create new services, events and product components, eventually stimulating new business entries, also through the overall local dynamic demonstrating the interest in tourism development.
More repeat business	Improved quality of the integrated network product makes people recommend and eventually repeat the experience, within the network

Table 1c: Benefits provided with the implementation of the network of European Village Tourism in Alentejo concerning the community

Community	Fostering common purpose and focus	The development of the Village Plans, the animation activities, the Network of “Tourism of Imagination”, and others, created a sense of cooperation and common goals within the community, supported by residents, agents of tourism supply, associations and local power structures.
	Increases or reinvents a sense of community	All activities and initiatives contributed to this effect of new sense of community and the strengthening of a common identity, leading to its emergence in some places and to its renewal in others.
	Engagement of small enterprises in destination development	Through the before presented strategies it was possible to involve small enterprises in the destination development process leading them to active participation in all fields and making them all aware of their relevance in the development process.
	More income staying locally	The fact of the project integrating villages with potential of receiving tourist visits in the short term yielded the immediate increase of local income. If tourists are offered a series of services (accommodation, restaurant and animation), they tend to stay longer and spend their money in the village and/ or region. Simultaneously the project fosters the interest in local products, such as agriculture and handicraft products from the local sources.

There are good examples of the above mentioned benefits concerning the new way of working together, attracting investment, the new sense of community and the process to reach a sustainable development in the Genuineland territory. Evoramonte, Telheiro and São Gregório are good examples of community and public involvement with a growing sense of community is arising.

In Evoramonte from the involvement in the project of a local association called LACE (Liga dos Amigos do Castelo de Evoramonte) was possible to create a footpath in the village with a street theatre. This street theatre is made by forty people from the community, residents and entrepreneurs, that all together represent the history of Evoramonte accompanied by the enchanted Moorish in a volunteer basis. This activity started in June 2006 and it continued until our days. This involvement also permitted to create other initiatives to complement the offer in terms of tourism activities, like “Evoramonte – Peace Castle” and others.

In Telheiro a similar feeling is being felt and it was possible to engage the several entrepreneurs and public authorities in the project. Through the Tourism of Imagination was possible to create several initiatives involving the community and mostly the entrepreneurs that are direct beneficiaries. In a volunteer basis they supported the creation of footpaths, familiarisation trips, edition of complementary promotional materials, thematic packages and offers, and other initiatives. For the first time all the entrepreneurs from this village are working together to create a better product having in consideration the Genuineland atmosphere able to give a new and different experience to the tourist. One important element of this new way of working is also the involvement of the community in the process. For reaching a truly involvement the entrepreneurs from the village invite all the community to participate in the activities house by house. This process gives also importance to the involvement of a local association and the local public authorities, Municipality of Reguengos de Monsaraz and Parrish of Monsaraz.

In São Gregório the village was completely recovered and converted in a village tourism facility, The Village of São Gregório. This small village works together with another village Rio de Moinhos, 2 kms far away from the other, where it's possible to find restaurants, shops, handicrafts, regional products like wine and cheeses. The link between these two villages created a new sense of community and a different understanding of the benefits of working together. The project created different initiatives being one of them the footpath "Memories of the Village" linking in a circular basis São Gregório and Rio de Moinhos. This footpath is felt also like a local patrimony to be also used by the community in a regular basis.

During the process of building this project, a project of sustainable tourism development, it was felt a real involvement of the communities and the public and private sector. And only in this way it's possible to create a project which can bring benefits and innovation to the involved communities and entrepreneurs and at the same time to the tourist which can benefit from the Genuineland experiences.