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Toward a Systemic Design Framework for Experiential Tourism Strategies in Rural Areas

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0. Abstract

This thesis explores the potential of experiential tourism as a strategic tool for sustainable development in rural European areas, within the systemic design approach. In response to the growing demand for authentic and meaningful travel experiences, the research investigates how rural territories can offer immersive, community-based tourism that fosters local identity, cultural heritage, and environmental sustainability. The study is developed within the framework of the SYSTOUR project, an Interreg Europe initiative coordinated by Politecnico di Torino. The research focuses in the final part, as part of an internship, on the Lea-Artibai region as the on-field case study.

Through a combination of literature review, data-driven analysis of 90 tourism experiences across six European regions, and participatory co-design workshops, the thesis identifies key challenges and opportunities in the experiential tourism sector. The research introduces a structured database and two systemic canvases to support policy-making and strategic planning and concludes with a set of guidelines for the sustainable development of walking routes and outdoor tourism in Lea-Artibai.

The findings highlight the importance of adopting a holistic and collaborative approach to tourism planning, where local communities, public institutions, and private stakeholders co-create experiences that generate long-term value for both visitors and residents. The thesis contributes to the advancement of systemic design methodologies in tourism planning and offers scalable tools for territorial regeneration through experiential tourism.

1. Introduction

In the last few decades, the tourism industry has undertaken significant transformations, going through a model of mass tourism, developed starting from the last century and focused on the second half of the 1900s, to models and types of sustainable tourism (Bramwell et al., 2017). In this context of change, tourist demand grew into the research of unique travel experiences, where they are the centre of the touristic offer, emphasising an authentic interaction with local culture, surroundings and communities. Rural tourism is one of the answers to this ongoing trend, as it is strongly linked to the context and territory where it takes place (Agapito et al., 2014). Activities are connected to nature, cultural heritage and local communities, which embody traditions and lifestyles often very different from those who arrive and visit the destination. The growing awareness and consciousness of environmental sustainability issues have led to the search for an approach that minimises negative impacts on the environment and the indigenous community, while at the same time bringing economic and cultural benefits, thus favouring balanced and inclusive economic development.

Despite the growing interest in sustainable rural tourism, many European regions still face significant challenges: demographic decline, infrastructural limitations, fragmented governance and a lack of integrated strategies for experiential design and promotion. The imbalance duality of "honeypot" areas, with pressuring overtourism and unsustainable development models, and rural regions that need to be revitalised, requires a shift in policy and planning aimed at redistributing tourism flows, attracting new targets with dedicated promotion and experiential offering. While the literature on sustainable tourism is expanding, remains a limited application of a systemic and holistic approach in facing the complex challenges of a rapidly changing sector.

Through systemic planning, the research aims to address these challenges with a holistic view, where complex systems and their interdependencies are addressed and understood. We see how these rural areas are not isolated entities but, on the contrary, relate to the surrounding environment, communities and social and cultural contexts. The goal of the thesis is to analyse the current experiential offering of the regions and provide practical tools and guidelines to be followed in the formalisation of new policies and strategies in the experiential tourism sector.

The application of the systemic design methodology to the process involves the analysis of the proposed territories and experiences, then highlighting the good practices identified through a co-design process with the project partners and stakeholders for an effective and sustainable promotion of the territory. Subsequently, the complete mapping and cataloguing of the experiences in a data-driven approach makes it possible to assess the effectiveness of the current proposal of the various territories in the experiential tourism sector. To implement systemic strategies and solutions, a structured and organised process, aimed at sustainable territorial transition.

This bodywork fits within the SYSTOUR (Systemic Approach for Sustainable Tourism Strategies in Rural Areas) case study, an Interreg European-funded program with the scientific coordination of Politecnico di Torino. A specific focus is placed on the Lea-Artibai region (Basque Country, Spain), selected as a case study for the on-field internship. This territory offers a concrete example of how systemic and experiential approaches can be applied, thanks to its strong local identity, collaborative governance and commitment to sustainable development. The project developed in the Spanish region is potentially scalable to the other SYSTOUR partners and similar rural areas all over Europe.

The thesis work is composed of nine chapters: the first part of the literature review, followed by the analysis of experiences, the third on the development of the co-design workshop and the focus on the case study of Lea-Artibai region and the last part, which includes systemic guidelines and future implications.

The literature review was carried out in two distinct phases: the first was of a general overview on the subject of sustainable tourism in rural areas exploring recent transformation in contemporary tourism, completed jointly with my colleague Roberta Butticè, while the second part of the research focused independently on the characterising theme of experiential tourism, examining both the challenges and opportunities related to the sustainable development of such regions.

The third chapter introduces the case study of the European project SYSTOUR, presenting the project's goal, methodology and the six partner regions, highlighting good practices and the use of complexity maps to visualise territorial dynamics. Chapter 4 is dedicated to the systemic design methodology used to conduct the research, explaining the analytical framework, the tools used and the qualitative and data-driven approach. In Chapter 5 the focus is on how tourism experiences are promoted and perceived through digital platforms. It includes the construction of a database of 90 mapped experiences, 15 for each country, that have been catalogued and then analysed according to pre-defined indicators. Chapter 6, details the participatory workshop held in Turin with SYSTOUR partners. It presents the design and application of two systemic canvases, one focused on policy and one on future vision, and synthesises the insight that emerged from the collaborative sessions. Chapter 7 presents the deliverables of the internship conducted at Leartibai Fundazioa, including interviews with local stakeholders and a focus on walking path, to apply systemic design to the development of touristic strategic planning and guidelines toward a more sustainable and regenerative experiential tourism. The last chapter summarises the main findings, reflects critically on the research process and outline recommendations for future research and policy development in the field of sustainable rural tourism. To conclude, the bibliography includes all the academic and institutional sources consulted to develop the thesis.

2. The tourism sector: from global to rural

The tourism industry has significantly evolved over the past centuries, moving from an exclusive activity reserved for the elites to a widespread phenomenon accessible even more to the people all over the world. Initially driven by cultural interests, leisure and the desire for discovery, tourism gradually shift to different forms and motivation for travel.

Among these, rural tourism emerged as the answer to an increasing demand for authentic, slow and meaningful experiences, offering visitors the opportunity to connect with local traditions, territories and communities.

This chapter traces a literature review of the development of sustainable rural tourism, from its origin to the rising necessities of sustainable practices and development, ending with the intersection with experiential tourism.

2.1 Origins and development of the sector

Tourism is now one of the most significant socio-economic phenomena globally, having experienced unprecedented growth in recent decades in terms of volume, geographical spread and variety of offerings. According to data from the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), international tourist arrivals grew from 25 million in 1950 to almost 1.5 billion in 2019, indicating a structural transformation that has affected almost every corner of the planet (OECD, 2022).

In her book *Overbooked: The Exploding Business of Travel and Tourism* (Becker, 2013), Elizabeth Becker traces the origins of modern tourism, revealing how, what we know today as the "tourism industry", is actually the result of a long evolution. The recognition of tourism as a serious business, spread across much of the economic fabric of today's society and generating $3 trillion a day, has not been, and still is not, easy. Its reputation as a frivolous and light-hearted activity has for decades prevented it from being studied and approached as a constantly growing phenomenon. It was not until 1974 that the UN agreed to set up an office in Madrid, attached to another institute, to deal with

tourism. The choice of city was not accidental: its distance from Geneva and the institutional centres of the United Nations denoted the lack of consideration given to the subject, but it was intended to signal a turning point in the democratisation process in Spain after Franco's authoritarian regime. It took another thirty years for it to be recognised as an independent agency. The dilemma that arose immediately was how to prove that tourism was an industry in its own right, as it was not considered a single, unified activity but rather a constellation of different industries (accommodation, transport, hospitality, tourist agencies) and was therefore not included in national economic indicators such as GDP.

While in ancient times travel was often linked to religious, commercial or educational reasons, it was not until the 19th century that the foundations of mass tourism were laid. Becker emphasises the crucial importance of technological innovation, such as the advent of railways, which made large-scale mobility possible.

After the Second World War, and in particular with the opening of borders and the end of the Cold War in 1989, the tourism industry experienced unprecedented growth, closely intertwined with the global economic boom. This exponential growth process was facilitated by a combination of structural and technological factors that gradually reduced barriers to tourism. In particular, we have seen an increase in disposable income among the middle classes, which has broadened the pool of potential travellers, while the liberalisation of the aviation market and the resulting reduction in transport costs have made even the most distant destinations more affordable. (Navarro et al., 2018).

An emblematic figure of this period was Arthur Frommer, author of the guidebook Europe on $5 a Day, which revolutionised the way people thought about travel. His practical and accessible guide shifted the focus from lengthy cultural descriptions to the need to facilitate logistics for the general public, helping to define tourism as a concrete economic sector based on mobility and direct experience. The emergence of chain hotels, the first travel agencies and cruise lines further structured a rapidly expanding sector. The guide also highlights how the perception of tourism became a symbol of modernity and progress: travelling was no longer just a recreational experience, but also a status symbol. At the same time, the spread of digital technologies, particularly online platforms for booking accommodation, transport and activities, has simplified travel planning, making the tourist experience more autonomous, customisable and immediate. These elements have transformed tourism into a widespread and cross-cutting activity, increasingly integrated into the consumption patterns of the global middle class (Navarro et al., 2018).

