Alternative tourism: optimizing social and economic benefits

An Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform event

Vittorio Veneto, Italy - 20 and 21 November 2024
www.interregeurope.eu/event/alternative-tourism

Summary: 45 policy makers gathered in Vittorio Veneto to exchange on alternative tourism. The participants explored the notion of alternative tourism and its various sub-categories such as slow, ethical and creative tourism. Furthermore, the discussion also focused on how a region could identify and cocreate such alternative tourism offers. Lastly, food and sport tourism were explored as particularly promising contexts for the promotion of alternative tourism. Throughout the workshop, various good practices were shared for inspiration. The agenda also included local study visits in Vittorio Veneto to experience the local tourism offer in a region that geographically stays in between two mainstream tourism destinations: Venice and the Dolomites area.

1. Highlights

Alternative and Creative tourism – what do these notions mean?

- **Alternative tourism** seeks to achieve mutual understanding, solidarity and equality among the visitors and local communities. Further notions emerged in the groups. Alternative as something that:
    - supports the mainstream offer, especially in regions with high tourism seasonality
    - is not a rejection of mainstream; but rather a need to differentiate and make the tourism industry more sustainable
    - can attract long-term stays from mainstream visitors in the case of slow tourism
    - something that is able to involve tourist in the surrounding area of the hotspot
    - is a rejection of the modern mass consumerism
- Alternative tourism could also imply that service providers and visitors adopt more **ethically or environmentally responsible practices**, e.g. inclusive offers that are adapted to a wide range of audiences (physically or mentally impaired people, different age groups, etc) or offers that are attentive to their climate footprint and environmental footprint (local food, limited meat consumption).
- Luxury tourism offers, that are socially exclusive by definition, can be alternative insofar as companies involved in their provision provide good working conditions and wages, are attentive to impacts on local communities and the environment, minimise their climate impact. They can also help alleviate poverty. The key message is that **'alternative' and 'luxury' tourism should not be opposed a priori**.
- Creative tourism, as a form of alternative tourism, harnesses **the qualities of place**. It is a proactive use of creative resources to provide new possibilities for locals and visitors. While cultural tourism is about experiencing then creative tourism is "becoming" and co-creating. The economic value is also highest on the creative tourism level, i.e. the difference between enjoying a local meal in a restaurant (experiencing) vs joining a cooking lesson to learn to make said meal (creating).
- **Creative placemaking** indicates interventions to increase the quality of place, i.e. improving the quality of life and experience. Creative placemaking is normally bottom-up and uses the creativity of visitors to expand the potential of place.

Cocreating the alternative tourism offer – the ingredients of the recipe

- Many small and/or rural areas can greatly benefit from **stronger collaboration and coordination in creating and providing the tourism offer**. Often the reality is that the tourism actors work separately, compete with each other and do not coordinate their events and other activities.
- Instead of branding each service provider separately, it is better to position the entire locality as one tourism destination. All actors need to work together and coordinate their activities. Storytelling and joint branding can go a long way in positioning a destination as unique and worth visiting.
- **Creative placemaking** is also about exploring with the community "what we have" (people, knowledge, resources) and "how we do things" (which encompasses the application of creativity to the use of our resources). For example, an opportunity can lie in building the alternative tourism offer around the intangible cultural heritage (e.g. legends) or the specifics of the landscape (e.g. lack of light pollution which makes astrotourism viable).
- Local and regional **universities** can also be included in the cocreation process. For example, the story of the "Legends of Āraiši" (Latvia) began with the collaboration between the municipality's tourism department and the students from the Sports and Recreation University whose field work became creation of engaging game which put all local tourism providers on the same map.
- Cocreation can also mean the **collaboration of multiple adjoining municipalities** in creating a broader territorial brand and providing a convenient guide for visitors on how they can take the most out of spending several days in the region.
- During the group work exercise participants were identifying the key elements needed for co-creating a new local alternative tourism offer. These include: mapping of resources, accurate data, transparent

communication (person-to-person dialogue) between local authorities and communities, collaboration with sectoral groups (like local wineries), and a strategic plan or vision for the cocreation process itself. Interestingly, conflicting experiences were shared whether this process should be entirely initiated bottom-up by the community or there is a need for top-down frameworks to promote bottom-up strategy design and implementation.

