

The project's partners



AER



Abruzzo (I)



Alba (RO)



Alytus (LT)



Province Avila (E)



Banska Bystrica (SK)



Karnten (A)



Eszak-Alfold (H)

SYDDANSK TURISME South Denmark (DK)



Orebro (S)



Sterea Ellada (GR)



Steiermark (A)



Toscana (I)



Jonkoping (S)

PRESERVE

Peer REviews for Sustainable Eco-Regions Via Europe

*European regions for
sustainable tourism*



This project is funded by the EU's European Regional Development fund through the INTERREG IVC programme.



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*European regions
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Europe is a leader in the tourism industry. The European Union is still the number one destination of holidaymakers from across the world. Its remarkable diversity is its main trump card. In Europe the traveller passes from Greek beaches and villages one minute, to icy Lapland the next, experiencing the Austrian mountains on the way. So many changes of setting without even setting foot off the continent.

Tourism is at the centre of numerous European policies and rightly so. This sector accounts for 5% of the European Union's GDP and concerns many policy areas of the EU, such as spatial planning and the environment. Tourism is fundamental for employment and is an important impetus for growth, with over 9.7 million people in Europe employed in the field. As such, it plays a crucial role in the context of Europe's growth strategy for 2020.

European tourism in numbers

- Europe is still the number one preferred holiday destination for 79% of Europeans.
- 2,145: this is the average holiday budget of a European family (+ 62 compared to 2010).

Source: Ipsos (2011)

Ever since 1992, when there was still no common policy on tourism, the Treaty of Maastricht presented the EEC with the possibility of taking action in this field, in order to achieve its goals of economic and occupational growth, economic and social cohesion and sustainable development, in respect of subsidiarity. The changes established by the Lisbon Treaty make it possible now for tourism related decisions to be taken by a qualified majority. The EU thus has the authority to sustain, coordinate and implement actions taken by member States with regard to tourism.

The structure of tourism enterprises – there are 1.8 million in Europe – is identical in all member states, both old members and states that have recently joined: over 90% of these enterprises employ between 1 and 9 people each. These are micro-enterprises owned by local players.

Source: Eurostat, Regional Yearbook (2010)

The role of European regions

To maintain its position as the world's number one tourist destination, Europe needs to modernise and diversify its tourism offer further. In this aspect, its cultural heritage gives it a significant advantage over other parts of the world, in terms of what it has to offer visitors. Thematic and cultural tourism still only represent a niche market, which has not been exploited much and the regions are the key to the potential development of these fields.

Today, creating a tourist offer involves a number of commitments: sustainable development and environmental impact, respect for the social fabric and protection of cultural heritage.

When faced with all these duties, this diversity, which is what gives European tourism its strength, becomes a problem if the right decisions are not taken, on a territorial level that is. Hence, the regions are the major players in the tourism of tomorrow.

PRESERVE

To respond to these challenges, 14 regional partners, from 11 European countries, met around PRESERVE (*Peer Reviews for green and sustainable regions through Europe*), a project financed by INTERREG IVC. PRESERVE's purpose is to contribute to the implementation of regional policies for sustainable tourism. The exchange of best practices, the organisation of seminars, conferences and work groups, the diffusion of results by the greatest number of industry professionals possible, the publication of recommendations and itineraries to follow, according to the *peer review* methodology adopted by the Assembly of European Regions, form the basis of this strategy.

The following results are expected from this exchange of experiences: a growth in the expertise of local tourism industry players, the identification of problems and sharing of solutions and, finally, the development of sustainable regional policies in the field of tourism.

Thanks to the instruments of communication – conferences, website, and newsletter – and through the numerous exchanges that have taken place, partners and their decision-making bodies have gained an awareness of the challenges and the principles that regulate sustainable tourism. Now they are in a stronger position to plan the tourism policies of the future.

Peer review

For the purposes of the PRESERVE project, 6 host regions were evaluated: Avila (E), Banská Bystrica (SK), Kärnten (A), Eszak-Alföld (H), Örebro (S) e Sterea Ellada (GR).

The results obtained thanks to PRESERVE, are the result of the methodology adopted during the audit. In order to guarantee objectivity during auditing, each group of international experts travelled with a check-list, a common standard that could be used by all the project's participants in order to make a coherent judgement on the tourism sector of each host region.

