

## CULTURAL TOURISM

# Policy BRIEF

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# How to bring cultural tourism to rural and remote regions

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## *Introduction*

Although cultural tourism is a well-recognized and expanding area of tourism in urban destinations, the role of cultural tourism in rural and remote regions is less acknowledged. The SPOT project focused on rural and remote areas throughout Europe and is able to shed some light on how cultural tourism can be developed there. In this Policy Brief, we draw together some lessons from the research to highlight some of the issues relevant to policy makers at both regional, national and European levels. Learning from other regions is an important outcome of comparative projects like the SPOT project.



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## 1. Evidence and Analysis

The SPOT cultural tourism project focused on countries with different kinds of tourism development. The majority of areas were rural areas, often underdeveloped in terms of tourism.

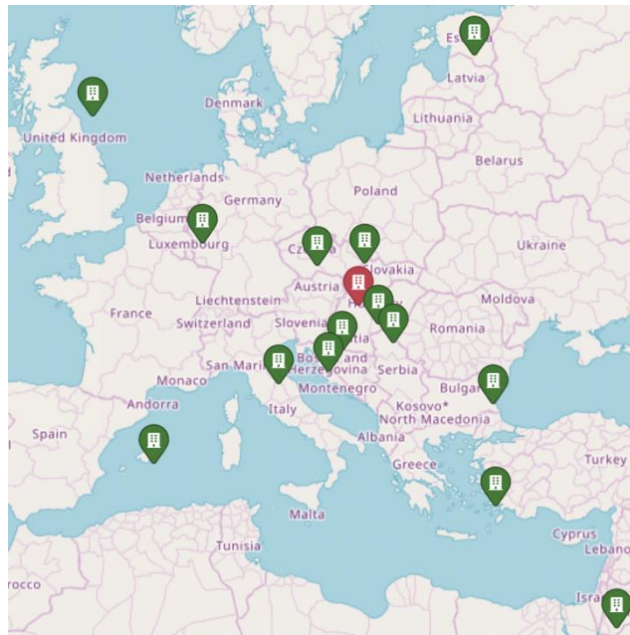


Figure 1: Map of 15 SPOT partners by country

The case study areas were: Barcelona in Spain, Kinderdijk in the Netherlands and some of the Cyclades Islands in Greece, Doune and Galashiels in Scotland, Ljubljana in Slovenia, South Moravia in the Czech Republic, Industrial areas of Styria in Austria, the Beit She'an valley in Israel, the Valley of Palaces and Gardens in Lower Silesia, Poland and the Lausatia region of Germany, Nitra in Slovakia, Komáron in Hungary/Komarno in Slovakia, Bužau Carpathians in Romania and the Ida-Verumaa region in Estonia.

Whilst the situation in each of these regions was very different, it is possible to pull together common themes to answer the question: how do we attract cultural tourism to rural and remote regions of Europe? To do this we need to identify four conceptual shifts that emerged from our studies. These are described below.

- I. **To redefine cultural tourism to include landscapes as culture** in addition to the more commonly recognized built heritage of cities, castles, museums and galleries. This is also acknowledged by UNESCO who have, or are considering, recognizing some of the landscapes in which our case studies were situated as of exceptional value (for example, the South Moravian region, the Narva region of Estonia and the Castles and Valleys region of Lower Silesia). In the SPOT project, teams have been arguing for an eclectic and encompassing model of cultural heritage that can include industrial heritage, agricultural heritage, communist era heritage as well as natural landscapes unique to different areas of Europe. All of these can be seen as “cultural” in the sense that they embrace unique histories of the regions which have been imprinted on the surrounding environment.



