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Uniejów - capitalising on a sustainable tourism vision for a small peripheral town



Subtitle: Uniejów, Poland



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Introduction

Uniejów, a small town in central Poland, has undergone a remarkable transformation from a little-known locality into a vibrant and respected tourism destination. Thanks to visionary leadership and well-aligned investments, the municipality has built a diverse tourism portfolio that emphasizes sustainability, cultural heritage, and active community involvement.



By capitalizing on its geothermal resources, historical landmarks, and local traditions, Uniejów has attracted a wide range of visitors while fostering environmental stewardship and strengthening the local economy. It now stands as a national example of how small towns can combine innovation and identity to create inclusive, resilient development through sustainable tourism.

Uniejów's rise as a tourism destination

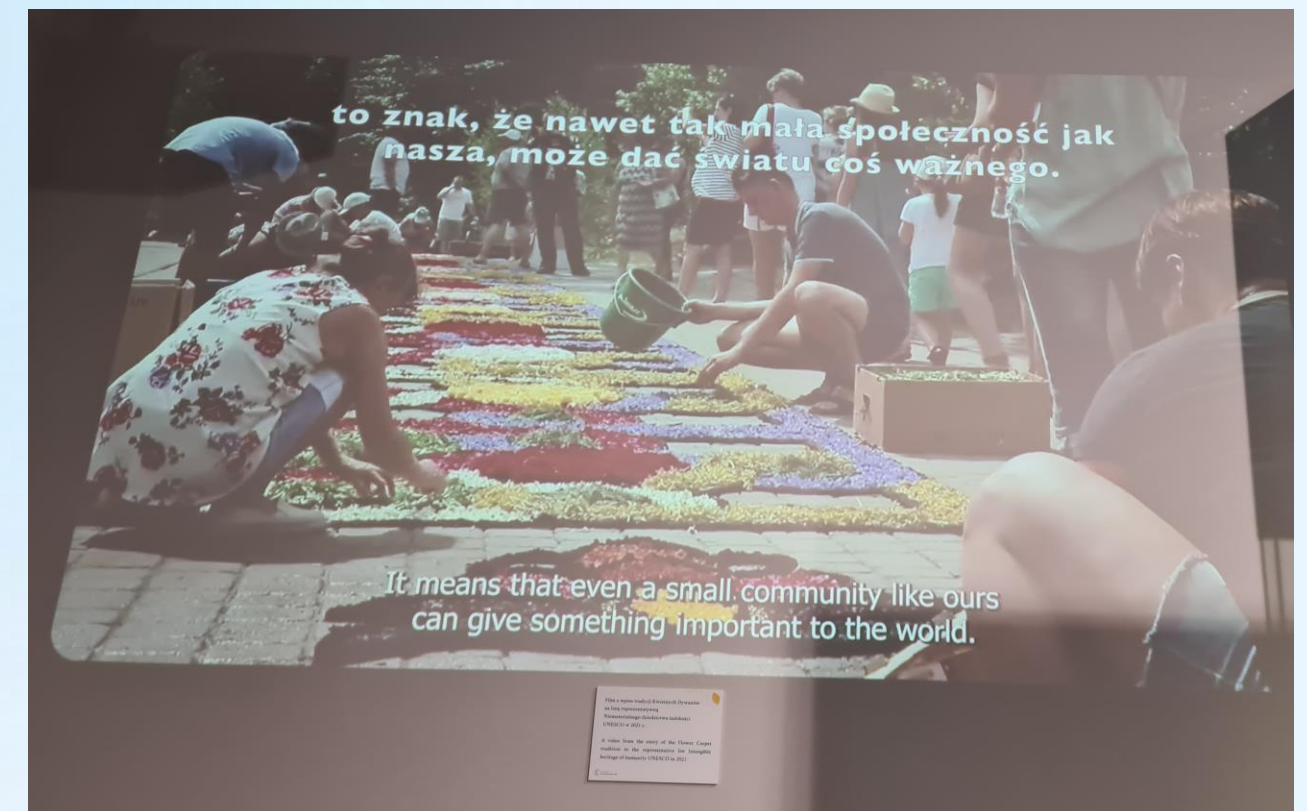
Uniejów's transformation into a model of sustainable cultural tourism began with the strategic development of its geothermal infrastructure. The establishment of Termy Uniejów, a modern thermal spa complex, became the cornerstone of both its tourism offering and environmental strategy. Beyond attracting wellness tourists year-round, the geothermal system now provides heat to approximately 80% of the town's buildings, significantly reducing emissions and demonstrating how renewable energy can power not just a tourism asset, but broader municipal services.