However, the author highlights how tourism has been an ambivalent phenomenon since its inception: on the one hand, a vehicle for knowledge, openness and economic growth; on the other, a source of environmental and social pressures on the territories visited.

This quantitative evolution has been accompanied by a profound qualitative transformation, which has changed the way tourism is enjoyed, the reasons behind travel and the effects generated in local contexts. The initial phase, characterised by elite, cultural and seasonal tourism, practised by a small segment of the population and mainly focused on European capitals and spa resorts, was followed, from the second half of the 20th century, by the emergence of mass tourism. The latter was characterised by the concentration of flows on a few iconic destinations, the standardisation of the offer (pre-packaged deals, short and intensive stays) and the high pressure exerted on natural resources, urban infrastructure and local communities. This dynamic contributed to the economic growth of the areas concerned, but also generated forms of saturation, loss of authenticity and growing conflicts between residents and visitors. Tourism, from a tool for cultural enhancement and openness, has gradually taken on the characteristics of mass consumption, characterised by extractive and short-term logic which, in many cases, has compromised its overall sustainability (Bramwell et al., 2017)

It is in this context that the concept of overtourism has emerged, both in literature and in international political agendas. This expression refers to a condition of imbalance in which the volume of visitors exceeds the social, cultural, economic and environmental carrying capacity of a given location. It is not, therefore, merely a question of quantity, but of a systemic disharmony between tourism and its host environment. The carrying capacity of a territory is not limited to physical or environmental constraints but also includes more complex aspects such as the social acceptance of tourist flows by the resident population, the resilience of local economies and the consistency between tourist demand and territorial identity (Milano et al., 2019).

The manifestations of overtourism are manifold and occur on different levels, with profound effects on the spatial, economic, social and cultural spheres of destinations. Among the most obvious consequences is the saturation of public spaces, which translates into urban congestion, overcrowding of sites of historical and cultural interest, and pressure on local infrastructure, which is often not designed to accommodate a continuous and massive flow of tourists. This overload leads to a deterioration of the tourist experience itself, with a reduction in the quality perceived by visitors and a lower emotional impact of the places.

Cities such as Barcelona, Venice and Amsterdam are emblematic cases of overtourism management. In Barcelona, the city council has introduced the Pla Especial Urbanístic d'Allotjaments Turístics (PEUAT), a special urban plan to regulate the introduction of tourist accommodation facilities, such as hotels, hostels, tourist apartments and shared accommodation. The plan divides the city into different areas with specific rules for each, limiting or prohibiting new licences in areas with high tourist density in order to ensure a balance between tourist supply and residents' quality of life. (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2022)

From 2025, Venice has introduced a booking and payment system for access to the historic city, known as the "Access Contribution". Day visitors must book their entry and pay a fee that varies depending on how far in advance they book, with the aim of managing tourist flows and reducing crowding. In addition, stricter regulations have been implemented for access by large cruise ships, limiting their entry into the historic centre to protect the environment and cultural heritage. (Venice visit Pass, 2025)

The capital of the Netherlands, Amsterdam, has taken an active role in curbing tourist flows in recent years. The administration has stated its goal of not exceeding 20 million overnight stays per year, establishing a new measure in 2024 that prohibits the construction of new hotels. The latter may only be authorised if an existing hotel is closed or converted, provided that the total number of beds does not increase and that the new structure has better characteristics in terms of environmental sustainability and integration with the urban context. (Deiana, 2024) (Van Campenhout, 2024)

With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the global dynamics has been significantly altered, the tourism sector has reached a sudden and unexpected stop, which caused the rest of the seven-year growth of the industry within weeks. (Nistor & Dezsi, 2022) The crisis, in addition to bringing an economic loss, prompted a shift in urban populations towards rural areas and a change in traveller behaviours and preferences, favouring, outdoor and sometimes isolated spaces, fewer crowds and authentic experiences (Marasco et al., 2022). According to the UNWTO World Tourism Barometer (UN Tourism, 2024), in 2023, international tourism rebounded to approximately 88% of pre-pandemic levels, with international tourism arrivals rates around 1.3 billion, indicating a strong recovery trajectory. This resurgence was particularly evident in regions like Europe and the Middle East, where arrivals approached or even exceeded 2019 figures. (UNWTO, 2023)

Domestic and national tourism during the pandemic has gained renewed relevance as a crucial turning point for local economies in the period of restricted international mobility. Due to safety reasons and restrictions, travellers' choices shifted to nearby, accessible and familiar destinations,

reshaping the demand around proximity and flexibility. OECD report (2022) highlighted the growing interest in local and regional experiences, repositioning rural areas as attractive and accessible destinations.

Scholars noted that communities and countries that has previously over-relied on international tourism were the most affected by the restrictions (Boto-García & Mayor, 2022). The inbound flows have been fluctuating, following the norms of each country, providing the need to recalibrate the strategies, balancing the recovery of inbound markets, aiming at a more resilient domestic tourism sector (Efthimiou, 2025). The post-pandemic scenario led the way to innovative, sustainable and adaptable approaches, capable of conveying both local and global audience, witnessing an acceleration in the adoption of digital tools and platforms, enabling contactless services, enhancing personalisation and facilitating the promotion of sustainable practices (Polukhina et al., 2021).

2.3. The need for sustainable development

Tourism, one of the most dynamic and globalised economic sectors, is a powerful driver of economic and cultural growth. However, its development cannot ignore the limited nature of the natural and cultural resources on which it depends. The quality of tourism and its ability to last over time depend on the responsible management of resources, with the aim of keeping them available for future generations.

The concept of **sustainable development**, first enshrined in the **Brundtland Report** of 1987 (United Nations General Assembly, 1987), defines development that *meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own*. This vision gained global recognition at the **Rio Earth Summit** in 1992, where fundamental documents such as the **Rio Declaration** (United Nations, 1992) and **Agenda 21** (United Nations, 1992) were drawn up, focusing on the promotion of balanced and environmentally friendly economic development.

A further step forward was taken at the Third Conference on Environment and Development in Johannesburg in 2002. On this occasion, the concept of sustainability was expanded to include three main dimensions:

1. **Economic**: the ability of businesses to generate prosperity without damaging the ecosystem or impoverishing the natural heritage.

2. **Social**: a commitment to social equity and respect for human rights, both for current and future generations.

3. **Environmental:** responsibility for the natural heritage, promoting its conservation and integrity.

This systemic view is particularly relevant to the tourism sector, which is heavily dependent on the environment and local communities. Tourism cannot be seen solely as an opportunity for economic growth, but also as a potential factor in environmental degradation and the loss of cultural identity.

In 1995, during the **First World Conference on Sustainable Tourism** held in Lanzarote, the concept of sustainable tourism was introduced and the **Charter for Sustainable Tourism** (World Tourism Organization, 1995) was drafted. This document recognised tourism as an important tool for socio-economic development but also emphasised the need to mitigate its negative impacts through a comprehensive and responsible approach.
Subsequently, in 1996, the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), in collaboration with other organisations, promoted the Agenda 21 for the Travel & Tourism Industry. This action plan aimed to develop tourism growth strategies that maximised economic and environmental benefits while minimising damage.

Finally, the 1997 Berlin International Conference on Biodiversity and Tourism (Environment Ministers on Biodiversity and Tourism Delegation, 1997) consolidated the link between tourism and environmental sustainability. The Berlin Declaration highlighted that a healthy environment and a well-preserved landscape are essential elements for sustainable tourism development. It also urged industry operators to adopt sustainable practices that respect the social, cultural, environmental and economic dimensions of tourism.

The evolution of these paradigms reflects a growing awareness that, in order to be competitive and long-lasting, tourism must develop in harmony with the environment and the communities in which it operates. This approach is particularly crucial in rural areas, where sustainable tourism is a privileged way of enhancing often neglected resources while ensuring their protection.

Building upon these principles, the concepts of responsible tourism, ecotourism and regenerative tourism are evolving the travel-industry, driven by changing traveller expectations and growing awareness of environmental and social impacts.

2.4. Sustainable tourism in rural areas

The literature review was carried out in two distinct phases: the first was of a general overview on the subject of sustainable tourism in rural areas, completed jointly with the colleague Roberta Butticè, and the second part of the research focused independently on the characterising theme of experiential tourism. The general research was conducted through the consultation of multiple databases (DOAJ, Science Direct, SCOPUS), which initially led to the selection of 14 articles, with the subsequent decision to focus primarily on SCOPUS for the in-depth analysis using the same string for all the database, ALL (*sustainab* tourism" AND "rural area*").

Through various search strings, the articles present on the database were selected by applying the filters listed in Table 1 and catalogued in a spreadsheet shown below in Table 2.