- II. **To redefine heritage to include the recent past or even ongoing legacies.** Whilst some areas such as the picturesque windmill landscapes of Kinderdijk, or a medieval castle at Doune can be seen as “classical” forms of heritage, other forms of heritage might include more recent industrial regions. This was the case with the industrial Iron Road in Austria or the more recent legacies of communism in many Central European countries or the heritage of the Second World War in terms of physical destruction and altered landscapes, which form part of the heritage of the area, as was the case in Ida-Verumaa in Estonia. Indeed the whole enterprise of heritage can be an act of rediscovering a hidden past as was the case in Lower Silesia where the pre World War 11 landscapes, palaces and gastronomy of the region are being revived.
- III. **To redefine heritage to include imaginative heritage** in the repertoire of heritage with different landscapes taking on different meanings depending upon the stories told around them. These can be in form of colorful legends (as in the Bužau mountains in Romania), the use of sites for film sets and TV series (as is the case of Doune Castle in Scotland) or the role of different authors in creating a landscape based upon the area, which people then want to visit as in the case of the Piedmont literary park in Italy or the Scotland created by Sir Walter Scott in his romantic historical novels.
- IV. **To develop the digital representation of cultural heritage** through the use of websites, blogs, vlogs, webcams, social media etc. which was already well developed in last decade but received a further stimulus from the COVID lockdowns, when digital media became the most important form of communication between households and encouraged “virtual” as well as corporeal visiting.

Category	A	B	C
Historical sites and buildings	4	4	2
Cultural heritage sites and buildings	5	1	3
Restaurants/food festivals		2	2
Music events (concerts/festivals)		2	2
Local traditions/folklore		2	2
Cultural routes	2	2	1
Townscapes	1	1	2
Health sites (e.g. spas/hot springs)	1		
Museums	1		
Film/theatre	1		1
Religious sites/events		1	

Table 1: Taken from the Visitors Survey in 2020 illustrates the fact that cultural tourism could cover a wide variety of offerings either separately or together. Source: D1.4 Table 30

Following from these theoretical shifts, we now focus on more practical and targeted lessons learned from our case studies.



Figure 2: Photograph showing the revival of pre War heritage in Poland: The Grand Palace in Łomnica and The Wojanów Palace Lower Silesia

## 1.1. Good practices

The good practices can be summarized as the role of cultural routes, the role of gastronomy and wine tourism, the role of festivals and events, the development of “nature tourism”, out of season tourism and finally the role of tour guides and local people in telling the stories about the place.

Some of our case study areas certainly benefited from the development of “**cultural routes**” increasingly recognized at a European level. These can be routes themed around a particular style of tourism or a particular topic. The Council of Europe has recognized and listed some cultural routes, including the for example the Viking Routes, pilgrimage routes, architectural routes and so on <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes>. In less explored and remote areas, cultural routes can be a way of connecting areas within countries to create a more complete experience. However, it can also be a way for connecting places across borders as well – and perhaps in the future even across seas. These cultural routes can help foster the Europeanisation potential of cultural tourism by linking different places through cultural themes. For example, the cultural route associated with cultural heritage is helping to draw attention to Nitra as a tourism hub in Slovakia. Furthermore, wine and gastronomy are being developed as cultural routes which can also exist across borders.



Figure 3: Cultural route developed around Nitra in Slovakia





**Wine and gastronomy** are developing areas of cultural tourism which help to recognize the intangible as well as the tangible cultural heritage of the region. They make the link between heritage, lived culture and agricultural/industrial landscapes. They can creatively involve local entrepreneurs and members of local communities as is illustrated in the development of wine tourism in Italy, the Czech Republic and the Cyclades islands among our case studies.



Figure 4: Regional food from our case study in Italy

**Festivals and events** are increasingly seen as ways in which to highlight aspects of local cultural heritage and attract visitors. In the Scottish Borders yearly book festivals have an important role in the annual tourism calendars, highlighting the role of local authors (for example crime writers using the area as a setting) and thus developing imaginative cultural heritage. Similarly, film festivals can be used to create off-season events. However, rural areas are generally well known for their distinctive folklore, costumes and music, which can represent intangible cultural assets and connect with local stakeholders. In the Cyclades this took the form of festivals honouring various local saints but involving food, drink, music and dancing from the whole community.