At the same time, Uniejów prioritized the preservation of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Key historical landmarks—such as the 14th-century Castle of the Archbishops of Gniezno and the collegiate church—were restored and opened to visitors, anchoring the town's cultural identity. Just a few kilometers away, the nearby village of Spycimierz celebrates a centuries-old tradition of creating intricate floral carpets for the Corpus Christi procession, which was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2021.



Promoting cultural heritage

To support the preservation and promotion of this unique tradition, the Spycimierz Corpus Christi Center was established as a joint initiative between the Parish Association "Spycimierskie Boże Ciało" and the Municipality of Uniejów. Functioning as a year-round cultural-educational hub, the center documents, interprets, and celebrates the floral carpet tradition while also highlighting other forms of intangible cultural heritage. This partnership serves as a successful model of community-based heritage management, showcasing the strength of collaboration between local government and grassroots organisations.



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Developing tourism portfolio

In its effort to offer a multidimensional tourism experience, Uniejów has developed a diverse network of complementary attractions rooted in cultural, ecological, and educational values. The Zagroda Młynarska (Miller's Farmstead) functions as an open-air ethnographic park where visitors can explore regional architecture, traditional crafts, and culinary heritage. Close by, the Tężnia Solankowa (salt graduation tower) offers therapeutic benefits through natural salt inhalation, aligning with the town's wellness and sustainability branding.



For families and educational groups, the Strefa Odkrywania, Wyobraźni i Aktywności (SOWA)—translated as the Zone of Discovery, Imagination, and Activity—provides an interactive science center that encourages curiosity, learning, and playful exploration, further enhancing the destination's appeal to diverse visitor segments.

Ambiental protection and entrepreneurship

Local culture and sustainability converge in community-driven initiatives, most notably the annual Earth Festival. This flagship event combines environmental advocacy, cultural performance, education, and music, creating a platform where locals and tourists engage with climate and sustainability themes in a celebratory setting. In parallel, Uniejów supports local entrepreneurship, enabling residents to participate in the tourism economy through small businesses in crafts, food production, and event services.

Together, these coordinated efforts have transformed Uniejów into a vibrant, year-round destination that connects wellness, culture, education, and environmental stewardship—showcasing how even a small town can build a recognized tourism model rooted in sustainability and community engagement.



Economic Impact

Uniejów's tourism model has diversified the local economy and created year-round income streams. Termy Uniejów serves as both a wellness hub and a reliable heat source for residents, reducing utility costs and carbon emissions. The rise in tourism has stimulated local entrepreneurship in accommodation, wellness services, gastronomy, and crafts. Municipal support has encouraged new business ventures—such as bike rentals and eco-tourism guides—ensuring economic benefits remain community-centered. Increased visitor numbers and spending have bolstered public revenue, which is reinvested in infrastructure and services.



Cultural Impact

The town has preserved its built heritage while elevating intangible traditions. Key landmarks have been sensitively restored and adapted for cultural tourism. Spycimierz's floral carpets, once a local religious tradition, now engage both tourists and locals year-round through educational and artistic programming at the dedicated center. Cultural venues and activities promote continuity, especially among youth, and reinforce the community's unique identity.



Environmental Impact

Uniejów's commitment to sustainability is most visible in its pioneering use of geothermal energy. The town's heating system, powered by local geothermal resources, provides heat to the majority of buildings—including public institutions and private homes—resulting in significant environmental gains. Emissions of harmful pollutants have been drastically reduced, contributing to cleaner air and improved public health. The development of nature-integrated infrastructure has further supported environmental goals. Facilities such as the salt graduation tower (tężnia solankowa) provide wellness benefits while reinforcing the region's branding as a clean, health-conscious destination. Green areas, walking paths, and riverfront development projects encourage sustainable mobility and nature-based recreation.

Environmental awareness is also promoted through educational initiatives, notably during the annual Earth Festival. This event blends environmental education with cultural expression, creating an accessible platform for learning and reflection. By embedding ecological values into cultural experiences, Uniejów has cultivated a tourism model that respects and preserves its natural surroundings.



Social Impact

The tourism strategy adopted in Uniejów places a strong emphasis on social inclusion and community empowerment. Local residents are not passive observers but active participants in the development and management of cultural tourism. Associations such as the Parish Group in Spycimierz have played a pivotal role in safeguarding and promoting traditional practices. The municipality supports these grassroots efforts, facilitating funding, training, and visibility.