Countries involved in the study	European
Language	English, Italian
Year of publication	From 2012
Access to the document	Open Access
Subject area	Social Sciences, Environmental Science, Business Management and Accounting, Agricultural and Biological Sciences, Economics Econometrics and Finance

Table 1: article selection criteria (personal elaboration)

LITERATURE REVIEW ARTICLES				
Variable	**Data content**	**Data value**		**Source**
		Data Type	**Levels**	
Title	Full title of the article	Text	The planning of tourism on rural area: the stakeholders' perceptions of the boticas municipality (northeastern portugal), ...	*compiler*
Author(s)	Author(s) of the article (if two or more, separate with a comma)	Text	Evelina Maziliauske, ...	*compiler*

Year	Year of publication of the article	Date	2023, ...	*compiler*
Source type	Type of publication	Text	Article review	*compiler*
Source	Title of the source	Text	European Journal of Tourism Research	*compiler*
Database	Database where the article was consulted	Text	SCOPUS, DOAJ, Science Direct	*compiler*
Keywords	Keywords that describe the text, as reported in the database	Text	Sustainable development; cultural heritage; ...	*compiler*
Objective	Brief description of the main objective of the text	Text	The main objective of the article is to highlight the challenges of tourism in rural areas, ...	*compiler*
Rural area(s)	Geographical area that is taken into consideration in the search	Text	Andalusia, Lecce, ...	*compiler*
Key points	Summary of the main concepts covered in bullet points	Text	- Point 01 - Point 02 - ...	*compiler*
DOI	DOI code	Text	10.1016/J.ANNALS.2018.09.008, ...	*compiler*
Link	Link to the database where the article was consulted or downloaded	Text	https://www.mendeley.com/reference-manager/reader/464fc36e-165f-38a1-b577-3142d22b54a9/0cc5818c-7c38-da4f-18ab-fc116dd5bb5b, ...	*compiler*

Table 2: Metadata of the article database (personal elaboration)

To further skim the results obtained, relevance to the research field was assessed by reading the title, abstract and keywords.

The review process began with the definition of targeted search strings, were applied on Scopus and produced a total of 2092 results, subsequently screened into a selection of 24 final documents. (Figure 1). The unsuccessful string, *ALL ('sustainab* tourism' AND 'rural area*') AND ('systemic approach' OR 'systemic design'),* generated 18 results but none was relevant or new compared to previous research, we can therefore deduce that the term 'systemic' is still little used and recognised in the papers compared to the more general 'holistic'.
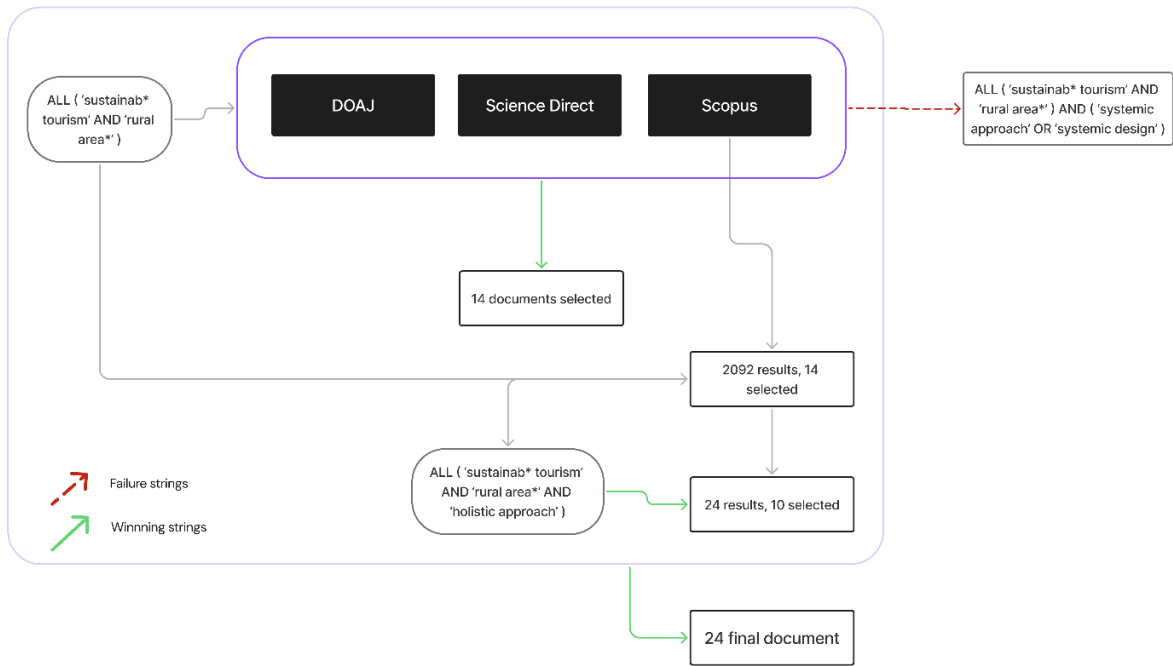
Figure 1: process of articles selection (personal elaboration)

With the help of AI based tools all the keywords used to categorise the articles were clustered into six given thematic areas (Figure 2):

- Sustainable tourism and innovation: 28,2%
- Sustainable development and strategies for rural areas: 21,4%
- Analysis, methodologies and tools: 16,5%
- Cultural and natural heritage: 11,7%
- Rural economy and economic sustainability: 11,7%
- Infrastructure, mobility and spaces: 10,7%

The results confirm the adherence to the research topic with key elements as the four pillars of sustainability, rural areas and tools and strategies to implements new projects in the field.
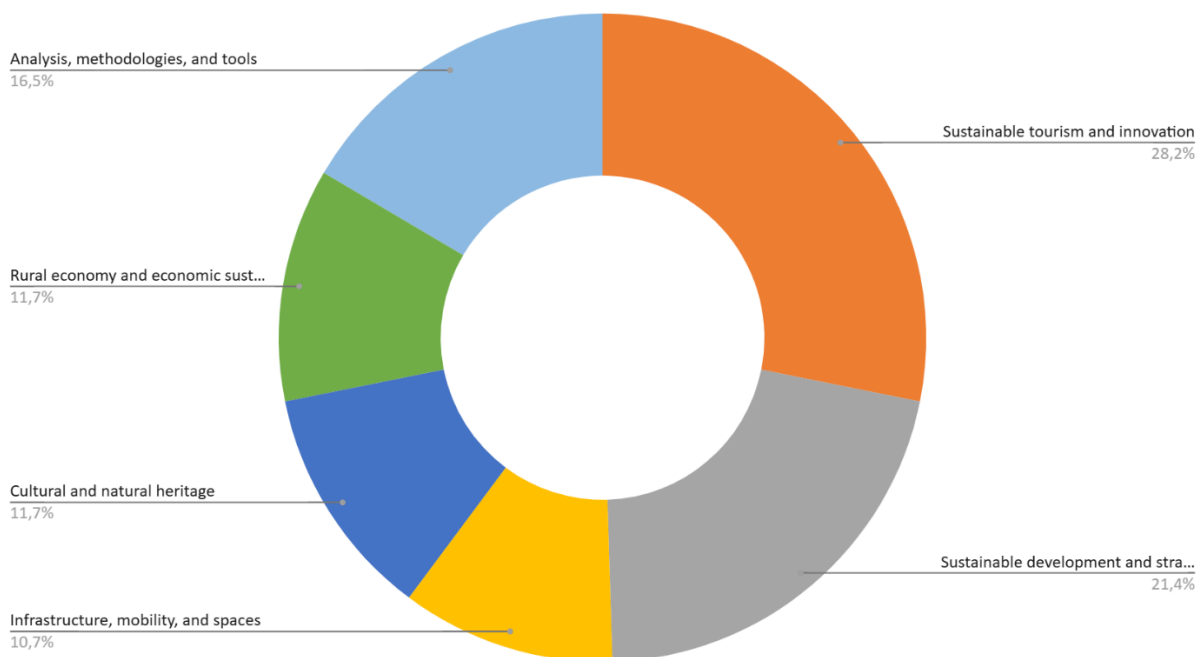
Keywords thematic area

Figure 2: graph representing keywords thematic areas (personal elaboration)

