CULT MED

Sustainable Cultural Tourism
on the Mediterranean

BEST PRACTICES FOR SUSTAINABLE CULTURAL TOURISM - report

Contents

1. Introduction

CultMED is a transnational cooperation project funded under the Creative Europe Programme. It seeks to promote Sustainable Cultural Tourism by enhancing cultural heritage and fostering inclusive and sustainable development models within the cultural tourism sector. The Work Package 2 (WP2) "Collecting good practices across the EU" plays a foundational role in this effort, aiming to map and collect best practices that reflect the diversity of European approaches as a ready to use digital resources, while establishing a common ground for providing practical learning opportunities and resources for Sustainable Cultural Tourism to stakeholders active in cultural tourism, in the future CultMED project development phases.

This report is a key document which outlines the process and results of good practices collection in Sustainable Cultural Tourism. It supports the activities of the CultMed project and reflects the key lessons learned throughout the process. The methodology and results presented are shaped by the established WP2 work objectives:

- Develop and apply a shared methodology and tools.
- Identify best practices across partner regions.
- Promote knowledge exchange and mutual learning.
- Identify best practices from alternative cultural contexts at the EU level and learn from them.
- Support the development of evidence-based recommendations.

2. Methodology and tools
2.1. Development of the common methodological framework

To provide a coherent, participatory, and operational structure for the identification and documentation of best practices in Sustainable Cultural Tourism—ensuring their seamless integration into a digital library and offering a practical, engaging resource for professionals in the sector—the WP2 methodological framework was developed by the consortium, in accordance with the parameters set out in the project proposal and coordinated by the WP2 lead.

This process was initiated through dedicated sessions at the project's Kick-Off Meeting and followed by a series of online communications aimed at achieving a shared understanding of thematic priorities, refining methodological tools, and incorporating input based on each partner's local expertise and context.

Although coordination and operationalization were led by the WP2 lead, all partners were actively involved in shaping key aspects, including:

- Reaching a joint definition of Sustainable Cultural Tourism, ensuring that all partners operated from a common conceptual base.
- Agreeing on the scope of best practices to be collected.
- Establishing and validating the criteria for the selection and evaluation of best practices.
- Providing feedback on the tools and ensuring their adaptability to local contexts.

The participatory element of the process enabled inclusion of diversified expertise, respecting different organizational and regional perspectives and harmonization across different national and regional contexts, while targeting high quality and responsive to the real needs of cultural industry results contributing to a robust and inclusive methodology.

As a result of this process, the Best Practices for Sustainable Cultural Tourism "Research Guide" was developed to define a common approach for identifying and collecting best practices. It also provides partners with guidelines and tools to successfully carry out the tasks of Work Package 2 (WP2).

2.2. Best practices for Sustainable Cultural Tourism - research guide and the key concepts

The research guide for the collection of best practices structures the research process into two phases:

- Phase 1 – Data Collection at the National Level,
- Phase 2 - Data Collection at the EU level.

Within each phase, all research partners aimed at identifying good practices within cultural tourism which follow the Council of Europe definition of **Sustainable Cultural Tourism** - "provide opportunities for economic development in local communities, enhances local culture and protect and preserve the heritage and authenticity of the destination[1]". As a result, all best practices highlighted in this report represent initiatives that contribute to local economies, respect social customs, and preserve cultural resources, while also providing visitors with meaningful cultural experiences. These are initiatives that have proven effective in enhancing cultural tourism and generating positive economic and social impacts on communities, while preserving local resources and demonstrating potential for replication in other locations.

To ensure the inclusion of relevant practices, the CultMED project carried out a research and collaborative refinement process to clearly define the criteria for best practices in sustainable cultural tourism. An initiative is considered a best practice if it meets specific criteria across several key categories, outlined as follows:

Table 1. Elements of good practices in Sustainable Cultural Tourism:

1. It **brings direct benefits to local communities**. It:
- Generates economic opportunities for local communities (jobs, entrepreneurship).
- Ensures fair revenue sharing with local stakeholders.
- Prioritizes locally owned businesses and services to keep income within the community.
- Avoids reliance on external operators or large chains that extract profits without reinvesting locally.
- Supports the development of sustainable business models that empower local entrepreneurs and ensure profitability.
2. It **fosters cultural preservation and respect**:
- Protects and promotes local cultural heritage (traditions, language, sites).

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[1] https://culture.ec.europa.eu/cultural-heritage/cultural-heritage-in-eu-policies/sustainable-cultural-tourism

- Involves locals in showcasing and educating visitors about their culture authentically. - Reinvests part of the profits into preserving cultural assets and practices. - Does not negatively impact local lifestyle and life quality.
3. While focusing on local community and cultural preservation and promotion factors, it does **include sustainable use of resources**:
- Minimizes environmental impact (waste reduction, energy efficiency). - Supports conservation efforts, reinvesting in protecting natural and cultural assets. - Encourages businesses to adopt eco-friendly practices that align with sustainable tourism principles.
4. It takes place **in line with community objectives** and **not against the local community will**:
- Involves community members in decision-making and tourism planning. - Promotes inclusive participation, ensuring benefits reach marginalized groups. - Encourages community ownership or co-management of tourism enterprises.
5. It provides **high-quality visitor experience**:
- Offers meaningful, immersive, and respectful cultural experiences for travelers. - Educates tourists about the culture and sustainability of the destination. - Includes opportunities for tourists to directly contribute to community projects or sustainable initiatives.
6. It **translates to economic or social benefits for local community**:
- Supports locally owned, self-sustaining enterprises that create lasting economic benefits. - Facilitates capacity-building programs for local entrepreneurs to run successful tourism-related businesses. - Establishes diversified income streams for communities (e.g., combining tourism with crafts, farming, or eco-services). - Encourages reinvestment of profits into the community or local development projects.
7. **Includes measures of monitoring** and is conducted in a transparent way:
- Tracks and reports on the economic, cultural, and environmental impact. - Continuously improves based on feedback from the community and travelers. - Implements metrics to evaluate the profitability and sustainability of local businesses involved.
8. It is **transferable and scalable**:
- Demonstrates a model that can be adapted to benefit other communities.

In this way, the practices identified and shared through the CultMED project are aiming to support a deeper understanding and application of the Sustainable Cultural Tourism principles, while also contributing to the broader development of sustainable tourism.

Ultimately, the goal of sustainable tourism is to balance the needs of the tourist with those of the destination, thus retaining the economic and social advantages of tourism and mitigating any negative social, economic, historic and cultural impacts on the destination. The Sustainable Cultural Tourism moves the challenge a step further adding the focus on **enhancing local culture, its visibility and understanding, protecting and preserving the heritage and authenticity of the destination.**

The practices highlighted as good/best practices look to ensure incorporation of both aspects in

line with the provided criteria.

2.3. Data collection at the national level

The process of identifying and documenting local best practices in Sustainable Cultural Tourism was carried out by each partner within the CultMED consortium, following a shared methodology and coordinated framework developed under WP2 leadership. The research aimed to collect at least three local practices per partner country that exemplify innovative, inclusive and sustainable approaches to cultural tourism. Special attention was given to practices linked to festivals, archaeological sites, museums/galleries and villages, in order to feed into the subsequent activities of the CultMED project WP3.

The identification of practices followed a flexible, context-sensitive approach allowing for both desk research and stakeholder engagement. In countries where reliable and extensive secondary data existed, the process was led primarily through document analysis, online resources and project archives. In others, a mixed-methods approach was adopted, incorporating interviews, focus group discussions and consultations with relevant actors, including tourism boards, local governments, cultural institutions, academic experts, NGOs and community representatives.

The practices were selected reflecting the multidimensional character of Sustainable Cultural Tourism based on a jointly agreed set of criteria as per Table 1. Partners applied these criteria during the identification process to ensure each practice met minimum thresholds of quality, relevance and transferability. The main criteria included:

- Contribution to diversified sustainability dimensions: cultural, social, economic, environmental.
- Level of community involvement and ownership.
- Relevance for protection and popularization of cultural heritage.
- Balance between the sustainability and tourist experience.
- Impact on local development and tourism diversification.
- Potential for replication in other regions or contexts.

Each selected practice was documented using a structured format to ensure consistency across partners and facilitated cross-national comparison and synthesis, while providing a practically oriented and attractive base of best practices from across the Mediterranean region for use by tourism sector professionals and beyond. Those were designed for use within the CultMED digital Library.

To ensure quality and compliance with the established criteria and approach, as well as support partners in the development process, a peer-to-peer review took place. To streamline the process and support partners in assessing the practices, comprehensive review questionnaires were developed by the WP2 lead and used by partners to provide feedback (see Annex 1).

Following the review, all practices were revised by the authors, presented to local stakeholders and final versions with inclusion of the internal and external feedback were uploaded to the Digital Library.

3. National Best Practices

3.1. Portugal

3.1.1. Identification of the best practices

Following the unified methodology for collecting and developing best practices, the identification of Portuguese examples was primarily based on desk research and an analysis of local initiatives against the criteria for Sustainable Cultural Tourism established during the initial project phase. To complement this, local stakeholders were consulted through informal inquiries to gather additional insights into existing practices.

Special attention was given to identifying best practices related to village tourism and to strategies and representing them initiatives for attracting visitors to remote and less popular among tourists areas of Portugal. The former will be the focus of future training materials developed by the local partner, E&D, as part of the CultMED activities. The latter addresses a critical challenge in sustainable tourism for Portugal—highlighting the importance of showcasing effective practices and sharing knowledge on how they can serve as drivers of meaningful, place-based solutions. Based on these criteria, stakeholder recommendations, and available information, three practices were selected and studied in detail.

3.1.2. Bringing legends to life: Friday 13 - The Night of The Witches - Montalegre, Portugal

The Sexta 13 Festival in Montalegre transforms the superstition of Friday the 13th into a unique cultural event known as the Noite das Bruxas (Night of the Witches), blending ancient folklore with theatrical performance, immersive technology and sustainable tourism practices. Its key strength lies in revitalizing a remote rural area through a creative, community-led celebration that merges tradition with innovation while respecting environmental limits.

> Best Practice: Friday 13 - The Night of The Witches - Montalegre, Portugal

This practice highlights several key insights:

- Cultural folklore can be creatively reimagined using modern technologies such as light shows, projection mapping and digital storytelling to enhance the visitor experience while keeping the core tradition intact.

- Sustainable practices can be embedded in large-scale cultural events, including waste reduction, reuse of materials and partnerships with local food and craft vendors that reduce environmental impact and boost the local economy.

- Community ownership contributes to authenticity, since local residents are central to planning, performing, and promoting the event, maintaining strong cultural integrity and intergenerational participation.

- Rural areas can become cultural destinations when tourism strategies are built around unique local narratives rather than generic offers.

- Multi-sensory, themed experiences (combining sound, visuals, performance and ritual) can attract diverse audiences and generate emotional connections that support cultural sustainability.

3.1.3. Quinta do Mocho – From High Risk Stigmatised social living area to popular cultural tourism destination

This practice describes the transformation of Quinta do Mocho from a stigmatized social housing neighborhood into Europe's largest open-air urban art gallery through a community-driven urban art festival. Its key strength lies in using Sustainable Cultural Tourism to foster social inclusion, empower local residents and promote economic and social revitalization.

➢ Best Practice: Quinta do Mocho, Sacavém, Portugal

The practice underlines that:

- Sustainable tourism initiatives that actively involve local residents can build community pride, ownership and social cohesion.

- Collaborative cultural projects can effectively challenge and change negative public perceptions of marginalized areas.

- Authentic, community-led guided tours enrich visitor experiences while generating local employment and economic opportunities.

- Integrating cultural tourism with social development promotes respectful, empathetic interactions between tourists and host communities.

- Long-term success depends on multi-sector partnerships, including public, private and social organizations working together toward common goals.

3.1.4. Carnaval de Podence – From Local Tradition to UNESCO-Honoured Cultural Heritage and Tourism Anchor

This practice showcases how the small rural village of Podence transformed its ancient Carnival tradition "the Entrudo Chocalheiro (Caretos)" into a globally recognized cultural asset and a driver of Sustainable Cultural Tourism. The revitalization of the Caretos tradition, led by a dedicated community association, has bolstered regional identity, preserved intangible heritage, and generated socio-economic benefits through tourism, education and artisan crafts.

➢ Best Practice – [Carnaval de Podence, Podence, Portugal](#)

The practice underlines that:

- Cultural heritage festivals rooted in local tradition can serve as powerful tools for rural regeneration, community pride and intergenerational engagement.

- Community-led preservation efforts, including youth involvement and gender inclusion, ensure cultural continuity and adaptive relevance in changing social contexts.

- Recognition by institutions such as UNESCO can significantly increase international visibility, tourist inflows, and heritage appreciation, contributing to local economic sustainability.

- Integration of education, craftsmanship and tourism, through initiatives like the Casa do Careto museum and mask-making workshops, creates immersive visitor experiences and supports local artisans.

- Long-term viability is reinforced by strong local governance, partnerships with cultural and youth institutions, and strategic adaptation to demographic and economic challenges.

3.1.5. Focus Groups

Focus Groups Details

In Portugal three (3) focus groups were organized in April 2025 aiming to bring insights from different types of stakeholders. Each focus group included two representatives of E&D and five external participants ranging from guides and cultural tourism operators, tourism and hospitality managers, representatives of NGOs supporting promotion of cultural heritage and events organisers to academics specialized in the topic. The first focus group took place in Porto as a face-to-face session, followed by two interactive sessions held online. Each focus group was designed as a one-hour meeting aimed at fostering a clear understanding of the Sustainable Cultural Tourism approach, facilitating the exchange of practices and expertise among participants and the CultMED project, and highlighting participants' engagement in related initiatives. The sessions also sought to identify needs and potential solutions that could be addressed through CultMED activities and within the broader local and Sustainable Cultural Tourism ecosystem.

Moreover, the small-scale and highly participatory format of the events was intended not only to encourage active engagement and knowledge sharing, but also to promote effective networking and build familiarity among participants and their complementary areas of work.
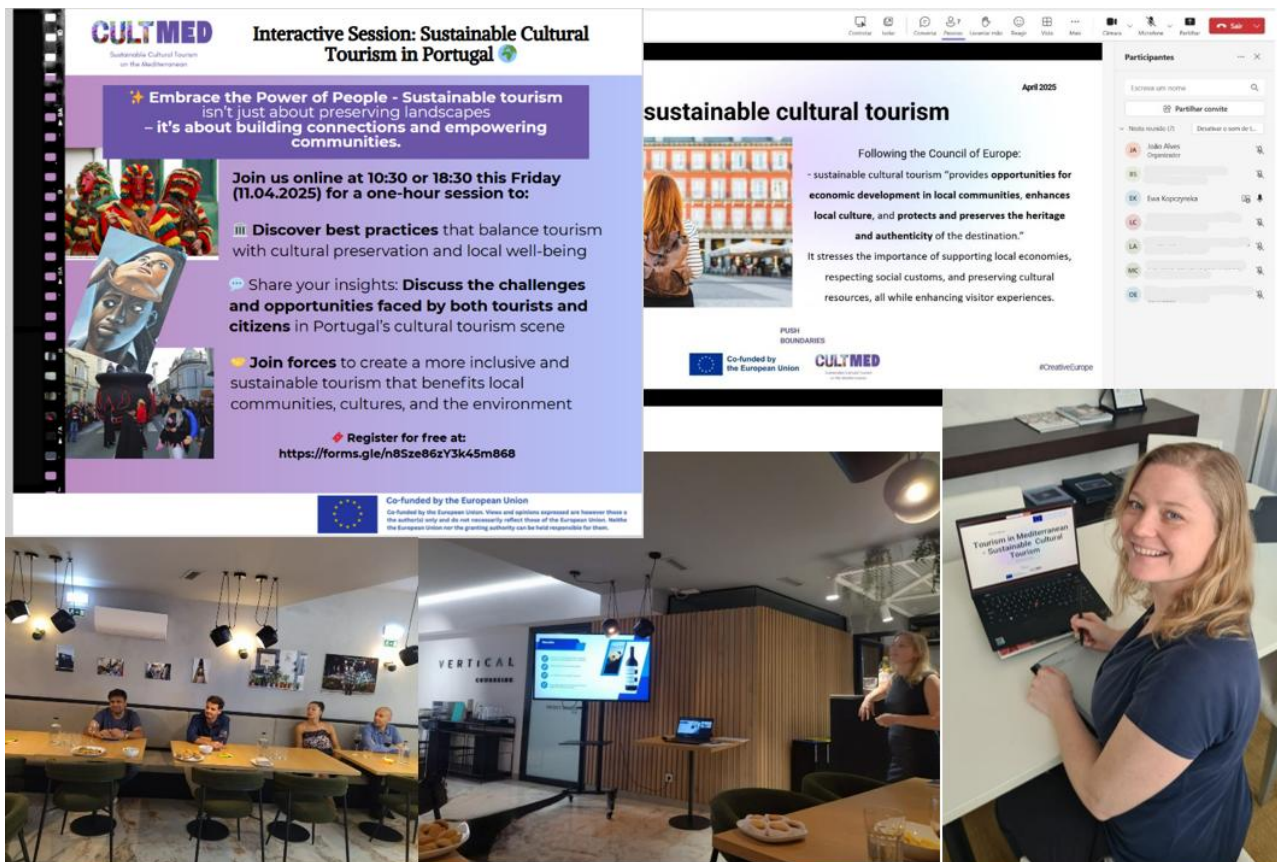
Feedback on Presented Practices

Across the presented three best practices participants were highly satisfied with the quality and content of the practices and especially with the clear approach to showing all aspects of design and implementation of the sustainable cultural tourism practices, from the origin, through growth to benefits, and especially in clearly highlighting aspects of integration of efforts between different stakeholders and the social, cultural as well as ecological scope. Many participants underlined the relevance of showing benefits for both local community and visitors and how those can be achieved by different approaches. Considering the face-to-face focus group participants underlined that they would appreciate if best practices from Porto area were included. One of the participants also expressed concern that while all practices and their practice-oriented presentation offer relevant practical value for practitioners, the values celebrated through the Montalegre event related to local ancient beliefs are not necessarily reflecting the cultural identity of Portugal and can give misleading impression to visitors. However other participants were not supporting those views.

Participants' Familiarity with Sustainable Cultural Tourism

Familiarity with the concept of Sustainable Cultural Tourism varied among the engaged stakeholders. The term is widely recognized and popular in the context of academic community and policy makers, but its practical conscious application is still rare and related to significant challenges, as low awareness and attention of tourists operators in the area. Participants highlighted the need to raise awareness and build the capacity of sector professionals for

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sustainable practices, indicating that many are still in a phase of adaptation or even denial for the need of adjustments. The majority agreed that there is in many relevant groups the general misconception of Sustainable Cultural Tourism as only referring to ecological sustainability and ignoring the attention to cultural values and needs of the community.

Needs and Challenges in Cultural Tourism and the Sustainable Cultural Tourism in Portugal

Next to the need to address misconceptions and awareness gaps regarding Sustainable Cultural Tourism the main challenges identified include:

- Tourist Flow Management: The concentration of tourists in specific cultural sites places significant pressure on heritage and local communities.

- Digitalization and Innovation: There is a growing need to integrate effective digital technologies to improve both tourist experiences and cultural resource management.

- Inclusion and Accessibility: Ensuring that cultural tourism is accessible to all, including people with special needs.

- Coexistence Between Residents and Tourists: Balancing the interests of local communities with tourism activities needs to be more integrated into sustainability strategies and models.

Gaps in Existing Practices & Educational Needs

The identified gaps in current practices include:

Professional Training: There is a lack of specific training programs for tourism operators and cultural managers on sustainable practices.

Cross-sector Integration: A greater collaboration between the tourism, culture, and education sectors is needed to promote a holistic approach.

Community Education: Implementation of educational programs for local communities and visitors about the benefits and responsibilities of Sustainable Cultural Tourism is still limited and needed for realistically capitalizing on Sustainable Cultural Tourism models.

Additional Insights from Stakeholders

The main additional insights relate to the wish for broader coverage of the topics covered, such as slow cultural tourism practices, inclusion of city tourism solutions with key relevance for overflown by tourism areas and highlighting the key practices in the mainstream tourism areas of relevance in Portugal, such as wine and food tourism. Based on best practices presented and follow up discussions, stakeholders highlighted the importance of:

- Community Participation: Involving local communities in the planning and implementation of tourism initiatives to ensure that their needs and values are respected.

- Promotion of Local Identities: Valuing and promoting local cultures and their different aspects and hidden peculiarities as a way to differentiate offer of destinations and attract visitors to diversified locations.

- Combating non-sustainable tourists patterns: Negative impact of bloggers and influencers on accumulating tourism traffic along repetitive itineraries and their often disrespectful behaviours toward local businesses, cultures and natural environment.

- Economic Sustainability: Developing business models that ensure the economic viability of sustainable cultural initiatives.

3.1.6. National level conclusions

The collected Portuguese cases show a strong power of cultural identity as a cultural asset in Portugal and a base to whether through local legends, traditional festivals, or community-driven arts, to transform lesser-known or marginalized areas into attractive cultural tourism destinations. In places like Montalegre, Podence and Quinta do Mocho, local people used their own culture (such as festivals, stories and street art) to bring new life to their villages and towns. These examples show how strong cultural identity can help attract visitors while also benefiting the people who live there. These examples demonstrate how deeply rooted cultural expressions, when respectfully promoted and creatively interpreted, can revitalize marginalized or lesser-known areas and transform them into compelling cultural tourism destinations.

A key conclusion across all cases is the critical importance of community involvement. Successful initiatives are those where local residents are actively engaged, from conceptualization and planning to execution and benefit-sharing. Community participation not only guarantees authenticity but also ensures long-term viability and inclusive local development. This point was further reinforced during focus group discussions, where participants underlined that stakeholder cooperation and grassroots involvement are essential to building trust, ownership, and social cohesion.

However, discussions also revealed a significant gap in the practical application of sustainability principles. While there is growing recognition of the term "Sustainable Cultural Tourism" among academics and policy-makers, its operationalization remains limited, particularly among tourism providers and local operators. Many professionals still associate sustainability primarily with environmental actions, overlooking the equally vital cultural and social dimensions. Addressing this misconception is essential to advancing more comprehensive and inclusive practices.

Stakeholders also emphasized the need for stronger integration of sustainability across all tourism sectors and scales. Despite existing positive examples, broader tourism systems in Portugal remain fragmented, with limited cross-sector collaboration and few scalable models that are adaptable across the country's diverse regions. Specific challenges include poor tourist flow management, underutilization of digital technologies, and limited accessibility in rural areas.

In addition, the focus groups revealed a consistent need for capacity building. There is a notable

absence of targeted training for tourism and culture professionals in sustainable practice design and delivery. Participants expressed a desire for tools, frameworks, and support systems that help them translate sustainability concepts into actionable strategies within their daily operations.

Finally, the discussions pointed to the urgency of diversifying and dispersing Portugal's tourism offer. There is strong potential to redirect visitor interest from over-concentrated destinations toward underrepresented rural and cultural areas. Doing so will require investment in infrastructure, improved digital presence, and promotional strategies that highlight the unique cultural narratives and experiences available across the country.

3.2. Cyprus

3.2.1. Identification of the best practices

Following the unified methodology for collecting and developing best practices, the identification of National practices in Cyprus was based on a combination of field experience, desk research and close collaboration with CultMed project partners. Particular input was provided by local stakeholders, Aspon Consulting Ltd and Cyprus Sustainable Tourism Initiative (CSTI), who drew on their long-standing involvement in the field of Sustainable Cultural Tourism.

To ensure relevance and authenticity, informal consultations were held with key local actors such as tourism organisations, community councils and community groups. Their insights helped guide the selection of practices that reflect both the strengths and ongoing challenges of rural tourism in Cyprus.

The selected practices were assessed against CultMed's evaluation criteria, including cultural relevance, community engagement, environmental responsibility, economic impact and transferability. Emphasis was placed on locally led initiatives that showcase how cultural tourism can support rural development while promoting sustainability and heritage preservation. Based on this multi-criteria approach and stakeholder input, three best practices were selected to illustrate different dimensions of Sustainable Cultural Tourism currently active across the island.

