



HITTS

Good Practices for the Enhancement
of Heritage Value in the Context
of Sustainable Tourism
in the SUDOE Area



Technical Sheet

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HITTS - Good Practices for the Enhancement
of Heritage Value in the Context
of Sustainable Tourism
in the SUDOE Area

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Project Background and Approach

Funded by the Interreg SUDOE Programme, HITTS (Heritage Innovation, Territory, Tourism and Sustainability) is a transnational initiative aimed at revitalising rural areas through sustainable cultural tourism and innovation. The creation of this Guide fulfills an important project deliverable, compiling and disseminating the exemplary “good practices” identified during the project’s implementation. In doing so, it directly supports Interreg SUDOE’s objective of leveraging culture and sustainable tourism as drivers of inclusive economic development. HITTS was conceived to address critical challenges faced by rural regions across South-West Europe – from depopulation and ageing communities to the under-enhancement of rich cultural and natural heritage. In response, the project’s core mission is to unlock the potential of these heritage assets as a basis for sustainable tourism development and rural regeneration. This entails new life into historic sites, traditions and landscapes through adaptive reuse and creative approaches, while mobilising local stakeholders in collaborative governance. From the outset, HITTS has engaged public authorities, private entities and community groups in each territory, establishing “territorial laboratories” to co-create solutions and ensure broad-based participation. Through these participatory local labs and diagnostic activities, each region assessed its heritage resources and identified opportunities for innovation. As a result, the consortium pinpointed good practices – diverse initiatives that exemplify how rural heritage can

be harnessed for sustainability and growth and, in this Guide, we present you fifteen of them.

Good Practices for Innovation and Resilience

The selected good practices showcased in this Guide illustrate novel ways of connect heritage conservation with socio-economic innovation. Other practices are built on community-based models of heritage management, empowering local residents and organisations to take the lead in preserving and promoting their cultural assets. Such grassroots approaches ensure that development is inclusive. Individually, each case study demonstrates how a rural area can convert heritage from a dormant asset into a dynamic resource for development. Collectively, they function as tools for territorial innovation, offering creative solutions to common rural challenges. From heritage trail apps and immersive storytelling tours to cooperative-run museums and art installations in historic sites, the good practices show that rural communities can reinvent themselves through culture. In doing so, they strengthen rural antifragility – helping local economies diversify, building pride of place, and equipping communities not only to adapt to change, but became stronger. This emphasis on local innovation and resilience echoes the SUDOE Programme’s priority of fostering social cohesion and territorial balance via social innovation and heritage enhancement. By documenting these success stories, this Guide intend to provide a practical toolkit of ideas that can be adapted and replicated across the region, inspiring policymakers and practitioners in other territories to pursue similar paths.



Alignment with European Strategic Frameworks

The HITTS project and its compiled good practices align closely with the European Union's broader strategic frameworks for sustainable development. By promoting low-impact, culturally enriching tourism, HITTS advances the goals of the European Green Deal, which calls for climate-neutral and resource-efficient growth across all sectors. Notably, the project was designed to have no negative environmental impacts; on the contrary, it adds value to the protection and regeneration of cultural and natural resources in rural areas. This approach demonstrates how heritage-led tourism can contribute to greener economies at the local level, connecting economic vitality with environmental stewardship in the spirit of the Green Deal. The project's outcomes also support the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – particularly SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) and SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities). By creating sustainable tourism opportunities and safeguarding cultural heritage, HITTS helps drive inclusive growth and community well-being in line with the 2030 Agenda's targets on culture and responsible tourism. HITTS draws inspiration from the New European Bauhaus initiative, which fuses creativity and innovation to reimagine sustainable living spaces. The New European Bauhaus aims to bring the European Green Deal into our daily environments by envisioning a future that is *sustainable, inclusive and beautiful*. The HITTS project embraces these same principles of sustainability, social inclusion and aesthetic quality in its activities – from the adaptive reuse of heritage sites to the creative tourism experiences highlighted in this Guide. In essence, the good practices serve as on-the-

ground reflections of European policy ideals, showing how high-level goals like the Green Deal, the SDGs and the New European Bauhaus can translate into tangible actions and positive outcomes in rural communities.

Structure of the Guide and Target Audience

This *Good Practices Guide* is the outcome of a specific activity developed within the broader framework of the HITTS project – an initiative that seeks to explore how heritage can contribute to more sustainable and resilient rural territories across the SUDOE region. The Guide focuses on one of the project's key goals: the identification, analysis, and dissemination of exemplary practices that demonstrate innovative and sustainable approaches to heritage-led development. Organised as a practical and accessible resource, the Guide begins by outlining the methodological framework and the evaluation criteria used to select the fifteen featured initiatives. Each good practice is then presented in a dedicated chapter, offering an overview of its origin, implementation. These chapters include analysis of distinctive features such as participatory governance, cultural sustainability, or social innovation and distil key lessons that may be transferable to other territorial contexts. Taken together, these practices form a diverse yet coherent set of examples of how local heritage assets, whether tangible or intangible, cultural or natural can be mobilised in support of inclusive economic development, environmental stewardship, and social cohesion. This publication is intended for a wide and diverse audience. Policymakers and territorial planners will find inspiration

for integrating heritage into local and regional strategies. Cultural organisations and community leaders may use the Guide to replicate or adapt similar initiatives in their own contexts. For researchers and educators, the collection offers concrete material for reflection and teaching on sustainable heritage management. Rather than concluding a process, this Guide opens a space for continued exchange, learning, and collaboration. By sharing these good practices, the HITTS partnership aims to contribute to the ongoing effort to place heritage at the heart of sustainable rural futures.

2. WHAT IS SUSTAINABLE TOURISM AND WHY IT MATTERS

Sustainable tourism is widely recognised as tourism that comprehensively addresses current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts, meeting the needs of visitors, the tourism industry, the environment, and host communities (United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2020). This definition underscores the complex interdependencies within tourism systems, acknowledging that economic viability, social equity, cultural integrity, and environmental responsibility must simultaneously be pursued to achieve genuine sustainability (Sharpley, 2020). The concept of sustainable tourism has gained substantial traction over recent decades, driven by rising global awareness of environmental degradation, cultural erosion, and socio-economic inequities exacerbated by unregulated tourism growth (Hall & Lew, 2021). The tourism industry's potential to significantly

impact local and global sustainability outcomes places it squarely within strategic frameworks such as the European Green Deal, which emphasizes climate-neutral, resource-efficient, and socially inclusive economic models (European Commission, 2019). Likewise, tourism aligns strongly with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), notably Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and Goal 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), highlighting tourism's multifaceted contributions to sustainable development (United Nations, 2015).

Economically, sustainable tourism represents a crucial opportunity for rural and peripheral regions, providing diversified income streams, employment opportunities, and economic resilience (Cawley & Gillmor, 2019). Through responsible practices, tourism can stimulate local economies, enhance market opportunities for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and reduce economic disparities, crucial for rural revitalisation in the SUDOE territories.

Socially, sustainable tourism fosters community well-being, cultural preservation, and social inclusion. It involves local communities directly in tourism decision-making processes, ensuring that the cultural heritage and traditional knowledge are respectfully integrated into tourism offerings. This inclusive model not only promotes cultural authenticity but also enhances community cohesion and empowerment (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2020).

Environmentally, sustainable tourism minimises negative impacts on biodiversity, ecosystems, and natural resources, advocating for conservation, responsible management, and the sustainable

use of natural assets. Tourism initiatives within the HITTS project underscore the importance of balancing visitor enjoyment with environmental stewardship, aligning directly with European conservation strategies and environmental objectives set by the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 (European Commission, 2020).

Community-Based Approaches

Community-based tourism (CBT) is central to sustainable tourism as it prioritises local community engagement, ownership, and equitable distribution of tourism benefits (Tolkach & King, 2015). By embedding local participation at every stage of tourism development — from planning to management and monitoring — CBT enhances the sustainability and resilience of tourism practices. Empirical evidence demonstrates that CBT initiatives improve local socio-economic conditions, cultural vitality, and environmental conservation, fostering sustainable regional development (Lopez-Guzman et al., 2019).

Policy Implications and Future Directions

The implementation and governance of sustainable tourism practices require integrated policy frameworks at both local and regional levels. European policies such as the European Green Deal and cohesion policy programmes strongly advocate for sustainable tourism practices that integrate local community engagement, environmental sustainability, and economic resilience. Policymakers within the SUDOE region are encouraged to adopt cross-sectoral and

participatory governance structures, embedding sustainability into the core of regional tourism strategies. Ongoing research and evaluation are critical for refining methodologies and ensuring the continuous alignment of tourism initiatives with broader sustainability goals.

3. ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This Guide represents a significant intellectual and operational output of the HITTS (Heritage Innovation, Territory, Tourism and Sustainability) project, developed and coordinated by the Polytechnic University of Tomar (IPT) under the auspices of the Interreg SUDOE programme. It specifically documents, analyses, and disseminates the good practices identified and evaluated through the project's implementation across the South-West European (SUDOE) region. The primary objective of this Guide is to provide stakeholders — including policymakers, heritage practitioners, tourism professionals, and community leaders — with a robust and practical repository of successful models and methodologies. These documented best practices serve as reference points and inspiration for enhancing rural sustainability, community engagement, and economic revitalisation through heritage-based tourism and innovation.

4. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The practices featured in this Guide were selected through a rigorous, systematic approach grounded in academic methodologies and policy analysis.

Central to this approach was the deployment of an innovative, evaluation model, uniquely tailored to the objectives of the HITTS project.

This model combined traditional evaluative metrics — such as economic impact, environmental sustainability, and socio-cultural benefits — with novel strategies designed to engage stakeholders and communities actively in the assessment and improvement of heritage practices. The evaluation process began with an extensive literature review and expert consultations, aimed at identifying key sustainability indicators relevant to rural heritage contexts. The project then defined clear evaluation criteria across multiple dimensions, including environmental conservation, socio-economic impact, cultural authenticity, community participation, innovation potential, and replicability. These criteria ensured that selected cases not only represented high-quality practices but were also scalable and transferable to other rural territories within and beyond the SUDOE region. Recognising the diverse contexts and needs of rural territories across South-West Europe, the Guide incorporates additional case studies provided by lead project partners. These supplementary examples enrich the original dataset, ensuring broader geographic representation and enhancing the practical applicability of the documented practices. By integrating these diverse experiences, the Guide achieves a comprehensive perspective that better reflects the heterogeneity of the SUDOE territories and fosters greater adaptability of the documented practices.