The timeline distribution of the selected papers (Figure 3) shows a clear increase over the years, from 2012-2015, when the topic of sustainability in the tourism sector began to gain relevance and accelerating in the post-pandemic period, during which publications significantly expanded in response to the evolving needs of tourists and the industry to explore new, more conscious ways of travelling.
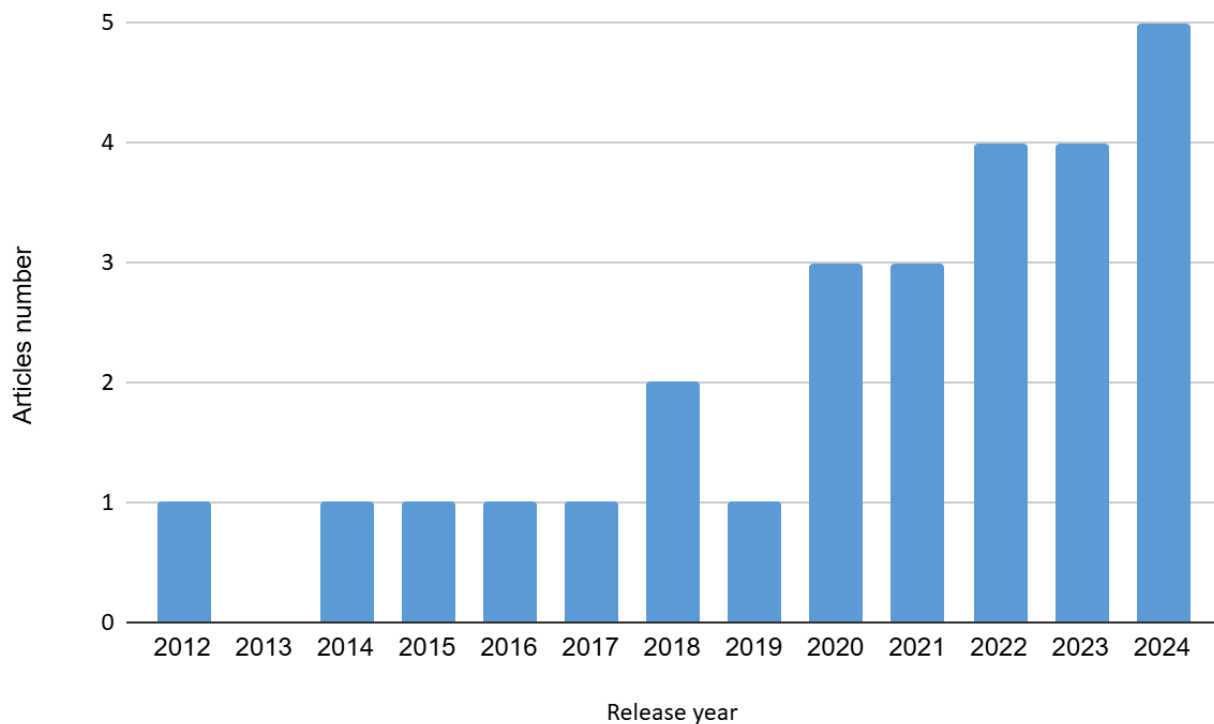
Figure 3: distribution through the years of the paper articles, personal elaboration

The term "rural areas" refers to non-urbanised geographical areas that can be found, for example, in inland areas, the countryside, coastal or mountainous landscapes, with small and medium-sized settlements and a low population density. These areas maintain a predominantly agricultural society, with traditional social structures, and are strongly connected to the natural environment in which they are immersed. (Agapito et al., 2014). This is the context in which the concept of rural tourism fits in, which the UNWTO defines as "a type of tourism activity where the visitor's experience is linked to a wide variety of experiences, generally related to nature, agriculture and a simple and traditional lifestyle" (Ladu et al., 2023). The characteristic elements of this type of tourism are linked to the territory, the economy and the local community. At the heart of rural tourism is the importance of the local community. Citizens are resilient bearers of the culture and traditions of a territory and of its present and future development. Sustainable tourism involves the active participation of the population in the planning, management and control of tourist activities, in order to gain the economic, social and cultural benefits. The article Community Role in Heritage Management and Sustainable Tourism Development: Case Study of the Danube Region in Serbia (TERZIĆ et al., 2014) analyses the role of local communities in cultural heritage management and sustainable tourism development in the Danube region of Serbia. The Serbian region is rich in natural and cultural resources (with over 50 natural resources and 658 cultural resources registered). However, the study highlights how heritage management in Serbia is highly centralised, meaning that local communities play a marginalised role in decision-making processes related to heritage conservation and tourism development. The aim is to analyse the level of involvement in heritage management, where perception is very low despite respondents believing that the area is very attractive for tourism. From this example, we can deduce that careful planning and co-design of experiences can benefit not only the area and its citizens, but also the authorities. When included in the processes, people will feel part of the system and will be more inclined to preserve and enhance it. In this sense, the authorities have a duty towards their citizens to keep them informed about tourism developments, changes and news in the area. Cultural tourism benefits the local community, not only because it offers an authentic experience, but also because it allows the preservation of traditions and folklore that could easily be

lost. By recounting and bringing their daily lives to life, traditions are passed on in an exchange that enriches both sides. (Constanta, n.d.) The tourism sector also offers employment opportunities, working on various aspects of the tourist offer, especially for categories most affected by unemployment and who are often forced to move to more attractive places from a job perspective, such as young people and women. Providing opportunities to work in the area creates value for the community and the local economy and must be supported through incentives and investments, not only economic but also in training and entrepreneurship. (Maziliauske, 2024). One perspective that warrants further analysis is the concept of gender transformative tourism (Стойка, 2023) , which challenges traditional gender roles and expectations, creating opportunities to transform relationships and promote more inclusive attitudes for both tourists and host communities. In particular, reference is made to the experience of women and how they can empower themselves through a process of empowerment, i.e. improving their decision-making skills, increasing their participation in leadership roles and income generation, particularly by working in the tourism sector, ensuring equal access to opportunities and resources. In this way, it is possible to improve the protection and promotion of women's rights in tourist destinations, promoting a safe and respectful environment.

We can also see how the tourism sector cuts across other industries, such as hospitality, food and beverage, agriculture and services, and as such, it is essential that relationships are created between all parts of this system so that they can support each other in offering a coherent and comprehensive service. The economic aspect must focus on adding value to the area, bringing new value and retaining what is already there. The importance of accessing dedicated funding and encouraging entrepreneurship in the area is a fundamental issue for the economic sustainability of a fragile area. The literature on the subject, through the article by (Maziliauske, 2024), emphasises how local SMEs are very often the agents of territorial development and innovation, using socio-cultural skills and traditions as a resource for competition in the market. SMEs are key components of the local supply chain as they very often use local and regional resources, reinvigorating the mechanisms of competition, specialisation, productivity and social function. The peculiarity of these companies is that they can be highly dependent on their owners and managers, who are often strongly linked to the community and fellow citizens, but who may lack the necessary skills to innovate and have a low propensity to take risks. One solution that has been proposed, and which is in line with systemic thinking, is to share resources and know-how between companies in order to cope with global market competition, attracting from outside those skills and figures that may be lacking, thereby increasing employment and the attractiveness of the area. When SMEs specialise in offering tourist products, we often see that they are run by locals, who offer a higher quality, authentic experience that promotes the area and increases employment opportunities, particularly for women and young people. Industrial and economic development often leads to the creation of infrastructure that benefits the entire community, helping to connect inland and more remote areas to metropolitan areas or larger centres. Smart mobility in rural areas can support and be supported by rural tourism, as the demand for mobility services, for example to access tourist sites, increases, the supply can be implemented, with the consequent need to maintain roads, bridges and all transport infrastructure for the benefit of all. In respect of the territory, sustainable modes of transport must be promoted, such as public transport services, shared mobility and soft mobility, such as cycling. (Hussain et al., 2023). Accessibility to remote locations must also be guaranteed for all types of users. Preserving the territory and natural environments therefore becomes a specific intention, which must be supported by actions and investments aimed at maintaining and improving the quality of the offer, in order to make it possible to enjoy these in the future. The protection of the cultural and landscape heritage of these areas is essential, as it is one of the aspects that most characterises a rural area and makes it attractive to travellers. It is therefore necessary to protect the cultural, architectural and natural or landscape heritage through museums, national parks and protected areas, which guarantee accessible enjoyment for all but also their conservation. In this regard, the role of local and tourist

administrative bodies is clear, as they have a duty to support sustainable development proposals and projects in the sector with effective laws and policies, keeping this high on the political agenda and providing incentives for training, employment and entrepreneurship. Through the enhancement of digitalisation and new technologies, innovation should be developed in order to increase efficiency and productivity, streamlining operations and adapting to the needs of tourists. In this way, it is possible to design effective tools to monitor the policies implemented in order to assess their effectiveness, understand any issues and facilitate decision-making processes, in a context of training policymakers to understand complex data and use it consciously in the decision-making process.

The challenges that can therefore be outlined in a rural tourism context are undoubtedly linked to the complexity of these areas. Depopulation (Bahamonde-Rodriguez et al., 2024) of rural areas is one of the main problems, particularly because it is mainly young people who are leaving, in a context of demographic decline and an ageing population. Trying to counter this trend by generating new job opportunities in this sector is certainly the solution to pursue. Seasonality is also a limiting factor in the business, as very profitable periods alternate with low seasons when regular income cannot be guaranteed for entrepreneurs and also for employees who may not be able to work. Seasonality also affects the management of tourist flows throughout the year, with peaks during the high season. Planning for sustainability also means addressing this issue by managing and designing diverse experiences that can be enjoyed all year round. As for the cultural aspect, the problem of the loss of traditions or their distortion in favour of a watered-down experience for tourists must be carefully monitored.