3.2.2. "Greening Cyprus for a Sustainable Future" Cultural Event, Agros Village, Limassol

This practice describes a long-running series of annual events organised by the Cyprus Sustainable Tourism Initiative (CSTI), with the 2020 edition held in Agros Village being a standout example. The event brought together local producers, tourism professionals, sustainability advocates and policymakers to promote responsible tourism, rural economic resilience and environmental sustainability in Cyprus. Its strength lies in its community-based model and ability to combine policy dialogue, cultural experiences and sustainability education in a rural setting.]

➢ Best Practice: AGM 2020, Agros, Cyprus

The practice underlines that:

- Engaging local producers, councils and stakeholders in the planning and delivery of events creates long-term ownership and strengthens community pride.

- Cultural engagement activities, such as guided tours, tastings and workshops with local artisans, foster visitors' understanding of heritage and encourage responsible consumption.

- Sustainable logistics, including the use of digital invitations, plastic-free practices and tree planting, demonstrate how such tourism events can have a reduced environmental impact.

- Supporting small, rural businesses by providing platforms for networking and direct sales connects local economies with the tourism sector in meaningful ways.

- The model has proven replicable, having been implemented in other rural villages across Cyprus since 2008, showcasing its scalability and continued relevance.

3.2.3. Kalopanayiotis: A Model Village for Sustainable Cultural Tourism in Cyprus

This practice showcases the transformation of Kalopanayiotis, a mountain village in the Troodos region, into a model for Sustainable Cultural Tourism. The revival was led by a local visionary who restored traditional homes into boutique accommodations, prioritising cultural heritage, community involvement and environmental stewardship. Its strength lies in combining heritage conservation with modern visitor experiences while ensuring local ownership and benefit.

➢ Best Practice: [A Model Village for Sustainable Cultural Tourism, Kalopanayiotis, Cyprus](#)
➢

The practice underlines that:

- A community-led, bottom-up approach to rural tourism can reverse depopulation and revitalise economically declining areas while preserving local identity.
- Adaptive reuse of heritage buildings, such as converting traditional homes into hotels

and museums, offers a replicable model for Sustainable Cultural Tourism development in historic villages.
- Integration of wellness, eco-tourism and cultural experiences has diversified Kalopanayiotis' tourism offerings, making it resilient to seasonal fluctuations.
- The initiative relies on local business ownership and avoids mass tourism by embedding tourism within the local economy and ensuring that revenue stays within the village.
- National and international recognitions, such as the EDEN Award, UN Tourism's Best Tourism Villages designation (2024) and inclusion in Cyprus' Colourful Villages initiative, have reinforced the village's visibility and credibility as a benchmark for Sustainable Cultural Tourism

3.2.4. Hadjigiorkis Flourmill Museum, Frenaros, Famagusta

The Hadjigiorkis Flourmill Museum is a private, community-driven initiative that preserves Cyprus' milling and bread-making heritage through interactive and educational experiences. Established by Cyprus Millers, the museum combines traditional craftsmanship with modern interpretation tools like VR, while engaging schools, tourists and artisans in the cultural tourism offering. Its strength lies in its authentic, hands-on approach to cultural heritage, its integration with educational and rural tourism networks and its model of community benefit through local economic circulation.

➤ Best Practice: Hadjigiorkis Flourmill Museum, Famagusta, Cyprus

The practice underlines that:

- Traditional industries such as milling and bread-making can be successfully transformed into immersive tourism attractions that preserve cultural identity.
- Educational partnerships with the Ministry of Education allow the museum to contribute to cultural heritage learning across generations, integrating vocational skills with local traditions.
- Community involvement is central to the museum's operations, with residents engaged as tour guides, workshop leaders and contributors to the preservation of milling culture.

- The museum's sustainability strategy incorporates energy-efficient infrastructure, zero-waste workshops and responsible visitor management, demonstrating how heritage spaces can also meet environmental goals.
- Digital innovations like VR tours expand access to cultural content, making Cyprus' rural heritage visible and engaging to international audiences and supporting wider replicability of the model

3.2.5. Focus Groups

Focus Group Details

The three (3) focus groups were designed as an interactive presentation and open discussion. The participants were introduced to three (3) Best Practices in Sustainable Cultural Tourism:

- CSTI's AGM 2020: "Greening Cyprus for a Sustainable Future": a sustainable cultural event organized in Agros village.
- Hadjigiorkis Flourmill Museum: a private initiative preserving heritage through responsible tourism.
- Kalopanayiotis Village: a rural tourism destination transformed through sustainable development and cultural preservation.

The 1st National Focus Group was held on 4th April 2025, from 14:00 to 15:00 at Lordos Beach Hotel, Larnaca. A total of seven (7) tourism professionals participated, all members of the hotel's executive and operational management team. The participants represented key departments within the hotel, offering diverse perspectives on the practical application of sustainable tourism principles in hospitality operations. The session was structured as a face-to-face roundtable discussion, with facilitation provided by CSTI's Executive Chairman and Project Manager. After presenting the three best practices, participants were encouraged to share their thoughts and exchange ideas in an open and informal setting. The conversation extended on the hotel's own upcoming international event in May 2025, offering a timely opportunity to reflect on how sustainability measures, such as the zero-waste principles highlighted in the CSTI AGM, could be adopted in practice.

The 2nd National Focus Group was held on 24th April 2025, from 15:00 to 16:30, at the Hadjiyiorkis Flourmill Museum in the village of Frenaros. Participants included a diverse mix of five (5) stakeholders; the Deputy Mayor of Frenaros (also affiliated with the Cyprus Millers Group), the museum's manager and environmental sustainability consultant, a representative of a local environmental initiative (Keep Our Sand & Sea Clean) and the Operations Manager of a 5-star beach hotel in Ayia Napa. The event was conducted in-person, with facilitation provided by CSTI's Executive Chairman and Aspon's Project Manager, and was guided by a combination of open discussion and interactive participation through a Google Form. Participants were asked to rank the three best practices and assess each one against five criteria: cultural preservation, economic benefits, environmental sustainability, scalability and visitor experience. The conversation extended into relevant local examples and challenges, such as the funding of cultural institutions, tourism staffing in rural areas and ideas for replicating plastic-free or sustainable village models in other parts of Cyprus.

The 3rd National Focus Group was held on 2nd May 2025 from 11:00 to 13:00 at the University of Nicosia. Due to scheduling constraints, the session was split into two parts, as one participant arrived an hour late and was engaged in a separate discussion to ensure their input was accounted for. Five senior tourism professionals participated, including two professors within the tourism field from the University of Nicosia and other members of the University's operational and management

team working in the HORECA sector of the campus. The session was conducted in person and facilitated through a combination of open discussion and interactive engagement via a Google Form. Participants were asked to rank the three presented best practices and evaluate them based on relevance, transferability and feasibility. The discussion also covered local examples and key challenges, such as the funding of cultural institutions, staffing issues in rural tourism areas and how plastic-free or sustainable village models could be adapted to other regions of Cyprus. The session was moderated in a roundtable format by CSTI's Executive Chairman and Aspon's Project Manager.

Feedback on Presented Practices

Participants expressed enthusiasm and curiosity about the presented best practices, noting the practicality and clarity of the examples. They appreciated the blend of environmental, social, economic and cultural elements, especially as these were tied to real and successful Cypriot case studies.

Key Strengths Identified:

- AGM 2020 in Agros was praised for being a replicable model for sustainable event planning and for mobilizing the local community.

- Kalopanayiotis stood out for long-term vision and effective integration of heritage, wellness and tourism infrastructure.

- Hadjigiorkis Museum was noted for maintaining authenticity and offering an educational experience tied to local production and history.

Key Weaknesses Identified:

Participants felt that replication of the Kalopanayiotis model would require significant investment, long-term vision, and a coordinated effort between public and private actors. These are factors that may not be easily available in all rural destinations. While the model is clearly successful, it was acknowledged that its transformation relied on a unique combination of resources, leadership and timing. Similarly, the Hadjigiorkis Flourmill Museum was recognized as a deeply personal and passionate initiative, with strong individual leadership at its core. While this contributed greatly to its authenticity and success, participants noted that such models might be harder to scale or institutionalize without broader structural support or sustained funding mechanisms.

Potential for Transferability:
The AGM sustainable event model was considered the most immediately transferable practice by both focus groups. At Lordos Beach Hotel, participants showed strong interest in applying the techniques presented, particularly with their upcoming BeMed Community Day international conference in May 2025. The model's structured, zero-waste approach was seen as both actionable and inspiring for the hospitality sector.

During the 2nd focus group, stakeholders also reflected on a similar event organized in 2017 in

Sotira, Famagusta that similarly had incorporated sustainability and local community engagement. This parallel reinforced the idea that such events can be adapted across different municipalities with similar cultural and logistical frameworks. The success of the Sotira event was cited as evidence of feasibility and resonance with local audiences.

The Kalopanayiotis model was viewed as an aspirational benchmark for rural regeneration, with strong cultural integration and long-term strategic planning. However, participants noted that replicating this model would require significant investment, a cohesive development vision and long-term commitment from both private and public sectors. That said, several stakeholders, including the Deputy Mayor of Frenaros, voiced enthusiasm for pursuing similar strategies in their own community. Villages such as Frenaros, Moutoullas, Pedoulas and Kakopetria were all identified as having the potential to evolve into sustainable, culturally vibrant destinations by adapting the principles demonstrated in the Kalopanayiotis example.

During the 3rd focus group, participants emphasized the strong transferability potential of both the CSTI AGM 2020 and Kalopanayiotis Village, highlighting them as standout practices. The AGM was seen as a practical and feasible model for sustainable event organization that could easily be adapted across different tourism settings. Kalopanayiotis was praised for its long-term vision and community-driven development, though its replicability was viewed as more complex due to the substantial investment and strategic planning it requires. The Hadjiyiorkis Flourmill Museum, while appreciated for its authenticity and educational value, was considered less transferable due to its unique private-sector context and strong cultural specificity. Overall, participants agreed that the relevance and feasibility of transferring these practices would depend on available resources, stakeholder engagement as well as the local tourism landscape.

Participants' Familiarity with Sustainable Cultural Tourism

Across all three focus groups, participants demonstrated a solid awareness of sustainability principles, particularly in relation to their respective fields.

In the 1st focus group, hotel professionals showcased strong familiarity with environmental sustainability practices, especially in the context of hospitality and event planning. However, their engagement with cultural heritage-based tourism initiatives was more limited, highlighting an opportunity for further integration of cultural dimensions into their sustainability strategies.

In the 2nd focus group, familiarity with Sustainable Cultural Tourism was notably strong among participants with backgrounds in heritage preservation and environmental advocacy. The Deputy Mayor of Frenaros and the museum's environmental consultant offered valuable insights, referencing specific local initiatives and challenges. Their contributions underscored a growing interest in aligning cultural preservation with sustainability efforts at the community level.

During the 3rd focus group, participants demonstrated a solid understanding of Sustainable Cultural Tourism, particularly from an academic and operational perspective. Two of the attendees, being university professors in the field of tourism, showed strong awareness of the concept, while the remaining participants were particularly well-acquainted with sustainable practices applied in campus operations. The group collectively acknowledged the growing importance of integrating cultural sustainability into tourism strategies and educational frameworks. However, they noted that despite increased awareness, actual implementation at a national and local level remains

limited, particularly in rural areas, due to challenges such as staffing shortages, fragmented stakeholder collaboration and lack of targeted funding.

<u>Needs and Challenges in Cultural Tourism and the Sustainable Cultural Tourism:</u>

1. Key Needs Identified:
    - Clear guidelines and checklists for sustainable event planning
    - Staff training in sustainable hospitality practices
    - Networking with local producers and cultural stakeholders

2. Key Challenges Faced:
    - Limited awareness among international event organizers
    - Budget limitations for sustainable upgrades
    - Lack of coordination between tourism professionals and cultural institutions

<u>Gaps in Existing Practices & Educational Needs</u>

Discussions during both focus groups revealed a shared recognition of the opportunities and obstacles involved in advancing Sustainable Cultural Tourism in Cyprus. While participants expressed strong support for sustainability-driven initiatives, they also identified a range of practical and structural challenges that need to be addressed for such efforts to be successful and replicable. These insights reflect the realities faced by tourism professionals, local authorities and cultural actors in their efforts to balance environmental, economic and cultural objectives. The following points summarize the most prominent needs and challenges identified during the sessions:

-   Key Needs Identified:
    - Clear guidelines and checklists for sustainable event planning
    - Staff training in sustainable hospitality practices
    - Networking with local producers and cultural stakeholders
    - Funding mechanisms for small-scale cultural initiatives and museums

-   Key Challenges Faced:
    - Limited awareness among international event organizers
    - Budget limitations for sustainable upgrades
    - Lack of coordination between tourism professionals and cultural institutions
    - Over-commercialization risk; growing concern about striking a balance between attracting tourists and preserving the authenticity of local culture.

<u>Additional Insights from Stakeholders</u>

Beyond the structured discussion points, participants brought forward a range of observations and suggestions that speak to the evolving landscape of cultural tourism in Cyprus. These reflections, which are based on real-life challenges and locally driven initiatives, add depth to our understanding of how sustainable practices can be applied in diverse settings. From revisiting past successful models to imagining future plastic-free cultural villages, the input provided by stakeholders underlines the importance of locally rooted strategies, cross-sector collaboration, and

adaptive thinking in shaping sustainable tourism pathways.

- CSTI's AGM 2020 in Agros Village:

This best practice was considered "best-in-class" by the hotel professionals participating in the focus group. They found the AGM to be an exemplary model for organizing sustainable cultural events, especially within a hospitality setting. What resonated most was the combination of local sourcing, community engagement and zero-waste practices, which are elements found realistic and directly applicable to their own operations. Participants expressed a strong interest in developing similar frameworks for the hotel's future events and suggested that a step-by-step guide or practical toolkit would support wider implementation across the sector.

- Hadjigiorkis Flourmill Museum:

The museum was praised for showcasing how small-scale cultural heritage can be meaningfully preserved and activated for tourism. Participants appreciated the authenticity and storytelling behind the museum, but acknowledged that replicating such a model would require strong individual commitment and possibly external support. There was interest in exploring how such initiatives could be institutionally supported, especially through partnerships with tourism bodies.

- Kalopanayiotis Village:

The transformation of Kalopanayiotis impressed participants with its comprehensive approach, by combining heritage conservation, infrastructure and wellness tourism. However, they recognized that it required significant funding and strategic vision. Stakeholders emphasized the importance of long-term planning, public-private collaboration and access to funding for such integrated projects to succeed elsewhere.

During the 1st National Focus Group participants stressed that while each best practice was context-specific, the core principles such as community involvement, cultural authenticity and environmental responsibility, are universally applicable. They advocated for more opportunities to exchange know-how with other Mediterranean destinations working on similar initiatives. A discussion was also raised around the relevance of applying international standards such as ISO 20121 (Sustainable Event Management to local cultural events), particularly as a way to formalise sustainability practices and enhance the credibility of initiatives like the CSTI's AGM.

During the 2nd focus group discussions, several additional best practices and future opportunities were identified. The Droushia Heights Hotel (Droushia Village) and Rodon Hotel (Agros Village) emerged as a noteworthy early example of community-based sustainable tourism, where local residents collectively invested in the creation of a hotel to stimulate economic development within their village. Frenaros Village was also highlighted as a promising candidate for future sustainable tourism projects, particularly due to its existing infrastructure and the presence of the Hadjigiorkis Flourmill Museum, which already serves as a cultural anchor in the area. Additionally, the villages of Pedoulas, Moutoullas and Kakopetria were recognized for their rich cultural heritage and seen as having strong potential to replicate the Kalopanayiotis model of rural regeneration if they received the necessary strategic support and investment to implement sustainable, culturally rooted initiatives.

During the 3rd focus group, participants emphasized the importance of cultural identity in shaping sustainable tourism experiences and highlighted the need for stronger cooperation between academic institutions and tourism practitioners. They also noted the opportunity for educational

settings, such as universities, to play a more active role in piloting sustainable practices and raising awareness among future tourism professionals. There was also a shared sentiment that cultural events and destination branding, when rooted in authenticity and supported by local communities, can serve as powerful tools in advancing Sustainable Cultural Tourism.

3.2.6. National level conclusions

The selected best practices from Cyprus reflect a diverse range of approaches to Sustainable Cultural Tourism. These include community-led rural revitalisation, heritage preservation through private initiative and event-based models that promote environmental awareness and collaboration. Each example demonstrates that authenticity, local ownership and cultural relevance are essential elements for meaningful and enduring tourism development.

Focus group participants confirmed that these practices are both representative of Cyprus' tourism strengths and adaptable to other local contexts. While each initiative is tailored to its own setting, they share a common foundation of community involvement, environmental responsibility and cultural integrity. These values were consistently highlighted by local stakeholders as critical to successful cultural tourism.

The case of Kalopanayiotis shows how long-term planning, committed leadership and investment in infrastructure can transform a remote village into a destination of national and international significance. The CSTI event in Agros illustrates how a well-designed cultural event, even of short duration, can create lasting community benefit when organised with sustainable principles and local engagement. The Hadjigiorkis Flourmill Museum presents an effective example of how traditional knowledge and craftsmanship can be preserved and shared through interactive education-driven visitor experiences.

Participants in the national focus group also raised the need for stronger capacity-building support. Several expressed interest in formalising event planning through international sustainability standards such as ISO 20121. There was also strong support for increasing opportunities for collaboration and knowledge sharing with other Mediterranean regions engaged in similar initiatives. Stakeholders agreed that practical training, institutional backing and access to ready-to-use tools would enhance the transferability and scaling of best practices across Cyprus.

Sustainable Cultural Tourism
on the Mediterranean

3.3. Greece

3.3.1. Identification of the best practices

Following the unified methodology for collecting and identifying best practices, the process began with targeted desk research to map initiatives aligned with the evaluation criteria outlined in CultMed's Research Guide. Based on this initial review, selected stakeholders were invited to present their most relevant and impactful practices related to Sustainable Cultural Tourism.

We collected and documented all relevant initiatives according to the guidance provided in CultMed's Research Guide. To gain deeper insights and resolve any outstanding questions, additional discussions were held with stakeholders, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the presented practices.

Finally, the practices were evaluated against the established criteria such as cultural relevance, community involvement, sustainability, and transferability; and three best practices were selected. These reflect diverse approaches to fostering sustainable cultural tourism and provide concrete examples for future exchange and replication within the CultMED framework.

3.3.2. Psiloritis Geopark Digital Tools – Enhancing Heritage Accessibility Through Technology

This practice showcases how the Psiloritis UNESCO Global Geopark in Crete, Greece, uses digital tools to preserve and promote its rich natural and cultural heritage. Through interactive maps, virtual tours, VR experiences, and educational apps, the initiative enhances accessibility and awareness while supporting local communities and sustainable tourism. It offers a replicable model for other rural and heritage-rich regions aiming to integrate technology and preservation.

➤ Best Practice: Psiloritis UNESCO Global Geopark, Psiloritis, Greece

The practice underlines that:

- Psiloritis Geopark has developed interactive digital maps, story maps, and virtual reality tours to promote its natural and cultural heritage. These tools have increased the geopark's visibility, enhance geotourism and support sustainable development goals.

- The innovative tools developed allow visitors to explore enriched experiences in the Psiloritis Mountains, providing immersive insights into the region's cultural heritage.
The geopark's interactive digital map promotes local products and services, connecting tourists with regional enterprises and fostering local economic development.

- Virtual tours increase accessibility and engagement. Psiloritis Geopark offers virtual tours and storytelling maps, making remote areas accessible to a broader audience including individuals with mobility challenges and enhancing cultural engagement.

3.3.3. Soulouksina – Sustainable Heritage Tourism by Electric Bicycle in Rural Crete

This best practice presents Soulouksina, an immersive, founder-led initiative based in Episkopi Pediados, Crete. Centered around sustainable electric bicycle tours, the project promotes cultural heritage, local gastronomy, and environmental consciousness. Through storytelling and local engagement, the initiative revitalizes the village economy and fosters deep connections between visitors and the Cretan lifestyle. It exemplifies how sustainable tourism can serve as a tool for cultural preservation, education, and rural development.

➢ Best practice: Soulouksina, Electric Bicycle Tourism, Episkopi Pediados, Greece

Episkopi Pediados, Crete. Electric bicycle tour

The practice underlines that:

- The narrative of the tale of Soulouksina fosters a deeper emotional connection to the locale, local history and traditions, making the experience immersive, more memorable and meaningful.

- The involvement with local community members (religious ceremonies, traditional cafes) ensures an authentic tourism experience. Such engagement not only enriches the visitor experience but also empowers the local community by valuing and preserving their traditions.

- The eco-friendly transportation using electric bikes for the tour reduces the environmental footprint, aligning with global sustainability goals, allowing visitors to traverse the unique landscape responsibly while enjoying natural beauty.

- The successful experience of Soulouksina demonstrates the potential for replicating similar, culturally adapted models in other rural settings. By focusing on storytelling, community involvement, and sustainability, respective initiatives can revitalize rural economies and enhance preserve cultural identities.

3.3.4. Thirathen – Preserving Cretan Musical Heritage Through Cultural Tourism

Thirathen, located in Krousonas, Crete, is a living center for traditional music and instruments that merges cultural preservation with sustainable tourism. Through the Museum of Traditional Music, interactive workshops, and community-led education programs, the initiative revives local musical traditions while generating cultural, economic, and environmental value. Thirathen exemplifies how music and heritage can be at the heart of responsible tourism and rural regeneration.

➢ Best Practice: Thirathen, Crete, Greece

The practice underlines that:

- The immersive hands-on engagement deepens cultural understanding. Through instrument-making demonstrations, live performances, and interactive learning sessions, visitors are not passive spectators but active participants in the living heritage of Crete, fostering richer experiences and long-lasting appreciation.

- Local participation reinforces authenticity and sustainability. Residents contribute as

performers, storytellers, curators, and educators. Their deep-rooted knowledge and lived experience ensure that the cultural narrative is accurate, emotionally resonant, and sustainable across generations, while nurturing community pride.

- The model thrives on adaptive collaboration and diverse income streams. Targeted alliances with educational bodies, artists, and cultural institutions, alongside free-access programming for children and event hosting, create a flexible, replicable structure that can be tailored to other culturally rich communities.

3.3.5. Focus Groups

<u>Focus Group Details</u>

Heraklion Development Agency conducted a total of three distinct focus group sessions comprising 63 participants. Two of these were held in person, while one was facilitated online.

Our online focus group brought together 19 invited local representatives from a diverse range of sectors, including Museums, Cultural Institutions, tourism and hospitality enterprises, and cultural tourism professionals.
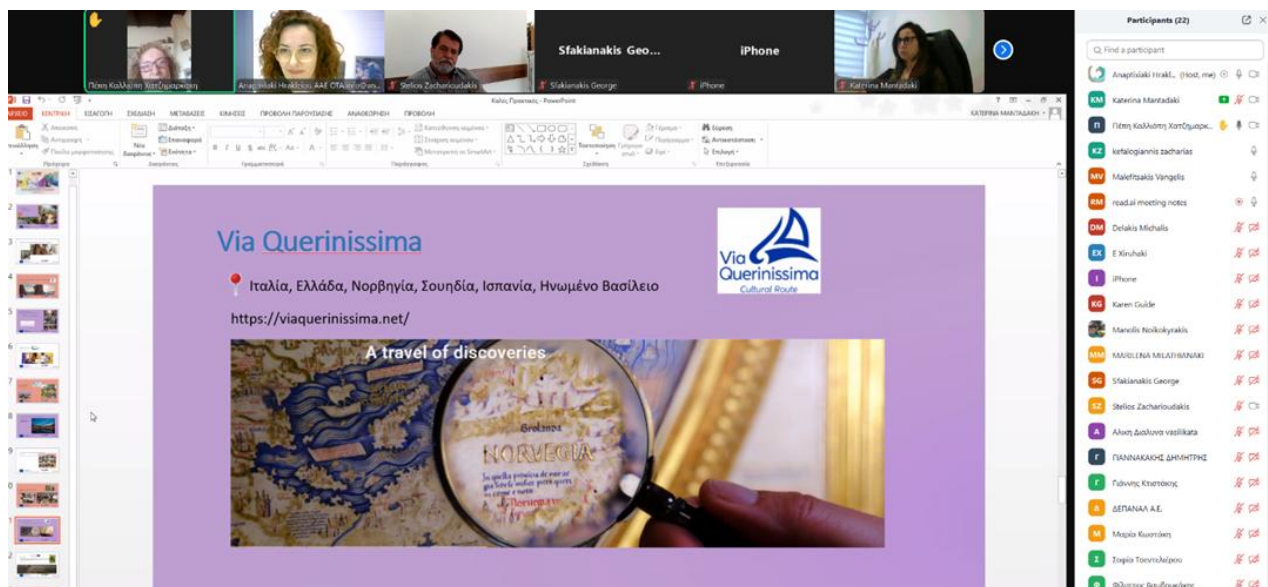
The first in-person focus group took place at the local Mayors' Office and involved 11 representatives from local authorities (24 March 2025). The other session, also in person, was hosted within the infrastructures of the Heraklion Development Agency (HDA) and engaged 33 Local Area Experts, Cultural Tourism Professionals (Community Liaisons).