Tourism-driven infrastructure improvements have enhanced the daily lives of residents. Public amenities, cultural venues, transport, and energy systems have been upgraded for the overall well-being of the community. Improved aesthetics, safety, and accessibility have created a more pleasant and cohesive urban environment.

Cultural and educational programs also promote intergenerational engagement, connecting young people with their heritage and offering opportunities for creative expression and innovation. The resulting social cohesion reinforces a shared sense of purpose and community pride, further strengthening the sustainability of the town's development model.

Visitors Benefits and Impact



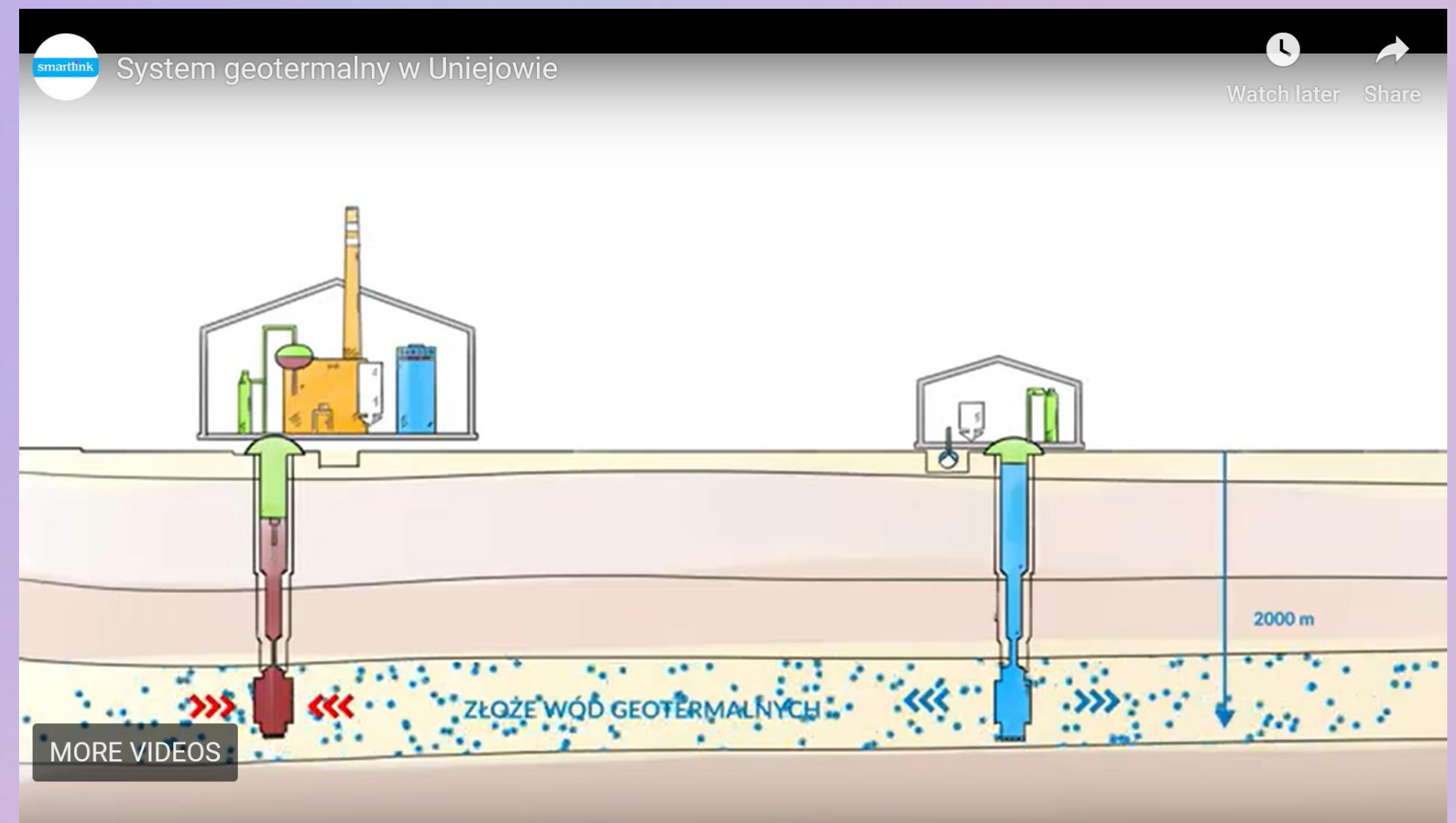
While Uniejów's geothermal waters and the Termy Uniejów spa are the main draw for many visitors—offering year-round wellness and therapeutic experiences—it is the town's broader, thoughtfully curated offer that makes it a truly rewarding destination. Cultural landmarks such as the 14th-century castle and collegiate church add historical depth, while attractions like the Zagroda Młynarska allow guests to experience traditional crafts and rural life in a hands-on setting. The UNESCO-recognized floral carpet tradition in nearby Spycimierz, showcased at the dedicated cultural center, provides a unique window into local identity.