The development of **nature tourism** was used in some areas to enjoy the cultural landscapes and offer visitors a way of appreciating them. In the Lausatia area of Germany for example, cycle tracks and hiking trails were being developed and in the Netherlands, boat trips could serve the same function. Bird spotting and photography trips could also be a way of preserving the natural heritage whilst allowing people to become immersed in it. In Lower Silesia the bike and hiking trails were designed to allow visitors to enjoy the landscape and natural attractions as well as lead them to cultural sites.





Figure 5: Eildon Hills on the Scottish Borders – a popular destination for walkers and cyclists



Figure 6: The park around the Bukowiec Palace, Lower Silesia

**Off-season tourism.** Although the peak tourism seasons tend to be during the Spring and Summer, cultural tourism can potentially attract people throughout the year. For example, on the Cyclades Islands in Greece there is a well developed winter tourism trend especially in Santorini and Mykonos, where cultural attractions played a very significant part. This can help to smooth out the visitors across the year and provide a less crowded and “slower” experience for tourists. Considering cultural tourists are often middle aged or even elderly, visits during the cooler times of the year can be attractive for them. In Ljubljana, international congresses and conferences are promoted in the off-peak periods (spring and autumn) to expand the tourist season, though these activities require a high level of tourism infrastructure.

Recognizing the role **tour guides, vloggers and bloggers** can be an important aspect of attracting tourists to more remote and rural regions. These are the people that can tell stories about the place which can make it attractive by creating imaginative heritage. Whilst tour guides tell their stories to visitors, vloggers and bloggers might do this digitally either voluntarily as part of the creative commons or with a more commercial goal in mind – indeed tour guides can also be vlogger and bloggers to drum up trade. In Lower Silesia (Poland)



their role was very important. The tour guides shared knowledge about the local area in various ways by doing tours in heritage costumes and developing their own guidebooks.



Figure 7: Examples of QR audio tour guides

**Story telling** is increasingly recognized as an aspect of cultural tourism and this is particularly the case where the stories might be less well known – for example in rural areas. Geographical places take on a new meaning once they are associated with stories either originating from the place or as settings for crime or historical novels and films. Stories can help to make industrial heritage and local crafts more interesting and accessible to visitors as was the case in Kinderdijk and in the Bužau mountains where the local legends about the enchanted Luana’s country helped to capture the imagination. These stories can be used both to attract visitors but also to make places more attractive to their own residents and neighbours. The increasing role of “influencers” needs to be recognized here as well as the connections with fans at a wider level.

**Games and Virtual reality.** In some areas the cultural heritage could be made more attractive for visitors by including them in various virtual games (through phone apps) but also in virtual reconstructions. The role of games was used in Komáron/Komarno for example to engage with children and young people, whilst in Estonian Ida-Verumaa it was possible to view the virtual reconstructions of castles and monuments that had previously existed there. In other places QR codes could be used to share information about the place and create cultural trails at a local level. Further information is available on <https://www.cultplay.eu/en/cultplay-project>.

**Social media** plays an ever more important role in spreading information, in connecting visitors and local people and in connecting fans and followers in different countries with a place involved in cultural tourism. This needs to be harnessed and developed, whilst recognizing the possible negative consequences of communications online (complaints, harassment etc.)



## 1.2. The impact of the COVID-19 lockdowns

Whilst the lockdowns were generally very bad for tourism, one of the worst affected industries, it did have some paradoxical results with benefits for rural and remote regions.

First of all, the lack of availability of travel meant that people could not go abroad, so “staycations” became more popular. This meant that people often started to explore the countryside around them rather than go further afield, including remote rural areas.

Secondly, there was a shift from urban to rural areas in terms of visitors because rural areas were seen as safer and less crowded. This is recorded in Austria in the Leoben region but also in Austria generally where more remote and less visited areas became more popular. This helped to open up some rural areas. It was also the case in Lower Silesia, where agri-tourism accommodation boomed whilst the large scale more traditional types of accommodation suffered huge losses.