We employed interactive Question & Answer formats, as a key engagement mechanism which involved participants rating the presented Best Practices according to their preferences.

Feedback on Presented Practices

- General Reactions: Participants were enthusiastic and eager to contribute, deeply appreciated the focus on sustainable tourism practices and described them as valuable.
- Key Strengths Identified: The emphasis on community involvement and stakeholder collaboration in several practices was seen as a significant strength, noting the potential to attract new audiences and enhance visitor experiences.
- Key Weaknesses Identified: The long-term sustainability and maintenance of some of the more complex or technologically driven practices, securing buy-in and cooperation from all relevant stakeholders, balancing economic growth with sustainability.
- Potential for Transferability: Participants generally believed that several of the presented practices held potential for local implementation, with some adjustments possibly needed. The transferability of practices relying heavily on specific technological infrastructure or digital literacy levels was questioned by some participants.

Participants' Familiarity with Sustainable Cultural Tourism
Across all focus groups in Greece, participants presented a general understanding and awareness of Sustainable Cultural Tourism, with Area Experts and Community Liaisons exhibiting the highest familiarity. They perceived that the broader Greek tourism sector's understanding is growing but not homogenous, with most implementations being in the early stages.

Needs and Challenges in Cultural Tourism and the Sustainable Cultural Tourism:

1.	Key needs identified: beyond the traditional 'sea-sun' a shift to more participatory,

immersive cultural experiences, protection of heritage, diversified-strengthened skills and capacity building, community engagement, accessibility for all, recording of current conditions, informed decisions, integrated planning and management, promotion of sustainable use of resources, support of local economy, usage of local products, respect for local customs, cooperation

2.   Key challenges faced: overcrowding in specific peak seasons, mass tourism, lack of defined guidelines, lack of indicators to measure progress, community engagement

Gaps in Existing Practices & Educational Needs

A.   Identified Gaps: digital integration to minimize environmental impact, education of guests, collaboration
B.   Resource & Skill Needs: comprehensive training in cultural sensitivity and environmental responsibility, awareness campaigns for local communities and visitors.
C.   Educational Requirements to be Addressed in WP3: strategies to boost community and visitors awareness, equality, diversity and inclusion education, integrated planning and management, cooperation skills, guidelines dissemination

Additional Insights from Stakeholders

Across all focus groups, a general consensus regarding the presented Best Practices emerged. 'Iter Vitis' and 'Via Querenissima' were identified as particularly interesting and well-aligned with regional needs.

3.3.6. National level conclusions

The selected Greek best practices underline the transformative potential of community-rooted, culturally immersive, and technologically integrated approaches to Sustainable Cultural Tourism. The emerging initiatives showcase how the diverse heritage of Greece could be leveraged to enhance visitor experiences, empower local communities, and contribute to broader sustainability goals. They present replicable models for other rural and heritage-rich regions, when ensuring cultural narratives are respectfully interpreted and shared.
A key takeaway from these examples is the importance of authenticity, emotional engagement, and local participation. Community-driven approaches with active involvement are considered as fundamental to sustaining cultural identity and ensuring long-term tourism viability.
Across all focus groups, community engagement and stakeholder collaboration emerged as central to success. Participants emphasized that meaningful cooperation enhances trust, and strengthens the resilience of cultural tourism initiatives.

However, focus group discussions also exposed some challenges. One of the most prominent was the need for greater integration of sustainability principles beyond environmental concerns, to include cultural, social, and economic dimensions. While professionals showed an evolving understanding, a gap remains in the operationalization of these principles with initiatives, still lacking structured guidelines and indicators to measure progress toward sustainability goals.
The focus groups also highlighted the uneven digital readiness across regions, with concerns expressed over deepening regional inequity. While digital tools demonstrate strong potential, their scalability depends on infrastructure, digital literacy, and technical support.
A clear and pressing need for capacity-building emerges, with an expressed aspiration for targeted

training in fields such as cultural sensitivity, sustainability planning, digital tools usage, and cooperative project development. Participants also supported the idea of developing clearer frameworks and support systems to help translate abstract sustainability concepts into practical and context-sensitive actions.

Finally, the focus groups identified the strategic importance of diversifying and decentralizing the tourism offer of Greece. Moving beyond the dominant "sea-and-sun" narrative toward immersive, participatory cultural experiences, driving a new rural and less resource-intensive model, was viewed as both a necessity and an opportunity. Such a shift could reduce pressure on crowded, overvisited areas, extend economic benefits to underrepresented regions, and provide more balanced and sustainable growth for the national tourism sector.

3.4. Italy

3.4.1. Identification of the best practices

The best practices were identified through internet desk research, expert consultations, and case study analysis. Selection criteria included effectiveness, replicability, and measurable outcomes.

3.4.2. I Carusi Bio-Relais – Sustainable Hospitality for Cultural Revitalization in Rural Sicily

This practice presents the transformation of a rural retreat in Noto, Sicily, into a model of eco-sustainabe hospitality and cultural preservation. I Carusi Bio-Relais integrates clean energy, local tradition and inclusive community development to address rural unemployment, promote sustainable tourism, and celebrate Sicilian heritage. The initiative highlights how small-scale, community-led tourism can protect cultural identity while contributing to local economic growth.

➢ Best Practice: I Carusi Bio-Relais, Noto, Italy

The practice underlines that:

- Eco-conscious hospitality can create local employment, reduce environmental impact, and preserve regional identity while offering authentic experiences to visitors.

- Cultural tourism rooted in local traditions, like ancient Roman mosaics and zero-kilometer organic cuisine, enhances the emotional and historical connection between guests and host communities.

- Youth involvement, local hiring, and artisan partnerships strengthen economic resilience and social cohesion in marginalized rural areas.

- Sustainability is not just environmental, but economic and social—through fair business models, cultural education, and energy-efficient infrastructure.

- Continuous improvement through guest feedback and community participation ensures the long-term adaptability and success of the initiative

3.4.3. Montata Grande Etna Agricoltour – Regenerating Rural Sicily Through Sustainable Agri-Cultural Tourism

This practice highlights the success of Montata Grande Etna Agricoltour, a family-led initiative in Trecastagni, Sicily, that transforms traditional farming into an immersive sustainable tourism experience. Rooted in heritage and ecological values, the project fosters a deeper connection between visitors, local culture, and nature. It serves as a model for rural revitalization by preserving local traditions, promoting environmental education, and creating inclusive economic opportunities.

➤ Best Practice: Montata Grande Etna Agricoltour, Trecastagni, Italy

The practice underlines that:

- Rural tourism models that prioritize sustainability, education, and cultural authenticity can revitalize underdeveloped regions while safeguarding environmental and heritage assets.

- Hands-on agricultural experiences like olive picking, grape harvesting, and artisanal food production promote visitor awareness and appreciation of traditional Sicilian culture.

- Community co-ownership and generational family stewardship empower locals and preserve knowledge, traditions, and the identity of the region.

- Visitors gain not only leisure but learning—about biodiversity, food systems, and

climate-conscious living—leading to long-term behavioral impact.

- Replicability across other rural areas is viable through partnerships with schools, cultural organizations, and the digital expansion of educational content and booking platforms.

3.4.4. Pantalica Terra Surti – From Historic Olive Mill to Model of Sustainable Heritage Tourism

This practice explores how Pantalica Terra Surti Casal dell'Olio has transformed a historic olive mill and farm into a vibrant cultural and environmental destination in Sortino, Sicily. Rooted in a three-generation family tradition, the initiative blends heritage conservation, responsible tourism, and technological innovation to create immersive experiences that educate visitors and empower the local community.

➢ Best practice: Pantalica Terra Surti Casal dell'Olio, Sortino, Sicily

The practice underlines that:

- Sustainable tourism initiatives anchored in local history and family legacy can revitalize rural areas and preserve intangible cultural heritage.

- Hands-on workshops and guided tours, including visits to the UNESCO-listed Pantalica necropolis, enable guests to connect deeply with both ancient and modern Sicilian traditions.

- Involving artisans and producers in tourism offerings promotes traditional crafts, supports the local economy, and enhances cultural continuity.

- The integration of modern resource-efficient technologies—such as automated oil production systems—demonstrates how innovation and tradition can coexist for

environmental sustainability.

- Replicability lies in the initiative's balance of educational value, economic empowerment, and ecological responsibility—offering a scalable model for other rural heritage sites.

3.4.5. Focus Groups

<u>Focus Group Details</u>

Following the tasks established by the CultMed Project and in particular the WP2 regarding best practices, 3 online focus groups were conducted involving various stakeholders.

The first Online Focus Group (OFG) on the Best Practice of "Montata Grande" took place in a hybrid format on April 1st and involved ten (10) local stakeholders among others Not for profit associations, Academics, VET centers, Students and young entrepreneurs. It is noteworthy the attendance of two experts on Sustainable Tourism, respectively Mr. Marco Coico (in charge of sustainable projects at "Le Vie dei Tesori Foundation" and Mr. Rosario Genchi (in charge of sustainable projects at "Studio Rosario Genchi") who were in charge of co-assisting the implementation of this FG.
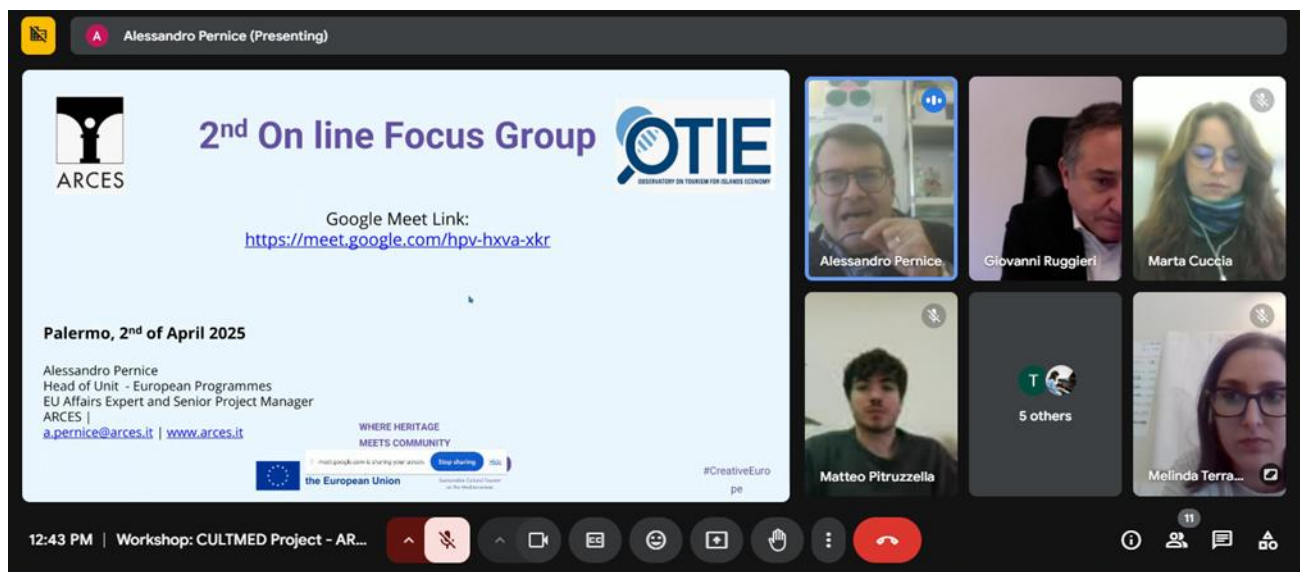
The second OFG on the Best Practice of "Hotel I Carusi" took place in a hybrid format on April 2nd and involved 12 local stakeholders among others Not for profit associations, Academics, VET centers, Students and young entrepreneurs. It is noteworthy the attendance of one expert on Sustainable Tourism, Mr. Professor Giovanni Ruggieri who is the legal representative of the "Observatory on Tourism for Islands Economy (OTIE)" and who was in charge of co-assisting the implementation of this FG.
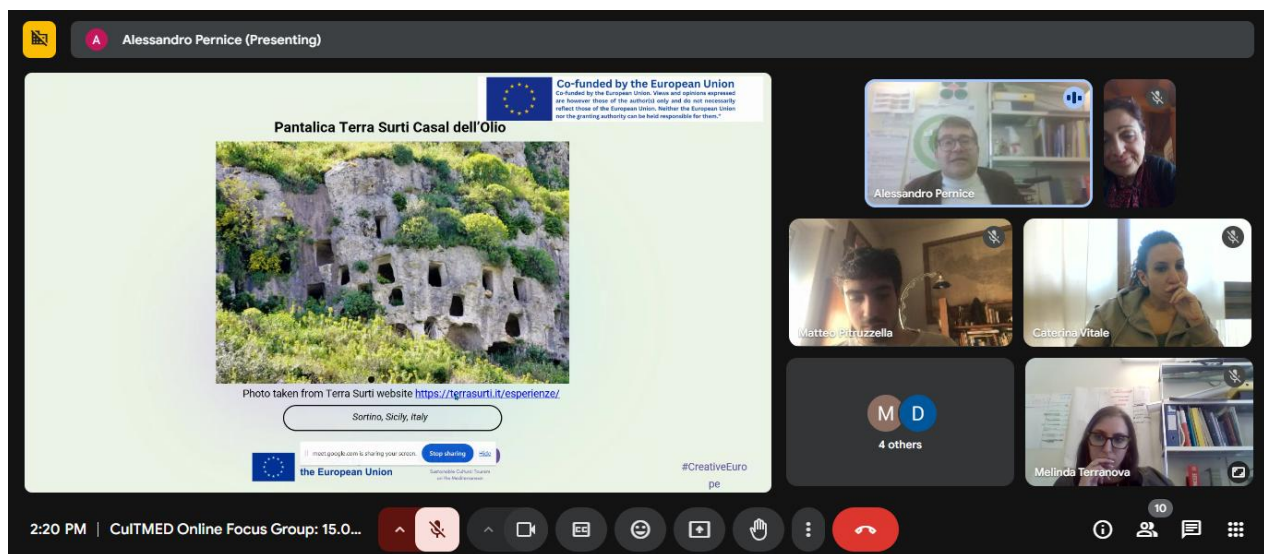
The third OFG on the Best Practice of "Pantalica Terra Surti Casal dell'Olio" took place in a hybrid format on April 15th and involved 10 local stakeholders among other Not for for profit associations, Academics, VET centers, Students and young entrepreneurs. It is noteworthy the attendance of one expert on Sustainable Tourism, Ms. Daniela Di Garbo who is the manager of the "Bergi farmhouse" located in Castelbuono, near Palermo and who was in charge of co-assisting the implementation of this FG.

The Power Point related to these 3 Best Practices have been presented during the meetings. Moreover, ARCES used an interactive tool to receive the feedback from the participants. The tool used was Mentimeter which allows the participants to evaluate the analyzed Best Practices based on several criteria (cultural, economic, environmental) and to assess the possibility of replicating it both nationally and internationally.

Feedback on Presented Practices

During the First OFG, there was a lively exchange of ideas about the selected Best Practice (BP) being discussed. Mr. Marco Coico, On behalf of "Le vie dei Tesori Foundation" explained with details this BP and highlighted the relevance for the regional context

The participants expressed their appreciation for this BP, recognizing its potential for replication, not only in their own local areas, since they came from different regions of Sicily, but also at a broader European level. What stood out to them the most was the pet therapy activities conducted within the facility, which they found to be a particularly innovative and valuable aspect.

However, one weakness was identified: the relatively low visibility of the facility's sustainable activities. The participants felt that these initiatives should be promoted more effectively to ensure they reach a wider audience and achieve greater impact.

During the Second OFG, there was an exchange of ideas about the best practice in question.
The participants discussed the concept of sustainability, which is increasingly involving cultural activities. A key aspect that Prof. Giovanni Ruggieri (President of the Observatory on Tourism for

Islands Economy - OTIE) emphasized the importance of clearly communicating the decision to transition to a sustainable market when starting a new business.

In this context, using some important consideration, the best practice could be really replicable in the time by other countries e.g. using building materials derived from waste and sourced from local suppliers, clearly defining the type of visitors we want to attract by limiting the offerings, and using language that encourages visitors to explore the local culture, rather than relying on typical hotel language.

One participant shared the example of his local area, where there are more Bed & Breakfasts than homes. According to the stakeholder, this highlights the need to establish limits to prevent the "turistification" of certain areas; which could represent a weakness in the regard of that best practice.

During the Third OFG, a key aspect of the Best Practice developed was analyzed—namely, the importance of aligning the farm with the agritourism business. This clearly ensures, for example, that the agritourism facility uses zero-kilometer products directly from the farm.

A key aspect that Prof. Daniela Di Garbo (Manager of the "Bergi farmhouse") highlighted the importance of adopting good criteria to set up a tourism farm in compliance with the principle of Sustainable Cultural Tourism. These criteria are:

A key point emphasized by Prof. Ms. Daniela Di Garbo, Manager of the "Bergi farmhouse" is the importance of adopting sound criteria when establishing a tourism farm, ensuring it aligns with the principles of Sustainable Cultural Tourism. These criteria include, among others:

- Presence of insects beneficial to biodiversity;
- Creation of a small natural ecosystem;
- Adopting the Waste management principles based on the Circular economy model;
- Using Photovoltaic (solar power)
- Becoming a Cultural agritourism
- Promoting the network of social farms.

Furthermore, the participants agreed—thanks to the Mentimeter shared at the end of the meeting—on the replicability of the Best Practice, especially when it comes to using photovoltaic panels and water purifiers to reuse water for field irrigation. The only weakness identified by the stakeholders was the difficulty of creating a 100% sustainable agritourism business, as this involves considerable costs.

Participants' Familiarity with Sustainable Cultural Tourism

All the 3 OFG were attended by Not for profit associations, Academics, VET centers, Students and young entrepreneurs based in Sicily, who have a direct experience with cultural tourism (for example for their job or study field).

In particular during the first OFG "Le Vie dei Tesori" brought a real added value to the FG by reporting the experience of its network of Borghi Dei tesori which is a big project and an example of cultural tourism sustainability as recognised by Unicredit bank.

During the second OFG, OTIE brought a real added value by reporting the experience of its network of Public institutions, Universities, Research Centres and other international organizations of 7 UE insular countries (Italy, Spain, France, Portugal, Greece, Malta e Cyprus).

Thanks to the direct dialogue with its network OTIE offers to the insular realities a support to devise strategic, operative and marketing plans on tourism because it has a wide network of contacts and a steady updated benchmark on European tourism.

Finally, the third OFG, the Bergi agritourism provided excellent points for reflection, especially considering the strong alignment between the agritourism itself and the Best Practice presented. They themselves implement significant sustainable actions that make their agritourism truly unique.

Over time, Agriturismo Bergi has been awarded the 'Ecolabel' ecological certification—a European Union label granted only to certain businesses, which identifies products and services that, while maintaining high performance standards, are characterized by a reduced environmental impact throughout their entire life cycle.

Needs and Challenges in Cultural Tourism and the Sustainable Cultural Tourism:

The stakeholders of first online focus group highlighted two important aspects and concepts during the discussion. The first concept referred to "Heritage interpretation", which is defined as an approach that enhances the visitor's experience at cultural and natural heritage sites. Rather than simply teaching, the goal is to guide visitors to personally discover meanings and relationships associated with these sites. To achieve this, three key elements are necessary: the place being visited, the visitor, and the interpreter. These elements work together to create a more immersive and engaging experience. The second key concept discussed was "Storytelling participation". This involves the visitor actively contributing to the story of the place, transforming from a passive observer into an active participant. In this way, visitors add their own insights and perspectives, enriching the narrative and deepening their connection to the site. Lastly, the term "Italea" was introduced, which is a word created by combining "Italia" and "Talea" (a botanical term for a cutting of a plant that, when replanted, can grow without its seed). This term refers to root tourism, which focuses on individuals' search for their ancestral roots and the recovery of places and traditions from their past. Root tourism has become a significant driver of the Italian tourism system, as many young people, particularly those with origins in small villages, choose to return to their roots and reconnect with their heritage.

Within the framework of the Second OFG, Professor Ruggieri took the opportunity to highlight that while the best practice presented by ARCES has proven to be quite useful, it is not without its shortcomings. One of the main concerns he raised was the lack of transparency on their platform in certain areas, particularly when it comes to whether the locally sourced food they use is actually certified organic. This lack of clarity, he pointed out, could be a potential issue for both stakeholders and consumers who are increasingly focused on sustainability and authenticity. In addition to this, Professor Ruggieri spoke about the long-term financial benefits of investing in sustainability. While he acknowledged that the initial costs can be significant, he emphasized that over time, these investments tend to pay off, especially when it comes to the implementation and ongoing operation of sustainable practices. His point was clear: despite the upfront costs,

sustainability can ultimately lead to greater financial stability and success in the long run.

In the third online focus group, The development of Agriturismo Bergi over time was discussed, starting from a small 2-hectare plot to a 108-hectare farm that now produces an increasing variety of products. However, it has faced challenges related to the low yield of certain goods, for example, in 2025, honey production was lower than in previous years due to climate change, which agritourism must confront every year. Despite this, it does not stop them from continuing to produce what makes them unique. Moreover, Dr. Di Garbo shared with the participants the designation of 'Social Farm,' as part of the network of social farms. At Agriturismo Bergi, various educational activities are available for schools of all levels, aiming to share the cultural practices and traditions that characterize the local area.

<u>Gaps in Existing Practices & Educational Needs</u>

All the three online focus groups identified the following:

Identified Gaps:
- Resistance to the change

Resource & Skill Needs:
- There is a strong need to enhance the following set of skills and mindset: Green skills, Resilience skills, Entrepreneurial skills and Digital skills.

Educational Requirements to be Addressed in WP3:
- Development of green skills as the main focus of the learning process, without neglecting the above other competencies.

3.4.6. National level conclusions

The Focus Groups confirmed the replicability and value of the best practices in sustainable cultural tourism. Discussions emphasized the role of sustainable cultural tourism in fostering innovation, local engagement, and environmental responsibility. Strengths included eco-friendly methods, while challenges involved low visibility, high costs and resistance to change. Green, digital and entrepreneurial skills emerged as key educational needs.

3.5. Spain

3.5.1. Identification of the best practices

Following the unified methodology for collecting and developing best practices, the identification of Spanish practices was carried out through a combination of desk research and analysis of local initiatives in relation to the previously established criteria for Sustainable Cultural Tourism. To ensure a broad and inclusive perspective, best practices were selected from diverse regions across Spain, from the south to the north, including coastal, inland and insular areas. This approach allowed for the identification of experiences with a more general character, applicable across the entire national territory.

Informal consultations with local stakeholders were also conducted to complement the research and gain deeper insights into impactful practices currently being implemented. Special attention was given to initiatives that enhance the visibility of lesser-known areas and promote sustainable tourism models rooted in cultural heritage.

Among the practices identified, "La Noche del Patrimonio" stands out for its pan-Spanish character, as it brings together cities from across the peninsula and the islands in a collective celebration of intangible heritage. It exemplifies how a nationally coordinated initiative can reflect local specificities while fostering a shared cultural identity.

Based on the defined criteria, stakeholder input and the collected information, three best practices were selected and analysed in detail for their potential transferability and relevance to future training activities.