Since its inception, the model developed by the researchers at the Polytechnic Institute of Tomar has been based on a dual commitment: scientific rigour and practical applicability. To this end, an extensive review of the literature

was carried out on cultural and natural heritage, sustainable tourism, territorial innovation, and community participation (Sharples, 2020; Hall & Lew, 2021; Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009; Smith, 2006), articulating contributions from the social sciences, the economics of culture, sustainability studies, and European public policies (European Commission, 2019; UNWTO, 2020; United Nations, 2015).

The HITTS model is structured around interconnected dimensions, referred to as axes or domains, each supported by conceptually clear constructs and operationalised through measurable indicators. This architecture was designed to encompass, in a differentiated manner, both cultural and natural heritage, recognising the specificity, but also the interdependence, of these domains in territorial regeneration (Graham et al., 2000; Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013). Accordingly, two parallel models were developed – one for cultural heritage and another for natural heritage – each with its own dimensions and areas of intersection, namely community participation, sustainable development, governance, and creativity.

Within the field of cultural heritage, the core dimensions include authenticity and cultural significance, conservation status and accessibility, community involvement, integration of art and culture, sustainable development, innovative practices, technology, sustainable tourism, governance, and the creative economy. In the case of natural heritage, the key axes include biodiversity and conservation, educational and scientific value, the impact of human activities, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Each axis is broken down into sub-dimensions and specific

indicators, whose selection results from a combination of theoretical review, document analysis, and expert consultation.

The definition of constructs was guided by criteria of conceptual validity and empirical relevance, seeking to ensure their suitability to the context of SUDOE territories. For example, the axis of authenticity and cultural significance draws on the typology proposed by Graham et al. (2000) to assess the preservation of original architectural elements, the existence of historical documentation, and visitors' perceptions of authenticity (Kalay et al., 2008). The evaluation of community involvement includes indicators of effective participation in safeguarding initiatives, the degree of satisfaction and capacity building among local actors, in line with the recommendations of Tolkach & King (2015) and Lopez-Guzmán et al. (2019).

With regard to natural heritage, the indicators cover species diversity, the conservation status of habitats, the presence of endangered species, and the effectiveness of measures to mitigate human impacts (Lourenço & Brito, 2020; European Commission, 2020). Cross-cutting aspects such as the integration of sustainable practices, replicability of solutions, and the inclusion of digital technology are also assessed, reflecting the guidelines of the European Green Deal and the New European Bauhaus (European Commission, 2021).

Methodologically, each indicator is accompanied by an operational definition and clear observation or evaluation methods – which may include direct observation, document analysis, interviews, questionnaire surveys, analysis of digital platforms, financial reports, and impact

studies. This detail ensures the replicability and transparency of the model, aligning with good practices in applied research (Flick, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The evaluation of each good practice is carried out using a Likert-type scale, from 0 to 5, enabling the capture of nuances between levels of performance and facilitating comparison between cases. The weights assigned to each axis and indicator were defined through an iterative process involving discussion among partners, validation by experts, and pilot testing in real contexts, so as to reflect the relative importance of each dimension (Hair et al., 2022).

To reinforce objectivity and reliability, a multi-rater evaluation protocol was implemented: each practice is assessed by at least two independent respondents, with any divergences resolved by a third evaluator. This approach is inspired by the cross-validation procedures used in the evaluation of projects and public policies (Rossi et al., 2019), thereby reinforcing the consistency and credibility of the results.

The model also provides for the collection of contextual qualitative information, including project description, heritage typology, objectives, territorial classification, technologies used, and forms of community involvement. This information is essential to understand the complexity of contexts, interpret results, and ensure the transferability of practices.

It is also important to underline that the application of the HITTS model is intended to be participatory and inclusive, stimulating the involvement of local actors not only as data sources, but as co-authors of the evaluation and

heritage enhancement process (García-Esparza et al., 2021; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2020). This participatory dimension, in addition to contributing to the validity of the model, reinforces the potential for local appropriation and replication, in accordance with the international agenda of UNESCO and the Sustainable Development Goals (UNESCO, 2019; United Nations, 2015). The robustness of the HITTS model derives from its ability to articulate quantitative and qualitative indicators, to integrate territorial diversity, and to promote a systemic, critical, and learning-oriented vision towards collective learning and social innovation. By providing a flexible, validated, and well-founded tool, the model contributes not only to the rigorous evaluation of good practices, but also to the construction of knowledge and more informed public policies that are better adapted to the realities of European rural territories.

5. GOOD PRACTICES SUMMARIES

5.1. Sur le Sentier des Lauzes

Ardèche Mountains Regional Natural Park, France

Description

In the Drobie valley, in this wild and wonderful space of the Monts d'Ardèche Regional Natural Park, the inhabitants and users decided to work together to think about the future of their living

environment. Aware of the extraordinary capital represented by their landscape and the difficulty of finding an adequate path of development in a sector weakened by the rural exodus, they invented a collective project based on a cultural approach. At the end of 2000, Sur le Sentier des Lauzes was born, an association in charge of carrying out the project of the same name.



During the DLA (dispositif local d'accompagnement) process, it was possible to identify a number of common concerns that now better structure the functioning of the association: the artistic challenge shared with the local populations and the valley, the ecological challenge and, finally, the collective challenge.



Thus, associative life and the functioning of the association have evolved towards greater sharing and horizontal decision-making. A management team consisting of the President, the Treasurer, the new Artistic Director/Mediator and the Administrator coordinate and drive the association's activities. Several committees have been set up to monitor each project and take specific measures, such as maintaining the works or communicating the events. Composed of a member of the Management Board and volunteers, its role is to enable a more flexible and lighter recruitment of new volunteers. The Governing Board, composed of twelve members, is responsible for summarizing activities and identifying needs.

The refuge studio is the artists' residence space. Central to the association's project, it is a place

of immersion: it allows the interpretation of the landscape and its uses, the encounters, while favoring proximity and a lasting and appreciated artistic presence in an isolated territory.

Every year, the association imagines events that bring together artists and the public to explore the issues of creation and landscape. It is a combination of artistic events and debates with artists and scientists, which is friendly, festive and enriching.

The mediation work is carried out around the refuge studio and, more generally, around the artistic presence in the region, bringing together a wide range of audiences.

The project has three main axes:

- Axis 1. Events to bring people together and raise awareness.



The goal is to get visitors to "look" at the landscape and become aware of its evolution, in a fun and festive way. These events gradually create a collective consciousness – the identity of Drobie Valley, rooted in its history and open to the world – and a shared vision. This "sharing" of points of view and conscience is the essential starting point for the emergence of a common project.

Among these events, the Association has organized for several years a «musical and poetic ballad», a concept developed by the author and director Roger Lombardot: as part of a guided tour, visitors discover the landscape through artistic interventions (theater, music, singing, storytelling, among others). In addition, the association organizes concerts - classical and contemporary - in exceptional locations, whose staging implies the analysis and enhancement of the landscape.

- Axis 2. Artistic residencies to bring an external perspective, favor reflection and new ways of doing things.

To invent, you need the contribution of professionals. Hence the idea of bringing artists and designers who, through their vision, their way of communicating and their way of doing things, propose a new approach. This appeal to "outsiders" is not a denial of local creative capacities, on the contrary, it is a way of revealing, awakening and enriching them.

The arrival of artists in residence is also an opportunity to leave their mark: the visual artists invited every year participate in the creation of a "Landscape Art Trail", allowing the development of cultural tourism throughout the year.

- Axis 3. Cultural equipment to anchor the dynamics.



The aim is to find concrete answers to the following questions:

What use should be made of the abandoned elements of rural heritage to allow them to be safeguarded? This is how the idea of creating an open-air theater through the rehabilitation of the faïsses came about. This project evolved into what is now known as “Le jardin des Figuiers”;

What new constructions can be made without damaging the landscape? Thus was born the Echappée project, an artists’ studio and refuge.

The aim of these developments is to materialise the thinking of the Sur le Sentier des Lauzes association, materialising, in an experimental and emblematic way, this desire to make local development different: to make room for invention to reconcile the enhancement of a heritage with the needs of an expected development.

It is thus intended to create infrastructures that support artistic dynamics. The association’s committees, alone or in partnership with individuals or local authorities, will be formulated in response to a specific program and a collective question.

Two types of response are therefore expected:

a “physical”, architectural or landscape response, to restore a meaning and a use to a space deserted by agricultural abandonment;

A “conceptual” response, based on arguments, to give a collective meaning to the action undertaken and also to allow the dissemination of the experience.

Objectives/Challenges

For twenty years, the Sentier des Lauzes has aimed to establish a cultural dynamic oriented towards the development of the Drobie valley. Numerous invited artists and intellectuals contributed to this reflection and to the formation of what is today the Sentier des Lauzes: a route punctuated by works in the heart of nature, a place of residence - the “atelier refúgio” - and numerous events in partnership with other structures (Format Danse in Jaujac, Labeaume en Musique, the Mirabilia gallery, the Comédie de Valence, among others). The design of the Sentier des Lauzes has always been marked by ecological concerns.

Today we are clearly witnessing the sixth mass extinction on a global scale. The responsibility of human activity, following the curve of the development of capitalism, has been proven. Capitalism (capitaloscène) marks a new geological era, leading to considerable changes in the

conditions of life on Earth for a large number of species, and even to their annihilation, including the human species. Discrimination, lack of vital resources, the development of diseases and climate disasters are causing an increasing number of exoduses and accentuating inequalities. It is therefore urgent to go further in questioning our lifestyles and assuming an ecological commitment. In the privileged setting of the Drobie Valley, a laboratory for reflection and collective action is proposed. From now on, artists, thinkers and researchers who are dedicated to these same ideas will be invited.

As it is believed that ecological action alone is not enough, as it is believed that it is essential to invent new economic models, new ways of living together are emerging: inclusive and collective.

Specifically, it is a matter of protecting and, at the same time, enhancing the heritage of the past, contributing to the definition of contemporary development models adapted to this specific territory. To help us understand the fragility of our living environment, to assess the risks of current developments, but also the potential for development present in our environment, the association has chosen to talk about and reinvent the landscape through the eyes of artists and designers. In order to encourage exchange, a source of mutual enrichment, the association strives to create the conditions for encounters between the inhabitants, the artists and the landscape.