For visitors, especially those from central Poland, Uniejów offers a rare opportunity to combine health, culture, education, and nature in a single visit. The addition of interactive spaces like the SOWA science center and eco-friendly walking paths has created a destination that is not only relaxing but intellectually and culturally engaging. This holistic and balanced tourism experience encourages deeper connections to place and promotes sustainable travel behaviors.

Sustainability Measures

Uniejów's sustainable tourism model is defined by the integration of environmental innovation, cultural preservation, and inclusive economic development. At its core is the efficient use of geothermal energy, which powers the Termy Uniejów complex and provides eco-friendly heating for most of the town—significantly reducing harmful emissions and demonstrating how infrastructure and tourism can reinforce each other sustainably.

Cultural sustainability is actively cultivated through the restoration of historical sites and the protection of living traditions. The UNESCO-recognized floral carpet tradition in Spycimierz is celebrated and shared year-round through the Corpus Christi Center, ensuring continuity and community involvement.



Sustainability

On the economic front, the municipality supports local entrepreneurs—particularly in crafts, gastronomy, wellness, and cultural services—ensuring that tourism revenues benefit local residents. Facilities like the graduation tower and nature trails promote low-impact, wellness-oriented recreation, while events such as the Earth Festival raise environmental awareness and strengthen community bonds.

Together, these measures reflect a well-rounded approach to sustainability—one that is embedded in infrastructure, identity, and everyday experience.



Community Involvement

The transformation of Uniejów into a model of sustainable tourism has been deeply rooted in the active involvement of the local community. Residents are not only beneficiaries of tourism but also essential contributors to its planning, development, and day-to-day operation.

Role of the Local Community

Local people play a central role in preserving and promoting cultural heritage, particularly in Spycimierz, where the Corpus Christi floral carpet tradition has been maintained for generations. This grassroots practice remains entirely community-driven, with families and neighbors collaborating to prepare intricate designs each year. Their involvement extends beyond cultural expression into education, as they help run the Spycimierz Corpus Christi Center, which educates visitors and locals about this living tradition.



Community Involvement



Ownership and Local Entrepreneurship

Tourism in Uniejów has spurred local entrepreneurship, with residents establishing and managing guesthouses, restaurants, craft shops, and wellness services. The municipality has facilitated this by providing infrastructure and support programs that lower the barriers to starting and expanding tourism-related businesses. This bottom-up development ensures that much of the economic value created by tourism remains in the community.

Collaborative Management

While the municipality leads strategic planning—such as geothermal investment, infrastructure development, and coordination with regional bodies like Łódzki Łuk Turystyczny—it does so in partnership with community stakeholders. Decision-making around cultural projects, festivals (like the Earth Festival), and tourism promotions often includes local associations, parish groups, and business owners, fostering shared responsibility and trust.

This collaborative, community-anchored model not only enhances authenticity and sustainability but also reinforces local identity and social cohesion, making Uniejów a living example of how rural areas can thrive through inclusive tourism development.

Monitoring and Evaluation



Uniejów employs a combination of municipal oversight, stakeholder feedback, and performance indicators to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness and sustainability of its tourism strategy. Key metrics include visitor numbers to attractions like Termy Uniejów and the Spycimierz Corpus Christi Center, accommodation occupancy rates, local business growth, and geothermal energy efficiency. Environmental indicators, such as air quality improvements due to geothermal heating and usage rates of eco-friendly infrastructure, are also tracked. Cultural engagement is evaluated through participation in heritage events and community involvement in traditions like the Corpus Christi celebrations. The municipality collaborates with academic institutions and regional tourism bodies to assess long-term impacts and adjust strategies accordingly.