3.5.2. La Noche del Patrimonio – Celebrating Spanish World Heritage Through Community and Culture

La Noche del Patrimonio is a national initiative celebrated across 15 World Heritage cities in Spain, aimed at revitalizing cultural tourism and heritage governance. Since 2018, the event offers nighttime access to historic landmarks, live performances, and interactive programming, blending heritage preservation with community engagement and sustainable tourism. Its model fosters shared identity and heritage appreciation on both local and international scales.

> ➢ Best Practice: [La Noche del Patrimonio, Spain](#)

The practice underlines that:

- Cultural heritage events can enhance local identity and tourism when managed with inclusivity, sustainability, and strong institutional partnerships.

- Opening heritage sites at night for public engagement builds emotional connections and stimulates learning through immersive experiences.

- Local communities actively shape the event—participating as artists, guides, and volunteers—which ensures cultural authenticity and equitable benefit-sharing.

- Environmental and economic sustainability is pursued through energy-efficient logistics, restoration of monuments, and integration of local businesses.

- The model is highly adaptable and replicable in other heritage-rich urban environments, especially when supported by digital engagement and cross-sector collaboration.

3.5.3. Geocaching "On the Trail of the Holy Grail" – Gamified Cultural Exploration in Valencia

This practice features a mobile app-based geocaching experience that guides visitors through Valencia's cultural and historical landmarks by solving puzzles centered on the Holy Grail. Initiated by the Valencia Townhouse and Visit Valencia Foundation in 2021, it blends tourism, education, and digital storytelling, turning city exploration into a sustainable, low-impact adventure.

> ➤ Best Practice: [Geocaching, Valencia, Spain](#)

The practice underlines that:

- Gamification can make heritage education accessible and exciting, drawing in tourists, students, and locals through narrative-based digital exploration.

- Virtual formats minimize environmental and physical wear on heritage sites while enabling deep cultural immersion through interactive media.

- Local stories, legends, and stakeholders are embedded in the app, strengthening the cultural fabric and offering economic opportunities for tourism-related businesses.

- Visitor feedback and data analytics inform continuous app improvements, ensuring the experience remains relevant and inclusive.

- Replicable in any heritage-rich city, this model supports cultural tourism through scalable, tech-driven innovation adaptable to global audiences.

3.5.4. Cáceres Smart Heritage – Integrating Technology for Sustainable Cultural Tourism

The Cáceres Smart Heritage project (2017–2020) showcases the power of digital innovation in heritage preservation and tourism management. By installing sensors, flow trackers, interactive kiosks, and digital platforms, the city modernized how it promotes and protects its UNESCO-listed assets, creating a smart ecosystem that enhances cultural experience and local economic vitality.

➢ Best Practice: Cáceres Smart Heritage project, Cáceres, Spain

The practice underlines that:

- ICTs can modernize heritage management, offering real-time data to optimize visitor flow, environmental conditions, and infrastructure use.

- Visitors benefit from user-friendly digital tools (apps, kiosks, virtual guides) that create personalized and accessible cultural experiences.

- Local businesses thrive through integrated marketplaces and discounts, while residents gain from improved infrastructure and cultural pride.

- The system's sustainability stems from optimized resource use, reduced wear on monuments, and economic returns reinvested in the community.

- Replicable in other heritage cities, Cáceres' model provides a blueprint for digitally enabled, community-centered tourism that balances preservation with promotion.

3.5.5. Focus Groups

Focus Group Details

Complying with the first task of the WP2 ('Collecting best practices towards Sustainable Cultural Tourism'), which follows data collection of three good practices at national level and the assessment of partners' presentations, this report is aimed at providing the details of how the focus groups on sustainable tourism were organized as well as the results obtained from them.

The first step was to choose the date of the meetings considering the time needed to prepare them (preparing powerpoint presentations and other tools, looking for and contacting potential participants), the duration of the sessions, and the availability of the participants as well as the

deadline to present the report as stipulated by the CultMED project calendar. Finally, the three focus groups were decided to be carried out on three consecutive Tuesdays: 25th of March, 1st of April and 8th of April. The 3 sessions were meant to take place ONLINE from 4PM to 5PM via the ZOOM meeting platform to ensure the assistance of all the participants and avoid working hours in the mornings.

Once the date was decided, the next step was to prepare the invitations to the focus groups and select the participants. Thanks to GEINNOVA's network and experience working with local institutions and enterprises, it was easy to look for participants. In order to select participants with relevant experience and insights on the topic to be discussed, we contacted 5 stakeholders from the sector of tourism. Concretely, there was a total of 5 participants, who were mainly tourism businesses professionals and local authorities from towns and rural county nearby Zaragoza: Angel Lassa (Department of Youth in the county of Calatayud) and Maria Jesus Guajardo Castejón (Department of Culture and Tourism in the county of Calatayud), Maria Gascon (Department of Culture in the county of Aranda), Beatriz Molina (chief of a local spa resort) Marta Monterde (chief of Hosteria La Barbacana). All the participants were sent an invitation via email which contained the date and time of the three meetings as well as the link to them. In addition, a reminder of the meeting was sent to them during the mornings before the sessions.

As some people wishing to participate were unable to do so they were contacted by email afterwards to receive the content covered in the sessions.
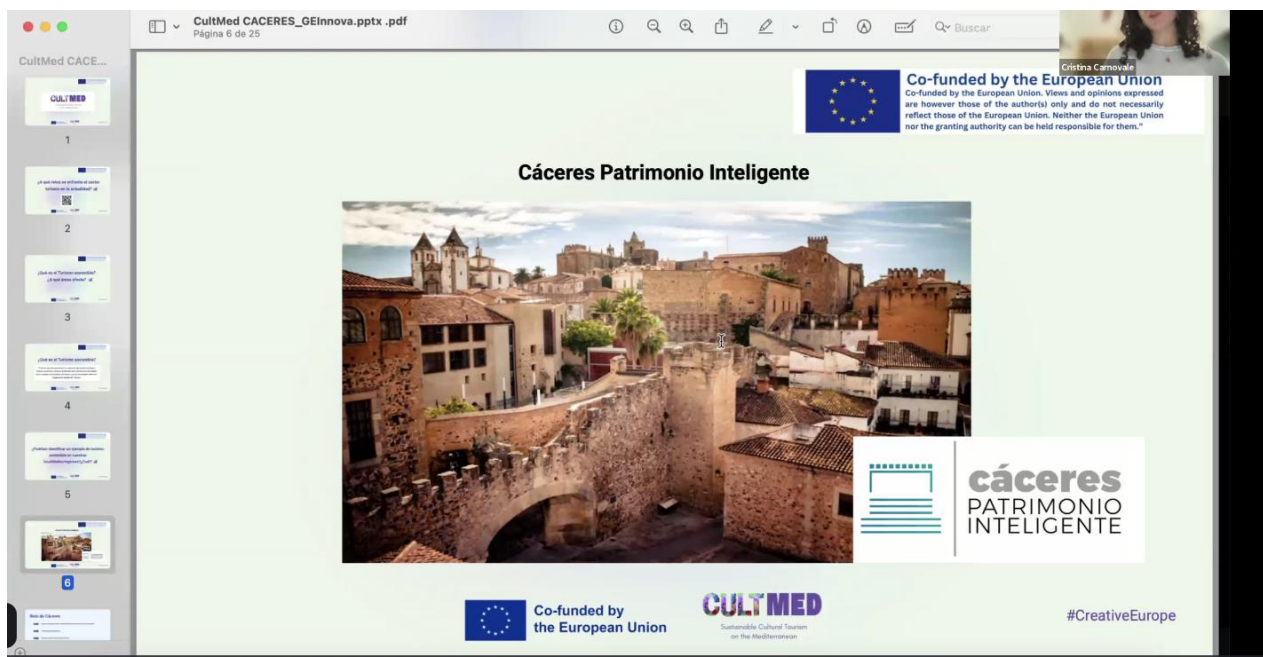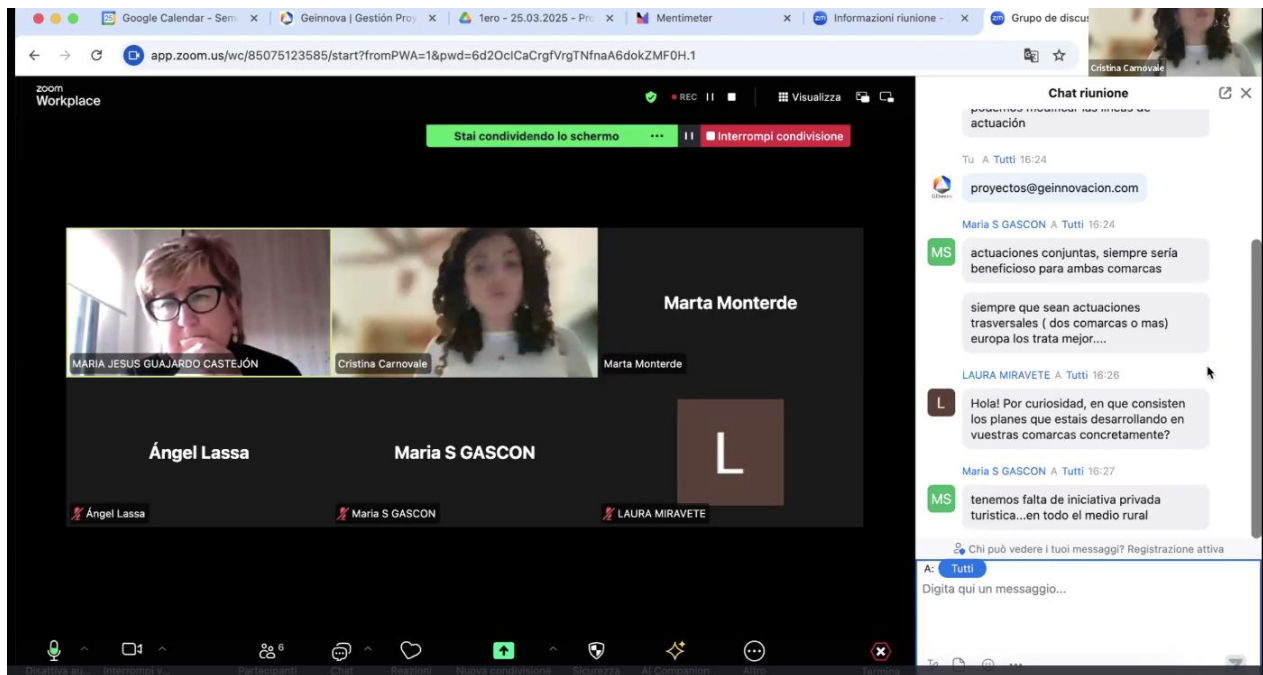
Each presentation for the focus group was based on one of the three practices we identified for the first task of the WP2, being organized in the following way:

1. 'Cáceres Patrimonio Inteligente': Tuesday 25th of March
2. 'La Noche del Patrimonio': Tuesday 1st of April
3. 'Valencia Geocaching Experience: Tras la Pista del Santo Grial': Tuesday 8th of April

In order to present the practices and engage the participants successfully we prepared a power point presentation in Spanish with key information, appealing pictures, and links to official websites for further information for each practice, which were shared with the participants after the meetings. The app 'Mentimeter' was used as a complementary tool in an attempt to record the answers of the participants to specific questions and points of interest.

Feedback on Presented Practices

Before starting the presentations, in order to get their general insight on tourism, participants were asked the following question: "what are the main challenges of tourism nowadays?". The purpose of this question was to relate the good practice to the concrete challenges faced for its implementation and how the practice has contributed to reducing them. During the presentation of the practices, special emphasis was made on the points of economic, social, environmental and cultural benefits so as to make sure that the participants understand what sustainable is and why they are examples of good practices as well as to make them reflect on their actual impact. As they had the opportunity to give their opinions and discusses the practices and the possibility to adapt similar initiatives to their specific context.

•   Key strengths identified: participants praised the innovation of the practices presented by means of digital tools and contents. They highlighted their potential to attract more tourists and

promote their heritage and, consequently, their local businesses.

• Key weaknesses identified: they did not identify any weaknesses as such in the practices. Probably because of their background, they only focused on discussing the possibility to implement them in their regions.

• Potential for transferability: participants were directly asked about the familiarity with similar practices and the possibility to replicate them in their regions. Even though they discussed two questions and mentioned the challenges that they could face, the stakeholders from Calatayud did see the possibility to organize a nighttime cultural festival in different cultural sites of the region, based on the example of 'La Noche del Patrimonio'. They also saw the possibility to replicate the practice of Valencia as it does not imply high funding costs, and it would be easy to create a geocaching experience app according to their context and needs, mentioning two potential topics: their rich cultural heritage and natural environment.

Participants' Familiarity with Sustainable Cultural Tourism

In the first session ('Cáceres Patrimonio Inteligente'), participants were directly asked whether they knew what it is meant by 'Sustainable Cultural Tourism', getting no response. Then, the concept was briefly explained to them, emphasizing the points of cultural, social, economic and environmental benefits, aiming to make them relate the concept with the practices to be presented.

After the presentation of each practice, they were asked whether they know similar initiatives established in their regions. Even though no affirmative responses were received in the case of 'Cáceres Patrimonio inteligente', they mentioned that there is a festival in Zaragoza city which is similar to 'La Noche del Patrimonio'. It is known as 'La Noche en Blanco' and is celebrated annually. During a night in June, there is free access to museums and other landmarks, such as San Pablo Church, open their doors to visitors exclusively for that night.

Needs and Challenges in Cultural Tourism and the Sustainable Cultural Tourism:

As mentioned previously, a question was made to the participants in order to get their general insight on tourism: what are the main challenges of tourism nowadays? After the three focus groups, it can be concluded that all the participants shared opinions and concerns regarding rural tourism: depopulation and ageing of the population, lack of services in rural areas, tourists shortage, and tourism activity depending on weather conditions and specific seasons. Considering the background of the participants and challenging context in which they are, it must be said that we expected these answers.

That is why we used Mentimeter to launch more questions at the end of the presentation in an attempt to make them reflect on the feasibility of the practices presented and their application in their specific context: "have you ever participated in a similar initiative?", "how do you think you could apply this practice in your case?, what will you need to do so?, which challenges will you face?".

Finally we included a final open question to relate their insights with the initial question: "how could this practice contribute to reducing the challenges you face nowadays?".

The main conclusions obtained from the three focus groups regarding needs and challenges can be summarized in the following way:

•   Key needs identified:

The participants mentioned funding as the main resource they would need to do so. For example, in the case of 'Cáceres Patrimonio inteligente', the project needed a great amount of funding for the installation of all the digital systems, the creation of new contents, or the development of the app.

The second need they mentioned was coordination and cooperation between local businesses, tourism and heritage institutions and local authorities. For example, 'Valencia Geocaching Experience' and the organization of 'La Noche del Patrimonio' are managed by the local city councils as regard the setting of the programs, dates, tickets and transport. In the case of Cáceres marketplace, local businesses participation is key for it to be effective.

•   Key challenges faced:
The participants mentioned that the lack of services and local businesses and depopulation hinder the possibility to start initiatives such as the ones presented. All the participants belong to rural areas near Zaragoza city, which are suffering the effects of depopulation, so they are aware of the high levels of risks implied by starting a new business in rural areas. In fact, they discussed how to solve this problem as there is an evident lack of eagerness to do so. Other challenges they mention was the gathering of tourists in high seasons, which hinders the viability and sustainability of the initiatives during the whole year, or WIFI shortcomings, which is a reality in some villages.

Gaps in Existing Practices & Educational Needs

In relation to previous points (familiarity with sustainable tourism), it was noticed that the participants lacked a clear idea about Sustainable Cultural Tourism and its relevance. On the other hand, they also showed interest in how the practices had been funded, as they were not familiarized with the procedures required to participate and benefit from projects like the ones presented.

That is why, it is capital to focus the training modules to be developed on WP3 on two topics:

1.   How to organize sustainable events and promote tourism development in an environmentally friendly way, applied to their specific context: villages.
2.   Existing European and local funds and programs dedicated to promote sustainable tourism and cultural heritage.

        A.   Identified Gaps:
        B.   Resource & Skill Needs:
        C.   Educational Requirements to be Addressed in WP3:

        Additional Insights from Stakeholders
The participants discussed the possibility to involve other associations from their villages who may have specialized experience in a specific field and who are aware of the needs to be addressed in

the region and may have contributed with good ideas to develop their own sustainable tourism initiatives.

3.5.6. National level conclusions

The Spanish focus groups on Sustainable Cultural Tourism highlighted the strong potential of cultural identity to revitalize rural and lesser-known areas through innovative and community-based practices. The selected cases - *Cáceres Patrimonio Inteligente*, *La Noche del Patrimonio*, and *Valencia Geocaching Experience* - reflect regional diversity from north to south, including the islands. *La Noche del Patrimonio*, in particular, was praised for its pan-Spanish character, showcasing how a shared celebration of heritage can strengthen national cohesion while respecting local uniqueness.

Stakeholders underlined the importance of community involvement for the success and sustainability of tourism initiatives. Authenticity, long-term viability, and social cohesion depend on local participation. However, the concept of "Sustainable Cultural Tourism" was not well understood. Participants mainly linked sustainability to environmental aspects, overlooking social and cultural dimensions, pointing to the need for clearer guidance and education.

Key challenges identified included depopulation, lack of services, poor digital infrastructure, and seasonal tourism dependency. Stakeholders expressed a strong need for training in sustainable event planning adapted to rural contexts and guidance on accessing European and local funding.

Despite limitations, participants saw great potential in replicating the presented practices, especially the geocaching model due to its low cost and adaptability. The focus groups confirmed the urgency of building capacity, fostering cooperation and supporting local actors to turn sustainability principles into action.

4. EU level practices

As part of the second phase of Work Package 2 (WP2), the CultMED project partners conducted EU-level research to identify innovative and transferable best practices in Sustainable Cultural Tourism from outside the participating countries. This phase was guided by the same methodological framework used at the national level, ensuring that selected practices aligned with key sustainability, cultural, and community-based criteria.

A core element of this EU-level effort was the organization of targeted study visits to sites demonstrating exemplary cultural tourism practices. These visits enabled in-depth, on-site exploration of initiatives, direct interaction with stakeholders and practices in question, and first-hand understanding of implementation contexts. Notably, five study visits were conducted by different partners in France, Poland, North Macedonia, and Croatia, each resulting in a curated set of best practices rooted in cultural authenticity, community participation, and sustainable approaches to heritage preservation, cultural promotion and visitor engagement.

The identification and development process combined desk research, stakeholder consultations, interviews conducted during, before and after these visits and direct observations. This hybrid approach allowed partners to gather rich qualitative data and assess each initiative against CultMED's shared criteria, such as economic impact, cultural preservation, visitor experience, and replicability, while considering the significant differences in types of practices and availability of information and its accessibility. These study visits also fostered cross-border learning and practical insight into how different European regions apply Sustainable Cultural Tourism principles in real-world settings.

4.1. Best practices collection by E&D

4.1.1. Stage 1 – Initial research

As a complementary activity to the identification, collection and development of best practices in Portugal, a study was conducted at the EU level to explore relevant examples of Sustainable Cultural Tourism. These good practices were assessed for their potential to inform learning within the scope of the CultMED project. The objective was to identify transferable knowledge and gather valuable input for future activities under the CultMED framework, including the selection of case studies and destinations for a study visit aimed at promoting knowledge exchange and deepening the understanding of sustainability challenges and solutions in the context of cultural tourism.

Given E&D's responsibility for leading the village tourism training component of the project, special attention was given to regions that demonstrate effective practices in areas aligned with the project's thematic focus—such as traditional festivals, archaeological sites, museums and galleries, and rural villages, while priority was given to locations that met sustainability criteria and aligned with the following selection considerations:

- Proven success in regional and village tourism,
- Availability and engagement of local stakeholders for facilitating knowledge exchange,
- Diverse and insightful examples of Sustainable Cultural Tourism,
- Wide range of practices for maximum learning benefits,

- Areas out of Mediterranean regions to enlarge scope of perspectives and approaches with potential to transfer to Mediterranean regions.

In this way, the research has focused on identifying a suitable direction for a study visit that would offer the most favorable cost-benefit ratio.

As a result, three potential destinations were identified: Estonia, Poland, and Croatia. Among them, Poland emerged as the most promising option. The country has demonstrated dynamic growth in the tourism sector, evolving from a peripheral destination to being ranked 18th among the world's top tourism destinations[2]. While cities such as Kraków and Warsaw initially attracted mass tourism, recent trends indicate a growing emphasis on regional and village tourism, supported by strong policy efforts to embed sustainability across all tourism sectors. Notably, local stakeholders expressed a high level of openness and willingness to share their approaches and experiences, offering valuable learning opportunities and meaningful contributions to the study.

Following the country selection, as part of the research, four Polish area with strong cultural heritage—each offering a distinct profile—were selected as the foundation for the study visit:

1. Gdańsk

A historic port city on the Baltic coast, Gdańsk is known for its Hanseatic legacy, Gothic and Renaissance architecture, and maritime traditions. It played a key role in World War II and was the birthplace of the Solidarity movement. As a well-connected coastal hub and a leader in sustainable tourism efforts, Gdańsk actively participates in the Destination Sustainability Movement. Its strategy aims to balance tourism growth with a high quality of life for its residents.

Desk study based practice preselection identified a number of potential best practices in Sustainable Cultural Tourism in Gdansk:

- The European Solidarity Center and related freedom movement heritage sites

- New Trends in Tourism Conference – a flagship tourism event practically embracing sustainable and inclusive tourism principles, which supports collaboration and exchange of best practices among Polish and international

- Collaborative coastal tourism strategy linking three cities with diversified tourism offer and heritage - Gdańsk, Gdynia, and Sopot

2. Łódź and Łódzkie Voivodeship

Formerly a booming textile center, Łódź combines industrial heritage with multicultural influences shaped by Polish, Jewish, German, and Russian communities. While not traditionally a tourism hotspot, the city is heavily invested in developing diversified tourism offerings across cultural and creative industries celebrating the unique industrial, architectural and cultural heritage, while actively supporting joint efforts of stakeholders across the region to create and promote attractive tourism offering combining multilayer approach and collaboration across towns, villages and sites.

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[2] https://wptravel.io/world-tourism-ranking-by-country/#h-results-of-2023

The initially identified practices with characteristic of best practices in Sustainable Cultural Tourism included:

- Manufaktura: Transformation of a degraded industrial complex into a multifunctional tourism, business, and cultural center with high relevance for local community and state of the art business tourism facilities not only looking to embrace sustainability principles, but also using creative approaches to foster sustainable behaviors among visitors.

- City of Four Cultures project: Showcasing the city's multicultural roots through festivals and public programming looking to attract tourism, but also promote awareness of the city heritage and tolerance and understanding among citizens.

- Revitalisation of Piotrkowska Street and its surroundings: Restoration of one of Europe's longest commercial streets to boost cultural and commercial vibrancy together with creation of neighbouring OFF Piotrkowska Center - A creative hub within a former factory, hosting art spaces, music venues, and local businesses to together bring back life and tourists to losing relevance (after opening Manufactura) area.

- Łódzki Łuk Turystyczny: Regional initiative integrating cultural, nature, and health tourism to promote local economic development based on capitalizing on underutilized or non-utilized local resources and collaboration between local stakeholders and locations.

3. Eastern Małopolskie Voivodeship

This area features rich historical and religious heritage, including Bochnia, home to one of Europe's oldest salt mines. It also showcases medieval and renaissance architecture, traditional wooden structures, and deeply rooted folk customs from Lesser Poland's rural areas. Despite the proximity of tourism giants like Cracow and Zakopane, many exceptional destinations in this region remain underexplored and are currently embracing modern trends such as smart technology integration, creation of new tourism products, and marketing its unique values to attract tourists to alternative areas of the region.

The initially identified practices with characteristic of best practices in Sustainable Cultural Tourism included:

- Event tourism initiatives, including unique offerings in wedding tourism,

- Grassroots folk project in Zalipie – known for its distinctive painted houses and local painters growing community.

- Creative integration of folk, historic, natural, and apiculture heritage into products designed for modern audiences, including gamers.