Support/Partners

On the Sentier des Lauzes é subsidiado pela Direction régionale des affaires culturelles (DRAC)

Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, pelo Ministry of Culture, pelo Conseil Départemental de l’Ardèche, pelo Conseil Régional Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, pelo Communauté de communes Pays Beaume-Drobie e pelas communes de Beaumont e Saint-Mélany.

Tourist impact of the project in the region

The Drobie valley in the Monts d’Ardèche Regional Natural Park is a wild valley. On the outskirts of the Joyeuse, the Sentier des Lauzes forms a 15-kilometre circuit that connects Dompnac to Saint-Mélany and, thanks to the association that bears its name, is a cultural route, an artists’ residence, as well as a place for meetings and exchanges.

Inviting artists, namely those who like to work with the landscape, heritage and local populations, is an excellent way to raise awareness and question the major issues related to the rural character of the territory.

The path taken by the Sur le Sentier des Lauzes association has created, over the years, a route of art in the landscape, as evidenced by the works that the invited artists have added to the valley’s heritage throughout the seasons.

This project encourages the energies, encounters and extraordinary debates that each residency, each encounter with an artist and each work of art has generated. In this way, the social bonds damaged by decades of devitalization were rebuilt. This is very close to one of the main challenges: rebuilding the social fabric of this area, convincing people that there is, in fact, a future to build together.



The Sentier des Lauzes project is now recognized beyond the borders of the Ardèche and, at the same time, continues to create links between the permanent and semi-permanent residents of the valley, in the common conviction that contemporary creation is a formidable tool for imagining the future of this region.

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5.2. Las Médulas

Castilla y León, Spain

Description

Las Médulas, ancient Roman gold mines, are a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This unique cultural landscape stands out for the interaction between nature and ancient Roman mining techniques. Today, the site is an example of how natural and archaeological heritage can attract sustainable tourism, offering interpretive routes that educate about the history and geology of the site. In addition, its rural environment drives the development of local economies linked to responsible tourism.

The Las Médulas Foundation is a non-profit organisation created in 1999 with the aim of promoting and carrying out research projects, ensuring the conservation and disseminating the heritage that constitutes the Natural and Cultural Space of Las Médulas.

The procedures for the recognition and protection of the natural and cultural space of Las Médulas began in 2002, when they were declared a Natural Monument and therefore included in the network of Protected Areas of the Junta de Castilla y León. In 2005, Las Médulas extended its declaration as an Asset of Cultural Interest (BIC) - a legal figure that protects Spanish historical heritage - with the category of Archaeological Zone, a distinction it has held since 1996. It was in 2010 that the Junta de Castilla y León declared Las Médulas as an Area of Cultural Interest.

The Plan for the Adaptation and Use of the Zone establishes the guidelines and the framework of action in relation to the measures aimed at its conservation, maintenance and use, by which the



different public administrations with competence in this territory are governed.

The tool to achieve the strategic objectives of the Las Médulas Foundation are the Action Plans. Currently, the 2023-2025 Action Plan is in force, which aims to promote the continuous improvement of research and knowledge of heritage assets for its interpretation and international dissemination. In this way, dissemination around the Natural and Cultural Area of Las Médulas is achieved and, in turn, recognition and added value is generated for the whole society.

The Action Plan aims to ensure the protection and conservation of Las Médulas, since these functions are inherent to those of research, dissemination and exploitation. Likewise, the development of the plan seeks to articulate the Las Médulas Natural and Cultural Area as an

economically and socially resilient territory that, at the same time, contributes to sustainable social and environmental development in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda in a proactive and committed way.

When the Romans began mining by ruina montium, as they called the complex mining technique, the appearance of Las Médulas began to change. The mountains were crumbling and the landscape was dotted with fissured testimonies, such as pinnacles and stone towers. Today they are the most beautiful vestige of mining and their origin is ancestral: they are safety testimonies that prevented unwanted landslides during the extraction phases.

Extractive human intervention in the landscape meant that, after the demolitions, small valleys, ditches, lagoons, among others, began to appear.



These valleys resulted from later mining works, such as the conduction of the gold conglomerate, the separation of coarse pebbles or muriae, the washing in channels for gold extraction and the final disposal of tailings outside the mining facilities. These materials, piled together, closed valleys and created exceptional places, such as Lake Carucedo, a wetland that the Romans unintentionally created, but which today is one of the natural treasures of Las Médulas.

Objectives/Challenges

The Las Médulas Foundation has a multidisciplinary team with extensive training and experience in the historical, archaeological, scientific, administrative and tourist aspects of Las Médulas. Its objective is to achieve sustainable management of the Natural and Cultural Space of Las Médulas:

Both the social participation programmes and the research and conservation work carried out by the Las Médulas Foundation team incorporate transparency in their management, as well as accessibility;

Another line of action of the Las Médulas Foundation focuses on the continuous improvement of scientific research and knowledge of heritage

assets. In this sense, its interpretation is promoted and, at the same time, its international diffusion is expanded;

The ongoing research focuses on the different aspects of heritage, natural resources and their historical use, as well as the Roman mining structures that make up the Cultural Space.

The areas of study include the analysis and monitoring of the evolution of the conservation status of the archaeological record, considering the changes in human society and its different socio-economic contexts.

The knowledge and use of new protection techniques to keep the heritage of Las Médulas in good condition contribute to its conservation and guarantee its enjoyment by future generations.



Support/Partners

The Las Médulas Foundation is run by the Board of Trustees which, as a government, administration and management body, aims to fulfil the mission, vision and values of the Las Médulas Natural and Cultural Space.

The Board of Trustees is chaired by the Council of Culture, Tourism and Sport of the Junta de Castilla y León. The Board of Directors of the Las Médulas Foundation includes representatives

from the Junta de Castilla y León, the Provincial Council and the Regional Council of El Bierzo. The municipalities of Carucedo, Priaranza del Bierzo and Puente de Domingo Flórez are also members of the Patronato, as well as representatives of the University of León. In addition to these public administrators, there are others from the private sector, such as the Institute of Bercian Studies.

This governing body of the Las Médulas Foundation is periodically renewed every four years. Its members perform their duties free of charge, without receiving any direct or indirect remuneration for the performance of their duties.

The Board of Trustees organises the actions in the Natural and Cultural Area of Las Médulas through the preparation of Strategic Plans. These are approved to be run for periods of several years and implemented territorially under the coordination of the Las Médulas Foundation.

Tourist impact of the project in the region

To meet this growing public awareness, the Las Médulas Foundation wants to accompany companies and organizations in the Las Médulas area in their transformation process towards more sustainable business models that help to enhance the socio-economic dynamism of Las Médulas.

Currently, companies must align themselves with the legal requirements for non-financial reporting and publicly expose their actions in the different areas of action to show their commitment to sustainability. An analysis that is developed in a framework of measurable action, in which business activity is evaluated through ESG criteria of good corporate governance. These are quantitative

principles whose fulfillment facilitates access to financing and public contracts that promote local development with more sustainable companies.

Promoting the correct application of ESG criteria in Las Médulas and, thus, the socio-economic revitalization of the territory based on sustainability, motivated the Las Médulas Foundation to establish a collaboration agreement with Pryisma, a Spanish company integrated in the Spanish Association for Standardization and Certification (AENOR) since 2022.

The ESG studies and reports that are developed jointly align with the latest advances in public policies, their requirements and practical applications. The companies stand out for an environmental, social and good governance approach in the public and private areas of the Las Médulas Natural and Cultural Space.

The services offered jointly to promote companies of the future in the municipality of Bierzo are designed within the framework of conformity assessment and carried out through technical audits and inspections based on economic stability and productivity. Destination training services such as brand recognition, internal motivation and relationship improvement are also offered.

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5.3. Caminito del Rey

Andalusia (Malaga), Spain

Description

The Caminito del Rey is an aerial path built into the walls of the Desfiladero de los Gaitanes, located in the province of Malaga, Spain. It is a path attached to the gorge with a length of 3 kilometers, with long sections and a width of only 1 meter. It starts in the municipality of Ardales, crosses the municipality of Antequera and ends in El Chorro (Álora).

This trail is suspended from the vertical walls of the gorge, at an average distance of 100 meters above the river, and was built at the beginning of the twentieth century by the Sociedad Hidroeléctrica del Chorro, owner of the Salto del Gaitanejo and the Salto del Chorro, due to the need for an access between the two waterfalls that would facilitate the passage of maintenance workers, the transport of materials and their surveillance.

The Caminito del Rey is today a tourist brand created after the restoration and reopening of the route in 2015, after decades closed to the public due to its extreme danger. It stands out for offering an active tourism experience in a deep natural environment. By taking a path that runs along the suspended walkways of the Gaitanes Gorge, it is possible to bypass a dangerous historical route, in one of the most attractive destinations in Spain today.

This project was further defined and solidly promoted by:

- The creation of a visitor reception center where all information, details of routes, regulations and recommendations are made available;
- Ample parking lots for cars and buses, connecting the beginning and end of the tour;
- Walkways and paths rehabilitated for safe tourism, with all the necessary equipment for this;
- Control and access points, as well as tour guide and hotel services;
- Rest areas at strategic points along the route.



Objectives/Challenges

Among the proposed objectives of the brand, the following stand out:

- The promotion of a sustainable tourism model that respects and preserves the natural environment of the Gaitanes Gorge;
- The positioning of the Caminito del Rey as a tourist destination, making it a reference for adventure and nature tourism;
- The promotion of local economic development in the province of Malaga through the tourism sector, with the promotion and management of services and experiences;
- The conservation and protection of the natural heritage and historical legacy of the Caminito del Rey;

- Ensuring the safety of visitors, offering a safe experience through the implementation of measures along the entire route.
- It is therefore important to conserve the natural environment, maintaining the balance between the preservation of the area and the growing flow of tourists, seeking the minimum ecological impact of tourism in an area of such high sensitivity. The infrastructure also needs continuous maintenance to ensure durability, due to wear and tear, as well as the climatic and orographic conditions of the territory.

Support/Partners

Several entities were instrumental in carrying out the restoration and reopening of the Caminito del Rey. The main promoter of the project was

the Provincial Council of Malaga, which financed the rehabilitation with an investment of close to 5 million euros for the recovery of the infrastructures and the conditioning of the path.



The Junta de Andalusia collaborated with the provincial government, offering institutional and regulatory support, especially for the protection regime that the Desfiladero Natural Area had. And the active participation of the municipalities, through the municipalities of Álora and Ardales, has contributed to them being able to integrate the project into their local tourism offer programs and thus promote employment and the municipal economy.