2.4 Experiential tourism

The specific research on experiential tourism was carried out with similar process as the general one, focused on SCOPUS database only, changing the strings and adapting them to the specific themes, as outlined in Figure 4.
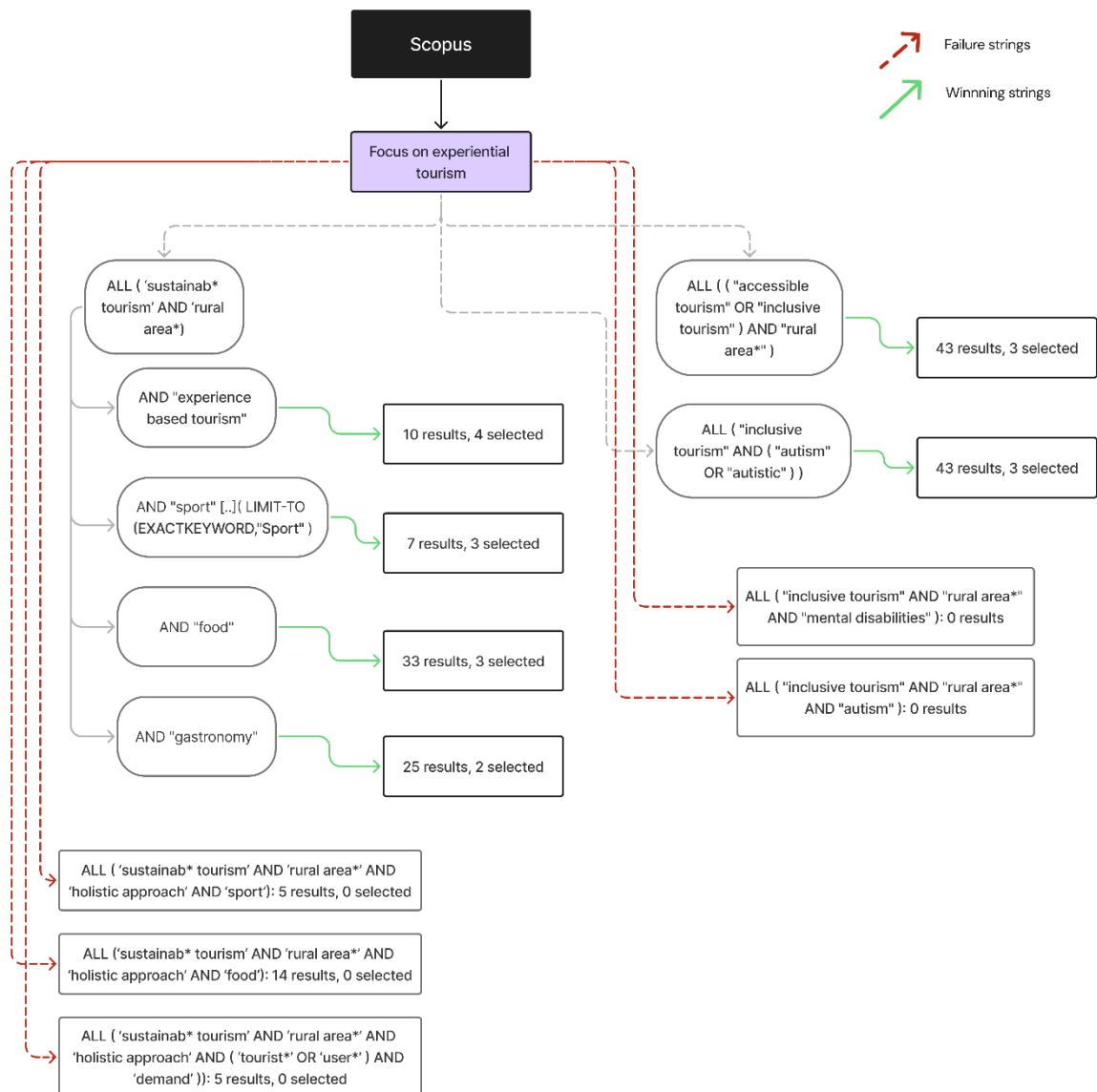
Figure 4: process of article selection on focus theme of experiential design (personal elaboration)

In recent years, experiential tourism has gained increasing visibility and importance within the sector and among travellers. This paradigm shifts from traditional tourism, where tourists simply visited places and attractions passively, to experiential tourism, where visitors' experiences and emotions are pivotal and stem from encounters with local culture and communities. (Fiorenza, 2024).

The core idea is that travellers become active participants, engaging in activities that enrich their understanding of the local culture. These experiences can be varied, including practical activities like craft workshops, cooking classes, participating in folk activities, discovering local art and crafts, or even stay in the home of locals. Experiential tourism encourages the exploration of a territory's more intimate and often hidden aspects, such as places of memory, small historical corners, traditions and local customs. Authentic encounters with locals are the focal point.
Experiential tourism has, therefore, emphasised the pursuit of deep and meaningful connections, contributing to individual well-being and strengthening local economies. It promotes a more authentic

and sustainable intercultural understanding. It is seen as a way to deepen one's knowledge of a place directly and profoundly. (Fiorenza, 2024)

This idea builds upon the valuable study of Joseph & Gilmore (1998) theory about experience economy. The article argues that economy evolve through four stages, commodities, goods, services and experiences, the level that companies has reached nowadays. It is not enough anymore to design services and products, like touristic products, that lack of the emotional and experiential part. The article continues identifying the four "experience realms" (Figure 5) defined by the costumer' mode of participation, active vs passive, and in relation to the environment, absorption vs immersion. The strengths of this "tool" lies in its ability to be declined in different scenarios and fields, such as tourism. As an example, in experiential tourism the *Entertainment* (passive-absorption) area, the proposed activities could be related to guided tours, tastings, folk evenings display, while in the *Educational* (active-absorption) could involve the learning experience to be the main attraction, like in hands-on workshops, winemaking labs, pottery courses and so on. The third realm consider the duality passive participation-immersion as *Esthetic* where presence and beauty contemplation are the end goal themselves, as in immersion in silent nature, birdwatching, stargazing. The *Escapist* realm is the most relevant in experiential tourism as it provides travellers an immersive experience requiring at the same time active participation, some examples could be an experience to be a shepherd for a day, or a multi-day experience in a local rural community to fully envelop in rural rhythms and traditions.
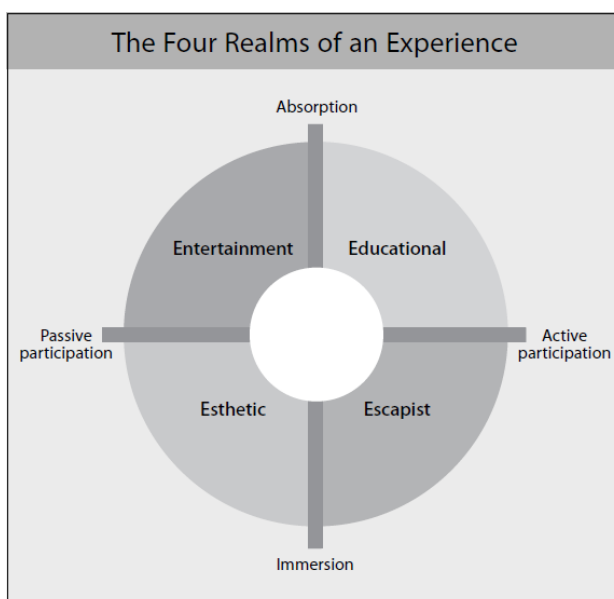

Figure 5: The Four Realms of an Experience (source: Joseph & Gilmore (1998))

In designing the experiences, co-creation approaches could be the competitive advantage, as they are co-produced by providers and participants. This could include, choice of the activities, their intensity or depts, flexible itineraries and real-time feedback loops to adjust the experience to the expectation or ability of visitors. (Joseph & Gilmore, 1998) The involvement in the process enhances the value perceived to customers, feeling a part of the system and emotionally resonating more creating a deeper emotional connection. In fact, the ultimate deliverable should be the lasting memory of the experience and the places, people, emotions one's came in contact with.

This form of tourism goes beyond standard tourist itineraries and focus on creating authentic experiences that are emotionally and intellectually engaging for travellers. It values the quality of the time spent during the vacation into an opportunity for personal or spiritual learning and discovery. A key aspect of experiential tourism is its sensory and subjective nature, positioning the tourist as the protagonist of both internal and external exploration. It encourages complete immersion in the surrounding environment through all five senses: sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste. These sensory inputs are processed by the brain and filtered through personal experiences, emotions and memories, making each trip a unique and deeply subjective experience. For instance, the sight of a landscape or farmer, the sound of nature, the touch of natural elements, or the taste and smell of local food can evoke emotions and contribute to a deeper connection with the environment and oneself. The sensory dimension is considered key to understanding, planning and marketing tourist experiences. (Agapito et al., 2014).

Experiential tourism responds to a growing demand for authentic and personalised experiences. The driving question for the traveller shifts from "where do I want to go?" to "what experience do I want to live?"(Belliggiano et al., 2021).

While often associated with slow tourism (Albanese, 2013), experiential tourism is distinct in its focus on direct and significant interaction with the experience, culture, history and traditions of a place, allowing for authentic and personal experiences that evoke unique emotions. Slow tourism, by comparison, is more oriented towards environmental and cultural sustainability and a slower pace to discover a destination.