4. Rzeszów and Surrounding Areas

Positioned as a gateway to the Carpathians, Rzeszów combines modern infrastructure with

Subcarpathian traditions. The area is home to diverse cultural legacies, including Jewish, Ukrainian, and Lemko influences, as well as traditional crafts and wooden architecture. Despite its cultural richness, the region faces challenges due to its peripheral location, underdeveloped infrastructure, and geographical remoteness near the Ukrainian border and is implementing projects and strategies looking to support sustainable development of cultural and natural tourism and foster collaboration in the area among local stakeholders.

The initially identified practices with characteristic of best practices in Sustainable Cultural Tourism included:

- Folk and wooden architecture routes of Podkarpacie,

- Participation in the CE4RT (H2020) project focusing on promotion and implementation of regenerative tourism models and fostering collaboration in the area among local stakeholders.

Stakeholder Engagement and Final Selection Process

After identifying the four regions and their respective practices, relevant local stakeholders were contacted to validate the pre-selected practices, assess their alignment with Sustainable Cultural Tourism principles and whether they are considered as best regional practices by regional experts in the area. These included representatives of:

- Gdańsk Tourism Organisation (GOT),

- Department of Tourism Events in Łódzkie Voivodeship,

- Dom Malarek in Zalipie (Painters House in Zalipie),

- Danmar Computers, representing the CE4RT project in Poland.

Stakeholders were approached via email and phone, followed by two online meetings. These discussions provided valuable insights into both the proposed and additional practices, helping to finalize the list of activities and locations for the upcoming study visits.

4.1.2. Study visit

Description, short note about the visited practice(s) and their key characteristics, proofs and lessons learnt from the visit

Following the discussions with local stakeholders the initial list has been significantly revisited based on the information collected from stakeholders underlining that some of the projects are not currently as successful and/or sustainable as the publicly available resources claim and that the areas offer better or more relevant examples of Sustainable Cultural Tourism practices.
As a result the initial list has been refined and based on the combination of the desk research and stakeholders inputs 11 practices were included in the study visit:

Sustainable Cultural Tourism
on the Mediterranean

1. <u>NTT (New Trends in Tourism Conference)</u> in Gdansk as an example of highly attentive to sustainability and inclusivity event promoting active engagement of destinations and businesses in sustainability, authenticity and inclusivity movements and fostering exchange of best practices and knowledge regarding modern trends in tourism among stakeholders in tourism sector, as well as an opportunity to collect information regarding best practices in Sustainable Cultural Tourism and challenges in the area from key Polish and foreign stakeholders, as not only previously contacted Gdansk Tourism Organisation, but also Polish Tourism Organisation, City DNA - City Destination Alliance, Destination Sustainability Movement and more.
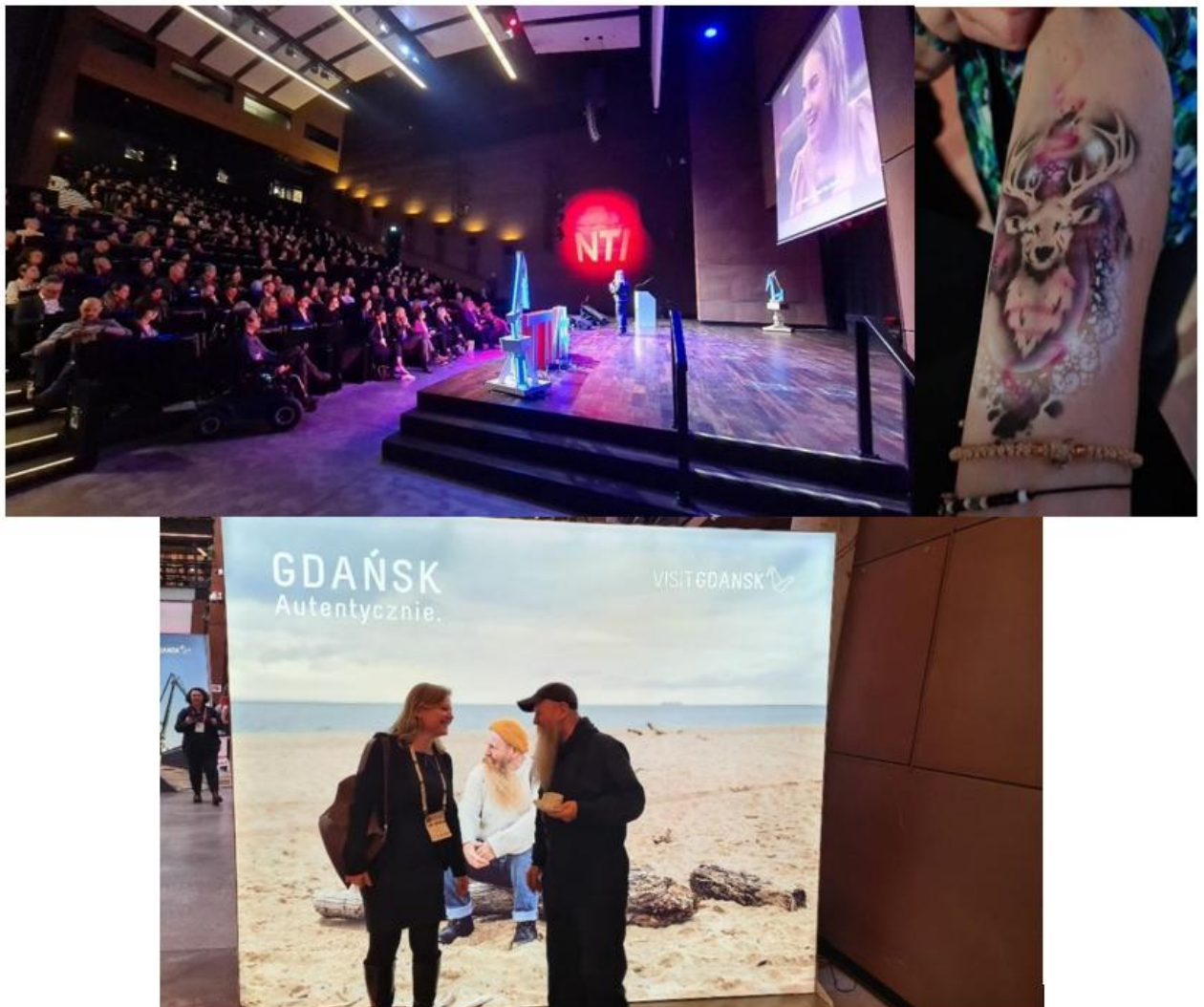
Key takeaways:

1 - sustainable events should look not only to ensure reasonable use of resources, but involve local stakeholders and use the opportunity to promote local products, heritage, businesses and artists, while finding new ways to make the experience memorable and in line with the specific interests of the event target group.

2 – designing sustainable tourism products and strategies there is a significant need to understand your audience and its evolution, as responding to the needs of Duvet generation the young working from home adults struggling with loneliness that wish to engage, but they will move to do so out of their local zone only if something is highly meaningful for them. Whatever is being designed from a marketing approach, tourism products or cultural offering it is not enough to put a beautiful picture in front of the people, but it needs to make people feel something to engage them.

3 – looking to offer meaningful and Sustainable Cultural Tourism offer it is critical to ensure authenticity, but also understand your audience and your own cultural resources and how they can be of interest for specific visitors. It is not uncommon that local agents underappreciate their resources which can be highly meaningful for foreign visitors, i.e. Poland being number one producer of traditional falconry accessories which is a huge magnet for Kaukaz tourists, but there is a close to none awareness of this asset in the sector leading to undercapitalization of this potential.

2. Smaki Gdańska – suggested by the Gdańsk Tourism Organisation (GOT) representative – is a collaborative project that revives 19th-century Gdańsk culinary traditions that were lost during turbulent Polish history by working with local chefs to recreate historical recipes. It offers tourists and residents an authentic taste of the city's heritage. This project not only preserves culinary history but also supports local gastronomy and promotes cultural tourism.
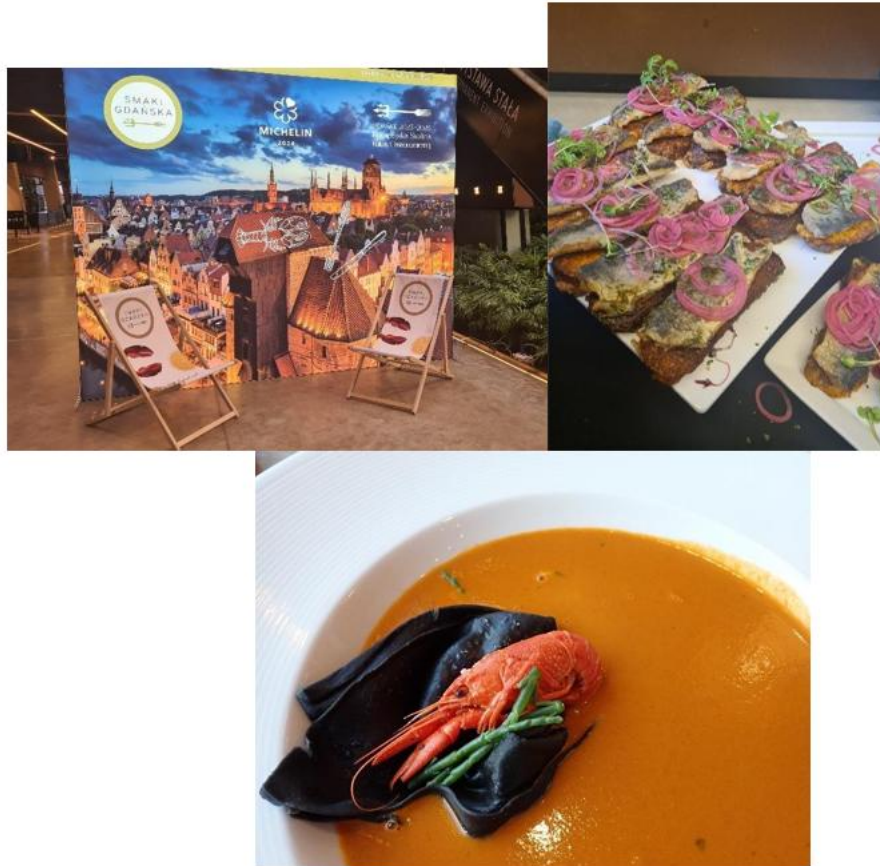
Key takeaways:

1 – While sustainability is a step in a good direction, sustaining current status is preserving the damage that has already been done to our culture and environment, instead we can increase positive impact by working toward regenerative tourism practices that will contribute to recovering what has been lost.

2 - Reviving traditional cuisines can strengthen cultural identity and enhance the tourist experience.

3 - Collaborations between historians and local businesses can lead to sustainable tourism products.

4 - Culinary tourism offers a unique avenue for cultural education and economic development.

3. The European Solidarity Center and related freedom movement heritage sites – The European Solidarity Center (ECS) in Gdańsk serves as a museum and cultural institution commemorating the Solidarity movement and Poland's journey to democracy. It is a museum and library dedicated to the history of Solidarity, the Polish trade union and civil resistance movement, and other opposition movements of Communist Eastern Europe. It

serves as a cultural and educational hub, promoting democratic values and human rights. By preserving and presenting this pivotal history, ECS fosters civic engagement and educates visitors on the importance of freedom and solidarity, while also supporting preservation of key for local community part of their identity.

Key takeaways:

1 - Cultural and historical institutions can contribute not only to preservation of heritage and tourism activities, but can take an active and modern role in promoting community values, social cohesion, active citizenship, as well as offering relevant spaces and resources for local citizens that contributes to both cultural development of visitors.

2 - Documenting and showcasing historical movements contribute to cultural preservation and awareness, but cultural sites need to ensure a sustainable and responsive to needs approach to engaging with visitors and offering them relevant value.

4. Gdansk Tourist and Citizen City Cards programs – The Gdansk Tourism Card allows free or discounted access of visitors to more than 50 tourism attractions, access to the public transportation of the overall metropolitan area as well as discounts in a network of more than 130 local businesses. While following other cities it facilitates access to tourism offering and promote sustainable forms of cultural tourism the product looks to support local businesses and tourism destination in receiving more stable in time cash flow, as the city organisation responsible for its management provides payments to involved cultural institutions even in case of drastic drops in tourism activities, as for example in case of recent pandemics, as well as share the perks of tourism with Gdansk citizens, translating the incomes to offer of a citizen card that allows local residents free access to Gdansk tourism attractions, cultural events, discounts in local businesses and other services through which citizens participate in benefits from the tourism influx in the city.

Key takeaways:

1 - City cards can effectively distribute tourism benefits among visitors and residents and contribute to compensating the local community for sharing their cultural resources and spaces with visitors.

2 - Such programs can encourage sustainable practices by integrating transport and access to culture, but to have a realistic impact need to offer a broad range of benefits that will respond to diversified needs of different groups of visitors and residents. Both offering and technological integration are key success factors.

5. Manufactura Lodz - Manufaktura in Łódź is a revitalized industrial complex transformed from extensive ruined textile production complex which is one of the founding cornerstones of the city of Lodz, but through the years was a falling apart abandoned area in Lodz center, into a cultural, commercial, and social hub. By preserving its historical architecture and repurposing it for modern use, Manufaktura exemplifies successful industrial heritage adaptation, but also a contribution to improvement of life quality in degraded culturally and socially areas of the city. The project revitalized a historic site, creating jobs and fostering community pride, but also adaptive reuse of existing structures minimized environmental impact compared to new constructions.

Key takeaways:

1   - Revitalisation projects can not only contribute to changing the image of city areas, but to social recovery and providing new opportunities to falling into marginalization communities.

2   - Abandoned industrial heritage has an extensive potential for offering canvas for

relevant city projects, but to contribute to sustainability those need to cater to needs of different residents and visitors groups and be inclusive in doing so.

3 - Large scale revitalization projects can significantly change the flows of people in the city. Such changes should be anticipated and managed.

4 - Adaptive reuse is an eco-friendly alternative to new construction and helps maintain local identity.

6. Uniejow tourism strategy and project of a comprehensive tourism offering capitalizing on local cultural and natural resources. Uniejów has developed a comprehensive tourism strategy that leverages its geothermal resources and cultural heritage to promote wellness and cultural tourism in a region not commonly associated with touristic assets. This inspiring project is based on development of a broad range of complementary offerings and gradually increasing the portfolio of products and services for tourists and residents alike, while supporting collaboration between sites and local businesses and support of administration in contributing to development of tourism and cultural initiatives in the region.

Key takeaways:

1 - Leverage Untapped Local Resources - Sustainable tourism can thrive even in less traditionally touristic regions by identifying and valuing unique local assets—like geothermal energy and underappreciated cultural heritage—and transforming them into cohesive, attractive offerings.

2 - Build Synergies Through Cross-Sector Collaboration- Strong collaboration between cultural sites, local businesses, wellness providers, and public administration can

significantly amplify the impact of tourism initiatives, enhancing both visitor experience and community benefit.

3   - Develop Complementary, Layered Offerings - A gradual expansion of diverse and complementary products—spa tourism, cultural events, educational activities—can increase resilience, attract varied visitor profiles, and extend tourist stays, thereby contributing to economic and social sustainability.

4   - Prioritize Resident Involvement and Benefit - Integrating tourism development with community needs and ensuring that local residents also benefit from the infrastructure and services (e.g. wellness facilities, cultural programming) supports long-term social sustainability and local buy-in.

5   - Embed Environmental Innovation in the Core Tourism Narrative - Using geothermal energy as a foundational element of the town's tourism offer not only reduces the ecological footprint but also turns sustainability into a unique selling point that educates and attracts environmentally conscious travelers.

7. Hotel Kasztel presents a distinctive example of cultural theming in tourism infrastructure, with its architectural and interior design drawing inspiration from Polish legends and medieval folklore. Designed in the style of a noble castle, the venue incorporates elements such as stone facades, traditional ironwork, heraldic motifs, and decorative features that reflect historical and mythological narratives. Thematic rooms and event spaces are tailored

to evoke the atmosphere of regional tales and legendary figures, offering guests an immersive cultural experience. This approach not only enhances the attractiveness of the venue for events and tourism but also contributes to the preservation and promotion of intangible cultural heritage. By embedding local storytelling traditions and historical references into the physical environment, Hotel Kasztel supports Sustainable Cultural Tourism practices that align with the principles of cultural continuity, identity reinforcement, and experiential learning.

Key takeaways:

1 - Thematic Design as a Tool for Cultural Preservation - Integrating legends, folklore, and historical references into the design and storytelling of tourism infrastructure can actively preserve and promote intangible cultural heritage. This approach enhances cultural authenticity and creates a unique identity that distinguishes the venue while supporting cultural continuity.

2 - Immersive Experiences Increase Engagement and Learning - Offering culturally immersive environments—such as themed accommodations and event spaces—encourages deeper visitor engagement. This fosters experiential learning and emotional connection, which are essential for meaningful, sustainable tourism experiences that go beyond passive consumption.

3 - Cultural Identity as a Market Differentiator - Positioning a venue around regional narratives and heritage creates a distinctive market offer that appeals to niche tourism segments, including cultural tourists and event organizers seeking unique settings. This strategy supports economic sustainability while reinforcing the value of local identity in tourism development.

8. Zamek w Wiśniczu (Nowy Wiśnicz Castle), located in the Lesser Poland Voivodeship,

exemplifies Sustainable Cultural Tourism through its integration of heritage conservation, community engagement, and innovative technologies. Constructed in the 14th century and expanded in the 17th century, the castle showcases Baroque architecture with Renaissance elements. Its preservation efforts maintain the historical integrity of the structure, with seamless integration of modern technologies allowing visitors to experience Poland's rich cultural legacy in a sustainable and engaging way.

The castle offers sensor-based audio guides developed in cooperation with the Kraków-based company MOVITECH, which enable user-friendly self-guided tours using modern technology. Moreover, the Bastion VR — an immersive presentation using virtual reality technology allows visitors to be transported to the 17th-century castle. Moreover, in a pioneering move, the castle has incorporated innovative solar windows which generate renewable energy while preserving the building's historical aesthetics. This approach demonstrates how modern technology can be harmoniously integrated into heritage sites to promote environmental sustainability.

The management of Zamek w Wiśniczu actively involves local stakeholders, including non-governmental organizations, in its operations. Initiatives such as competitions for school students from the Nowy Wiśnicz municipality, aimed at designing visual identity elements for the Bastion VR, demonstrate the active involvement of the local community in the development of cultural tourism.

Key takeaways:

1   - Innovative Use of Technology Enhances Heritage Interpretation - The integration of technologies such as VR experiences (Bastion VR), laser scanning, and sensor-based audio guides provides immersive, educational encounters with cultural heritage. These tools enrich visitor engagement while protecting the physical site from excessive wear.

2   - Blending Authentic Heritage with Modern Accessibility - By combining original historical spaces with interactive exhibitions and self-guided digital tours, the site offers both cultural authenticity and modern convenience. This approach makes heritage accessible to diverse audiences, including younger and tech-savvy visitors.

3   - Community Involvement Strengthens Cultural Relevance and Sustainability -

Initiatives involving local students and residents in the development of cultural content and visual identity foster a sense of ownership and pride. This not only supports social sustainability but also aligns tourism development with local values and identity.

9. Zalipie - Zalipie, a village in southern Poland's Lesser Poland Voivodeship, exemplifies Sustainable Cultural Tourism through its enduring tradition of floral house painting. This practice, originating in the late 19th century as a means to conceal soot stains on walls, has evolved into a vibrant expression of local identity and artistic heritage. The annual "Malowana Chata" (Painted Cottage) competition, established in 1948, encourages residents to refresh and showcase their decorative motifs, fostering community engagement and intergenerational transmission of skills.

   Key cultural sites, such as the Felicja Curyłowa Farmstead and the Dom Malarek (House of Painters), serve as hubs for cultural preservation and education. These institutions offer workshops, exhibitions, and information on the village's artistic traditions, enhancing visitor understanding and appreciation. The integration of living traditions with tourism infrastructure ensures that cultural practices remain dynamic and community-led, providing an authentic and sustainable tourism experience.

   Key takeaways:

   1- Community-Led Cultural Preservation: Empowering local residents to lead in the preservation and presentation of their cultural heritage ensures authenticity and sustainability in tourism practices.

   2 - Integration of Cultural Heritage into Tourism Infrastructure: Developing cultural centers and museums that offer educational programs and workshops can enhance visitor engagement and support the local economy.

   3 - Annual Cultural Events as Sustainable Tourism Drivers: Organizing regular cultural events, such as the "Malowana Chata" competition, can stimulate community participation, attract tourists, and reinforce cultural identity.

10. CE4RT Rzeszow - The Circular Economy for Regenerative Tourism (CE4RT) project is a European Union-funded initiative aimed at transforming tourism small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) across five countries—Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Poland, and the Netherlands—by integrating principles of the circular economy and regenerative tourism into their operations. Launched in January 2023, CE4RT provides participating SMEs with financial support (up to €8,250 per business), hands-on training, and mentorship to adopt sustainable practices that not only minimize environmental impact but also contribute positively to local communities and ecosystems. The project emphasizes a holistic approach, encouraging businesses to engage with local stakeholders, preserve cultural heritage, and promote visitor behaviors that enhance the well-being of destinations.

    1 - Holistic Integration of Sustainability Principles: Adopting both circular economy and regenerative tourism frameworks enables businesses to move beyond traditional sustainability measures, fostering practices that restore and enrich local environments and

communities.

2 - Capacity Building Through Tailored Support: Providing SMEs with customized training, mentorship, and financial resources facilitates the practical implementation of sustainable practices, leading to measurable improvements in environmental and social performance.

3 - Community and Stakeholder Engagement: Active collaboration with local communities and stakeholders ensures that tourism development aligns with regional values and needs, enhancing authenticity and long-term viability.

In the scope of the CultMED project, a meeting with the Polish representative of the CE4RT project in Rzeszow, Poland took place. Moreover, due to highly practical and transferable for CultMED project results of this initiative, e-meeting with the project representative was held to exchange best practices and lessons learnt across the consortium (see more in the section 4.4.).

While each practice offered relevant learning experience, some of them offered more unique and relevant examples of good practices and better responded to established selection criteria and stood out in relation to other good practices. Those practices were studied in more detail and have been included into the CultMED collection of best practices.

4.1.3. Best practices

4.1.3.1. Best practice - Zalipie – from a grassroot initiative to local cultural phenomenon

Zalipie, a small village in southern Poland, has become a distinctive cultural tourism destination thanks to its long-standing tradition of floral house painting, which began as a local custom in the late 19th century. Its key strength lies in how it preserves and promotes living traditions through community involvement, artistic continuity, and educational tourism. Zalipie represents a rare model where tourism emerges as a byproduct of vibrant local culture, rather than being the primary driver of local activity.

Sustainable Cultural Tourism
on the Mediterranean

➤ Best Practice: Zalipie Art Village, Poland

The practice underlines that:

- Community-led initiatives are essential for sustaining and sharing cultural heritage authentically.

- Living traditions can become powerful tourism assets when supported by infrastructure like museums, workshops, and cultural centers.

- Cultural events like the annual "Painted Cottage" competition stimulate both creativity and tourism, reinforcing identity.

- Educational and intergenerational approaches help preserve cultural knowledge while attracting interest from both domestic and international visitors.

- Small-scale, art-based tourism can contribute significantly to the local economy without compromising authenticity.

4.1.3.2. Best practice – Smaki Gdanska – regenerative culinary tourism practice for cultural revival

Smaki Gdańska (The Tastes of Gdansk) is a collaborative project that revives lost 19th-century culinary traditions of Gdańsk by working with local chefs to recreate historical recipes, offering an authentic taste of the city's multicultural heritage. Its key strength lies in combining food culture, historical research, and local business development to build a sustainable and emotionally engaging tourism product.

> Best Practice: Regenerative culinary tourism, Gdańsk, Poland

The practice underlines that:

- Reviving traditional cuisines can enhance cultural identity while creating distinctive tourism offerings.

- Culinary tourism is a powerful tool for cultural education and storytelling, especially when designed around authenticity.

- Partnerships between historians and local chefs/businesses can generate meaningful and sustainable tourism products.

- Regenerative tourism should go beyond preserving the present and actively work to recover what was lost, both culturally and socially.