Thirdly, it allowed over touristed areas time to reflect and reconsider tourism policies. In places like Barcelona the sector focused its energies on attracting local or ‘proximity’ tourists to the city’s major tourist attractions and to areas with great outdoor spaces. Despite a severe reduction in visitor numbers, the city also continued its plan to regulate and reduce the number of AirBnbs and other tourist accommodations.

Fourthly, it encouraged a more individualized, tailored type of tourism as people drove around in the cars or rode bicycles rather than using the more usual mass tourism avenues (such as coach trips). This can help to benefit cultural tourism in remote areas but also in more popular areas such as the Cyclades islands.

Fifthly, it accelerated the role of digital tourism either as an adjunct or a replacement for real visits. This was not only the case for social media and virtual representations. Bookings and payments took place increasingly online. It also made possible the communications between various stakeholders and key actors scattered across a wider territory. In Ida-Verumaa in Estonia, for example, more than 50 stakeholders scattered across a wide rural area were able to communicate using a digital portal, which enhanced their co-ordination during the lockdowns. This innovation may well continue after the lockdowns ended.

Table 2 shows that in most countries in 2020, most visitors were nationals rather than foreigners.

Case study area	National (%)	Foreign (%)
AT	96	4
CZ	100	0
DE	97	3
EE	91	9
ES	9	91
GR	75	25
HU/SK	98	2
IL	93	7
IT	83	17
NL	49	51
PL	92	8
RO	98	2
SI	26	74
SK	87	13
UK	-	-

Table 2: Percentage of Visitors, national/domestic. Source D1.4, Table 7





### 1.3. The limitations of tourism in rural and remote areas

The COVID lockdowns also illustrated some of the limitations of tourism in rural and remote areas. First of all there is often a lack of service infrastructure (hotels, restaurants etc.) and even those that were open many closed under COVID and never reopened or were limited by lack of staff.

Secondly, the lack of transport infrastructure in rural regions means that motorized travel increased leading to congested roads, wild camping and lack of parking spaces. This was the case for example at Doune Castle where visitors were restricted by the lack of parking available and in the Kinderdijk area there were problems of congestion too.



Figure 8: No parking sign in Doune village, Scotland

Thirdly, digital communications and infrastructure are often poor or lacking in rural and remote areas, which is especially a problem given the “digital turn” in tourism for bookings, information seeking and social media communication.

On the whole though, local communities were happy to welcome a rise in cultural tourist visitors to their areas (Table 3).



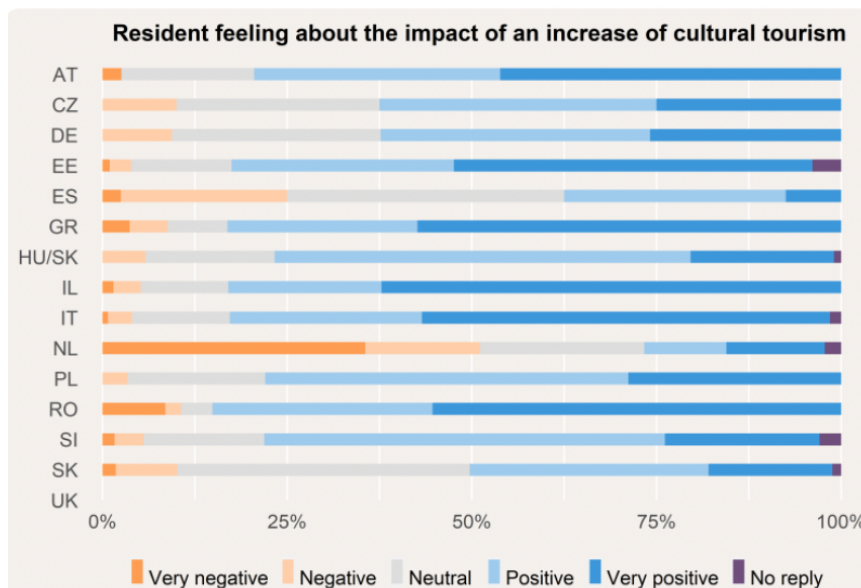


Table 3: Resident feeling about the impact of an increase in cultural tourism. Source: D1.4, Figure 16

It is not clear to what extent the “return to the local” will continue as an aspect of cultural tourism. Ongoing problems with international travel at the time of writing would suggest that local tourism or proximity tourism (visits from accessible neighboring countries) are likely to persist. This also feeds into the nationalist agendas of some countries keen to promote local areas as an expression of the nation.