Also involved in the implementation and success of the Caminito del Rey, both in its rehabilitation and in its management, were local companies, which have been linked to the dynamism of the economy of the area, travel agencies and tour operators, as well as the environmental sector.

The remaining financial support corresponded to European funds through the ERDF programme.

Tourist impact of the project in the region

Since 2015, there has been a notable evolution in footfall, following the initial rehabilitation of the

Caminito del Rey, which has improved safety and accessibility.

The experience was also enriched with a flow control (maximum of 1,100 visitors per day) and a set of infrastructures such as the visitor center or various tourist services (reservations, guided tours, shops or even hotel establishments) that have made it a reference in sustainable tourism management.

To boost and promote local business, so that SMEs adapt to the opportunities generated by adventure and nature tourism that the Caminito del Rey offers, promotion between the public and private sectors has been strengthened, meaning that the tourist experience has had a positive impact on the local economy. In fact, the Caminito del Rey attracted more than 1 million visitors in its first five years, consolidating itself as one of the main tourist attractions in Andalusia, with 300,000 or more annual visitors. More than 30% of these visitors are of foreign origin and the occupancy rate in rural lodgings and hotels near the Caminito del Rey has increased considerably, especially in high season, reaching occupancy levels of over 80% on weekends and holiday periods.

The preservation of the natural and cultural value of the Gaitanes Gorge, as well as the guarantee of the safety of visitors, controlling the environmental impact and, at the same time, revitalizing and boosting the local economy make the Caminito del Rey a brand that seeks to position itself to become a reference in sustainable nature and adventure tourism, at international level.

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5.4. Vezeira Association

Fafião, Montalegre, North of Portugal

Description

The Associação Vezeira de Fafião, located in the village of Fafião, in the municipality of Montalegre and inserted in the Peneda-Gerês National Park, represents an exemplary practice of reactivation of community traditions in favor of sustainability, cultural enhancement and territorial cohesion. The “vezeira” is an ancient system of rotational grazing, in which the families of the village take turns taking care of a common herd of wild goats, adapted to the mountainous terrain. This ancestral practice, which was at risk of disappearing, was recovered and boosted by the local community through the creation of the association, which transformed it into a living system of agroecological management, environmental education and community-based tourism.

Objectives / Challenges

- Reactivate a traditional grazing practice as an instrument of ecological sustainability and social cohesion.

- Value the community's ancestral knowledge about the territory and its resources.
- Promote the active involvement of the local population, especially the youngest, in the preservation of intangible heritage.
- Create innovative financing mechanisms that guarantee the viability of pastoral activity.
- Develop authentic and educational tourist experiences, based on participation and emotional connection to the place.

3 - Support / Partners

The Vezeira de Fafião Association is led by the local community itself, with the support of the Municipality of Montalegre, the Barroso Ecomuseum – Vezeira and Serra pole, and entities such as ADERE-PG (Association for the Development of the Regions of the Peneda-Gerês National Park). Through the “Sponsor the Vezeira” initiative, individuals and institutions can symbolically support the maintenance of the herd. The project also has the collaboration of schools, researchers and volunteers in reforestation campaigns and educational actions.





Tourist impact of the project in the region

The recovery of the vezeira and the creation of tourist products such as the “Pastor for a Day” program contributed to positioning Fafião as a sustainable and experiential tourism destination.

The activities offered (thematic walks, traditional knowledge workshops, visits to the ecomuseum and reforestation actions) provide direct contact with the local way of life, favoring longer stays and tourism sensitive to cultural and environmental dynamics. The economic impact, although moderate, is significant for the local economy and helps to combat human desertification. More than a tourist product, Vezeira has become a symbol of resilience and cultural innovation in the Portuguese rural context.

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5.5. Valle Salado de Añana

Basque Country, Spain

Description

Valle Salado is located in the Salinas de Añana, in the province of Álava, in the Basque Country, 30 kilometres from Vitoria-Gasteiz. In this saline landscape, for thousands of years, man has been able to take advantage of its saltwater springs to obtain a product essential to life: salt.

In recent years, the archaeological work that has been carried out inside the salt pans has shown that the Valle Salado de Añana is a unique archive of human history. Specifically, a large part of the southern end of the salt pans is an extensive archaeological site that is providing relevant data from the last six millennia, which allows us to know when the systematic exploitation of the springs began, how salt was obtained and how the salt workers lived at that time. The research, still ongoing, indicates that the beginnings of salt production in Valle Salado date back about 7,500 years and that, during prehistoric times, the salt pans had a very different appearance from what is seen today. This is due to the fact that the production system is different, not based on the exposure of the brine of the springs to atmospheric agents (sun and wind), but on forced evaporation through the combustion of igneous materials.

Valle Salado is one of the most representative examples of the history of salt worldwide, known since ancient times as “white gold”. The natural appearance of brine springs led to the uninterrupted development of an important settlement in its vicinity for thousands of years, a settlement that, revolving around the production



of salt, was able to adapt to the conditions and specificities of each historical period up to the present day. The result is a humanized landscape composed of more than four kilometers of wooden channels that carry salt water from the springs to the wells and stepped terraces, built with stone, wood and clay, supporting the threshing floors where the salt is collected. The fragility of structures and the need for permanent care and maintenance are, therefore, a constant. The salt workers knew how to take advantage of the stone walls as the base of the wooden structures to build terraces of great height that, in some cases, reach more than eight meters.

For these reasons, Valle Salado de Añana is a unique place that combines heritage, sustainability and millennial salt production. Its salt terraces, used for more than seven thousand years, are

an example of efficient management of natural resources. The recovery of the salt pans allowed them to reactivate their production, associating cultural preservation with economic development. It is a sustainable tourism and circular economy model, supported by scientific and educational initiatives.

Objectives/Challenges

The recovery of sustainability promoted by the salt workers since the end of the twentieth century has meant a new turning point in the history of the salt pans of Añana. This complex project to recover one of the most important saline cultural landscapes in the world has been underway since the late 90s and can be divided into three phases:



The first was developed between 2000 and 2004 by a multidisciplinary team of professionals who prepared the “Master Plan for the Integral Recovery of Valle Salado”, in order to document and investigate the tangible and intangible heritage of the space, as well as to establish the guidelines that provide it with a future;

During the second phase (2005-2008), part of the actions foreseen in the “Master Plan” were executed, but, above all, the foundations were laid for the future management of the salt pans;

The third stage began in 2009, when the *Fundación Valle Salado de Añana* was created, the entity responsible for its management, recovery and enhancement.

In 2013, a new Management Plan updated the guidelines of the Master Plan (2000-2004) of the first phase.

The *Fundación Valle Salado de Añana*, as the sole owner of Valle Salado, has three main objectives:

Recover and conserve the material and environmental culture of the landscape, in order to ensure its sustainability;

To produce, using traditional techniques, in a sustainable way and respecting the centuries-old

know-how of the salt workers, a high-quality salt, the sale of which contributes to the self-financing of the project;

Develop, in a perspective of recovery open to citizens, cultural and tourist initiatives that are an engine of social, economic and tourist development in the region.

From the beginning of its activity, the Foundation was aware that its objective could not focus only on Valle Salado, but had to go much further. After years of work, it has already been demonstrated that compliance with the new Management Plan makes Valle Salado a key point for the tourist, cultural, economic and social revitalization of Álava and the Basque Country.

With a long-term action plan, the *Fundación Valle Salado de Añana* also promotes various actions open to the public from a social, functional and landscape point of view. At the same time, it develops research activities, respects and disseminates traditional construction and production systems and promotes other resources (other tourist, cultural, gastronomic and health services open to the general public) that, in a coordinated way, collaborate for the enhancement of this Cultural Landscape, unique in the world.



Support/Partners

The *Fundación Valle Salado de Añana* has the support and intervention of various public and private entities:

The municipality of Álava, the main driver of the project, having drawn up an ambitious rehabilitation plan that involved architects, archaeologists, biologists and economists;

The Basque Government, which contributes funding and institutional support for the recovery and promotion of Valle Salado;

The Municipality of Añana, which actively participates in the management and tourism promotion of the site;

Sociedad de Salineros Gatzagak S.A., which represents the former owners of the salt pans, who have ceded their properties to the Foundation in exchange for annual compensation for the rights to the brine;

According to the 2023 action plan of the *Fundación Valle Salado de Añana*, the total budget foreseen was 2,116,550 euros, distributed as follows:

- Public sector grants and donations: 1,006,799 euros;
- Private investment: 42,500 euros;
- Sales and services of the company's own activities: 893,000 euros (about 54 % of the financing required for the maintenance of the voucher);
- Other types of tickets: 821,851 euros.

In addition, investments worth 493,000 euros have been planned, aimed mainly at the recovery and conservation of the historical heritage of Valle Salado (rehabilitation of evaporation platforms, recovery of historic channels and hydraulic structures, construction and maintenance of walkways for visitors, technical installations and accessibility or safety improvements and assembly of exhibition spaces or support for musealization).

Tourist impact of the project in the region

The restoration and maintenance work carried out in the Valle Salado de Añana is a representative example of good heritage practices. They harmoniously combine the management and enhancement of all the elements present in the landscape, but they are also a pioneering model in this field, as they combine the traditional techniques of salt know-how, obtained after centuries of trial and error, with the sustainable techniques and materials of modern times, which were incorporated into the project after a long process of scientific research.

The Cultural Landscape of Valle Salado is, intrinsically, a multi-experiential tourist product, with heritage, cultural, natural and gastronomic attributes of the first order. Since its inception, the activities and guidelines of the Management Plan have made the sustainable recovery of the

valley compatible with a whole series of tourist and cultural activities, in order to offer citizens unique experiences.

In Valle Salado, the differentiating elements are:

- A unique and exceptional landscape, where tradition and modernity combine harmoniously;
- A wide variety of historical, architectural, archaeological, geological and natural attractions;
- and locals and salt producers who are proud of their culture, their past and their heritage.

In this *sui generis* space, visitors have the opportunity to participate in a recovery and conservation project to ensure the sustainability of an ancient salt exploitation. In a recovery approach open to the public, maintenance work, the study and production of salt are compatible with tourist visits in a living and evolving landscape in which the visitor is the main protagonist.

In 2023, Valle Salado de Añana reached a historic milestone by surpassing 1 million visitors, consolidating itself as one of the most emblematic tourist destinations in the Basque Country. This tourist flow has contributed significantly to the economic dynamism of the area, sustaining about 50 jobs, including salt workers, vendors, guides, managers and administrators.