- Culinary experiences have the potential to connect visitors emotionally with the destination, offering high value with relatively low environmental impact.

4.1.3.3. Best practice – Uniejow – from marginalised tourism location to regional example

Uniejów demonstrates how a small, peripheral town can successfully transform into a sustainable tourism destination by building on its underutilized resources, in the specific case - geothermal resources, cultural heritage, and community identity. Its key strength lies in the integration of wellness tourism with environmental innovation, cultural preservation, and strong community involvement, creating a model that is both holistic and highly replicable for rural regions and towns.

➤ Best practice: Multidimensional tourism offer – Uniejów, Poland

The practice underlines that:

- Starting small and local is effective: Uniejów proves that small towns don't need iconic landmarks to attract visitors; leveraging modest but meaningful local assets can generate powerful tourism offerings.

- Diversified tourism increases resilience: By combining wellness (thermal spa), heritage (historic sites and UNESCO-recognized traditions), nature (eco-trails), and education (science center), Uniejów appeals to varied audiences and supports year-round tourism.

- Sustainability must be embedded across the system: Environmental, cultural, and economic sustainability are not treated separately but integrated into infrastructure, daily operations, and long-term planning.

- Community involvement ensures authenticity and continuity: Local residents are active co-creators of tourism experiences, especially in the preservation and presentation of living traditions like Spycimierz's floral carpets.

- Collaboration and phased development support long-term success: Strategic planning, inter-municipal partnerships, and gradual, flexible investment allowed the town to grow responsibly while staying aligned with community needs.

4.2. Best practices collection by CultMed consortium partners: Aspon, ANHER and CSTI.

4.2.1. Stage 1 – Initial research

In preparation for the EU-level data collection phase of the CultMed project (WP2), the project team leveraged from the extensive network of the Development Agency of Heraklion (ANHER) to identify Sustainable Cultural Tourism initiatives in Bordeaux, France, that aligned with the project's sustainable tourism criteria. The study visit was co-organised and attended by representatives from three (3) CultMed consortium partners: Aspon Consulting Ltd (Cyprus), Development Agency of Heraklion (Greece) and Cyprus Sustainable Tourism Initiative (Cyprus). Stakeholders in Bordeaux and Gan were contacted via direct outreach and site visits were arranged in collaboration with local tourism operators and cultural institutions.

The selection of practices focused on venues and initiatives that:

- Combine cultural heritage with immersive visitor experiences
- Integrate sustainability principles in management and design
- Demonstrate strong educational value, innovation and/or replicability
- Address community engagement or environmental sensitivity

4.2.2. Study visit

The study visit to Bordeaux involved on-site exploration and discussions with stakeholders at four key locations:

- La Cité du Vin (28/04): A world-renowned wine culture museum and experience centre integrating digital storytelling, regional promotion and international cultural narratives.
- Bassins de Lumières (29/04): An immersive digital art centre housed in a repurposed WWII submarine base, merging heritage preservation with high-tech exhibition formats.
- Le Cave de Jurançon (29/04): A rural wine cooperative and heritage site promoting local wine traditions through sustainable viticulture and eco-tourism.
- Bordeaux Métropole (30/04): A meeting with Deputy Director of Digital and Data Antoine Bidegain at Bordeaux Métropole, provided insights into the region's strategies for digital inclusion and how data-driven governance is shaping equitable access to cultural and tourism services across the metropolitan area.

4.2.3. Best practices
4.2.3.1. Best Practice - La Cité du Vin

The project team being involved in this study visit, successfully arranged and held a meeting with Florence Maffrand, Head of Wine Partnerships & International Patronage at the Fondation pour la Culture et les Civilisations du Vin, which operates La Cité du Vin.

The team received first-hand insights into the foundation's international strategy, its commitment to sustainability and its approach to creating accessible, immersive visitor experiences. These insights were complemented by detailed on-site observation of facilities, exhibitions and visitor

engagement.

La Cité du Vin is a landmark cultural facility in Bordeaux dedicated to the global heritage of wine. Combining immersive digital technologies, architectural symbolism and educational programming, it serves as a model for sustainable, experience-driven cultural tourism. Its key strength lies in its ability to blend cultural storytelling with innovation, making wine heritage universally engaging and accessible.

La Cité du Vin opened in Bordeaux with a mission to celebrate wine as a civilizational and cultural heritage. The structure is jointly owned by Bordeaux Métropole and the City of Bordeaux (each contributing to 50% of the capital), with an €82 million total budget—modest for a site of its scale.

Financing sources from public and private stakeholders include:

- European funding and a relaunch program contributing €4 million
- The Chamber of Commerce and Wine Council (which alone provided 30%) –
- Industry patrons (20%)
- A public foundation operates the museum, aligning it with public interest objectives[3].

The building's architecture reflects the shape of swirling wine and was designed with sustainability in mind (see Figure 1), by using natural materials (like wood from wine barrels), natural ventilation and transport accessibility. The museum receives approximately 200,000 visitors annually, 54% of whom are international and operates 364 days a year (only closing on Christmas Day). Top countries of visitors include Spain, USA and UK.

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[3] The foundation is not allowed to engage directly in wine trade.

Its core offering includes:

- Tasting workshops pairing wines with seasons (e.g., Hungarian sweet wine for winter)
- Salle de Dégustation: curated wine tastings
- Weekly themed Thursday evenings
- Book-lounge areas accessible to all visitors
- Group tastings led by sommeliers.

La Cité du Vin exemplifies how cultural specificity (wine) can be used as a universal storytelling tool, enhanced by technology, architecture and sustainability principles. It engages visitors not only as tourists, but as co-learners and participants in a sensory and educational experience. Its international reach, with active partnerships and planned expansion (including in China, Germany and Greece), shows how cultural institutions can evolve as global platforms while remaining rooted in local identity.

La Cité du Vin offers a transferable and adaptable model for regions that wish to promote their intangible cultural heritage through experience-driven tourism infrastructure. Its approach *can be replicated by cities or regions with a strong cultural product (e.g. wine, olive oil, tea, cheese, spices etc.) seeking to translate that identity into a visitor attraction.* The combination of storytelling, digital innovation, educational programming and sustainable design makes it suitable for diverse cultural contexts. It also provides a governance and financing structure, through a public-interest foundation with mixed funding, that ensures both long-term sustainability and cultural integrity.

Therefore, La Cité du Vin represents a best practice in Sustainable Cultural Tourism by transforming a culturally specific tradition (i.e. wine as a civilizational heritage) into an inclusive, global and educational experience. It demonstrates how a product deeply tied to regional identity can be elevated through immersive design, digital storytelling and thoughtful architecture to promote cultural understanding and dialogue. Its foundation-based governance model ensures financial sustainability with public oversight, while the building's low-impact design and mobility integration reflect a commitment to environmental responsibility.

La Cité du Vin has the ability to connect local authenticity with global accessibility, by inviting international visitors to engage with wine not simply as a beverage, but as a story of land, people and time. Its model combines economic resilience, sustainability principles and emotional engagement, making it a leading example of how cultural tourism can evolve without losing its roots.
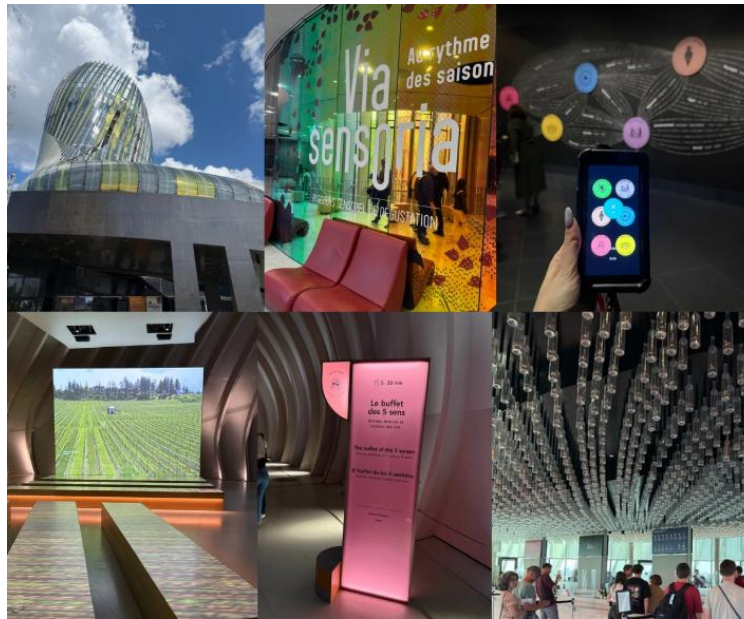
The La Cité du Vin model demonstrates that:

- Cultural storytelling can be localized yet globally relevant, using a specific product, like wine, to explore human history, tradition and ecology.
- Public-private partnerships can finance and sustain large-scale cultural projects while maintaining public interest oversight.
- Foundations offer an effective governance model for cultural venues, balancing educational missions with operational efficiency.
- Immersive digital tools (e.g. AR, scent diffusion, multimedia) can make complex heritage content accessible to broader and younger audiences.
- Visitor experiences can be multi-layered (educational, sensory, participatory), encouraging longer stays and repeat visits.
- Sustainable architecture and eco-mobility integration (e.g. bike access, natural ventilation) are replicable and beneficial even in medium-scale cultural projects.
- International collaborations prove the model's adaptability to different cultural and institutional environments.
- Scalability is possible, since smaller venues can adopt modular aspects, such as thematic tastings, localized exhibits or digital storytelling, without replicating the full infrastructure.

> Best Practice: La Cité du Vin, Bordeaux, France

The practice underlines that:

- Immersive storytelling and digital technologies can make complex heritage (like wine culture) engaging and educational for diverse audiences.
- Public-private funding and foundation-based management offer a sustainable operational model with public oversight and market responsiveness.
- Cultural institutions can generate repeat visits and loyalty through layered experiences (education, tasting, events, digital content).
- Sustainable architecture and mobility planning (bike access, low-energy systems) can be embedded from the design phase.
- International partnerships and cultural diplomacy help extend the relevance and reach of locally grounded institutions.

4.2.3.2.   Best Practice - Bassins de Lumières

The partners involved in this study visit identified Bassins de Lumières as a strong candidate for EU-level best practice in Sustainable Cultural Tourism due to its architectural reuse, cultural innovation and public access model. The project team reached out to the managing body of Bassins de Lumières and other stakeholders in advance to request a formal meeting. Unfortunately, due to scheduling constraints, it was not possible to arrange interviews during the dates of the visit. Despite this, the team conducted a site visit, participated in the visitor experience, collected photographic documentation and followed up with in-depth desk research.

The Bassins de Lumières in Bordeaux is a cultural venue that transforms a World War II German-built submarine base (i.e. the U-Boot-Bunker) into the world's largest digital art centre. This best

practice highlights how a site once associated with conflict and occupation can be reimagined as a space for immersive cultural engagement, tourism and sustainability. Its key strength lies in its successful fusion of adaptive heritage reuse, immersive digital technology and public-private cultural development.

Constructed in 1941 by the Nazis to house up to 15 submarines during WWII, the massive concrete base survived Allied bombings and later sat largely unused for decades. It was occasionally used as a metallurgy plant, a film set, or an event venue. In 2018, the City of Bordeaux granted Culturespaces a concession to develop the site for cultural use.

Between 2018 and 2020, Culturespaces invested approximately €10 million in transforming four of the eleven submarine cells into an immersive digital exhibition centre. The work included the installation of 90 video projectors, 100 kilometres of optical fibre and high-capacity sound systems, allowing for synchronized, multisensory projections across the 13,000 m² water-filled space. The site officially opened to the public in June 2020.

In addition to offering rotating exhibitions of classical and contemporary art, the site preserves the raw architectural integrity of the submarine base, creating a powerful juxtaposition between historical memory and artistic expression. This careful balance not only prevents the erasure of difficult heritage but actively repositions it for cultural, educational and economic benefit.

Although only part of the 41,000 m² site is currently active, future plans include expanding the centre into a larger arts and creative industries hub, including studios, workshops and performance areas.

Bassins de Lumières is a standout example of Sustainable Cultural Tourism through its innovative reuse of a historic, conflict-associated site, a former Nazi submarine base, into a space for art, education and collective memory. This transformation balances the ethical dimensions of heritage preservation with the opportunity to create immersive, emotionally powerful visitor experiences. It also demonstrates a low-impact, high-value approach to infrastructure (i.e. no new construction, minimal emissions and efficient use of an existing architectural shell).

Its public-private partnership ensures long-term viability while keeping cultural access open and affordable. By engaging broad audiences, including families and international tourists and combining digital creativity with historical authenticity, Bassins de Lumières redefines how we relate to build heritage. It shows how post-industrial or trauma-linked spaces can be reclaimed as meaningful and sustainable tourism assets, aligned with environmental goals and cultural healing.

The Bassins de Lumières is a highly transferable model for reclaiming complex heritage and promoting Sustainable Cultural Tourism. It demonstrates how:

- Digital technology can democratize access to art and heritage, particularly in post-industrial or trauma-associated spaces.
- Public-private partnerships can unlock value in underused heritage assets without relying solely on public funding.
- Cultural experiences rooted in place and history can attract broad, multi-generational audiences and boost local tourism economies.
- Environmental sustainability can be achieved by reusing infrastructure, minimizing new construction and using efficient lighting and AV systems.

> ➤ Best Practice: Bassins de Lumières, Bordeaux, France

The practice underlines that:

- Cultural infrastructure projects can redefine sites with difficult or traumatic histories into meaningful, educational and attractive tourism destinations.
- Adaptive reuse of architecture is both cost-effective and environmentally sustainable, reducing material waste and preserving memory.
- Immersive, technology-led art spaces are powerful drivers of visitor engagement, particularly when combined with historical storytelling.
- Multi-stakeholder collaboration (including municipalities and private operators) is essential for managing large-scale, high-investment cultural assets.
- Such practices are scalable and replicable in other European regions with neglected military, industrial or logistical sites.

4.2.3.3.   Best Practice - La Cave de Gan-Jurançon

The project team involved in this study visit successfully arranged and conducted a guided visit to La Cave de Gan-Jurançon in Gan, Pyrénées-Atlantiques, France. During the site visit, the team met with two (2) stakeholders, who provided a thorough overview of the winery's history, cooperative model, sustainable production practices and its role in regional wine tourism. The team was shown key technical facilities, including the wine cellars, underground transfer infrastructure and bottling systems and participated in a guided wine tasting session featuring both dry and sweet Jurançon wines.

La Cave de Gan-Jurançon was founded in 1949 and is one of the largest and most important cooperative wineries in the Jurançon appellation. Located at the foot of the Pyrenees in the Béarn

region, it brings together approximately 300 winegrowers, collectively managing over 900 hectares of vineyards. It plays a leading role in producing AOC Jurançon and AOC Béarn wines, ensuring quality through cooperative support and shared standards.

The region's unique terroir, influenced by both Atlantic and Pyrenean climates, provides ideal conditions for cultivating Gros Manseng (used for dry wines) and Petit Manseng (used for late-harvest sweet wines). The cooperative's system of compensating growers based on sugar content and grape health encourages sustainable viticulture and quality-oriented production.

With an annual production of over 5 million bottles, La Cave de Gan-Jurançon uses a technically advanced, centralized infrastructure, including an underground pipe system that allows wine transfer between buildings and a semi-buried cellar designed to optimize storage through natural humidity control.

Environmental sustainability is central to the operation. Grape waste is reused for distillation or upcycled into by-products such as natural soaps. Water from nearby rivers is recycled through the facility for cooling, air-conditioning and cleaning processes, which demonstrates a circular approach to resource use and a commitment to zero waste.

The cooperative also stands out for its well-developed tourism infrastructure. Welcoming approximately 270,000 visitors per year, La Cave de Gan-Jurançon offers multilingual guided tours, a vineyard tour on a 15-seater train (see Figure 5), tasting rooms and accessible event spaces. Its hospitality setup is well-equipped for international and intergenerational audiences, including visitors from Spain, Japan, the United States and Greece.

La Cave de Gan-Jurançon presents a replicable model for rural regions with strong agricultural identity, demonstrating how cooperative governance can lead to sustainable, high-quality production, regional branding and successful integration of tourism.

La Cave de Gan-Jurançon exemplifies the principles of Sustainable Cultural Tourism through its ability to integrate economic viability, cultural preservation, environmental responsibility as well as community benefit into a single cooperative model. It safeguards a centuries-old regional wine

tradition, rooted in place and practice, while adapting to modern expectations of quality, traceability and sustainability. Its tourism offering is not only accessible and educational, but also authentic and non-intrusive, respecting both the cultural rhythm of production and the community's ownership of its heritage.
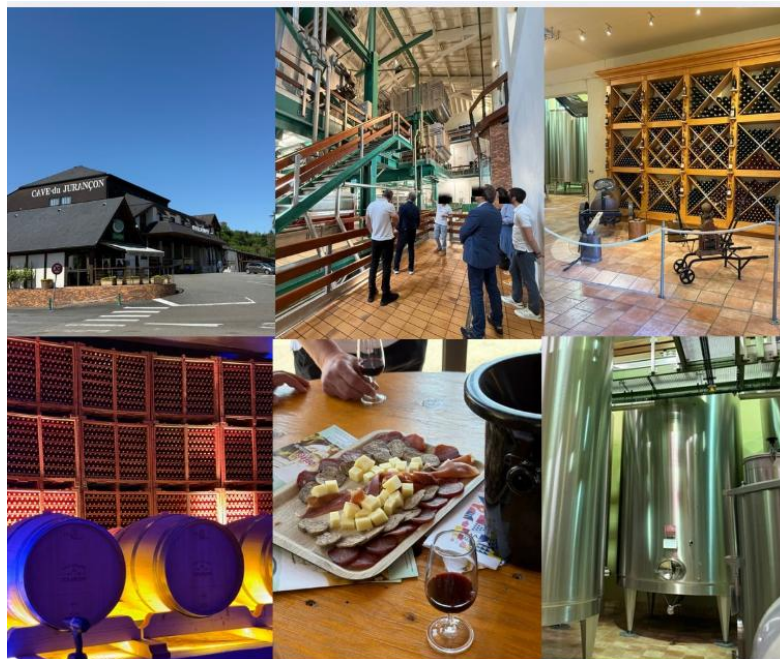
By combining low-impact infrastructure, collaborative governance and deep cultural storytelling, the site invites visitors to connect with a living tradition rather than consuming a staged experience. This alignment with local identity, environmental ethics and social inclusion reflects the foundational pillars of the CultMed project and positions La Cave de Gan-Jurançon as a benchmark for how sustainable tourism can be both culturally rooted and forward-looking.

Its approach is particularly transferable to:

- Rural or mountainous regions with multiple small producers seeking shared infrastructure and market access.
- Areas with Protected Designation of Origin (PDO/AOC) recognition and a desire to develop cultural tourism.
- Communities focused on preserving agricultural traditions while building economic resilience through diversification.

The La Cave de Gan-Jurançon model demonstrates that:

- Cooperative structures can offer both economic efficiency and cultural stewardship, ensuring long-term regional impact.
- Practical sustainability innovations, such as grape residue reuse, water recycling and natural cellar cooling, can be implemented affordably and effectively.
- Wine tourism, when integrated with production and storytelling, creates deeper visitor engagement and new revenue opportunities.

- Heritage can be activated through experience, education and local pride, making the region more attractive for tourism and investment.
- This model can scale or adapt to other products, such as olive oil, herbal remedies or rural crafts, especially in Mediterranean and alpine regions.

➢ Best practice: La Cave de Gan-Jurançon, Bordeaux Region, France

The practice underlines that:

- Cooperative management can elevate regional products by offering shared infrastructure, branding and quality incentives.
- Sustainability can be embedded through efficient design, resource reuse and low-impact technologies that are cost-effective for rural settings.
- Visitor experiences grounded in authenticity, education and sensory engagement support long-term tourism development.
- Combining production with storytelling reinforces the value of place and product, especially when targeting both domestic and international markets.
- This model is adaptable and accessible, offering a holistic strategy for rural development, cultural preservation and sustainable tourism.

4.2.3.4.   Best Practice - Bordeaux Métropole

The project team involved in this study visit successfully arranged and held a meeting with Antoine Bidegain, Deputy Director of Digital and Data at Bordeaux Métropole, on 30th April 2025. The meeting was organized as part of the CultMed project's investigation into forward-thinking governance for Sustainable Cultural Tourism, particularly following Bordeaux's designation as a European Capital of Smart Tourism in 2022. The CultMed team aimed to explore how Bordeaux's smart city strategy embeds equity, data ethics and digital inclusion into tourism and cultural services as well as how these practices might be replicated elsewhere in Europe.

Bordeaux Métropole serves as the central authority coordinating digital and data infrastructure across its 28 member municipalities[4]. Its digital department includes over 400 professionals, managing services such as satellite mapping, school equipment, public network infrastructure, and data-driven support for urban mobility, climate resilience and tourism. The department's overarching philosophy is that data is a public asset, hence data is a tool for transparency, equity and sustainability, not just efficiency.

One example of this approach is the urban comfort index, designed to address the effects of rising summer heat. Residents are invited to scan QR codes placed in public spaces and share their real-time perception of thermal comfort. These insights are combined with environmental sensor data to guide tangible interventions, such as planting trees, installing water features or adjusting urban design to enhance comfort and livability.

In the cultural tourism domain, Bordeaux also uses GDPR-compliant mobility data, sourced from telecom operators, to track visitor flows, dwell times and country of origin. This helps move the city beyond assumptions or volume-based tourism metrics and enables targeted promotion of under-visited cultural sites, while reducing congestion at high-traffic landmarks.

Crucially, Bordeaux emphasizes data sovereignty. All public contracts are designed to ensure that data remains fully accessible to the municipality, not locked into private platforms. The city has developed a centralized internal data lake, allowing departments to cross-analyze datasets across mobility, culture, infrastructure and climate, which supports integrated, responsive planning.

Bordeaux is a participating and active member of the Cities Coalition for Digital Rights (CC4DR), a global alliance of over 60 cities committed to human rights in digital transformation. According to the city's profile on the CC4DR website (citiesfordigitalrights.org/city/bordeaux), Bordeaux has formally committed to the following:

- Universal and equal access to the internet and digital literacy
- Ethical and transparent use of data and algorithms
- Participatory digital public services rooted in human rights

This public stance reinforces Bordeaux's role not just as a digital innovator, but as a city where technology supports civic participation, cultural inclusion and public trust.

While artificial intelligence (AI) was not the central focus of the meeting, Mr. Bidegain emphasized the city's deliberate avoidance of hype-driven tools like generative AI. Instead, Bordeaux favors fit-for-purpose, interpretable systems, co-developed with academic institutions, to ensure that digital innovation serves public goals, such as climate adaptation and cultural accessibility.

Bordeaux Métropole presents a replicable and scalable best practice for municipalities seeking to embed data governance within Sustainable Cultural Tourism Policy. It demonstrates that digital transformation does not require high-tech solutions or large-scale investment, but rather strong

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1. [4] Bordeaux Métropole. (n.d.). *Les 28 communes de la Métropole*. Retrieved May 2025, from https://www.bordeaux-metropole.fr/metropole/linstitution-territoire/28-communes-metropole

ethical standards, cross-sector coordination and tools designed around community needs.

More importantly, Bordeaux's digital strategy actively contributes to Sustainable Cultural Tourism by improving cultural service planning, diversifying tourist flows and fostering inclusive participation. Through ethical use of data and participatory technologies, the city enhances cultural equity, avoids over-tourism and empowers communities to co-shape their urban environment.