Financing

Uniejów's transformation has been financed through a combination of public and private sources. A relevant component was European Union funding, particularly under programs supporting renewable energy, cultural heritage preservation, and rural development. The development of geothermal infrastructure and spa facilities benefited from substantial investment by the municipality, with co-financing from national and EU structural funds. Additional funding has come from private sector partners, especially in hospitality and wellness services. Community projects, such as the Corpus Christi Center, are often supported through partnerships between local government, parish institutions, and cultural foundations. Revenues from tourism - through taxes, ticket sales, and service fees—are reinvested in infrastructure, cultural programming, and support for local entrepreneurship.

This structured, multi-source financing model and evidence-based evaluation framework help ensure that Uniejów's tourism development remains inclusive, adaptive, and sustainable.



Uniejów's Sustainable Tourism Model

One of the most compelling aspects of Uniejów's success is its creation of a multidimensional tourism offer that demonstrates how sustainable tourism can flourish even in regions without iconic landmarks or strong tourism traditions. What began as a strategic effort to transform geothermal resources into a competitive local advantage evolved into a layered and complementary experience that integrates wellness, cultural heritage, natural assets, education, and community engagement. Rather than relying on a single flagship attraction, Uniejów built a coherent portfolio of modest yet meaningful elements—each enhancing the other. This approach has proven effective in attracting a wide range of visitors, encouraging longer stays and return visits. Its phased development, from geothermal infrastructure to cultural and recreational services, provides a replicable roadmap for other small towns.

Moreover, Uniejów's active participation in regional networks such as Łódzki Łuk Turystyczny enhances its scalability by fostering inter-municipal cooperation and knowledge exchange—further reinforcing the model's relevance for sustainable rural revitalization.

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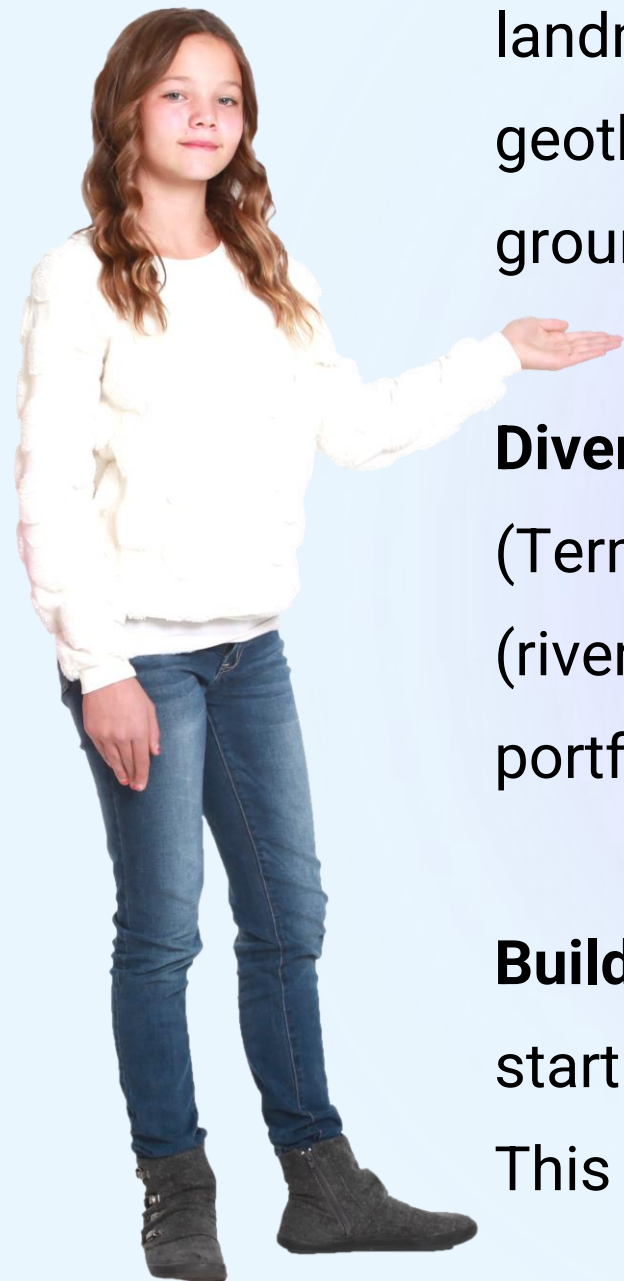