Other distinctive features could be the embodiment in agricultural practices and everyday life, micro-scale community interaction an environmental sustainability, as low impact footprint. The article "Walking along the sheeptrack" (Belliggiano et al., 2021) proposes the experiential journey through the Italian rural setting, proposing the concepts of ecomuseums and tratturi roads. Focusing on ecomuseums, particularly those centred on pastoralism and transhumance, the practice of moving livestock between seasons (winter and summer) to find better pastures conditions, the authors argue that experiential tourism, is not merely a form of leisure, but if grounded in authentic participatory and transformative practices, it can foster both cultural preservation and socio-economic revitalisation. These places emerge as key facilitators of this model, as territorial interpretation centres who coordinate educational, economic and cultural initiatives, delivering a convincing storytelling that facilitates knowledge transfer and co-creation of value and meaning between hosts and guests. When considering also challenges and risks, the paper's implications for top-down development strategies that prioritise infrastructure over intangible heritage and community involvement are significant because authors stressed the idea that without a shared goal and agenda to achieve it and the active involvement of local stakeholders, the risk of failing to deliver meaningful experiences projects become increasingly real.

Nature and rural setting are the main peculiarities of the experiential tourism landscape, developing through the years established forms of experiential way of living travels. **Agritourism** and farm-based tourism propose a perspective on rural daily life through rural accommodation, meals and participation in farm activities, like animal care or harvesting (Santucci, 2013). This kind of activities connect visitors, especially the ones from cities or urban context, to a natural and hard-working emotional journey. Many rural regions then focus on **ecotourism** or nature-based, a practice oriented to the preservation of the natural heritage to raise awareness on sustainable practices and challenges related to the environment. By promoting low-impact activities, like wildlife guided tours, hiking in natural settings, birdwatching, ecotourism tries to raise awareness on a way of responsible travels to natural areas that conserves the environment, involves interpretation and education on the subject and respect and sustains local people and their well-being (Huang et al., 2023). David Brower (1912-2000), environmental activist and first executive director of the Sierra Club, is a pioneer and founding father of modern environmentalism. His view on experiential tourism focuses on active conservation that springs from the connection with nature. What he defines as "quiet places" and "wild places" are personal revelations places that must generate an internal transformation in the ones that truly engage in the experience and in the territory in which they are immersed (Russell, 1994).

Continuing with nature-driven experiences, **adventure and recreational tourism** is another key typology in rural areas. Activities such as hiking, biking, skiing, canoeing and horseback riding, are high-engaging activities and experiential by core, preferred for their low environmental impact and for showcasing landscapes (Cvijanovic et al., 2025). Slow mobility options, like walking and cycling paths, are seen as immersive experiences that not only allow to engage in physical activity, but above all they are a way to connect deeply with the places one pass through and the people and communities, thereby enriching the experience (Marasco et al., 2022).

Gastronomic tourism, food tourism or culinary tourism are interchangeable terms to refer to the type of tourism where food is either the primary reason for travel or a significant motivational factor (Nistor & Dezsi, 2022). The activities and experiences that are included in this category are visits to food producers, food festivals, gastronomic routes restaurants and specific location where food tasting or specialty products, recipes and cuisine are a driver for local traditions expression (Figueiredo et al., 2021). Tourists become active participants of the experience through workshops, cooking classes, tasting activities to interpret the environment with different senses and tools. The motivations to engage in such activities are several, cultural to discover a destination through its flavours, recipes and local heritage, social by bringing together people through food, socialising and shared dining experiences, prestige and status if taking into account exclusive food experiences and even health reason, like health issues or for wellness reasons.(Nistor & Dezsi, 2022).

Rural areas also abound in intangible and tangible heritage, giving the opportunity to the rise of **cultural tourism**, where visitors choose to focus their holiday on discovering the cultural aspects of a destination, such as architecture and historical sites, museums, UNESCO sites and experiences related to folklore and traditions. For instance, ethnographic villages offer workshops on local crafts, performances of folk music or dance, allowing tourist to engage with tradition again in active and participatory way (Adie et al., 2025).

Despite the wide potential of experiential tourism in rural areas, several challenges and risks must be acknowledged. Commodification of cultural and natural resources, is one of the main concerns as traditions, landscapes an even community life risk being simplified or adapted to meet tourists' expectations, leading to a potential loss of authenticity (COŞKUN, 2021). Another concern is the pressure that tourism development could put on local ecosystems, infrastructures in fragile rural context, highlighting the inequalities between insiders and outsiders.

These critical aspects underline the importance of designing tourism experiences in a way that benefits local communities while offering meaningful experiences to visitors. Among the key issues that require further attention is the question of accessibility for people with different skills. On this issue, in rural and experiential tourism in particular, satisfactory results were not reported. The gap in recorded literature denotes a lack of dedicated research on the subject in the tourism sector and particularly in rural tourism. However, ensuring equal opportunities for all individuals to enjoy leisure and travel is fundamental. The ultimate goal is for all destinations to be for all, not a subsection of separate experiences and sites that promote dignity and independence for all visitors (Rebelo et al., 2022). Ensuring accessibility is a matter of social justice and sustainability, aligning with international conventions like the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN General assembly, 2017) which contains key reference to accessible tourism (Article 30) and the commitment of signatory states to adopt appropriate measures to guarantee people with disabilities full access to sporting, recreational and tourism facilities. A second step to take into consideration is the UN Flagship Report on Disability and Development (United Nations, 2019) which, in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, underlines the inclusion of persons with disabilities in global development goals. The Department of Economics and Social Affairs (United Nations, 2019) indicates that there are more than 1 billion people affected by disabilities that goes up to 2 billions people that has the role of caregiver (relatives, spouses, children), representing one third of the global population directly living daily with disabilities, and the number is increasing due to the aging population. These data are particularly relevant considering the size of the market share that is constantly overlooked, remaining underestimated with a lack of services and facilities, as well as discriminatory policies and practices in the tourism industry (Benedetto, 2023). Furthermore, the economic value of promoting accessible tourism products is significant, as often people with disabilities and older individuals travel with family and friends, meaning larger groups and if the feedback is positive that will lead to increased demand, leading to enhance destination's

competitiveness, by broadening its appeal and the wider market mentioned above (Rebelo et al., 2022) .

The target group that is took into consideration in the actual academic literature, predominantly focus on people with physical disabilities, like mobility, hearing, vision impairment, while smaller research is conducted also on sensory, cognitive and intellectual disabilities (Benedetto, 2023). Neurodivergent individuals (like autistic) also are often underrepresented. Families and caregivers belong to this framework as directly related to users but also being a target themselves, as they face complex and stressful situations (Jepson et al., 2024).

When travelling, these users can face different challenges. In rural contexts, these can be accentuated as it may be less of a priority to think about designated actions. For example, architectural and physical barriers, indoor and outdoor, like lack of ramps, narrow doors, inaccessible toilet and difficult terrains make it difficult to navigate the destination, as well as communication barriers, in not clear signage, interpreters or access to information and clear instructions on routes, public transports, cultural brochure and fundamental services (Benedetto, 2023). Communication is a challenge especially for neurodivergent people, that could face some difficulties in the interaction with others. A lot of cases have been recorded of incompetence, lack of knowledge on the subject and also discrimination among tourism professionals and local communities, in meeting their needs (Sanchez-Padilla et al., 2024).

In the effort of addressing the issues, some articles propose new initiatives and practices implementation, like the "Tourisme & Handicap" brand certification in wine regions of France, that guarantee higher standards in inclusive and accessible hosting (Benedetto, 2023), or government and European policies and funds to promote accessible tourism, with special regards for small municipalities and internal areas in some cases, like the Italian Unified Fund for the inclusion of people with disabilities (Ministero per le disabilità, 2024), which allocates €50 million to the Regions to finance interventions targeted on the promotion of full accessibility to tourist services.
Other efforts regarding touristic experiences include infrastructure adaptation (e.g. wider doors, higher tables in wineries, ramps, accessible public transport) and the development of digital tools and platforms to enhance a personalised experience using AI and VR tools.

Looking ahead, accessible tourism represents not only a social responsibility but also an opportunity for rural areas to differentiate their offer and attract a wider, more diverse audience, leveraging on the strengths of internal areas of quieter and immersive environments. Effective collaboration among private, public stakeholders and local communities and specialised training for tourism staff are crucial for truly inclusive tourism. In the end there's the need to shift to a more holistic approach, acknowledging the heterogeneity of disabilities and tailoring services to specific needs, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach (Jepson et al., 2024).

3. SYSTOUR project

3.1 What is SYSTOUR? An introduction

The SYSTOUR project represents an innovative initiative in the field of sustainable tourism, characterised by the application of systemic design principles to address the challenges and enhance the potential of Europe's rural areas. The project, whose full name is *Systemic approach for sustainable tourism strategies in rural areas*, was presented within the Interreg Europe programme by the Department of Architecture and Design (DAD) of the Polytechnic of Turin and was selected as a winning proposal.

Interreg Europe is in fact a European programme that helps local and regional governments to improve their public policies. Through the exchange of experience, knowledge and good practice, it encourages the cross-fertilisation of ideas between partners from all over Europe. The programme offers two main tools: interregional cooperation projects such as SYSTOUR, which bring organisations together to work on common challenges, and the policy learning platform, which provides ongoing support, resources and networking opportunities for those working in regional policy. (Interreg Europe, s.d.)