This practice is particularly transferable to:

- Cities seeking to move beyond mass tourism metrics toward equity-based visitor strategies
- Municipalities wanting to combine climate adaptation with cultural planning using real-time citizen input
- Local governments aiming to maintain public control over digital infrastructure while working with external service providers

The Bordeaux Métropole model demonstrates that:

- Data-informed tourism planning enhances fairness, resilience and accessibility in cultural services
- Participatory digital tools such as QR-coded surveys can drive inclusive, real-time policy responses
- Data sovereignty ensures strategic autonomy and long-term flexibility for public institutions
- Digital rights frameworks (e.g., CC4DR) provide a replicable ethical foundation for smart tourism policy
- Cross-sector data integration supports more agile, climate-aware and citizen-focused city management

➢ Best practice: Bordeaux Métropole, France

The practice underlines that:

1   - Bordeaux's approach redefines smart tourism as people-centered, equity-driven and sustainability-aligned

2   - The city's digital infrastructure supports transparency, participation and cultural inclusion

3   - Ethical, low-cost tools are often more impactful than complex AI when properly aligned with policy goals

4   - Collaborative networks like CC4DR help scale local innovations while reinforcing public values

5   - Bordeaux exemplifies how smart city tools can meaningfully support Sustainable Cultural Tourism and democratic governance

4.3. Best practices collection by ReadLabs

4.3.1. Stage 1 – Initial research

As part of the CultMed project's EU-level data collection (WP2), a field study visit was conducted to Vevčani, North Macedonia, between 27 April and 3 May 2025. The aim was to document community-driven practices that exemplify Sustainable Cultural Tourism, intangible heritage safeguarding, and green rural development. The visit was organized with support from the Municipality of Vevčani, Cultural Society "Drimkol", and local NGOs and entrepreneurs involved in the "Vevčani Green" initiative.

Through prior desk research and interviews conducted with local actors, three interrelated best practices were identified that align with CultMed's sustainability and heritage criteria:

- Vevčani Lazarki – a revived seasonal ritual centered on intergenerational knowledge and intangible heritage.

- Vevčani Carnival – a 1,400-year-old pre-Christian celebration rooted in satire, symbolism, and cultural continuity.

- Vevčani Green – a contemporary initiative integrating eco-tourism, cultural preservation, and sustainable entrepreneurship.

All three practices exemplify:
- Authentic integration of culture and sustainability.
- Community-led governance and strong resident involvement.
- Clear educational, ecological, and economic impacts

4.3.2. Study visit

The study visit involved direct observation, stakeholder interviews, and field documentation of the three practices. The schedule included:

1. Vevčani Lazarki (27–28 April): Participation in preparatory gatherings, observation of rituals involving young girls and elder women, and discussions on the revival of this intangible tradition. Insights were gathered on its role in intergenerational transmission and rural identity.

During the field visit, the research team observed the Lazarki rituals as they unfolded in the streets and homes of Vevčani. In-depth interviews were conducted with members of the Cultural Art Society "Drimkol", elderly women who had last participated in the tradition during their youth, local families, and the new generation of young girls who are now leading its revival.

Key observations from the visit include:
- The active involvement of women and girls, both as cultural transmitters and performers.

- The emotional significance of the ritual's return, often described by locals as a "healing of memory."

- The integration of traditional music, costume design, and oral poetry, all passed down within families or revived through archival research.

- The inclusive nature of the event, inviting both residents and respectful visitors to participate, observe, or support its continuation.

Cultural and Tourism Relevance:

Ritual, Music, and Storytelling
The Lazarki tradition includes a specific repertoire of ritual chants, often sung in pairs or small groups, which bless the household with fertility, health, and abundance. These songs, once nearly lost, are now being recorded and taught to younger generations. The girls wear traditional costumes, some of which are restored heirlooms, and carry handmade baskets filled with flowers and symbolic tokens.

Intergenerational Transmission
The practice relies on oral knowledge passed down between generations. Many of the grandmothers who once participated in Lazarki during the 1950s and 60s have been involved in its revival, offering guidance on costume preparation, song memorization, and ritual etiquette.

Community Empowerment
Unlike commercial cultural events, Vevčani Lazarki is entirely managed by the local community. It receives modest support from the Municipality, but relies mainly on volunteerism, local pride, and civic ownership. This ensures cultural integrity and deepens community cohesion.

Seasonal and Gender-Inclusive Tourism
As a springtime event, Lazarki offers a counterbalance to the winter tourism peak created by the Carnival. It also places young women and girls at the center of cultural expression, something rare in rural ritual contexts.

Sustainability and Impact:

- Environmental: The event is fully walkable, has zero emissions, and produces no commercial waste.

- Social: It strengthens rural identity and promotes community bonding through shared cultural memory.

- Economic: While not a major commercial event, it generates income through traditional costume-making, local gastronomy, and small-scale hospitality services.

Transferability:

Vevčani Lazarki offers a replicable model for reviving dormant traditions in other rural or peri-urban areas. Its core features, community ownership, gender empowerment, seasonal celebration, and low environmental impact, make it highly suitable for destinations seeking authentic, non-commercial cultural experiences.

2. Vevčani Carnival (29 April): Meetings with cultural bearers and organizers from "Drimkol" society. Focus was placed on the Carnival's social, economic, and environmental sustainability, its impact on rural winter tourism, and its unique satirical character.

During the CultMed study visit, the research team engaged in on-site observations and follow-up interviews with organizers, municipal officials, artists, and residents. The Carnival was studied not only as an event, but as a socio-cultural system of intergenerational transmission, symbolic resistance, and local economic development.

Though the official festival is held annually in January, the research visit allowed the team to explore its year-round preparation processes, mask-making techniques, narrative themes, and logistical frameworks. Archival material, video documentation, and follow-up interviews provided a complete picture of its cultural significance and sustainability model.

Key Features and Strengths

Living Heritage, Rooted in Community Memory
The Carnival traces its origins to pre-Christian rites and continues today with the same essential structure: costumed processions, house-to-house visits, drumming rituals, and performances that mock public figures and societal injustices. It is not museumized—rather, it is *lived heritage*, co-produced each year by locals of all ages.

Community-Driven Cultural Production
The event is neither centrally orchestrated nor institutionalized. Instead, dozens of informal

neighborhood-based groups (maali) organize independently and converge in a self-managed cultural system. Costumes are handmade, often reusing local or upcycled materials, and performances are based on oral storytelling and current affairs.

Environmental and Spatial Sustainability
Taking place entirely within the walkable bounds of Vevčani, the Carnival has a minimal carbon footprint, no external stage infrastructure, and low material waste. Most of its elements, music, ritual, props, are locally sourced or handmade.

Tourism Without Commodification
While the Carnival attracts visitors, it remains uncommodified. There are no paid tickets, no staged versions for tourists, and no top-down programming. Visitors are welcomed into the village's natural rhythm, contributing to the economy by staying in local guesthouses, dining in family-run taverns, and purchasing artisanal crafts.

Replicability and Relevance:
The Vevčani Carnival provides a unique and transferrable model for heritage-based tourism in rural or semi-peripheral European regions. It proves that bottom-up governance, symbolic rituals, and creative freedom can create enduring tourism offers rooted in cultural integrity.

This is particularly valuable in destinations seeking to:

- Activate *off-season* tourism (January)

- Promote *inclusive, slow tourism*

- Use *ritual, satire, or folk culture* as a platform for engagement

- Support *community-based heritage safeguarding* outside formal institutions

3. Vevčani Green (30 April – 3 May): Exploration of nature-based tourism activities, eco-gastronomy experiences, green entrepreneurship (e.g., herbal product makers), and walking tours highlighting Vevčani's natural and cultural landscape. Sessions were held with youth groups, municipal staff, and local businesses contributing to the initiative's governance and visibility.

The CultMed project team engaged in on-site exploration and direct dialogue with the founders, residents, cultural facilitators, and local officials involved in Vevčani Green. The study visit included immersive observation of the outdoor infrastructure (eco-paths, nature interpretation panels, heritage signage), participation in workshops on green crafts and storytelling, and informal interviews with key contributors from the cultural and environmental sectors.

Special attention was given to the governance model, educational outreach, partnership with the Municipality of Vevčani, and its status as a Green Destinations Top 100 awardee (2024–2025).

Key Features and Strengths

Ecological Storytelling and Regenerative Tourism

At its core, Vevčani Green is a regenerative model—tourism serves not as an extractive force but as a means to restore, educate, and empower. Trails and installations guide visitors through cultural landscapes, sacred springs, medicinal plant routes, and geological formations while linking them to local myths, traditions, and seasonal rituals.

Community-Led Sustainability

Unlike externally managed eco-parks, Vevčani Green is rooted in the village itself. The initiative was sparked by local youth and volunteers and continues to involve elders, artisans, schools, and returning diaspora. Village-based participation ensures the continuity of values, environmental monitoring, and cultural authenticity.

Circular Economy and Local Products

The project supports small-scale green entrepreneurship, handcrafted souvenirs, herbal remedies, and seasonal produce, offering alternatives to mass tourism. Organic waste is composted, natural building materials are reused, and digital storytelling platforms minimize the need for paper signage or large-scale construction.

Education and Place-Based Learning

Through hands-on environmental education and citizen science activities, Vevčani Green empowers both residents and visitors to observe, learn, and protect. It collaborates with schools, researchers, and NGOs on biodiversity, sustainability, and heritage interpretation.

Replicability and Relevance:

Vevčani Green is a transferable model for eco-cultural regeneration, particularly suitable for:

- Mountainous, remote, or Natura 2000 territories
- Destinations with rich biodiversity and threatened landscapes
- Communities seeking low-impact tourism combined with local revitalization
- Municipalities with strong diaspora engagement and storytelling potential

The initiative has received national recognition and is increasingly engaged in European sustainability and tourism networks, opening the door to EU project participation, knowledge exchange, and cross-border collaboration.

CULT MED

Sustainable Cultural Tourism
on the Mediterranean

4.3.3. Best practices

4.3.3.1. Best Practice - Vevčani Lazarki

Vevčani Lazarki is a traditional springtime ritual celebrating Lazarus Saturday (Lazareva Subota), which was revived in the village of Vevčani in 2022 after more than 65 years of discontinuation. The ritual involves young girls dressed in elaborate traditional costumes going from house to house to sing ritual songs, offer blessings, and receive symbolic gifts. It marks the transition to spring and the spiritual preparation for Easter.

Why it matters:

This best practice illustrates how a forgotten intangible heritage tradition can be revitalized by the community to promote intergenerational learning, women's cultural leadership, and sustainable, low-impact tourism. Vevčani Lazarki is not staged for tourists but co-created with and by the community, making it a living, evolving tradition with deep social meaning. The Lazarki tradition includes a specific repertoire of ritual chants, often sung in pairs or small groups, which bless the household with fertility, health, and abundance. These songs, once nearly lost, are now being recorded and taught to younger generations. The girls wear traditional costumes, some of which are restored heirlooms, and carry handmade baskets filled with flowers and symbolic tokens. The practice relies on oral knowledge passed down between generations. Many of the grandmothers who once participated in Lazarki during the 1950s and 60s have been involved in its revival, offering guidance on costume preparation, song memorization, and ritual etiquette.

➢ Best Practice: Lazarki, Vevčani, North Macedonia

The practice underlines that:

- Revived intangible heritage can be a powerful tool for regenerating community pride

and visibility.
- Cultural empowerment of women and youth can enhance the inclusivity of tourism development.
- Small-scale seasonal rituals can become meaningful cultural experiences for visitors without compromising authenticity.
- Heritage practices do not require commercialization to contribute to cultural tourism, they thrive when rooted in community ownership.
- Documentation and oral transmission must go hand-in-hand for rituals to be resilient in the long term.

4.3.3.2.   Best Practice - Vevčani Carnival

The Vevčani Carnival is a 1,400-year-old ritual celebration held every January 13–14 in the mountain village of Vevčani, North Macedonia, during the Orthodox New Year. This community-led event is a vibrant mix of satire, symbolism, and performance, where locals craft handmade masks and costumes, enact socially and politically charged parades, and celebrate pre-Christian traditions through music, folklore, and collective participation.

Why it matters:

Vevčani Carnival represents a best practice in Sustainable Cultural Tourism because of its unbroken continuity, grassroots cultural governance, and integration of social critique and heritage expression. Its unique ability to preserve local identity while attracting domestic and international visitors, without compromising authenticity, offers a highly replicable model for sustainable tourism based on intangible cultural heritage.

➢ Best Practice: Vevčani Carnival, Vevčani, North Macedonia

Vevčani Carnival

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Vevčani, Southwestern Region, North Macedonia
Key Focus: Sustainable cultural events & community-led heritage safeguarding for local development and authentic visitor experiences

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The practice underlines that:

- Grassroots-led tourism models can outperform top-down ones in cultural resilience and authenticity.

- Satirical and participatory rituals create unique cultural narratives that attract engaged and respectful visitors.

- Minimal environmental impact and *strong social cohesion* are achievable through locally grounded practices.

- Replicable at low cost, this model can be adapted by other European villages with strong ritual or performance traditions.

- Intergenerational transmission and youth engagement are sustained not through formal education, but through annual practice, mentorship, and pride.

4.3.3.3. Best Practice - Vevčani Carnival

Vevčani Green is an award-winning initiative in the village of Vevčani, North Macedonia, promoting sustainable tourism, green entrepreneurship, and cultural heritage conservation through community-led action. Located in a mountainous UNESCO-recognized area with outstanding biodiversity and water resources, the initiative stands out for combining eco-tourism, environmental education, and the revitalization of local identity.

Why it matters:

Vevčani Green exemplifies Sustainable Cultural Tourism by activating local communities, enhancing ecological awareness, and creating experiential pathways for visitors to connect with both nature and living heritage. Its replicable model of micro-scale innovation, circular economy practices, and ecological integrity positions it as a rural sustainability benchmark for the Mediterranean and beyond.

> Best Practice: Vevčani Green, Vevčani, North Macedonia

The practice underlines that:

- Green infrastructure can be grassroots-led, affordable, and context-specific, challenging the idea that eco-tourism requires heavy investment.
- Environmental and cultural narratives are not separate: by aligning ecology with identity, destinations can elevate both.
- Digital storytelling and interpretation tools (e.g., QR codes, mobile trails) reduce physical infrastructure needs while enhancing visitor engagement.
- Green awards (like Green Destinations Top 100) help elevate small communities onto international platforms, supporting reputation and funding access.
- Replicable in scale and method, this model can guide regeneration in other vulnerable Mediterranean or Balkan locations.

4.4. Best practices collected by GEINNOVA

4.4.1. Stage 1 – Initial research

In the early phase of the project, local partners and stakeholders were engaged to identify successful models of sustainable rural and cultural tourism in the Pau and Bearn region. Initial research was coordinated through the regional tourism office, cultural associations, and representatives from local development agencies. The selected practices were assessed based on their ability to:

- Integrate cultural heritage and community participation
- Promote sustainability through local production and low-impact tourism
- Support local artisans, producers and rural revitalization
- Offer a replicable and scalable model adaptable to other European rural areas

4.4.2. Study visit

A study visit has been organized across Pau, Monein and nearby villages to observe and evaluate different best practices in action:
1. La Terrasse du Jurançon (Pau/Monein): An immersive wine and rural tourism initiative centered on the Jurançon wine region, promoting biodiversity, slow tourism, and local heritage.
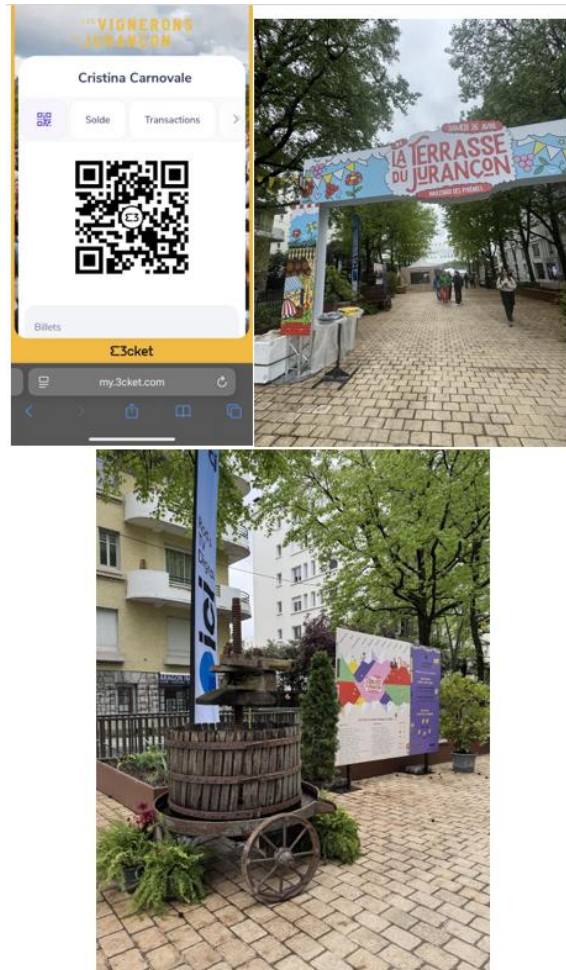
2. Exposition at La Chapelle de la Persévérance (Pau): A multidisciplinary visual arts exhibition integrating local artists, heritage preservation, and educational engagement.

3. Pau and Its Market (Pau and rural villages): A food and village tourism model leveraging local markets, traditional products, and culinary experiences.

The visits included participation in events, interviews with organizers and stakeholders, guided tastings and cultural workshops. These engagements allowed for in-depth understanding of the role of community, sustainability, and storytelling in creating authentic and economically viable tourism experiences.

4.4.3. Best practices

4.4.3.1. Best practice - Practice 1 – La Terrasse du Jurançon

La Terrasse du Jurançon is a regional best practice in sustainable wine tourism that combines local winemaking traditions with biodiversity education and cultural events. Key strength: Its community-led model emphasizes low-impact, high-value tourism that integrates local identity, sustainability, and economic revitalization.

> Best Practice: La Terrasse du Jurançon, France

The practice underlines that:

- Community involvement ensures long-term sustainability and local ownership
- Wine tourism can act as a catalyst for economic and cultural revival
- Storytelling and education deepen the tourist's connection to the region
- Seasonal and eco-friendly events promote slow tourism
- The model is transferable to other wine or agri-based regions across Europe

4.4.3.2. Best practice - Practice 2 – Exposition at La Chapelle de la Persévérance

This exhibition project repurposes a historic chapel into a dynamic space for contemporary and traditional visual arts, emphasizing cultural participation and preservation.
Key strength: The practice exemplifies how heritage sites can be revitalized through creative programming and sustainable cultural management.

> Best Practice: Exposition, Pau, France

The practice underlines that:

- Historic venues can be adapted as cultural hubs with minimal infrastructure
- Local artists and associations play a key role in maintaining cultural vibrancy
- Sustainability can be embedded in exhibition design and operations
- Community workshops foster intergenerational learning and cultural access
- The model can be scaled or adapted to other heritage buildings in rural towns

4.4.3.3. Best practice - Practice 3 – Pau and Its Market: A Model of Food and Village Tourism

This practice enhances local gastronomy and heritage by organizing food markets, festivals, and village tours that connect visitors to rural producers and culinary traditions.
Key strength: It fosters responsible tourism through local food systems, territorial branding and cultural immersion.

➢ Best Practice: [Food and Village Tourism, Pau, France]

The practice underlines that:

- Local food tourism strengthens regional identity and supports small producers
- Culinary heritage is a gateway to sustainable tourism and education
- Community markets promote inclusivity and local economic development
- Guided tastings and cooking workshops create engaging, multisensory experiences
- The model is replicable in any region with gastronomic heritage and rural tourism potential

4.5. Best practice collected by ARCES

4.5.1. Stage 1 – Initial research

The selection of the Best Practice was the result of a thorough research process conducted by the ARCES team. Multiple options were considered based on the diverse opportunities offered by the city of Split (Croatia) in the field of sustainable cultural tourism.
The analysis focused on identifying initiatives aligned with the principles of the CultMed Project, with particular attention to innovation, community involvement, and educational impact.
Among the potential stakeholders, **Culture Hub Croatia (CHC/Prostor)** emerged as the most suitable Best Practice which was selected by ARCES.
Despite the availability of detailed information on their official website, the team sought a deeper understanding by conducting an interview with Ms. Marina Batinić, one of the co-founders of CHC. Her direct insights and engagement as a key stakeholder provided valuable context and confirmed the initiative's alignment with the project's goals.

The decision to focus on Culture Hub Croatia was based on its strong integration of education, culture, and creativity to foster local development. This cultural Organisation promotes the transmission of knowledge, supports artistic practices, and contributes to the creation of innovative educational programs. These elements are fully consistent with the criteria outlined in the CultMed guidelines, making it a compelling example of sustainable cultural tourism in

practice.

4.5.2.   Study visit

The study visit took place at Culture Hub Croatia (CHC) in Split (Croatia) and was designed to offer participants direct experience with one of the most innovative cultural initiatives in the country. The visit included a range of activities organized by the hosting Organisation CHC, enabling the participant from ARCES (Mr. Alessandro Pernice, CultMed Project Manager) to observe how underused and neglected heritage spaces can be creatively repurposed for community engagement, artistic expression, and cultural education.

A central focus of the visit was the transformation of the spaces (e.g. Diocletian's area) used during summer for touristic purposes which were given to artists and citizens. Short-term intervention in existing spaces and their re-use, encouraging dialogue with the aim of involving the local community and good quality cooperation of all actors, ultimately enabled the creation of alternative spaces of culture and art which can be accessible for all people interested in culture (e.g. exhibitions, art crafts workshops, painting, etc.).

Through presentations and guided exploration of the space, the two CHC co-founders (*Marina Batinić and Jasmina Šarić)* showcased their methodology for activating heritage buildings by involving local artists, educators, and community members in co-creation processes. This approach not only preserves the architectural heritage but also revitalizes it through inclusive cultural programmes.

While the primary focus was on CHC/Prostor as the selected Best Practice, the visit also provided broader insights into the cultural ecosystem of Split and highlighted the role of grassroots initiatives in shaping inclusive urban cultural policies.

Mr. Alessandro Pernice recognized the relevant role this initiative plays in advancing *sustainable cultural tourism* in the country. During the face-to-face interview with the two co-founders, held on June 2025, two key dimensions of sustainable cultural tourism were highlighted:

- Inclusiveness – the initiative provides disadvantaged artists and artisans with free access to public spaces for performance and exhibition, thereby fostering equity and cultural participation;
- Financial sustainability – it supports artists not only through exposure but also by creating opportunities for income generation outside of peak tourist seasons.

Crucially, the initiative promotes sustainability by diversifying tourism offerings beyond the conventional, seasonal model. It makes thoughtful use of existing infrastructure—particularly heritage sites that often remain underutilized during the off-season—transforming them into dynamic cultural venues. By repurposing rather than building anew, the project minimizes environmental impact while maximizing cultural, social, and economic value. This resource-efficient approach reflects a broader commitment to responsible tourism development, one that prioritizes conservation, local engagement, and long-term stewardship of cultural assets.

4.5.3. Best practice - Culture Hub Croatia (Split) – "Voids 2020: Heritage Activation in the Off-Season"

This best practice showcases how Culture Hub Croatia (CHC) creatively reactivates underused heritage sites during the off-season, promoting cultural sustainable tourism and community ownership. Its key strength lies in transforming neglected spaces into cultural hubs that empower local stakeholders and foster inclusive, year-round engagement with heritage. It is dealing with the new ways of thinking about the space that can be sustainable and independent, open to all and that supports innovative projects with a positive impact on the community.

➢ Best Practice: Culture Hub Croatia, Split, Croatia

The practice underlines that:

- Reusing heritage sites during the low season supports **sustainable tourism** by diversifying tourism offers, reducing pressure during peak periods and increasing value in off-peak months.
- Local communities are not passive participants but co-creators: through initiatives like "Adopt the Space", they lead the cultural programming.
- Economic sustainability is ensured via hybrid funding (co-working, residencies, events) and reinvestment in local culture and education.
- The model is highly replicable and scalable, thanks to its principle-based, participatory approach adaptable to other contexts and communities. Indeed the practice was replicated in Dubrovnik (Croatia) and other towns.

4.6. Best practices from e-meetings with Sustainable Cultural Tourism stakeholders

4.6.1. Stage 1 – Initial research

To support the objectives of the CultMED project, a structured research process was undertaken to identify relevant experiences and best practices in Sustainable Cultural Tourism. This process included organizing a series of four thematic meetings with key stakeholders and experts from successful EU-funded projects. The key purpose of these sessions was (1) to gather transferable knowledge and insights to inform CultMED's development and (2) to assist in selection of best practices and their key for practitioners elements to be highlighted.

