

AUSTRIA

Fostering local development in rural areas

Location

Graz

Programming period

2014 – 2020

Priority

P6 – Social Inclusion and
Economic Development

Measure

M19 – LEADER/CLLD

Funding (EUR)

Total budget 187 000
RDP 147 600
Private 39 400

Project duration

2016 – 2018

Project promoter

Widum Tourismsservice
GmbH

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Website

www.himmlisch-urlauben.com

A transnational cooperation project on converting abandoned parish houses to accommodate tourists.

Summary

This is a LEADER transnational cooperation project about a secondary use concept for abandoned parish houses. Almost five local action groups in Austria and Germany developed together a concept and marketing strategy for renting these houses to tourists.



Each LAG identified at least one pilot house to present it as its sample object. A group of experts with stakeholders from each cooperation partner educated project partners in adapting the buildings to accommodate tourists and to promote and run these places. The next step was to develop a webpage as a common booking platform.

Results

A short list of parish houses was developed from each participating area;

The development of the tourism concept had started;

Development and implementation of the booking platform;

Partners organised four excursions to other LAGs;

One big network event was realized.

Lessons & Recommendations

- Transnational cooperation projects need very good cooperation, networking and transfer of knowledge capabilities.
- It's very important, to have all stakeholders on board from the very beginning onwards.
- Such a project needs lot of time for preparation and the original idea needs to be supported by all partners.
- The first and most difficult milestones were to find partners, develop the cooperation and apply for support.

Context

Parish houses are mostly located in the center of the villages and represent an important historical heritage place. However, many of the most historically significant parish houses in rural areas are no longer in use. The lack of priests is huge and quite often one priest has to service more than one church/parish, so the priests' quarters are not used in all the parishes anymore. At the same time it is quite difficult and expensive for small local communities to maintain these buildings. In addition, for local residents this trend illustrates a bigger emotional aspect of losing local identity, because quite often not only the parish house has been abandoned. Sometimes also the local primary school, the police office or other public buildings have shared the parish house's fate. Their windows are dark during the night, none of the rooms are lit or show signs of life, which can be seen as a signpost for rural depopulation.

For urban areas it is easy to find new solutions for abandoned houses. Rural areas on the other hand need to modify and integrate more (soft) tourism in their villages and to show their cultural and historical heritage. However, there is a tourism trend with the motto 'back to the routes', and more and more people have the growing need and aspire to do special things or to go special places focusing on areas with high historical and cultural value.

Objectives

The objectives of this project are:

- to adapt parish houses to be used for tourism;
- to develop programs around these parish houses to get tourists interested in the material and immaterial cultural heritage of the countryside;
- to add value to the mostly structurally weak areas;
- to create new jobs and stimulate economic activity.

Activities

Transnational cooperation projects are very difficult to manage and normally a lot of time is necessary, first to establish the cooperation itself, then to identify the partners, next to reach good agreements between them, and finally to start the real work.

After the establishment of the partnership between originally three and later on five Local Action Groups (LAGs), the first objective was to develop a tourism concept for a second use of these buildings. The focus has only been on old and abandoned parish houses.

Each LAG had to identify at least one pilot house and to present this as its sample object. A group of experts with stakeholders from each cooperation partner started to educate the project partners in adapting the buildings for the accommodation of tourists and how to promote and run these new places on offer.

The next step was to develop and implement a webpage as a common booking platform. This is the central tool for the marketing. Tourists should have a simple and short way to book different locations in different areas. It was to decide if partners agreed on only one platform for all offers, or whether the platform will be a collection of links to different booking websites.

The project partners of the cooperating LAGs are all officials in tourism, in the Catholic dioceses and in the Protestant churches.



Main Results

The results by December 2017 included:

- The cooperation between the LAGs had been established;
- Two more LAGs showed their interest in participating and are on the way to becoming new cooperation partners;
- Parish houses were identified; a short list of those houses which could get adapted was finished;
- The development of the tourism concept had started;
- Development and implementation of the booking platform under www.himmlich-urlauben.com;
- Partners have already managed 4 excursions to other LAGs;
- One big network event was realized.

Key lessons

Transnational cooperation projects need very good cooperation, networking and transfer of knowledge

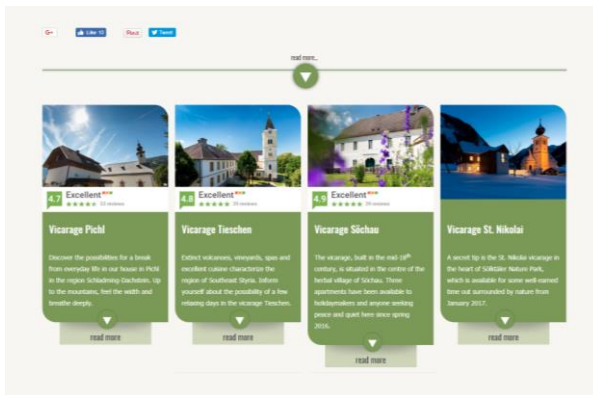
capabilities. The basic cooperation between the LAGs Mariaszell-Mürztal, Eichsfeld and Ulten played a vital role and constituted the core of the project.

It's very important, to have all stakeholders on board from the very beginning onwards. These are the local action groups, owners of the houses, regional managements, tourism boards, craftsmen etc.

Such a project needs lot of time for preparation and the original idea needs to be supported by all partners.

It was quite interesting that all areas had a wish for re-using their parish houses and could identify objects. Furthermore, all of them confirmed a huge demand for possible accommodations for tourists.

The first (difficult) milestones were to find partners, develop cooperation and manage official ways for applying money from TNC programs, because it takes lot of courage to get connected and involved with such projects.



Additional sources of information

n/a