- Some stakeholders highlight a critical stage in the community-based development of alternative tourism initiatives. During the initial phases, these projects often rely primarily on local resources, which helps align them with the needs and aspirations of the local community. However, as the initiative progresses, substantial investments in infrastructure and promotion become necessary. This typically requires the involvement of external investors or support from public authorities, such as national agencies. At this 'tipping point,' compromises between stakeholders are often needed to advance the project. It is crucial to ensure that the initiative's core principles and original vision are preserved throughout this process.

Forms of alternative tourism

- Traditional **gastronomy** is one "resource" that all locations have, and which can be utilised to provide a more novel experience. Focusing on gastronomy can also help ensure that traditional recipes and cooking practices are kept alive while at the same time creating new revenue streams for local producers and communities. These days, such a focus on traditional gastronomic practices, if combined with short supply chains (i.e. the produce used is secured locally) also aligns well with the overall sustainability policies and increasing demand for sustainable consumption from consumers.

- Gastronomic tourism development can also be seen through different phases. Prof. Greg Richards has categorised the gastronomic experiences in tourism as follows:

Phases of gastronomic tourism development

Food	Tourists need to eat	Mass tourism
Foodies	Travelling to eat	Cultural tourism
Foodscapes	Eating places	Creative tourism

Richards, G. (2021) Evolving research perspectives on food and gastronomic experiences in tourism. IJCHM

- Another approach worth exploring is **sports tourism**. It often makes use of local natural amenities. Volunteers contributing to the organisation of sports events may be recruited among relevant sport clubs and associations. Sports events often constitute a significant source of income for these clubs and associations, which play a vital role in fostering social cohesion within communities. Sporting events, like other forms of alternative tourism, can also bring together local communities members involved cocreating the event and associated activities. For example, Tour de Fruska combines various sporting events with music and local gastronomy.

- During the study visit of the workshop the participants also experienced **industrial tourism** in the case of the Museo del Baco da Seta which covers the history of silk production in Vittorio Veneto. Furthermore, the museum is run by Terra Fertile, a social cooperative **dedicated to sustainable agriculture, local traditions, and the promotion of rural communities**. Their work focuses on enhancing the local environment through projects that connect people to the land, nature, and cultural history. Importantly, Terra Fertile runs it activities for and with people with disabilities, thus helping them play **a bigger part in the local community, economy and the tourism industry**.

2. Good practices

Below are summaries of the good practices that were featured at the workshop.

Co-creating the alternative tourism offer

Legends of Āraiši (Cult-CreaTE project): This practice from a small locality in Latvia is a great example of a community based creative tourism. Together with university students and the local community a new life was given to the rich local legends by utilizing them for regional promotion through storytelling and a new visual identity. The Legends of Āraiši is based on public private collaboration and gives chance to involve local businesses – as storytellers/guides, craftsmen, musicians, caterers, food and souvenir makers and accommodation providers. Thanks to the joint branding of the region there has been an increase in visitors, services and local entrepreneurship (including new infrastructure in terms of housing). Due to the small size of the region each new service or SME in the tourism sector can increase the touristic offer in the region. Therefore, the alternative tourism offer is highly dependent on community cooperation and joint marketing efforts.

Astrotourism in the Coimbra Region (Tourism4SDG project): Astrotourism is about the observation of the starry sky, planets and constellations and exploring scientific knowledge. In the interior of the Coimbra region, the dark sky has been transformed into a tourist asset, making it possible to develop a range of activities that go beyond mere observation of the sky to become a strategic commitment that reconciles tourism development with social and environmental sustainability, thus transforming an apparent weakness of the territory (sparsity of population) into a distinctive asset of economic and cultural value. This transformation has happened in a multistakeholder framework through collaboration among local authorities, civil society, and private stakeholders, integrating the diverse perspectives in the design and development of the tourism product, services and experience.

Food and sports as potential alternative tourism offers

Local Gastronomic Points (TIB project): a nationwide network of rural households in Romania offering visitors a local, safe, unique culinary experience in the countryside. Started in 2019, it emerged from the need of offering tourists from Vama Buzăului Commune - Brașov Metropolitan Area dining options during their stay. The concept supports and encourages local producers in the countryside and sets strict limits to the origin of the food being served (at least 70% hyperlocal). The Points solve a market gap between supply and demand as in such smaller areas traditional restaurant businesses are often not viable. While initiated by an association, a similar model could be replicated in other regions under the auspices of the local government, especially considering that the Local Gastronomic Points origin story involved coordination with the local mayor, county council and its implementation has required close collaboration with food safety authorities as well as an enactment of a specific national law governing the Gastronomic Points.