Thanks to these activities, the enhancement of Valle Salado not only contributes to the preservation of a cultural landscape of exceptional value, but is also a clear example that investment in heritage is profitable and constitutes a powerful engine of tourist, cultural, economic and social development for the local community and its environment.

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5.6. La Beneficia de Piloña, L'Infiestu-Piloña

Asturias, Spain

Description

Located in L'Infiestu, capital of the municipality of Piloña, in Asturias, the origin of La Beneficia dates back to 1906, when it was founded as a Sociedad de Socorro Mutuo, at a time when there was no formal social security. This type of associations, common at the beginning of the twentieth century, provided economic and medical support to their members, also functioning as civic meeting centers. The Sociedad de La Beneficia was so successful that in 1926 it built a rectangular building of about 400 square meters that would function as its own theater, enlivening Piloña's cultural life for decades with theater, cinema, dances and social gatherings.

However, in the middle of the twentieth century and with time and the arrival of new forms of leisure, the building lost relevance and went through different uses (candy factory, garage, warehouse) until it fell into ruin, becoming a symbol of the decline of the local community.

The rebirth of La Beneficia began in 2018, when Asturian artist and performer Rodrigo Cuevas, singer and winner of the 2023 National Prize for Contemporary Music and known for his fusion



of tradition and avant-garde, teamed up with cultural producer Sergi Martí and architect Nacho Somovilla. Together, they created an association, *La Beneficia Espaciu Cultural*, a non-profit association founded in March 2021 and with the mission of rehabilitating the space, giving it back its social and community function. The project quickly gained support, not only locally, but also nationally, driven by Cuevas' notoriety. In addition, it was urgent to create proposals that rethought cultural life outside the large urban centers, creating a space that combined four concerns: artistic and cultural expression, community action, the fight against the abandonment and depopulation of rural areas and the transmission of knowledge.

The rehabilitation process was designed with a strong sense of heritage and aesthetics: the original structure of the building was maintained, respecting the marks of time, but contemporary elements were introduced to adapt the space to the requirements of a multifunctional cultural center.

The new theatre reopened in May 2023 and, since then, has been hosting a diverse programme ranging from theatre to music, from creation workshops to intergenerational training, promoting a model of proximity culture, strongly anchored in the territory.



Objectives/Challenges

The ultimate goal of the reconstruction of the La Beneficia building is to recover the spirit with which it was built, rehabilitating a space that gives visibility to contemporary and avant-garde artistic expression, but also to popular and traditional culture, facilitating the transmission of knowledge between different generations. It also aims to be a place integrated in the community, which boosts the cultural ecosystem of the Municipality of Piloña, as well as an intergenerational leisure space.

La Beneficia de Piloña is also a reason not to leave the village, embracing it as a place to create and enjoy culture. It is thus presented as an ambitious project, which aims to have an impact beyond Asturias, weaving alliances with artistic projects from all over Europe and with a program that aims to make the center a national reference.

The following main objectives stand out:

- Reactivate local cultural life with external projection, serving the local community and attracting creators, artists and audiences from outside the region, making Piloña a new reference pole in the Asturian and national cultural scene;
- Valuing the interior territory and combating rural depopulation, reinforcing the sense of belonging, creating roots for those who still live in the territory and attracting new inhabitants, whether cultural creators, entrepreneurs or families in search of quality of life outside the big cities;
- To promote cultural and proximity tourism, positioning Piloña as an alternative cultural tourism destination, away from the mass routes, and thus encouraging a sustainable tourism model, based on local identity and responsible management of resources;
- Preserve and give new use to historical heritage, conserving the original structure and reinterpreting the space as a place of creation, reinforcing the role of heritage as an engine of innovation and not just as a static vestige of the past;
- Foster community participation and social cohesion, making a strong commitment to social inclusion and citizen participation thanks to activities such as intergenerational workshops, collective memory projects and spaces for active listening.

Support/Partners

The association *La Beneficia Espaciu Cultural* is responsible for the management and coordination

of the project, leading the initiatives for the rehabilitation and cultural programming of the space. The total estimated funding is around 500,000 euros, raised for the complete rehabilitation of the old theatre, combining public, private and community funds.

The Government of the Principality of Asturias was responsible for a nominative grant of 30,000 euros, announced in January 2025, with a focus on supporting the cultural and community activities of La Beneficia, recognizing the project as exemplary in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda. The project also had the support of the Municipality of Piloña.

Fundraising campaigns and community support were also essential in supporting La Beneficia de Piloña, and this project had a strong mobilization of the local community and sympathizers, through crowdfunding campaigns, such as the “Amigues con derechos” initiative, which allowed significant funds to be raised for the rehabilitation works.

Also noteworthy are the support of the Caja Rural Foundation for the second phase of the rehabilitation of the old theater, as well as the sponsorship of local and national companies such as Filmin and Primavera Sound.

La Beneficia also benefited from European funds through the Next Generation program, aimed at heritage recovery and sustainable development. This funding contributed significantly to the rehabilitation of the building and the implementation of cultural and community activities.

Tourist impact of the project in the region

The rehabilitation project of La Beneficia de Piloña has been widely recognized by various cultural entities and public institutions, both regionally and nationally, for its exemplary contribution to the cultural revitalization of the rural environment.

With regard to the local economy, this project has contributed in several ways:

Revenue generation: events such as the “Artistes Benefics” exhibition raised more than 12,500 euros in 2023, intended for the continuation of the rehabilitation works of the space;

Support for local commerce: the holding of cultural events has boosted local commerce, with a particular increase in demand for catering and accommodation services during events;

Job creation: the management and organization of cultural activities have generated employment opportunities, both direct and indirect, for the local community.



In 2022, La Beneficia was included by the Observatory of Culture in the national ranking of the best cultural initiatives of the year, standing out in the category of “Best of Culture in Rural Areas”. This recognition, based on the opinion of more than a thousand professionals in the cultural sector in Spain, valued the project as a model of cultural and social dynamism in depopulated territories. In 2023, it was included in three categories of the same ranking: “Best of Culture in Rural Areas”, “Exemplary Projects in Social Commitment and Sustainable Development” and “Most Outstanding Cultural Novelties”.

Thus, La Beneficia de Piloña confirms its role as a catalyst for the tourist and economic development of the region. Through the promotion of cultural activities and community involvement, the project continues to contribute to the revitalization of the inland territory, serving as a model for similar initiatives in other regions.

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5.7. Implementation of the artist residency *Chemin faisant*, a volcanic road movie

Hautes Terres (Cantal), France

Description

The artists' residency *Chemin faisant*, a volcanic road movie is an artistic project that welcomes artists and aims to mobilize their creativity around the specific characteristics of the volcanic territory of the Grands Causses.

The hosting of artists paved the way to explore the theme of the volcanic mountain through an innovative artistic approach, revealing its multiple dimensions. The company *Espèces d'Espaces* has managed to shake up traditional perceptions and propose a new way of understanding and discovering the territory, directly involving the local populations who met, namely by going to meet them by bicycle.

For several weeks, the artist collective *Espèces d'Espaces* immersed themselves in local communities, meeting and speaking with residents. The objective was to collect words, sounds, images, atmospheres and faces.

There are several highlights during the residency period. The artists invited local residents to become actors or spectators of this adventure through workshops, evening events and mediation.

Objectives/Challenges

The ambition of the Hautes Terres Communauté with this artistic residency is multiple and is in line with its cultural program:

- To support and encourage the creation of original works that are coherent with the region;
- To disseminate and promote artistic influence in the territory, due to the uniqueness of the proposal presented by the group of selected artists;
- To allow the development of artistic and cultural training actions. To this end, specific artistic mediation sessions are organised for young people (schools, colleges, inter-municipal leisure centres).

The decision to choose the *Espèces d'Espaces* collective and its artistic approach is part of the desire to contribute to the cultural development of the region, taking into account its specificities and, in particular, its identity as a “volcanic mountain”. The real objective is to allow local populations, the project's drivers, to (re)discover their territory from an artistic and cultural perspective.



Support/Partners

Financed by the Agence nationale de La Cohésion des Territoires (ANCT) and the Banque des Territoires, one of the main axes of the Avenir Montagne strategy developed in the region is to strengthen and promote the notion of “mountain culture”. The artists of the collective decided to travel the region by bicycle, a “slower” means of transport that favors the meeting and exchange with local populations. Along the way, they also capture videos and photographs to make the territory known.

Tourist impact of the project in the region

This testimony highlighted the fact that Avenir Montagne Ingénierie's approach goes far beyond simple tourism development. It opens up valuable insights into the identity and richness of the territory, underlining the importance of the participation of local populations, who are true ambassadors of their environment and play an essential role in promoting our cultural and natural heritage.

Along the way, the territory of the Communauté des Hautes Terres was presented from an original artistic angle. To remember, the ambition is to show the region to its inhabitants, who are its first ambassadors.

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5.8. Route of the Romanesque

Sousa, Douro and Tâmega Valleys,
Northern Portugal

Project description

The Route of the Romanesque is an integrated territorial initiative that goes beyond a simple heritage itinerary. Located in the Sousa, Douro and Tâmega valleys, in the north of Portugal, it brings together more than 60 Romanesque monuments (churches, monasteries, bridges and towers) dating mostly from the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Launched in 1998, the Route emerged with the aim of revaluing a dispersed and little-known architectural heritage, through an innovative approach that articulates conservation, education, sustainable tourism and territorial identity. The Route currently includes 12 municipalities and is

a member of the European TRANSROMANICA network.

Objectives / Challenges

- Reinterpret the Romanesque heritage as a living resource for local development.
- Promote the rigorous conservation and adaptive use of monuments.
- Create a cohesive network of interpretation centres and multimedia content for inclusive visits.
- Stimulate quality cultural tourism, with a positive impact on local economies.
- Integrate sustainable mobility, management and digital communication practices.
- Involve local communities and the various institutional actors in shared governance.



Support / Partners

The Route of the Romanesque is coordinated by VALSOUSA – Association of Municipalities of Vale do Sousa, also involving city councils, parish councils, dioceses, cultural associations and residents. It has public and European funding, is integrated in networks such as TRANSROMANICA and collaborates with entities in the education, tourism, handicrafts and local products sectors.

