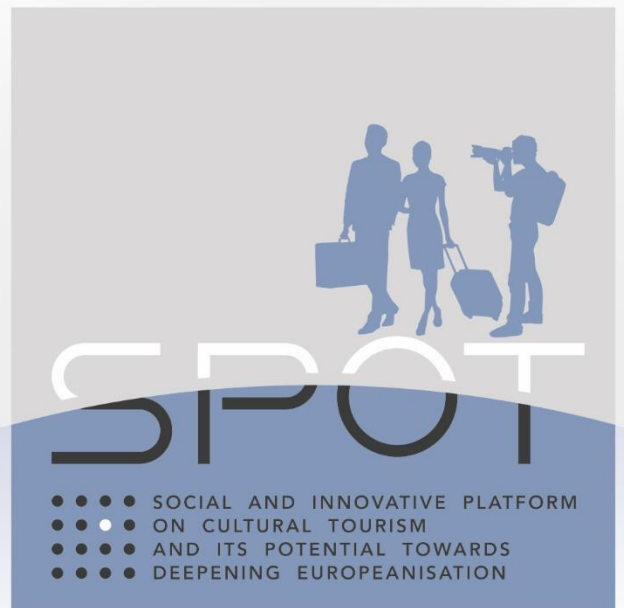


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Cultural Heritage Tourism along the Styrian Iron Route

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Introduction

The Styrian Iron Route has been characterized by mining and steel processing for centuries until today. Like many other industrial regions in Europe, this heritage and present-day culture forms a unique cultural landscape full of material and immaterial remains, as well as present-day companies with international reputation, set in a stunning Alpine landscape. The region possesses a major USP in form of the Erzberg, as one of the few public accessible surface mining sites of its kind in Europe. Interconnected touristic experiences such as the “Adventure Ore Mountain tour”, annual sport events like the “Erzbergrodeo” and the close-by UNESCO Global Geopark “Eisenwurzten”, underline the character of an adventurous tourism destination also to the outside of the Styrian context.

The region is marked by a close, but effective actor’s network which encompasses different interest groups. Private actors, companies, associations, the university as well as political representatives all have close connections. The strong interdependence of the core players, the stable political constellation, the rootedness of the parties in rather mono-structured industries, however, makes the network somewhat exclusive. Additionally, the regional actors, esp. from politics, show a weak and changing identification with tourism. In general, a broad-based cooperation between the tourism actors and a proper destination management are missing so far.

All in all, the region is rich in cultural heritage, especially regarding its industrial past, yet it still constitutes a challenging tourism destination: The industrial image, a lack of tourism-related services and investments as



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well as different interests of involved stakeholders inhibit further development. Also, given the hard competition on the domestic tourism market, the valorisation of cultural potentials is an increasingly important challenge. Strengthening cooperation, fostering regional identification, making use of innovative branding strategies, e.g. incorporating the locals as well as the tourists in the target groups and creating new job opportunities - represent the challenges of the near future, but must be overcome by regional actors in order to create a sustainable tourism product.

1. Evidence and Analysis

1.1. Status quo of cultural heritage tourism along the Styrian Iron Route

Cultural heritage, in its material and immaterial forms, is nowadays one of the most thriving elements in the tourism industry. In this regard the Styrian Iron Route is in a comfortable position, boasting a range of cultural assets, often (but not exclusively) linked to its industrial past. One of these is even recognized by the UNESCO. Much of this heritage is preserved and displayed by the regional Museum Association, a cultural network of 12 local museums. The biggest institution is the Kunsthalle in Leoben, which regularly features exhibitions with national outreach. Leoben is also home of the historic Stadttheater (city theatre) and is additionally an important location for MICE tourism. Here, the opening of the new congress centre in 2022 will increase opportunities further. The region's undisputed "unique selling proposition" is nevertheless the Erzberg mining site, with its various, interconnected offers. Besides displaying mining traditions and customs in museums, the connection of culture and art has become very popular and offers the opportunity for economic and social transformation. So the region features the cultural initiative "eisenerZ*ART" with its goal to discover the special essence of the place and its inhabitants by connecting traditional cultural forms with modern art. Another good example is the "Rostfest", an annual festival for regional impulses, which is trying to cultivate an alternative subculture in the town of Erzberg. Furthermore, the region has developed and advertised a quality label for regional products ("Genussreich"), is home to an annual motor sport event "Erzbergrodeo" and offers a unique, visitor friendly, glimpse into the realities of modern day industrial production (Gösser, VOEST).



Figure 1: Eisenstraßen-Song von Gebrüder Jakob, © Stefan Lozar





Figure 2: GANGART – Montanistic performance at the Erzberg Art project by Lawine Torrèn © for the eisenerZ*ART 2012 on behalf of the VA Erzberg GmbH

1.2. Opportunities and barriers for a better utilisation

Cultural tourism has helped to diversify the local economy of Styrian Iron Route to a certain degree. It introduced additional services next to industries and industry-related services in the region and has upgraded the image of the region – from a “rusty” industrial region to one with attractive townscapes, nature exploration, sports, and MICE activities. Such offers attract more people and are combinable with other, already existing, tourism products based on industrial heritage, such as the museum route. Altogether these offers create a package, showcasing the industrial heritage of the region and providing an incentive for visitors to stay longer or return. Industrial heritage constitutes an important “add-on” or byproduct to the prevailing tourism-types of nature tourism (skiing, hiking etc.) and sports tourism.

Nevertheless, it also has to be stated that tourism in general, contrary to other regions in Styria, is not a major driver in terms of employment. The share of employment has even decreased already in pre-COVID times and there are severe issues concerning a lack in qualified service staff across the tourism sector, hampering business in opening hours, service quality and long-term perspectives of businesses. While the touristic offers are distributed across the region, nevertheless the core touristic infrastructures such as hotels are mainly situated in and around the town of Leoben itself. Additionally, as the visitor flow in the pandemic showed, many tourism infrastructures need investment and locations have experienced a breach in caring capacity, mainly in form of shortage in parking facilities and the closure (and limited opening hours) of gastronomy and other service providers.

These problems are not new for the region itself, nor are these aspects different from many other industrial regions across Europe, struggling with a difficult image, low service attitude, a lack of investments and deficits in tourism management. The cultural tourism product on offer is geared towards a niche market, that nevertheless may experience growing interest. Here, offering the authentic ‘experience’ in ‘how things are/were done’, combined with often cheaper prices of undiscovered and new locations, constitutes an interesting market position.



2. Policy Implications and Recommendations

2.1. Taking action

Overall, the challenges of cultural tourism in industrial towns and regions are specific and multidimensional, requiring place-based solutions tailored to the region's needs, from a variety of actors. The Styrian Iron Route is marked by a close, but effective actor's network which encompasses different groups of the region, which all have close connections. This makes it difficult for new players to gain access and gives additional weight to different interests between single stakeholders or municipalities.

Given the rather low political standing of the topic of tourism in the region, there is more need for coherent action. Stakeholders should aim for a long-term, holistic strategy that considers different sectors, thereby combining multiple actors from different backgrounds and fields, e.g. youth and heritage institutions, private companies and administration. The existing USP should be strengthened, and the region should clearly position itself in the field of cultural tourism towards its market niche. This will require more professional structures on regional level in close cooperation with Styria Tourism. The new destination management structures are a step towards this direction but creating a new Leitbild of the Erzberg-Leoben destination will require a broader stakeholder engagement, both for civil society and government, to create a stronger, recognizable image of the region. Further, an inclusive approach must be pursued to ensure the creation of added value also for small cultural heritage institutions besides the already existing influential touristic players (see lighthouse model).

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Project Identity

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