## 2. Policy Implications and Recommendations

One factor emerging from these studies was the lack of policy coherence when it comes to cultural tourism. Often responsibilities are split between the Ministries of the Economy (responsible for revenue raising from tourism) and Ministries of Culture where culture is seen as a national (and even nationalist) priority which should not be seen as commercial. These two views are often opposed to one another. In some countries, a National Tourist Agency or Board (such as Visit Scotland in Scotland or the Slovenian Tourist Board in Slovenia) helps to span these two areas but in many countries this is missing (see D2.1).

There is a similar lack of coherence between EU, national and regional/local tourist policies. Our meetings with stake holders suggested that lofty aspirations expressed at an EU or national level often do not connect with local stakeholders.

### Policy recommendations

- Bridge the responsibilities of cultural and economic ministries in promoting cultural tourism. One way to do this is to create an agency which is specifically responsible for tourism that cuts across the different ministries
- Ensure coherence between different policies on different geographical scales. For example between EU/national and regional scales
- Ensure the involvement of local stakeholders in shaping cultural tourism policies. Their inputs are vital and they often have better knowledge of local needs and priorities. This can be done for example by creating local networks and umbrella organisations as was done in Idaa-Vermuma during the COVID lockdowns

- Help to create cultural routes (or extend existing ones) to connect remote and rural areas to more mainstream cultural heritage and information sources
- Develop the wine, gastronomy and other intangible heritage aspects of cultural tourism. These can help to involve local stakeholders as well as be linked to the cultural routes described above
- Create the possibilities of festivals and events celebrating local, regional, national, European and global cultures in particular regions
- Use the innovative SPOTIT tool to create better infrastructures and offerings.
- Encourage the development of agri-tourism in areas where it is not already established as a way of linking visitors with local cultures and rural businesses
- Develop (where appropriate) the role of nature tourism through cycle paths, boating waterways, hiking trails and wildlife spotting
- Develop off-season tourism using cultural tourist attractions to smooth out visitor flows through the year and sustain local employment
- Create better transport links for those not travelling in cars and improve infrastructures for water and energy
- Enroll and encourage the role of tour guides, vloggers and bloggers in developing stories around cultural interests in particular places. Local colleges, schools and universities might be able to help in developing these skills. This can also be helped by virtual trails using QR codes, virtual reality and gaming apps
- Create downloadable Apps to help with guiding people around rural areas, which can also reflect specialist interests (for example gardens or gastronomy)
- Develop the promotional and communicative use of social media in spreading news and information about a region to visitors and fans.
- Improve the digital connectivity of rural areas to facilitate information spreading, bookings and payments.

### Sources from which this information is drawn:

SPOT Reports and Deliverables (available from SPOTprojectH2020 website)

Graphs and Tables are taken from D1.4 *Report of the results of surveys for tourists, residents and entrepreneurs in the case studies*

Further information can be found in D1.3 *Report on statistical data SPOT*

D2.1 *Policies, Practices and Strategies. Framework Paper*

D2.2 *Summary Report on Stakeholder Involvement*

D2.3 *Summary Report of impact of evaluations of cultural tourism on target areas for types of cultural tourism*

D2.4 *Summary Report on the role of cultural tourism for the development of place identities, the appreciation of “otherness” and the impact on minorities*



# Project Identity

<b>Project name</b>	Social and innovative Platform on Cultural Tourism and its potential towards deepening Europeanisation (SPOT)
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