Upon arrival, the experts carried out a number of interviews and made various visits in the space of one week, in order to draw an outline of the region's performance according to the check-list. They had the opportunity to meet numerous professionals and political decision-makers, to better identify the tourism sector's strengths and weaknesses. Following their visit, the experts wrote up an initial evaluation report containing a series of recommendations. All the region's tourism industry players operated on this basis, in order to establish a strategic plan of action with a series of short and long term actions.

Il piano d'azione

The aim of action plans is to establish how auditors' recommendations will be implemented and what the project follow-up schedule would be. Thanks to PRESERVE, the project's various partners were able to use their own action plan as a real itinerary to be followed. However, a series of pre-established principles were set:

First of all, the principle of exchange. Everyone taking part in the audit brought their experience and solutions to the table and so each of them rightly expected to learn from the others. In other contexts, experience exchanges are often too general and people do not go into specifics, inasmuch as each participant speaks about their own experience. But here, real co-operation begins when participants discuss a specific problem and try to find solutions to a particular point, together. Instead of dealing with issues together, discussions during audits were systematically rooted in a particular problem, or were to do with how this best practice could be applied elsewhere. Examples were illustrated with "on site" visits.

Results can be split into two categories. Some conclusions relate to the PRESERVE project itself, in as far as communication improved around the project on an institutional level.

These are “common” results that benefit all partners as a whole, as opposed to “individual” results. Individual results apply to partners in their respective regions only, for actions that are aimed at improving their local policies. Having two categories of results allows both a global vision of existing problems and a local perspective on solutions to be adopted.

The objective of EU funding is to launch a network that obtains short term results, with actions being taken during the course of the project. Other, long term activities, however, depend on the success of the PRESERVE project and on the solid implementation of initiatives taken throughout the duration of the project, when INTERREG funding stops. The plans of action set out for each region that took part in the audit, are really put to use: a long term plan is drawn up on paper for each sector dealt with.



Ion Dumitrel

President of the Alba Region, Romania

In what ways did the peer review process prove to be useful in your region?

This project has been a unique experience for us, giving us the opportunity to find out about the best practices and ideas of excellent professionals from all over Europe. They showed us some constructive examples and came up with solutions to our biggest problems.

The *peer review* process in itself pushed us to analyse both the host region and our own region. The identification of problems that a particular region may have encountered and the search for solutions, proved to be a very useful and interesting exercise. Now we will start using this as an instrument to resolve existing problems in our region.



Rita Di Matteo

Abruzzo Region, Italy

Could you give us an example of best practices acquired during the audit?

We drew inspiration from the “Landlust” network in the Austrian region of Steiermark, where a network of tourist villages is to be developed. Hospitality and love for old houses are at the centre of the initiative. All houses in the Steiermark region are all situated bang in the middle of nature;

they are furnished with restored antique furniture and offer a high level of comfort and hospitality. The houses were built in the early Twentieth century and have undergone careful restoration work.

Thanks to this example, Abruzzo is starting to think about interior decorating in an entirely new way and has thus come up with the Italian *Albergo Diffuso* (literally, “scattered hotel - a single hotel with rooms scattered throughout different buildings in a town) concept. Our region has numerous old and picturesque villages that have been abandoned or partially destroyed. The willingness of some locals to continue living in this little paradise of mountains, forests and stone villages was what inspired the *Albergo Diffuso* idea.

The idea is to restore and decorate in a typically local style, a number of old houses in one single village often deserted by the younger generations. These houses are inhabited and only one section of the buildings is used as a residence for tourists, with the aim of attracting visitors who want something different from their hotel stay. This form of hospitality has proven to be particularly efficient as a means of promoting villages that are unusual in terms of their architecture and artistic style.

A number of initiatives like this have sprung up in Abruzzo – in Corvara, Santo Stefano di Sessanio, Robur Marsorum and In vacanza sulla Majella – but these are all individual initiatives, with no common point of reference or strategy. So we thought of grouping them together under one structure, using the region of Steiermark as a model. In December 2010, a number of municipalities formed the Gran Sasso d’Italia association for the promotion of local tourism, in order to guarantee a more widespread promotion of the region. The association’s goal is to develop sustainable tourism policies, highlighting cultural and religious practices and thus preserving the identity of the local territory.

Key dates

After its official launch at a conference which took place on 15 February 2009 in Brussels, the PRESERVE project gave the go ahead for 6 regions to be audited.