SYSTOUR officially started with the kick-off meeting on 29 March 2023 and will be developed over four years. The transnational dimension of the project is highlighted by the involvement, in addition to the Politecnico di Torino as Lead Partner, of 6 other public and private partners and more than 90 stakeholders from six different European countries: Italy, Spain, France, Hungary, Poland and Finland. This wide network of collaboration reflects the desire to create a truly integrated and shared approach to the challenges of sustainable tourism in Europe. (Systemic Design Lab, s.d.)

As Professor Silvia Barbero, SYSTOUR's scientific coordinator, emphasises*: "The territorial diversities that these countries present should be valorised because Europe's richness lies in being able to promote individual peculiarities by looking at common sustainability objectives, sharing tools, good practices of political innovation and experiences among the different regions of Europe. Policies for growth and employment in the tourism sector, together with territorial cooperation, represent the two basic elements of the project. In this framework of political-territorial innovation, the Politecnico di Torino is at the forefront for the sustainable transition not only of production processes, but also of territorial value chains that produce a considerable induced effect in the different contexts of Europe".* (Systemic Design Lab, s.d.)

A growing priority in European policies has been the need to redistribute tourist flows from "honeypot" areas (overcrowded destinations) to lesser-known but equally potential-rich destinations. This issue has received increasing political and media attention in recent years, especially in response to the phenomena of overtourism that have affected several European locations.

Through the methodology of systemic design, the project aims to have a positive impact on the quality of life of citizens in rural areas, striking a balance and connecting different areas through **mobility**, **digitalization** and **unique experiences**. Aiming at the sustainable development of the territories, the plan is to increase the **employment opportunities** in "green" fields, the **empowerment** in depopulated areas and the **economic benefits** and investments of companies on the territory.

As of April 2025, the six holistic diagnoses were developed, 30 good practices were identified, evaluated through a peer review process and reviewed during the 6 field study visits to the regions involved, two online events (Sustainability, mobility, and digitalisation in tourism; Innovative Business Investments, Green Jobs and Challenges in Revitalizing Depopulated Areas) and one last Interregional

Workshop held in Turin were valid learning opportunities. Each region presents its selected Good Practices during the dedicated study visits, creating moments for discussion and collaboration among partners. (Aulisio, et al., 2024) These steps are included in the first part of the Interregional project or Core Phase, illustrated in Figure 6 that has an estimated duration of three years and focus on the cross-contamination of ideas and interregional learning. These exchanges serve as the foundation for designing regional political roadmaps that would be implemented in the Action Plans. After the Core phase, there will be the Follow Up Phase to monitor the effects of the policies improvement, a process of one year with additional three months, if required. (Interreg Europe, 2024)
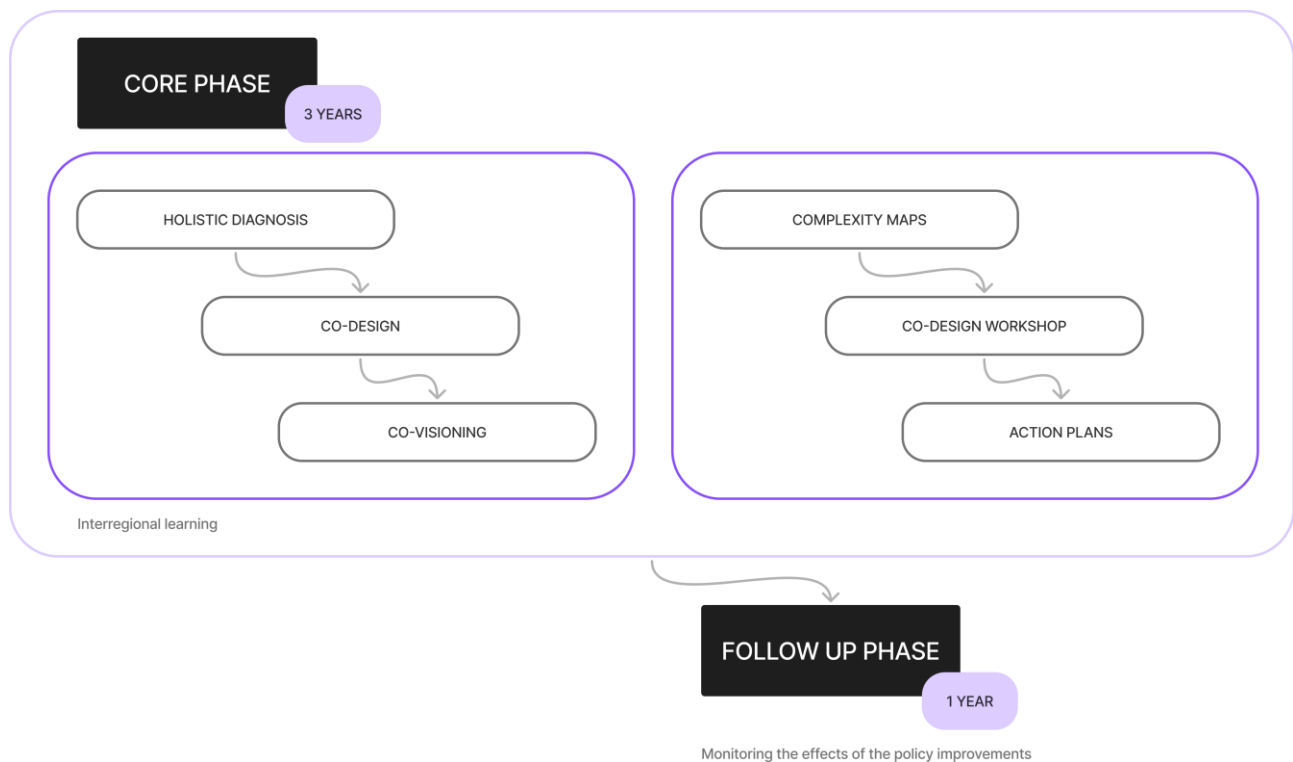

Figure 6: SYSTOUR project phases (source: Interreg Europe)

Based on the insights gathered, each region will then develop its own strategic roadmap, informed by complexity maps produced by the research team. The SYSTOUR project places strong emphasis on sustainable development, employment opportunities within tourism, and territorial cooperation. These elements will guide the creation of strategies that respect the authenticity of the territories, enhance their resilience, and promote tourism that is more inclusive and sustainable. (Systemic Design Lab, s.d.)

3.2 The rural areas involved in in the project

As mentioned before, SYSTOUR works in six distinct geographical areas in Italy, Spain, France, Finland, Poland, and Hungary. These nations are geographically evenly distributed across Europe reflecting one of the main conditions of European Union-funded projects: the representation of regions from various areas of Europe: South, North, Central, Eastern and Western.

These regions were selected following a thorough scouting procedure conducted via a European platform with the objective of guaranteeing a balanced geographic distribution. Aside from geographical reasons, selection of individual regions was also guided by existing networks of association that were commonly developed in earlier projects. (Systemic Design Lab, 2024)

After being scouted each partner select its stakeholders to include in the project, who coordinate internally within their own region to support themselves for example in the selection of Good Practices

and the implementation of actions and new polices. The diagram below shows all the stakeholders in each country grouped by Key Stakeholders (KS), Contextual Stakeholders (CS), Subordinate stakeholders (SS) and marginal stakeholders (MS). (Figure 7)
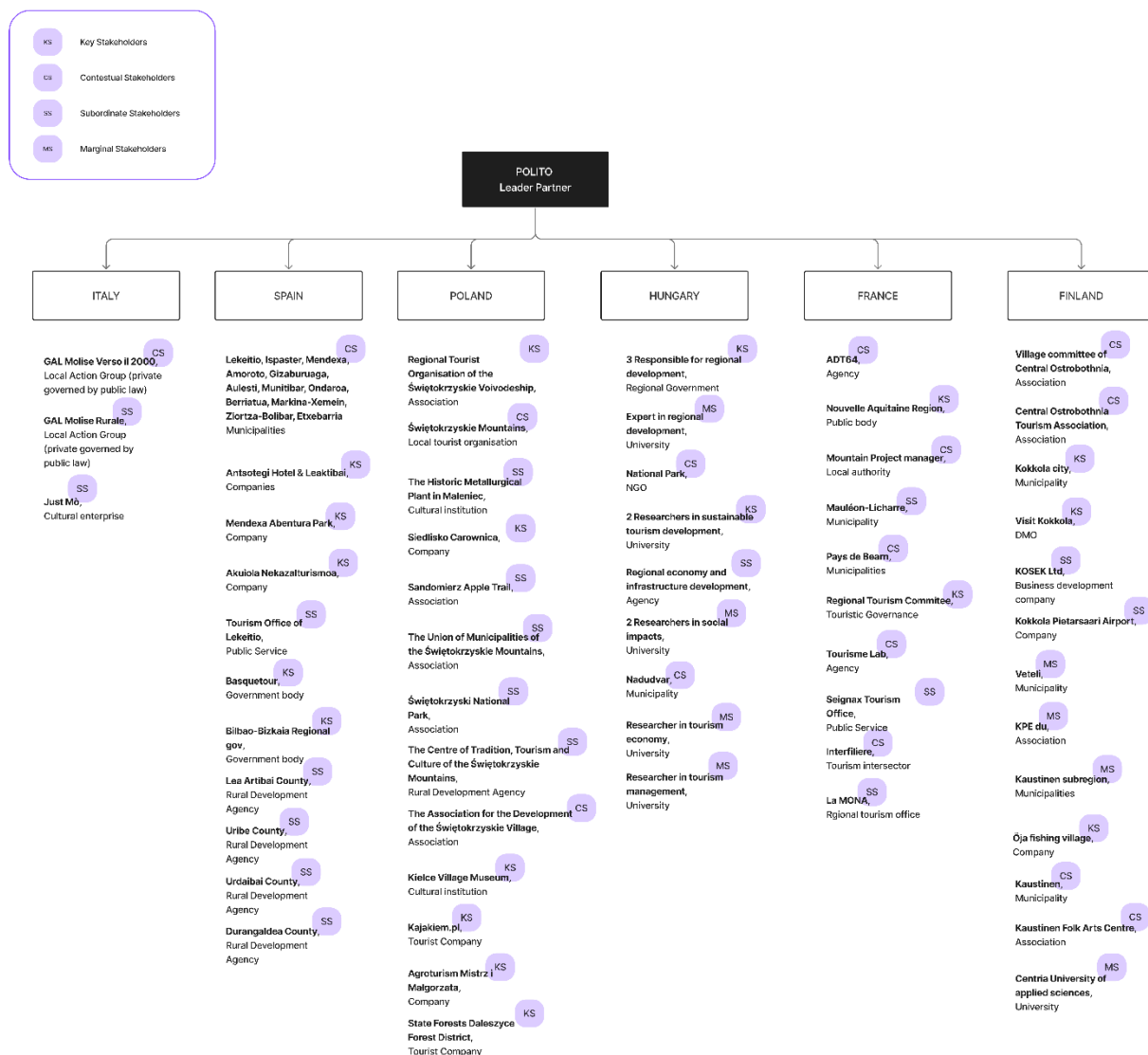
Legend