Tourist impact of the project in the region

The Route of the Romanesque has become a national and international reference in sustainable cultural tourism. Through multilingual tourism products, immersive experiences, educational content and a strong articulation with the gastronomic and artisanal offer, it has been able to attract visitors and boost the local economy. The structuring of the route promotes the decentralization of tourism,

the valorization of host communities and the creation of qualified jobs. The growing presence on digital platforms and the use of technologies such as augmented reality reinforce accessibility and innovation.

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5.9. Cathedral of Santa María de Vitoria-Gasteiz

Basque Country, Spain

Description

The Cathedral of Santa María de Vitoria Gasteiz, whose construction began in the twelfth century, is located on the highest part of the hill on which the primitive Gasteiz was built, which gave rise to the city of Vitoria-Gasteiz. It formed part of the medieval wall and groups a set of buildings of different uses built at different historical moments.

Between 2000 and 2016, major structural prevention and consolidation works were carried out due to the serious state of material and structural deterioration of the building. This work allowed

not only to restore the damaged parts, but also to know in depth the origins of the city based on the archaeological excavations carried out in the cathedral and its surroundings. In addition, these works made it possible to enhance the entire cathedral, so that all its spaces could be used for tourism and/or cultural purposes, making it accessible to the whole of society.

The recent restoration of the portico roofs and the placement of a glazed area made it possible to widen the section of the tourway that can be visited and to install a multipurpose room above the portico. The interventions are currently concentrated on the roofs of the outpatient clinic and, in the next two years, they will move to the roofs of the central nave and transept, which will open the space between the roofs of the church to visitors and expand the possibilities of guided tours.



The Cathedral of Santa María de Vitoria Gasteiz is, therefore, a jewel of Gothic architecture in a constant process of restoration, which makes it an example of dynamic heritage conservation. Its participatory approach, which allows visitors to observe the restoration process live, has been pioneering and widely replicated, creating an immersive experience that attracts tourists, architects, historians and curious people from all over the world. It is also a cultural and tourist engine for the city, with events and exhibitions that promote the connection between the past and the present.

Objectives/Challenges

The Cathedral of Santa María Foundation is the institution created to manage and develop the Plan for the complete restoration of the most emblematic church of Vitoria-Gasteiz.

It was created in 1999 by the Provincial Council of Álava, the Municipality of Vitoria-Gasteiz and the Diocese of Vitoria-Gasteiz. It is a non-profit institution and its board of directors or governing body is composed of representatives of these three institutions.

Among the objectives of the foundation, the following stand out:

- To fully restore the Cathedral of Santa María de Vitoria-Gasteiz;
- To develop the potential of the cathedral as a heritage element of reference in the territory at a historical, cultural, tourist and scientific level;
- To know the constructive characteristics of the temple, its historical evolution and the origins of the city and its historic center;

- Recover numerous material evidences of the city's history;
- Develop the territory through culture-based creativity;
- boost the attractiveness of Vitoria-Gasteiz as a tourist destination;
- Promote a sustainable model of local development.

Support/Partners

The Cathedral of Santa María Foundation not only manages the architectural restoration of the Cathedral, but also develops cultural, didactic and tourist activities for its enhancement, becoming a valuable instrument for the cultural dynamism of the city and its historic center. It is made up of several public and private entities that finance and supervise the cathedral project.

The main financial driver of the recovery of the Cathedral of Santa María de Vitoria-Gasteiz was the CREADIS3 project, funded by INTERREG EUROPE (2017-2021) and led by the Basque Government.

Thanks to an agreement with the City Council and the collaboration of the Spanish Ministry of Culture and Sport, it is also possible to enjoy a complete visit to the old walled enclosure, as part of the guided tours program of the Cathedral of Santa María Foundation and the collaboration with institutions such as the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU) has allowed a scientific and multidisciplinary approach to the restoration. This cooperation has also attracted national and international research grants and funds.

The Cathedral Foundation of Santa María, in collaboration with numerous public and private

agents (such as Fundación Vital), is also developing an interesting cultural program with multiple initiatives. Concerts, recitals, conferences, poetry recitals, theatrical performances, open-air cinema, workshops, children's stories, among others, offer a wide range of activities for all tastes and interests.

In this context, this project presents the notion of systemic governance as an emerging concept from the restoration experience of the Cathedral of Santa María, this being an approach that allows us to understand the different dynamics and scales in which the processes of innovation, learning and social participation in the field of Cultural Heritage occur.

Tourist impact of the project in the region

The Cathedral of Santa María de Vitoria-Gasteiz is currently the main tourist attraction in the city of Vitoria-Gasteiz and the historic territory of Álava, going from a practically forgotten monument to one of the tourist attractions that most contributes to the diversification of the tourist offer of the Basque Country, traditionally dominated by cities such as Bilbao and San Sebastián.

Opened for worship in 2014, it perfectly combines this activity with the integral restoration process and the *Abierto por Obras* guided tour program, through which thousands of people visit it every year. Currently, more than 2 million people have toured the cathedral, and the multiple activities proposed take place in different areas of the church, from the portico to the crypts, passing through the Plaza de Santa María and even extending to other points of the historic territory of Álava.

The economic impact of the Cathedral of Santa María is quite multifaceted, as it has generated direct

and indirect employment. During the restoration works, conservation specialists, archaeologists, tour guides, architects and engineers were hired. At the same time, the growth of associated tourism boosted sectors such as hotels, restaurants, local commerce and cultural services.

In June 2000, when the Cathedral of Santa María launched an innovative system of visits in which, wearing a helmet, visitors could walk through a temple under construction, no one thought that this slogan would become a reference point with great social repercussions over the years. *Abierto por obras* was born from people's interest and curiosity to share the space with archaeologists trying to unravel the origins of a city, restorers who recovered the beauty of a hidden portico or technicians who strove to consolidate pillars deformed by weight and the passage of time. This open restoration was, and still is today, a declaration of intent for a project that is known by citizens, day after day.

And this work philosophy has not only imposed itself among those closest to the project, but has also been disseminated and used in other projects in different parts of Spain. They all share the vision of cultural heritage as an engine of social cohesion and economic development.

In this context, the restoration of St. Mary's Cathedral was selected as a good governance practice in the field of Cultural Heritage. The quality of the Plan for the Integral Restoration of the Cathedral (1996-1998) was recognized by the Basque Government with the Tourism Award (2000). In addition, it participates in SICTED, the project to improve the quality of tourist destinations promoted by the Secretary of State for Tourism, and is committed to the Basque Tourism Code of Ethics.

The quality of the Plan was also widely recognized by the European Union, the Vatican and the Spanish Ministry of Culture, and received the Europa Nostra Prize in 2002.

In 2015, the Cathedral was included in the UNESCO World Heritage List as an asset linked to the Camino de Santiago do Norte, having also seduced internationally renowned writers, such as Ken Follet, who was inspired by the cathedral to write the second part of *The Pillars of the Earth*.

This perspective, which the *Cathedral of Santa María Foundation* pioneered in Spain, is already common in letters of recommendation on cultural heritage and is increasingly taken up in numerous projects and in European sectoral guidelines, recommendations and legislation.

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5.10. Church of San Lorenzo de Úbeda

Andalusia, Spain

Description

The Church of San Lorenzo is located in Úbeda, a historic town located in the province of Jaén, in the autonomous community of Andalusia, in southern Spain. Located in the western part of the historic center of the city, in the vicinity of the old medieval walls, its construction began in the thirteenth century, shortly after the Christian conquest of the city, in 1234. Over the centuries, the church has undergone several renovations and architectural modifications. Although of Gothic origin, the building incorporated Renaissance and Baroque elements as it adapted to the needs and

styles of each era.

However, the Church of San Lorenzo would fall into disuse and abandonment from the nineteenth century onwards, particularly after the processes of ecclesiastical depreciation in Spain, which caused the closure or decline of several temples. Left without liturgical function and without maintenance, the building progressively degraded and, during the twentieth century, lost part of its roof, remaining practically in ruins and excluded from the social life of the city.

The situation of the Church of San Lorenzo began to change significantly at the beginning of the twenty-first century, thanks to the mobilization of a group of citizens, intellectuals, artists and cultural agents, committed to the preservation of the historical heritage of Úbeda.



Faced with the advanced state of ruin of the building and the institutional lack of interest that for decades left the church abandoned, the Fundación Huerta de San Antonio was born, a non-profit organization that took on the mission of saving and giving new life to the temple. The foundation not only dedicated itself to raising funds and raising awareness of the value of the church, but also conceived an innovative rehabilitation project that went beyond the traditional idea of monumental restoration. Instead of returning the space to exclusive religious worship, the proposal was to reimagine it as a plural, living, participatory cultural space open to the local community and the public that was interested in visiting it.

A key step in this process was taken in 2013, with the signing of an agreement between the foundation

and the Diocese of Jaén, the building's legal owner. This agreement formalized the concession of the use of the church to the foundation for a period of 50 years, allowing its management, recovery and reuse for cultural, social and educational purposes. This concession was innovative in the Spanish context, as it represented an example of collaboration between the Church and civil society for the preservation and promotion of religious heritage, without restricting it exclusively to liturgical use.

Objectives/Challenges

The *Fundación Huerta de San Antonio* led the project to rehabilitate the church, not with the intention of returning it exclusively to religious worship, but rather to transform it into a cultural space open to the community. The intervention was carried out

with great heritage sensitivity, respecting the marks of time and integrating contemporary elements that value the building as a place of memory and artistic creation.

The main objectives were:

- Fully restore and rehabilitate the church of San Lorenzo in Úbeda as a center for social and cultural revitalization;
- Adopt a sustainable restoration approach, avoiding aggressive reconstructions and valuing ruin as part of historical discourse;
- To value Úbeda as a destination for quality cultural tourism, offering an alternative to mass tourism;
- To raise awareness among the local population of the distinctive and differentiating value of their heritage;
- To value the importance of heritage as an asset for sustainable local development;
- Transform the church into a pole of economic dynamism, attracting visitors throughout the year and creating a positive impact on commerce, restaurants and local accommodation.

Support/Partners

Fundación Huerta de San Antonio maintains close collaboration with other institutions. Thus, in the development of its multiple activities, it cooperates with the UNED (Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia), with the “Casa de las Torres” Art School, with the University of Jaén, or even with the Baltasar Garzón International Foundation.

The diocese of Jaén and the Huerta de San Antonio

Foundation have committed to bear the costs of the intervention, which amounted to 300 thousand euros.

Thanks to the contribution of other financial institutions, such as La Caixa or Caja Rural, the foundation can carry out interesting projects and initiatives such as the rehabilitation of the monument itself or the annual “Artistic Residency”. The latter promotes creation *in situ*, in the very setting of the church of San Lorenzo.