The first audit was carried out in the Swedish region of Örebro, in June 2009. During this four day visit, all partners together, were able to familiarise themselves with AER audit methodology and were naturally enthusiastic about this opportunity *“to exchange good ideas, but also bad practices to avoid.”* They also became aware of the importance of preparation work, required for an audit that uses specific methodology: the need to find good interlocutors and decision-makers and arrange for them to meet; find the sites which best illustrate the problems encountered in a given region, and visit them.

Auditors also realised the extent of the task that lay ahead of them: after examining what had been written about a region and its tourism related problems and documenting this information, they were faced with the challenge of comparing their own opinions with the in-depth vision of more than 30 local tourism industry figures, they had found, during a four day period of intense work.

In October 2009, PRESERVE’s auditors visited the Slovakian region of Banská Bystrica, less than one year after the project was launched. Experts discovered the immense potential of a region that could offer both nature oriented and rich cultural tourism services. Its ski slopes, thermal baths and 1700 cultural monuments are all ideal attractions for the development of tourism in the area. Auditors identified various sectors that could be developed to create a great tourist experience. For example, developing the promotion of regional dishes prepared using local products, in the restaurant industry. Or the creation of a central information network, to advise and guide visitors to the region, more easily – as opposed to the current situation, where databases are not linked to each other.

Mid-term review

PRESERVE’s partners met in March 2010 for a midterm review conference in Alba, Romania, where they reflected on the opportunities opened up by the project. Above all, they shared their common concern with regards to the difficult economic situation, the problems in the tourism sector and the consequent need to come up with innovative solutions, together.

After the audit in Banská Bystrica, the next region assessed was Eszak Alföld in Hungary, in April 2010. The audit was carried out before the two dissemination conferences which took place in May in the region of Corvara (Italy) and in June, in Atylus (Lithuania). The aim of these conferences was to inform PRESERVE's members (regions, tourism professionals, politicians) of the completion of the project and the first conclusions reached during the audit. The circulation of results is obviously an important aspect of the project.

The audit carried out in the region of Avila (Spain) provided a lot of useful knowledge. It took place in June 2010 and gave auditors the opportunity to immerse themselves in a number of sectors, in a region that is already very active in the tourism field. Emphasis was given, for example, to the need to diversify local tourism services, as a means of prolonging visitor stays and attracting new visitors. This would aid the development of new multilingual communication channels, making use of the internet and social networks for the promotion of tourism in Avila.

In the context of one of the most difficult economic situations dealt with, the audit carried out in Greece's Sterea Ellada region is an example par excellence of an area in which tourism is a promising source of development that has not been exploited to its full potential. PRESERVE's six experts visited the region in September 2010, discovering its enormous potential: historic sites, beaches and mountains that are just a stone's throw away and hot springs – to name just a few examples. Following the audit, the region was able to clearly identify the need to improve communication and maximise its tourism experience. A training course for tourism professionals will be developed, in order to allow them to adapt to changes in the sector. Finally, the importance of eco-responsible tourism through the adoption of the "green tourism" logo which will be issued by the region, as well as through its participation in the Intelligent Energy programme (<http://ec.europa.eu/energy/intelligent/>).

What does the future hold for PRESERVE? _____

Thanks to the conferences, *peer reviews* and work groups, and the implementation of all the action plans originally set out, the quantity of information gathered during the PRESERVE project was immense.

This information is a gold mine for any European region looking for innovative solutions and practices, to stimulate their tourism sector.

The initiatives taken thanks to PRESERVE are also perfect examples of the need now, to get engaged and promote.

PRESERVE's final conference will be held on 20 and 21 October 2011, in Siena (Italy).

The project's partners

PRESERVE groups together 14 regional and local authorities from 11 countries – its partners represent both new and old European Union member states and cover a wide geographical area. The regions are brought together under the Assembly of European Regions which leads the project.

With its 270 members from 34 countries, AER, Europe's biggest interregional network will act as a communication platform for the sharing of experiences related to the project, and will guarantee the widespread distribution of results across all Europe.

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INTERREG IVC

The European Union's INTERREG IVC programme co-finances interregional co-operation through Europe. It aims to promote territorial cooperation on cohesion policy and is financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). INTERREG IVC's operational programme was adopted in September 2007 and is scheduled to go on until 2013.

The programme's general objective is to help make regional policies more efficient, particularly through the exchange of experiences among regional decision-makers, a green economy and the prevention of environmental risks. To this effect, INTERREG IVC, subscribes to the goals set out in the Lisbon and Gothenburg strategies: economic modernisation and competitiveness.

PRESERVE: Co-funded INTERREG IVC project under the European Regional Development Fund.

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