Tour de Fruska (DEPART project): a three-day family-friendly event designed for cycling enthusiasts and for promoting recreational activities in untouched nature. It takes place on Fruška Gora National Park known for its beautiful landscapes and rich cultural and historical heritage. Besides sports, the event includes tasting of Vojvodina's gastronomic specialties, cultural programs and workshops, making it ideal for visitors of all ages. The aim of the event is to raise awareness of the importance and protection of Fruška Gora, while promoting the tourist, cultural and economic potential of this region. While run by an association and volunteers, this practice highlights for public authorities the opportunities that scenic rural areas have around event and sports tourism.

Study visit

Il Paese della Fiaba (The Town of Tales) (Local Flavours). Home to the Zavřel Foundation, Sarmede is internationally recognized for its dedication to the art of illustration and storytelling. As part of the Interreg Europe Local Flavour Project, this good practice highlights how culture and tourism can be intertwined to foster community development. The Sarmede's charming murals and its International School of Illustration showcase how the village has become a hub of artistic creativity and cultural tourism.

3. Next steps

Two discourses emerged from the workshop interaction. The first discourse concerns alternative tourism destinations **that provide a "niche" alternative tourism offer**. This typically implies that corresponding tourism products result from a cocreation processes, that their design focuses local development needs and aspirations and that they are particularly attentive to social, environmental and climatic externalities. Such initiatives can typically be observed in remote rural areas, or other areas with limited "mainstream" tourism such as regions with numerous industrial brownfield sites. Alternative tourism is **a key development lever in such areas**.

The second discourse concerns alternative tourism products in any location, including tourism hotspots. They are rather envisaged as **an "add-on" to the mainstream offer that enrichens the experience**. Few authorities and stakeholders envisage alternative tourism as a potential "game changer" in areas with an already well-developed tourism offer. Practices of established tourism industries and of visitors (currently often influenced by social media) are often considered difficult to challenge. In these cases, alternative tourism enriches the tourism offer. New and different practices **challenge the "commodification" of localities and regions** and enable visitors to connect with the location more deeply. This not only implies an improved understanding of its culture and history, but also engaging with its inhabitants and communities.

An additional discourse focuses on alternative tourism as a solution to mitigate seasonality. Creative tourism experience is often less dependent on weather conditions. Similarly, gastronomy and sports tourism can often be promoted outside of the core tourism season. This "temporal" perspective on alternative tourism applies to both mainstream and "off the beaten path" tourism localities.

Additional resources from the Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform:

Stories
- How digitalisation transforms tourism, heritage preservation and cultural activities (20.11.2024)
- Sustainability Communication in Tourism (22.07.2024)
- Solidarity tourism – different ways to discover a territory (03.01.2024)

Policy briefs
- The social dimension of culture (29.02.2024)
- Cultural and Creative Industries (29.01.2024)
- Regional branding for SME success (06.10.2021)

Events
- Webinar – The social dimension of agritourism (29.11.2024)
- Webinar – Synergies between traditional operators and cultural creative industries (17.01.2024)
- Webinar – Creating social cohesion through cultural initiatives (26.10.2024)
- Webinar – Cultural and Creative Industries: Towards a more social Europe (10.02.2023)

Peer Review & Matchmaking Reports

- Matchmaking : Tourism strategies and roadmaps for supporting SMEs in Moldova (23.07.2024)
- Peer review: Improve regional branding for attracting tech-savvy visitors (02.11.2023)
- Peer review: Development of Smart Island and Smart Tourism Strategies (15.12.2022)
- Peer review: Territorial strategies to turn the Val di Fiemme into a green community (22.04.2022)

Vittorio Veneto, Italy – 20 November 2024
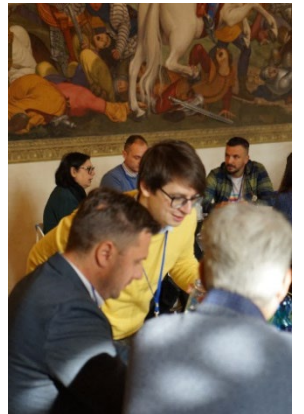
www.interregeurope.eu/policylearning