All the actions of the Fundación Huerta de San Antonio are included in the *Abierto por obras project*, resulting from the collaboration with the Cathedral Foundation of Santa María de Vitoria, creator of the project and provider of advisory services and sharing of experiences. The spirit of this slogan is to share with the public the knowledge generated by a heritage considered universal.

Tourist impact of the project in the region

The Church of San Lorenzo has increased the tourist attractiveness of Úbeda by offering an alternative to the traditional monumental circuit, centered on Renaissance architecture, and standing out as a space for contemporary cultural tourism, especially valued by travelers interested in art, architecture, modern heritage interventions and authentic experiences.

The church also contributes to distributing tourist flows to less explored areas of the historic center of Úbeda, namely the western part of the city where it is located, revitalizing these areas. Its dynamism also attracts regular visitors for concerts, exhibitions, conferences, Guide presentations, theatre, poetry recitals, workshops and gastronomic proposals, which translates into movement in the sectors of catering, local accommodation and traditional commerce. In fact, artists, curators, technicians

and cultural promoters linked to the programming of the space generate direct local income. There is also a multiplier effect, with the emergence of other cultural and entrepreneurial initiatives in the area, such as small galleries, artisanal goods stores and cultural cafes.

The Huerta de San Antonio Foundation also hosts social initiatives, such as the rehabilitation of the gardens of the traditional market of Úbeda, and is interested in the recovery of oral memory, launching the Juancaballos editorial collection of narrative and poetry.

Of note is the creation of direct jobs (management, curatorship, maintenance) and the encouragement of collaborations with local professionals (musicians, artists, tour guides, designers and technicians), in addition to the involvement of volunteers and residents in educational activities and projects, creating social capital and collaborative networks that strengthen the economic and cultural fabric of the city.

The use of the church as a multifunctional space with continuous programming (instead of a simple museum or closed monument) also allows it to generate its own revenue through ticket offices, event rentals, sponsorships and cultural patronage, making this management model particularly innovative due to



the fact that it is partially self-sustainable.

The success of the project has brought national and international visibility to Úbeda, attracting researchers, architects and cultural agents from other regions and reinforcing the city’s cultural brand and its positioning as a quality tourist destination, contributing to its continued presence in networks such as UNESCO.

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5.11. Les Sentiers de l’imaginaire

Carladez, Aveyron, France

Description

The Sentiers de L’imaginaire are located in a rural area in the north of Aveyron, where the local population was unaware of the richness of its surroundings. The 6 interpretation routes have been created in the following six municipalities: Mur-de-Barrez, Taussac, Brommat, Thérondels, Lacroix-Barrez and Murols. Local artists organize activities to tell the story of their region. They are sculptors and painters. These 6 family outings will spark the imagination thanks to the vitality and spirit of these dream-makers. Specially designed for children, these small rides offer a unique experience of fun and education. Immerse yourself in a world where every step reveals a hidden treasure and where imagination soars. The Sentiers de l’Imaginaire promise unforgettable adventures for the whole family, to the rhythm of the elements of nature.



Nature comes to life and speaks to the imagination of the little ones and the old. Together, you learn about plants, geology, the forest ecosystem, and the formation of a lava flow. Each village tells its own story, its particularities, and offers a unique discovery, far from the usual interpretive routes. These villages awaken our imagination, fed by all kinds of apparitions invented by the creator-inhabitants.

There are several topics defined by municipality:

- Lacroix-Barrez: “from magma to stone”;
- Murols: “of fire and wind”;
- Taussac: “the magic forest”;
- Brommat: “along the water”;
- Thérondels: “and the peasant created the meadow”;

- Mur-de-Barrez: “From History to History” and “Tales and Legends”.

The objective is also to create painting and sculpture workshops, where the facilities and accessories necessary for the proper functioning of the project will be developed. The important thing is to find the necessary resources in the area, according to the particularities of each inhabitant, in order to highlight their know-how.

Objectives/Challenges

The trails had to be built with the local population and the challenge was to allow the smaller and larger municipalities to:

- Develop cultural and artistic activities and transmit their stories;

- Create social links between the different inhabitants of the communes and develop tourist attractions in the Carladez area.

Support/Partners

The mayors are committed to the project and give their support. Over time, the organization developed through the creation of an association for each trail and a global association that covers all trails. The board of directors of the latter is composed of elected representatives and local inhabitants.

The community of municipalities was involved in this regional development policy. It is a unique project that requires a great personal investment in terms of creativity and time spent. This project could not have been successful without the strong involvement of the inhabitants of each municipality, the city councils and the Tourism Office.



Tourist impact of the project in the region

In addition to the walking paths, a mill on the Pirommat path, a forge on the Murols path, as well as a wooden house created in Taussac have been restored. At the local level, the Tourist Office was able to use a predefined graphic convention to promote this project and make it the identity of the territory. Welcome plaques have been created on the borders of Carladez and a brochure has been produced covering the six trails. Counters have also been installed on the Taussac, Brommat and Murols walking routes to quantify the turnout (between 6 000 and 8 000 people per year).

It is a tourist asset of this region that evolves over time.

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5.12. Ruta de los Patios, de Villanueva de los Infantes

Castilla-La Mancha, Spain

Description

The “Ruta de los Patios” of Villanueva de los Infantes is an initiative that celebrates the architectural and intangible heritage of the Castilla-La Mancha region, through the annual opening of private patios. These courtyards, located in noble houses, convents and historic residences, are temporarily

transformed into cultural spaces accessible to the public. During the event, the courtyards are decorated with floral elements, handmade objects, family memories and architectural components such as columns, wells and arcades, creating a sensory and immersive experience. Beyond mere heritage contemplation, the Ruta de los Patios proposes an active involvement of the visitor, including guided tours, musical performances, poetry readings, gastronomy and theatrical performances. The owners of the patios themselves assume the role of guides and storytellers, which reinforces the community and participatory character of the project.

Objectives/Challenges

- To value the local heritage as a tourist-cultural resource.
- Promote local identity and intergenerational engagement.
- Offer an immersive and accessible cultural experience.
- Ensure the sustainability of the event through community mobilization and the use of local resources.
- Overcome accessibility challenges, with specific adaptations for people with reduced mobility or sensory limitations.

Support / Partners

The event is managed through a participatory model that includes local cultural associations, municipal authorities and volunteers. The organization is based on a horizontal structure that is responsive to the needs of the community. The collaboration between the various agents guarantees the continuity and organic character of the initiative.



Tourist impact of the project in the region

The Ruta de los Patios generates a significant impact on the local economy, boosting commerce, restaurants and artisanal production. By attracting visitors who explore the courtyards and heritage assets of the village, the event contributes to sustainable and community-based tourism.

In addition, it fosters a sense of belonging and the cultural revitalization of the historic center of Villanueva de los Infantes. The model has already been replicated in other locations, demonstrating its transferability and power as a reference for good practices in rural territories.

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5.13. Barroso Ecomuseum

Montalegre, Northern Portugal

Description

The Barroso Ecomuseum, located in Montalegre, northern Portugal, represents an innovative approach to the musealization of the territory, where rural heritage, collective memory and landscape are integrated in a decentralized structure. Instead of focusing on a single building, the ecomuseum is divided into several interpretive centers and thematic poles, each dedicated to different aspects of local heritage. The nerve centre, Espaço Padre Fontes, next to the medieval castle of Montalegre, introduces visitors to the Barroso identity through multisensory exhibitions, everyday objects, audiovisual narratives and ambiances evocative of rural life.



This ecomuseum stands out for its experiential aspect: it is the residents themselves, artisans, shepherds and cultural mediators who animate the spaces and interact with visitors, reinforcing a logic of co-authorship and transmission of knowledge. Among the interpretive poles, the Casa

do Capitão (in Salto), dedicated to architecture and domestic practices; the Corte do Boi (in Pitões das Júnias), centered on community rituals linked to pastoralism; and the Borralha Mines Interpretive Center, which explores the region's mining legacy. Trails, granaries, mills and agricultural terraces complement this interpretative mesh, revealing the symbiosis between human activity and mountainous ecology.



Objectives / Challenges

- Preserve and enhance the rural heritage and the cultural identity of Barroso.
- Promote environmental sustainability through the reuse of existing buildings and infrastructure.
- Boost the local economy, supporting producers, artisans and tour operators.



- Involve the community in the management and animation of spaces, reinforcing cultural appropriation.
- Develop a critical and evolving narrative of the territory, avoiding romanticizations.

Support / Partners

The Ecomuseum is managed through a partnership between the municipality of Montalegre, local associations and the resident population. This model of collaborative governance ensures the local legitimacy of decisions, the adaptability of practices and a broad sharing of responsibilities in safeguarding heritage.



Tourist impact of the project in the region

The Barroso Ecomuseum has become a national and international reference in the field of community museums and sustainable rural development. It attracts a continuous stream of visitors interested in authentic cultural experiences, which directly benefits local economic agents. Educational and interpretive activities promote intergenerational dialogue and value knowledge systems that are often marginalized. The model applied is replicable in other territories with dispersed heritage, demonstrating that it is possible to build rural resilience from cultural valorisation.

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5.14. Holy Week Interpretation Centre

Sardoal, Central Portugal

Description

The Holy Week Interpretation Center, located in Sardoal, central Portugal, was created to preserve and enhance one of the most striking religious traditions of the village: Holy Week. Integrated in the old restored chapel of Nossa Senhora do Carmo, this center does not function as a conventional museum, but as an immersive space where tradition is lived and interpreted throughout the year. Through digital projections, audiovisual archives, symbolic objects and sensory experiences, the visitor is led into the intimacy of Easter celebrations, namely the floral carpets, processions and deep-rooted community rituals.





Objectives / Challenges

- Preserve and transmit the tradition of Holy Week as intangible cultural heritage.
- Create an innovative and multisensory interpretive experience, accessible to different audiences.
- Involve the local community as a co-producer of the project, valuing intergenerational knowledge.
- To prolong the tourist impact of Holy Week throughout the year, promoting the permanence and cultural consumption in the territory.
- Work on sustainability through the rehabilitation of buildings and the enhancement of endogenous contents.

Support / Partners

The center was developed by the Municipality of Sardoaal with the collaboration of residents, parish groups, artists and local educators. Much of the content results from oral histories and community workshops. The management of the space is participated in and invests in regular educational activities, guided tours by seniors, and workshops with schools and young people.