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Key Conclusions & Takeaways

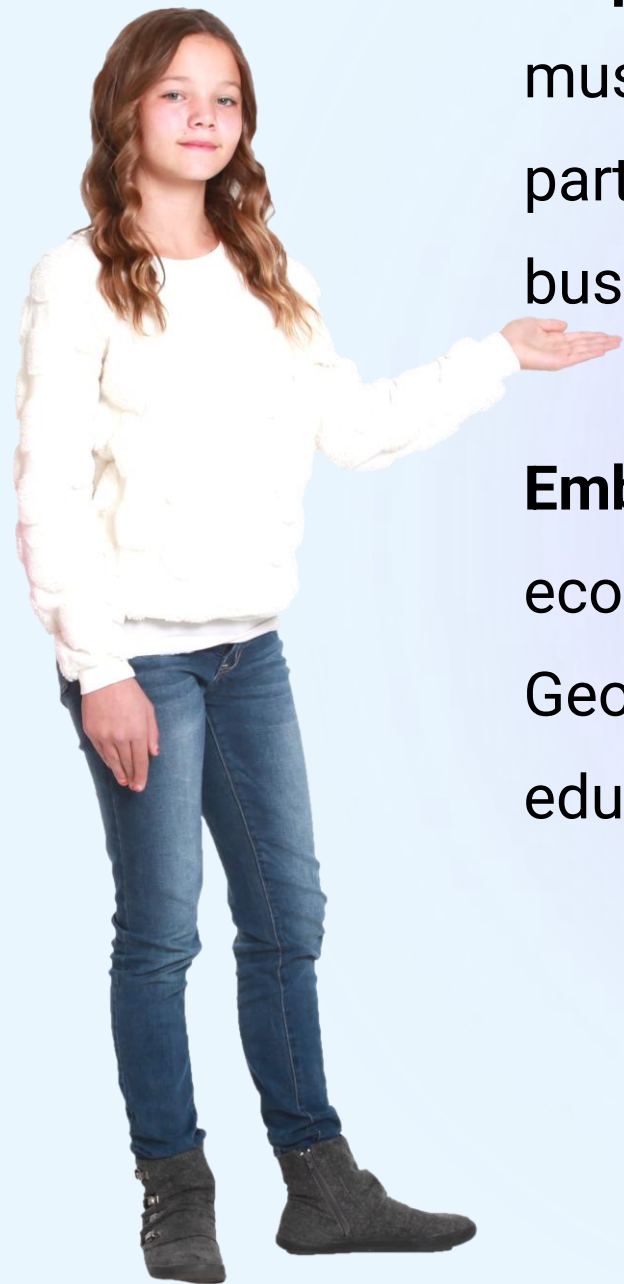


Start with What You Have—Even If It's Not Iconic: Uniejów proves that small towns don't need world-famous landmarks to become attractive destinations. By leveraging modest but meaningful local assets—like geothermal water, historical sites, and living traditions—the town created a rich, coherent offer from the ground up.

Diversify the Visitor Experience: Uniejów's success lies in its multi-dimensional tourism model. Wellness (Termy Uniejów), culture (castle, Spycimierz floral carpets), education (SOWA science center), nature (riverside trails), and events (Earth Festival) are not standalone attractions but part of a mutually reinforcing portfolio that caters to diverse audiences and extends the average visitor stay.

Build for Long-Term, Phased Growth: Rather than pursue rapid development, Uniejów grew strategically—starting with geothermal infrastructure, then gradually adding cultural, recreational, and educational layers. This phased approach ensures flexibility, community engagement, and adaptive management.

Key Conclusions & Takeaways



Empower the Local Community as Co-Creators: The town's traditions—especially in Spycimierz—are not museum pieces but living practices maintained by residents. Uniejów's model emphasizes bottom-up participation, with local people involved in everything from product development to festival organization and business creation.

Embed Sustainability Across the Entire Model: Environmental stewardship, cultural continuity, and local economic inclusion are not separate goals in Uniejów—they are integrated across the tourism offer. Geothermal energy powers wellness and infrastructure. Cultural centers preserve traditions while supporting education and business. Events and trails foster awareness and low-impact experiences.

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Key Conclusions & Takeaways



Collaborate Beyond Borders: Uniejów enhances its visibility and replicability through participation in regional networks like Łódzki Łuk Turystyczny. These partnerships support shared marketing, product development, and knowledge exchange—making the model scalable and transferable to other municipalities.

Make Tourism Work for Residents, Too: Tourism in Uniejów improves local quality of life—not just the visitor experience. Infrastructure investments benefit residents, cultural programs engage youth and seniors, and the economy grows through locally owned businesses. This people-centered approach ensures local support and long-term sustainability.

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