Speakers and stakeholders were selected through a combination of systematic desk research and targeted outreach. Databases and repositories of completed EU projects were reviewed to identify initiatives aligned with CultMED's thematic focus areas. Additionally, expert contacts were drawn from existing professional networks and project consortiums to ensure high-quality contributions. More, meetings with stakeholders in the scope of preparations of study visits were used to look for potential e-meetings relevant guests. Selection criteria included demonstrated impact in Sustainable Cultural Tourism, relevance to Sustainable Cultural Tourism development and especially the addressed within CultMED project areas - events, archeological sites, rural and village tourism and galleries and museum, openness to knowledge exchange, and geographical diversity.

The meetings also served a dissemination function, ensuring that the gathered insights were shared across the CultMED partnership and contributed to a collective understanding of effective practices and innovation in the field.

As a result 4 e-meetings were hold during which a number of best practices with relevance to future development of the CultMED project was identified.

4.6.2. SDGs heritage (Antroposervice Sas)

As part of the CultMed project's ongoing efforts to collect and assess good practices in Sustainable Cultural Tourism within the EU, an e-meeting was organised with Mr. Franco Diandrea, coordinator of the completed Creative Europe project "SDGs Heritage – Let's Create an SDGs Heritage", led by the Italian organisation Antroposervice Sas. The meeting was held on 11 April 2025 and brought together 12 CultMed partners for an open discussion aimed at gaining insights into the best practices, tools and frameworks developed within the SDGs Heritage project, particularly those with relevance to cultural sustainability.

The SDGs Heritage project sought to enhance the capacity of small cultural organisations across Europe by equipping them with strategies and frameworks to align their work with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This alignment was not only theoretical but also action-based, involving the design and delivery of creative events, capacity-building programmes and the development of practical guides. One of the most significant outputs of the project has been the SDGs Alignment Handbook, a methodological tool to support cultural actors in identifying, planning and evaluating sustainability-aligned initiatives. This handbook

is publicly accessible and offers structured guidance on SDG interpretation in the cultural field, stakeholder mapping, impact planning and assessment procedures. Its availability represents an important resource not only for Creative Europe beneficiaries but also for policymakers and practitioners aiming to bring cultural practices into harmony with sustainability objectives.

During the meeting, Mr. Diandrea described how the project was rooted in a bottom-up methodology. Each partner worked within its own community context to assess which SDGs were most relevant to the local reality and which actions could realistically contribute toward them. This resulted in the development of an SDG Relevance Matrix, which is a practical tool enabling stakeholders to prioritise specific goals in line with regional cultural strengths and challenges. Mr. Diandrea explained how this tool allowed for contextual specificity while preserving the universal relevance of the SDGs, especially in rural or post-industrial areas struggling with visibility and economic resilience.

Best Practices Highlighted During the E-Meeting

Among the key practices discussed, several stood out as models for community engagement and sustainability in cultural tourism:

1. Cultural Revitalisation in Under-Resourced Areas: The Ascoli Piceno Experience

In the town of Ascoli Piceno, Italy, a rural area which was deeply affected by the 2016 earthquakes, local initiatives combined literary heritage, community engagement and creative placemaking to enhance visibility and social cohesion. One of the key events was a multi-day creative training session, which used Dante Alighieri's Divine Comedy as a narrative device to introduce participants to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through emotionally engaging and culturally rooted storytelling. Instead of using abstract or generic categories, the SDGs were reorganized into five thematic clusters directly tied to cultural practice: *events and experiences design, heritage services, tourism and urban/rural reactivation, literature, publishing and libraries and museums and galleries.* This reinterpretation helped participants connect global sustainability objectives to their own regional realities and professional fields. The training culminated in a public performance involving classical music and youth-led artistic activities staged in outdoor public spaces. These events not only raised awareness of the SDGs but also *attracted visitors from other parts of Italy, including Rome,* revitalizing interest in an area previously excluded from mainstream tourism routes. The initiative demonstrated the potential of cultural expression to reanimate marginal or depopulated regions while fostering a deeper, community-led approach to sustainable development.

2. Environmental Governance and Green Teams: The Mazovia Institute of Culture

The Mazovia Institute of Culture in Warsaw, Poland, presented an established example of institutional sustainability, predating the SDGs Heritage project but highly aligned in spirit. The institute formed a Green Team and issued a Green Manifesto—a voluntary commitment to integrate environmental consciousness into all levels of operation. This included installing refillable water stations, creating a rest-oriented "science room," drafting green procurement guidelines for all departments, and renovating outdoor spaces into orchards used for community activities such as weekly swap markets.

The scale of implementation and the cultural framing used stood out, such as the internal narratives like the "plastic umbrella", which is a fictional cultural artifact, were employed to foster staff buy-in and organizational storytelling. While this model is more feasible for mid-sized institutions with stable funding, its underlying principles are adaptable to smaller organizations willing to invest creatively in internal culture change.

3. Art-Based Awareness Events Across Europe

Multiple examples of creative, low-budget events were shared, including:

- Cyprus: A beachside installation of sculptures made from recycled plastic, created by schoolchildren, used public space to raise awareness of SDG 14 (Life Below Water) and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption). The event was accompanied by poetry, dance and a fashion show promoting sustainable design.
- Spain: The community-based "New Ruralities" event in Dormaleo (Asturias) repurposed a former coal mine as a cultural hub. Activities included handicraft showcases, mural painting, and art workshops aimed at rural regeneration and SDG-linked dialogue.
- Greece: A theatrical performance titled From Oedipus to Ulysses served as a metaphorical journey from unsustainable to sustainable human and environmental practices. It was staged in the mountain village of Fyli, in conjunction with a trail-running event, and included demonstrations of local traditions by a women's association.
- Poland: A community festival organized in Warsaw merged sustainability education with dance, sports, and interactive exhibits, encouraging multi-generational engagement.

These events were characterized by their emotional appeal, their use of local cultural references, and their emphasis on inclusion and participation, making sustainability both visible and approachable.

Transferability and Key Takeaways for CultMed

The SDGs Heritage project provides a valuable repository of approaches, particularly for small and micro cultural organizations navigating the complexities of sustainability. However, the e-meeting emphasized that not all practices are universally transferable. Several transferability considerations emerged:

- Scale and Resources Matter: Initiatives like Green Teams and institutional frameworks are more easily implemented in mid-sized institutions with stable administrative structures (e.g. Mazovia Institute). For smaller players, similar ideas require strong internal motivation and low-cost creativity.
- Contextual Relevance is Key: The SDG Relevance Matrix developed by SDGs Heritage enabled partners to selectively align with the most applicable goals based on local cultural, economic, and social conditions. This adaptive model is particularly useful for CultMed's diverse partner contexts.
- Emotional Learning Has Lasting Impact: The use of cultural metaphors, storytelling, and participatory art forms was repeatedly cited as enhancing both awareness and memory

retention. This approach complements more cognitive or behavioral sustainability training strategies.

- Community Engagement Amplifies Reach: Events that leveraged school networks, local artisans or intergenerational participation were notably more impactful. These methods can be scaled or adapted based on available networks within CultMed partner regions.

4.6.3. TexTOUR (Fundación Santa María la Real del Patrimonio Histórico)

As part of the CultMed project's WP2 activities to identify innovative and transferable practices in Sustainable Cultural Tourism, an e-meeting was held on 10 April 2025 with Mr. Daniel Basulto, Project Coordinator of the TExTOUR Horizon 2020 project. The meeting brought together 12 CultMed partners. The discussion was led by Mr. Basulto on behalf of the Fundación Santa María la Real del Patrimonio Histórico, the Spanish lead partner of the project. The session focused on the key methodologies, tools and lessons learned from the TExTOUR project, which has worked across a diverse set of European and neighbouring regions to support community-led tourism development in culturally and economically marginalised areas.
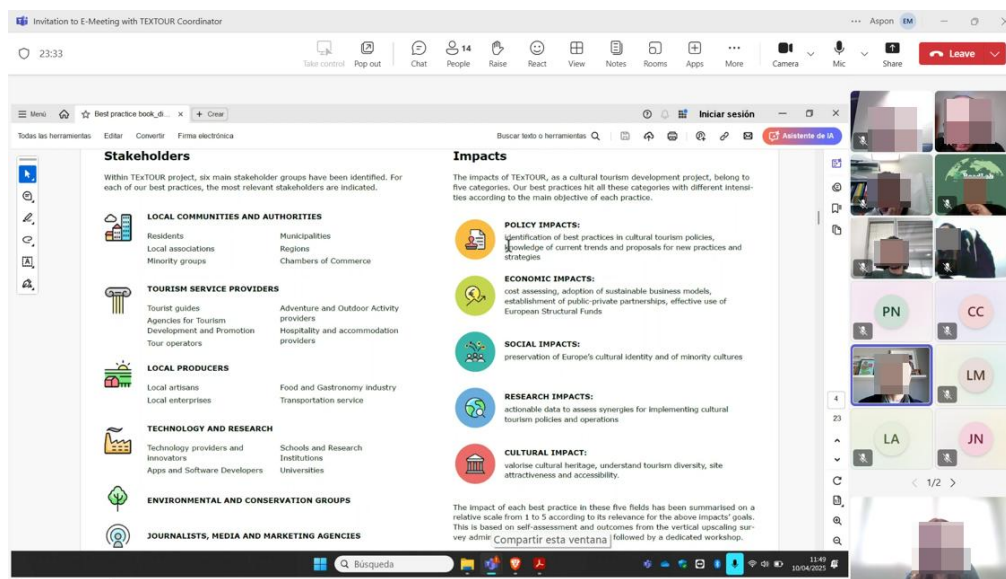

Figure 1: e-meeting with TexTOUR Coordinator

TExTOUR (Social Innovation and Technologies for sustainable growth through participative cultural TOURism) was funded by the European Union under the Horizon 2020 programme. The project aimed to improve the sustainability of cultural tourism by placing communities at the center of tourism planning and implementation.

To test and implement its strategies, TExTOUR selected eight pilot sites located in underrepresented or remote areas. These included Crespi D'Adda (Italy), Narva (Estonia),

Umgebindeland (Germany), Via Regia (Ukraine), Trebinje (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Tarnowskie Góry (Poland), Vale do Côa – Siega Verde (Portugal and Spain) and Anfeh – Fikardou (Lebanon and Cyprus). Each of these sites applied the project's co-creation methodology in its own way, adapting tools and processes to suit the local context.

The results and methodology of the project are captured in the TExTOUR Best Practices Book, which outlines the project's strategy for participatory tourism development and highlights transferable approaches drawn from its pilot regions. In addition to the original pilots, five scalable territories are already replicating the TExTOUR methodology, demonstrating its adaptability and ongoing relevance. These include Caretos na região de Trás-os-Montes (Portugal), Eco Museum Zagori (Greece), Itinerarium Rosaliae (Italy), Sabbioneta (Italy) and Menjez Village (Lebanon).

Best Practices Highlighted During the E-Meeting

Although the TExTOUR project involved eight diverse pilot sites, the examples below reflect the specific practices and locations highlighted during the e-meeting discussion with the project coordinator.

1. Community Co-Design and Local Ownership

In each pilot site, tourism strategies were developed through a co-design process that actively involved local residents, authorities and businesses. These stakeholders were not passive recipients but full participants, helping define cultural priorities, shape action plans and carry out the implementation. Mr. Basulto emphasised that this community-led structure made the initiatives more relevant, resilient and likely to continue beyond the project's funding period.

Heritage Ambassadors and Youth Engagement

A successful practice implemented in pilot sites such as Spain and Portugal was the training of local residents, particularly young people, to become heritage ambassadors. These individuals served as storytellers and cultural mediators, promoting their communities' heritage through guided tours, digital platforms and public events. This practice strengthened community identity and ensured that heritage promotion was authentic and locally grounded.

Culinary Heritage and Youth Education in Trebinje

In Trebinje, Bosnia and Herzegovina, TExTOUR partnered with a local culinary school to reconnect young people with their gastronomic heritage. Students were involved in researching, preserving and presenting traditional recipes, some of which had been forgotten. This initiative revitalised local food culture while also enhancing employability and attracting gastronomic tourism to the region.

Infrastructure and Capacity Building along the Via Regia Route

In the Rivne region of Ukraine, part of the historic Via Regia route, TExTOUR focused on enhancing lesser-known cultural heritage areas. The project aimed to upgrade poor public infrastructure, enhance and create new tourism services and train tourism professionals in the area. These efforts

were designed to strengthen transnational, regional and local cooperation to promote cultural tourism in less developed areas, fostering a sense of belonging to Europe.

Digital Accessibility and Remote Engagement in Fikardou
In Fikardou, Cyprus, a remote and traditional village, TExTOUR supported the development of a digital heritage platform (https://efikardou.eu/index.php). The platform offers virtual access to the site through interactive tours and digital storytelling. This allowed the village's cultural assets to reach new audiences, including those unable to visit physically and contributed to preserving the heritage in an accessible and modern format.

Transferability and Key Takeaways for CultMed:

- TExTOUR demonstrates that Sustainable Cultural Tourism strategies are most impactful when co-designed with the communities they serve, ensuring that local priorities, identities and capacities shape the direction and legacy of tourism development.
- The project provides a tested framework that can be adapted across diverse settings, including rural villages, post-industrial landscapes, cross-border routes and remote heritage sites, offering CultMed partners a flexible and inclusive model.
- The use of heritage ambassadors, particularly involving youth in storytelling and promotion, reinforces the importance of engaging younger generations in cultural transmission and tourism interpretation.
- Culinary heritage, as seen in Trebinje, shows how food can be both a cultural asset and an economic opportunity, supporting skills development and enriching the visitor experience.
- Digital platforms, such as the one implemented in Fikardou, enable remote access to heritage and promote inclusion for audiences who cannot visit physically, while also preserving and showcasing intangible heritage in engaging ways.
- The example of Via Regia highlights how tourism initiatives can be part of broader regional development strategies, including improvements to infrastructure, professional capacity-building and fostering a shared European identity through cultural routes.
- The fact that the TExTOUR methodology is already being replicated in five additional territories shows its adaptability and relevance.

4.6.4. CE4RT – Best practice for effective engagement of hospitality businesses in Sustainable Cultural Tourism

As part of the CultMED project's activities to gather and disseminate knowledge on Sustainable Cultural Tourism, an e-meeting was held in May 2025 with a representative from Danmar Computers, the Polish partner in the CE4RT – Circular Economy for Regenerative Tourism project. The session focused on sharing practical experiences and lessons learned from implementing circular and regenerative tourism approaches including rural and cultural tourism settings.

Best Practices Highlighted During the E-Meeting

1 - Capacity Building Through Tailored Support: CE4RT emphasizes the importance of offering practical, needs-based support to tourism SMEs, including funding, mentoring, and access to tools that help embed sustainability into daily operations.

2 - Storytelling as a Low-Barrier Entry Point: One of the key takeaways was the potential of well-crafted storytelling as a simple yet effective entry point into sustainable tourism. It enables tourism actors to convey authenticity and meaning while requiring minimal resources.

3 - Sustainability as a Multidimensional Process: It was stressed that sustainability is not a one-off action but a gradual, multi-layered transformation. Certifications can play a role, but only as part of a broader mindset shift towards long-term, systemic change.

Transferability and Key Takeaways for CultMED

1 - Communicating Value to Stakeholders: A major insight was the need to clearly communicate the benefits of sustainability to future users and local stakeholders. Helping them understand how these practices positively impact their business, community, and environment is critical for long-term adoption.

2 - Embedding Sustainability Across Operations: The CE4RT experience highlighted the importance of embedding sustainability principles across all dimensions of tourism activity—rather than treating them as stand-alone efforts. This calls for an integrated approach tailored to the specific realities and needs of each local context.

3 - Sustainability as a Journey, Not a Label: Certifications and labels are useful tools but should be framed as means to an end, not the end itself. The ultimate goal should be long-term transformation that supports regeneration, resilience, and cultural continuity.

5. General conclusions and recommendations

The CultMED project's transnational collection of best practices, supported by a range of activities—including research, focus groups, e-meetings, study trips, and stakeholder interactions - offers critical insights into the multifaceted nature of Sustainable Cultural Tourism. A central conclusion is that it is critical for Sustainable Cultural Tourism to address not only environmental concerns but also the cultural, social, and economic dimensions that underpin resilient and inclusive communities. Across all partner countries, the most effective initiatives are those that strike a careful balance between visitor engagement, cultural preservation, and tangible benefits for local populations - while also enjoying strong support from the local community.

Community participation emerges as a consistent success factor throughout the documented practices. Locally led and co-created tourism initiatives foster cultural authenticity, empower residents, and promote a more equitable distribution of tourism benefits. These efforts not only ensure long-term sustainability but also offer distinctive experiences that attract visitors and stimulate sustained interest over time - even if initial outreach and visibility are modest. The evidence shows that sustainability is rarely achieved through top-down planning alone; it requires participatory approaches grounded in local knowledge, needs, and aspirations.

Digital innovation is also proving transformative for Sustainable Cultural Tourism. Technologies such as virtual reality, mobile gamification, and smart infrastructure are enhancing visitor engagement, reducing environmental pressure, improving accessibility, and supporting off-season tourism. However, for these tools to have widespread impact, they must remain affordable, scalable, and adapted to the needs of rural and resource-limited areas.

Despite promising examples, awareness and understanding of Sustainable Cultural Tourism remain uneven. Many tourism stakeholders continue to associate sustainability narrowly with environmental practices, underestimating the importance of cultural integrity, social equity, and local empowerment. There is an urgent need to build a shared, comprehensive understanding of sustainability and its value within tourism ecosystems.

Equally important is the recognition that sustainable tourism strategies must be flexible and context-sensitive. One-size-fits-all models are unlikely to succeed in the culturally diverse and geographically varied landscapes of the Mediterranean and wider Europe. Best practices must be adaptable, scalable, and deeply rooted in local realities to be effective and sustainable over time.

Based on the multidimensional studies and knowledge exchange conducted during this phase of the CultMED project, the following key recommendations are proposed for stakeholders with the capacity to positively shape the tourism sector's transition toward a more sustainable and culturally meaningful model:

1. Promote Practical Training and Knowledge Exchange - Develop tailored capacity-building programs for tourism professionals, cultural managers, and community stakeholders, focusing on cultural sustainability, business development, and participatory planning.

2. Support Local-Led Tourism Initiatives - Encourage and fund grassroots initiatives that align with sustainability principles, promote shared ownership, and support cultural and creative

industries as key tourism drivers.

3. Facilitate Cross-Sector Collaboration - Strengthen partnerships between the tourism, culture, education, and environment sectors to design integrated, community-responsive sustainable tourism strategies.

4. Strengthen Monitoring and Impact Measurement - Introduce tools and guidelines for evaluating the cultural, social, and environmental impact of tourism practices. Transparent reporting helps refine approaches and build credibility.

5. Invest in Digital and Interpretive Infrastructure - Expand the use of digital tools to create immersive, accessible, and educational visitor experiences. Prioritize solutions that are affordable and adaptable to rural and small-scale contexts.

6. Use Certification as a Means, Not an End - Promote certification schemes as part of broader sustainability frameworks. Help businesses embed sustainability principles throughout their operations and storytelling, rather than treating certification as a final objective.

7. Redirect Tourism from Overcrowded Areas by Elevating Undervalued Destinations - Develop strategies that encourage tourism dispersal from high-traffic destinations to smaller, less-visited areas by identifying and promoting their unique cultural assets. Use tools like regional cultural mapping, storytelling campaigns, and integrated travel routes to highlight the richness of lesser-known places and foster balanced territorial development. Promote Visitor Education to Encourage More Conscious Travel. Encourage them to explore lesser-known places.

8. Respect and Empower Small-Scale Cultural Initiatives - Design support mechanisms that recognize the value of small, often informal cultural initiatives as key contributors to local identity and tourism diversity. Funding schemes, visibility platforms, and capacity-building programs should be accessible and flexible, allowing these initiatives to grow organically while maintaining their authenticity.

9. Diversify the Tourism Offer by Leveraging Everyday and Intangible Heritage - Broaden the definition of what constitutes "tourism-worthy" culture by including local languages, craft techniques, oral histories, culinary practices, and seasonal traditions. These often underappreciated resources can create meaningful, low-impact visitor experiences when framed as immersive, participatory, and educational encounters.

10. Align Destination Management with Regional Capacity and Identity - Ensure that destination strategies are based on realistic assessments of local infrastructure, community interest, and environmental carrying capacity. Avoid pressuring small communities to scale up beyond their means; instead, support them in shaping tourism in ways that respect their pace, values, and priorities.

Sustainable Cultural Tourism
on the Mediterranean

Annex 1. Figure 1. CultMED – Best Practices Review Template

Survey on Compliance of Best Practice Presentations in Sustainable Cultural Tourism
Introduction: This survey aims to assess whether the best practice presentations prepared by partners follow the instructions provided, including compliance with Sustainable Cultural Tourism principles, adherence to technical requirements, and alignment with established rules. Please fill one form for each practice assigned to you.

Section 1: General Information

2. Name of the Best Practice Presentation: _____

3. Partner Organization Responsible (Author): _____

4. Partner Organization Revising (Reviewers): _____

5. Country/Region: _____

6. Category of the practice (festivals, archeological sites, museums/galleries, villages, others – specify): _____

7. Please propose key words that describe the practice: _____

Section 2: Compliance with Sustainable Cultural Tourism Requirements

8. Does the practice clearly demonstrate a good practice providing added value for tourists and the local community?
    [ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] Partially (please specify: _____)

9. Does the best practice have cultural relevance?
    [ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] Partially (please specify: _____)

10. How well does the practice foster cultural preservation and respect?
    [ ] Very Well [ ] Well [ ] Moderately [ ] Poorly [ ] Not at all (please specify: _____)

11. Are environmental sustainability measures (e.g., waste reduction, resource conservation, upcycling) integrated?
    [ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] Partially (please specify: _____)

12. Is the initiative aligned with community objectives and involves local stakeholders in decision-making and/or relevant practices?
    [ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] Partially (please specify: _____)

13. Does the practice provide an immersive and/or educational experience for visitors?
    [ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] Partially (please specify: _____)

14. Are monitoring aspects addressed?
    [ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] Partially (please specify: _____)

15. Is the best practice transferable and scalable to other locations?
[ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] Partially (please specify: _____)

Section 3: Quality and Adherence to Technical and Content Requirements

13. Does the practice clearly describe the context and the practice? (is it easy to understand what the practice is about, its objectives and other relevant aspects)?

[ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] Partially (please specify missing elements/gaps/need or suggestions for improvements: _____)

14. Does the presentation cover all relevant aspects – introduction, practice overview, stakeholders, local benefits and impact, visitors benefits and impact, sustainability measures, community involvement, information regarding monitoring, evaluation and financing, as well as replicability and scalability, conclusions/key takeaways?

 (please refer to the contents not to the headings which should reflect the contents rather than the structure from the template)?

[ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] Partially (please specify gaps/needs for adjustments/clarification: _____)

15. Are the key aspects of the best practice (economic, cultural, social, environmental) well covered?
[ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] Partially (please specify gaps/needs or suggestions for improvements: _____)

16. Does the presentation provide clear, concise, and well-organized information?
[ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] Needs improvement (please specify: _____)

17. Are required visual elements (photos, graphs, maps) effectively used to support content?
[ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] Partially (please specify or provide any further suggestions: _____)

18. Is the language and terminology appropriate, ensuring accessibility and clarity?
[ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] Needs improvement (please specify: _____)

19. Are references and sources included and relevant?
[ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] Partially (please specify: _____)

Section 4: Compliance with Formatting and Accessibility Standards

19. Does the presentation use an appropriate font size, contrast, and structure for readability?
[ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] Needs improvement (please specify: _____)

20. Is the use of visuals and graphical elements effective, sufficient and not overwhelming?
[ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] Needs improvement (please specify: _____)

21. Does the presentation comply with accessibility recommendations (e.g. text organization, clarity, color contrast)?
[ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] Needs improvement (please specify: _____)

22. Does the presentation use a proper project template and include EU required elements?

[ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] Needs improvement (please specify: _____)

Section 5: Overall Evaluation and Recommendations

23. Based on your review, does the best practice presentation meet the required standards?
[ ] Fully compliant [ ] Partially compliant [ ] Not compliant
(please specify: _____)

24. What are the strongest aspects of this presentation?

24. What areas need improvement?

24. Additional comments or recommendations:

Thank You for Your Participation!