Tourist impact of the project in the region

The Interpretation Centre has diversified Sardoaal's cultural offer, extending the tourist interest beyond the Easter season. It created new synergies with other cultural facilities in the municipality (municipal gallery, churches, heritage routes), boosted local commerce and positioned Sardoaal as a destination for cultural and spiritual tourism. The national and international recognition that the project has obtained proves its value as a good practice for safeguarding intangible heritage.

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5.15. Lapas Caves

Torres Novas, Center of Portugal

Description

The Lapas Caves, located in the small parish of Lapas, in the municipality of Torres Novas, are a remarkable system of cavities excavated manually in an outcrop of limestone tuff, a porous rock characteristic of the region. For centuries, these caves have been part of the daily life of the local population, being used as wineries, storage rooms, stables or refuges, without there being a full awareness of their heritage value. Far from being treated as musealized relics, these underground structures have survived precisely thanks to their functional and continuous appropriation, remaining off the traditional tourist routes. In recent years, however, a requalification project led by the municipality, supported by principles of territorial enhancement and sustainable development, has repositioned the Caves of Lapas as a strategic cultural asset.





Objectives / Challenges

- To value a cultural heritage hitherto undervalued and not monumentalized.
- Integrate the Caves into an interpretive network that connects natural, historical and community elements.
- Develop an educational and tourism offer focused on sustainability and local involvement.
- Recover and adapt the space to the requirements of safety and accessibility for visitors.
- Stimulate the sense of belonging of the local population and promote active participation in the narration of the history of the place.

Support / Partners

The project is promoted by the Municipality of Torres Novas, with the support of local associations, schools and residents. The rehabilitation was conducted with the contribution of oral memories and local technical knowledge. Educational actions include school programs and thematic tours, with the participation of cultural mediators and experts in geology and local history.

Tourist impact of the project in the region

The revitalization of the Lapas Caves has strengthened the positioning of Torres Novas as a destination for authentic cultural tourism, with a special appeal to visitors interested in underground landscapes, vernacular heritage and community practices. The creation of guided and self-guided tour circuits, as well as educational activities with schools and

organized groups, has fostered a more attentive, reflective and sustainable type of tourism. The project contributed to increasing the length of stay of visitors in the territory, boosted local commerce and integrated the caves into a network of heritage that includes the Castle of Torres Novas, the Carlos Reis Municipal Museum and the karst system of the Almonda spring. The involvement of the local population in cultural events, staged visits and heritage mediation actions also generated a strong sense of belonging and community pride. The project won a national prize for geologic heritage valorisation, and the place is now included in the national Guide of the Portuguese Geological and Mines Sites.

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6. LESSONS LEARNED AND REPLICATION POTENTIAL

A foremost lesson emerging from this documented practices is the fundamental importance of community participation and collaborative governance in achieving sustainable heritage outcomes. Successful cases frequently demonstrate that heritage initiatives anchored in active community involvement foster increased stakeholder engagement, cultural authenticity, and long-lasting sustainability. Effective strategies observed include establishing inclusive local advisory bodies, enabling participatory decision-making frameworks, and empowering local stakeholders

through training and capability enhancement (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2020). Cross-sectoral collaboration also emerges as a crucial factor. The collaboration among public institutions, private enterprises, community organisations, and non-profits enhances resource efficiency, sustainability, and resilience in heritage projects. These collaborations align closely with European Union cohesion policies, which emphasize regional integration and balanced territorial development (European Commission, 2019).

Replication Potential and Strategies

The identified practices present substantial opportunities for replication, primarily due to their inherent adaptability and scalability:

- **Adaptability to Local Contexts:** The selected case studies demonstrate flexible implementation frameworks, making them suitable for diverse geographical, cultural, and socioeconomic realities across the SUDOE territory.
- **Structured and Validated Methodologies:** The evaluation model developed within the HITTS project is based on clearly defined criteria and field-tested indicators, allowing for consistent analysis and facilitating transferability to other rural contexts.
- **Participatory and Collaborative Approaches:** Emphasis on community engagement and multi-level governance contributes to the replicability of practices, as these elements enhance local ownership, institutional trust, and long-term sustainability.

Recommendations for Policymakers and Practitioners

To support the effective transfer and long-term sustainability of good practices, the following strategic recommendations are proposed:

- **Capacity Building:** Invest in local skills and knowledge through tailored education and training programmes that empower communities, cultural actors, and territorial agents.
- **Multi-Level Governance:** Foster governance models that ensure coordination across local, regional and national levels, reinforcing policy coherence and institutional cooperation.
- **Support for Contextual Innovation:** Promote innovation rooted in cultural, social and ecological specificities, favouring inclusive and locally grounded heritage-based solutions.
- **Strengthened Networking:** Encourage transnational and inter-regional platforms for knowledge exchange, enabling the dissemination of experiences and the co-construction of future practices.

The best practices documented in this Guide represent concrete and tested contributions to strengthening sustainability, resilience and cultural vitality in rural territories. Their adoption - together with the strategic orientations proposed here - can serve as a catalyst for inclusive and sustainable development across the SUDOE region and beyond.

7. REFLECTIONS ON THE FUTURE OF HERITAGE-BASED RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE SUDOE REGION

The practices presented in this Guide are more than a catalogue of successful experiences (they represent fragments of a broader and shared ambition: to redefine the role of cultural heritage in the regeneration of rural territories). Each case, in its uniqueness, contributes to a collective understanding that heritage, when approached not as an inert past, but as a living and co-constructed resource, can serve as a powerful engine of territorial resilience, social cohesion and sustainable development.

What emerges from these examples is a model of action that refuses simplification. It is not just about heritage preservation projects; These are complex, often subtle, negotiations between memory and innovation, between rootedness and openness, between tradition and change. Whether through the participatory activation of domestic spaces, the reanimation of ancestral agropastoral systems, or the reinterpretation of medieval architecture through contemporary digital tools, these initiatives challenge prevailing assumptions about what rural development should look like and who can shape it.

Several cross-cutting insights can be drawn from the body of work compiled here. First, that community involvement is not an accessory, but a central condition for the legitimacy and longevity of heritage-based initiatives. The most impactful practices are those that recognize local actors not as passive beneficiaries, but as co-authors of meaning and direction.

Second, this scale is important, but not in the way one might expect. Many of the most effective interventions operate at microlevels: a chapel, a path, a flock, a courtyard. Its strength lies precisely in its ability to root action in the specificity of the place, articulating with broader cultural, economic and ecological systems. This interaction between the intimate and the structural, between the local and the European, is the hallmark of the most resilient practices.

Thirdly, that sustainability must be understood in all its breadth: ecological, yes, but also cultural, economic and institutional. The cases included in this Guide show that it is possible to design heritage initiatives that conserve biodiversity, reinforce identity, generate income and contribute to public policy innovation. They demonstrate that sustainability is not a limit, but a method – a way of thinking in the long term, in an inclusive and systemic way.

However, these achievements are not without tensions. Threats of depopulation, bureaucratic rigidity, climate vulnerability, and cultural homogenization persist. Many projects still rely on the dedication of a few individuals or short-term support from external funding. For heritage to become truly strategic, it is necessary to consolidate governance models, ensure stable funding and invest in strengthening professional and community capacities. It also requires public policies that are sensitive to diversity not only between regions, but within them.

Looking to the future, it is essential to continue to promote exchange, visibility and learning platforms throughout the SUDOE space. The cases presented in this Guide demonstrate the value of transregional collaboration, not as a

standardization of approaches, but as a mutual recognition of different ways of being, knowing, and doing. In this sense, the HITTS project and this publication are not only a contribution to knowledge, but a call to action.

At a time when Europe is facing urgent challenges, green transition, demographic rebalancing, digital transformation, rural heritage should not be relegated to nostalgia or marketing. It should be understood as a field of possibilities, where alternative models of prosperity and coexistence can be imagined and tested.

May this Guide be read not as a conclusion, but as a beginning an invitation to continue the work, to question more deeply, to connect more broadly, and to create with care.

8. FINAL THOUGHTS AND CLOSING MESSAGE

This *Good Practices Guide* concludes a fundamental stage of the HITTS project, reflecting the collective efforts of all partners and territories in identifying concrete, locally rooted solutions for sustainable rural development. The practices documented here go beyond isolated success stories - they represent a living testimony of how heritage, when managed inclusively and strategically, can become a powerful engine for resilience, innovation and cohesion. Far from offering a universal recipe, this publication provides information, inspiration and methodological guidance for regions facing similar challenges. It underlines the importance of building capacity, fostering collaborative governance, and reinforcing cultural identity as

key pillars of long-term development. By giving visibility to practices that are effective, adaptable and replicable, HITTS contributes to a shared European ambition: to preserve and activate our cultural and natural heritage as a resource for future generations. The journey does not end here. The legacy of this project is not only in what has been documented, but in what will be reinterpreted, improved, and implemented from these shared experiences.

Acknowledgement of Project Partners

The success of the HITTS project and the realisation of this *Good Practices Guide* were only made possible thanks to the dedication, knowledge, and collaborative spirit of a diverse network of partners. Regional authorities, academic institutions, cultural organisations, and local communities from across the SUDOE space brought not only their expertise but also their lived experience, enriching the project’s vision and enhancing its territorial relevance. We extend our sincere appreciation to all consortium partners, with special recognition to the lead institutions that contributed additional case studies and provided valuable outputs into the diversity of rural heritage dynamics. Their active participation ensured that this publication reflects both the complexity and the richness of our shared cultural landscapes. While this Guide represents the conclusion of a key phase in the HITTS project, it also signals the beginning of new conversations, new collaborations, and renewed commitments. The fields of heritage and sustainable tourism continue to evolve in response to global challenges, technological shifts, and changing societal needs. In this context, HITTS stands as a platform - not only of results, but of possibilities.

We invite policymakers, heritage professionals, educators, and local actors to engage with the ideas and practices presented here. Let these examples inspire new projects, inform public policy, and strengthen local strategies that value heritage as a living, evolving asset. Fostering regional learning networks, supporting continuous capacity building, and investing in inclusive governance models will be crucial for sustaining this momentum.

Above all, this Guide affirms that sustainable heritage management is not an abstract ambition - it is a tangible, achievable path to revitalised communities, stronger identities, and more resilient territories. Let us preserve the spirit of collaboration and innovation that defined this journey, and continue to shape together a more inclusive and sustainable future for rural heritage in the SUDOE region and beyond.

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