- KS — Key Stakeholders
- CS — Contestual Stakeholders
- SS — Suborditate Stakeholders
- MS — Marginal Stakeholders

POLITO — Leader Partner

ITALY
- GAL Molise Verso il 2000, Local Action Group (private governed by public law) — CS
- GAL Molise Rurale, Local Action Group (private governed by public law) — SS
- Just Mò, Cultural enterprise — SS

SPAIN
- Lekeitio, Ispaster, Mendexa, Amoroto, Gizaburuaga, Aulesti, Munitibar, Ondaroa, Berriatua, Markina-Xemein, Ziortza-Bolibar, Etxebarria, Municipalities — CS
- Antsotegi Hotel & Leaktibai, Companies — KS
- Mendexa Abentura Park, Company — KS
- Akuiola Nekazalturismoa, Company — KS
- Tourism Office of Lekeitio, Public Service — SS
- Basquetour, Government body — KS
- Bilbao-Bizkaia Regional gov, Government body — KS
- Lea Artibai County, Rural Development Agency — SS
- Uribe County, Rural Development Agency — SS
- Urdaibai County, Rural Development Agency — SS
- Durangaldea County, Rural Development Agency — SS

POLAND
- Regional Tourist Organisation of the Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship, Association — KS
- Świętokrzyskie Mountains, Local tourist organisation — CS
- The Historic Metallurgical Plant in Maleniec, Cultural institution — SS
- Siedlisko Carownica, Company — KS
- Sandomierz Apple Trail, Association — SS
- The Union of Municipalities of the Świętokrzyskie Mountains, Association — SS
- Świętokrzyski National Park, Association — SS
- The Centre of Tradition, Tourism and Culture of the Świętokrzyskie Mountains, Rural Development Agency — SS
- The Association for the Development of the Świętokrzyskie Village, Association — CS
- Kielce Village Museum, Cultural institution — KS
- Kajakiem.pl, Tourist Company — KS
- Agroturism Mistrz i Malgorzata, Company — KS
- State Forests Daleszyce Forest District, Tourist Company — KS

HUNGARY
- 3 Responsible for regional development, Regional Government — KS
- Expert in regional development, University — MS
- National Park, NGO — CS
- 2 Researchers in sustainable tourism development, University — KS
- Regional economy and infrastructure development, Agency — SS
- 2 Researchers in social impacts, University — MS
- Nadudvar, Municipality — CS
- Researcher in tourism economy, University — MS
- Researcher in tourism management, University — MS

FRANCE
- ADT64, Agency — CS
- Nouvelle Aquitaine Region, Public body — KS
- Mountain Project manager, Local authority — KS
- Mauléon-Licharre, Municipality — SS
- Pays de Beam, Municipalities — CS
- Regional Tourism Commitee, Touristic Governance — KS
- Tourisme Lab, Agency — CS
- Seignax Tourism Office, Public Service — SS
- Interfiliere, Tourism intersector — MS
- La MONA, Rgional tourism office — MS

FINLAND
- Village committee of Central Ostrobothnia, Association — CS
- Central Ostrobothnia Tourism Association, Association — CS
- Kokkola city, Municipality — KS
- Visit Kokkola, DMO — KS
- KOSEK Ltd, Business development company — SS
- Kokkola Pietarsaari Airport, Company — SS
- Veteli, Municipality — MS
- KPE du, Association — MS
- Kaustinen subregion, Municipalities — MS
- Öja fishing village, Company — KS
- Kaustinen, Municipality — CS
- Kaustinen Folk Arts Centre, Association — CS
- Centria University of applied sciences, University — MS

Figure 7: SYSTOUR partners' stakeholders (source: SYSTOUR)

Molise, Italy

Molise region is situated in southern Italy and it represents one of the country's least populous and least known territories. Officially established in 1963 following its separation from Abruzzo, Molise is characterised by a diverse landscape of mountains, hills and sea. Administratively divided into two provinces, Campobasso and Isernia, the region is characterized by a low population density, an aging demographic and a fragile socio-economic structure. Despite these challenges, Molise preserves a rich tapestry of cultural heritage, natural landscapes, including protected areas like the Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise National Park and traditional legacy, evidenced also by a small Croatian-speaking community. The economy is predominantly third sector-oriented, though agriculture still plays a significant role. Molise's culinary traditions, including local products such as cavatelli pasta and Tintilia wine, are deeply rooted in its identity. Often overlooked by mass tourism, this region maintains

a strong sense of authenticity and an appropriate choice for responsible tourism practices. (Systemic Design Lab, 2024)

Lea-Artibai, Spain

Lea-Artibai is a comarca located in the Basque Country in the province of Biscay, northern-east Spain, known for its cultural cohesion and strong regional identity. It has a relatively small population, yet its density is higher than the national average. The demographic profile is characterised by an ageing population, although recent years has seen positive migration trends, with more people moving into the area than leaving. The economy of the comarca is primarily service based, with retail, accommodation transportation and healthcare representing key sectors. The secondary sector, particularly construction, also play a significant role, while agriculture and fishing continue to sustain the rural fabric of the region. Tourism is considered an important driver of the economic growth and cultural preservation, reinforcing the community's commitment to sustainable development. Culturally, Lea-Artibai maintains a strong link to Basque traditions, offering a rich blend of historical heritage, natural landscapes and gastronomic excellence. The local cuisine, influenced by the nearby Cantabrian Sea, features fish plates, with other regional fresh produce, like tomatoes, peppers and potatoes complemented by traditional wine Txakoli. Although the Covid-19 pandemic led to a temporary decline in tourist arrivals, the region has shown resilience, with coastal towns like Lekeitio and Ondarroa attracting the majority of visitors. In conclusion, Lea-Artibai remains a territory with significant potential for sustainable tourism growth. (Systemic Design Lab, 2024)

Świętokrzyskie, Poland

The Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship, situated in south-central Poland, is one of the country's smallest administrative regions, both in terms of area and population. Established following the 1999 administrative reform, it encompasses a varied landscaper that includes among the oldest mountains in Europe, the Świętokrzyskie (Holy Cross) Mountains and fertile river valleys, between the Vistula and Pilica rivers. The capital, Kielce, is the principal urban centre. Despite its rich historical and natural heritafe, including UNESCO listed reserves and centuries-old traditions, the region faces significant demographic challenges, such as population decline and aging. Economically, the Świętokrzyskie region is dominated by the third sector, though agriculture and small-scale manufacturing remain important. Tourism is modest but diverse, oriented around natural parks, historical sites and agritourism. The region's cultural identity reflects a mosaic of influences from various ethnic groups over the centuries. Local gastronomy remains closely tied to rural traditions. Considering all factors, this voivodeship hold substantial development potential, but it also confronts itself with structural socio-economic vulnerabilities. (Systemic Design Lab, 2024)

Hajdú-Bihar, Hungary

The County of Hajdú-Bihar is positioned in eastern Hungary bordering Romania and is one of the key administrative regions of the country. Its capital, Debrecen, serves as a major urban and cultural centre. Geographically, the county is part of the Great Hungarian Plain, characterized by flat, fertile lands shaped over millennia. The region includes notable features such as the Hortobágy National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, renowned for its biodiversity and cultural landscapes. Demographically, Hajdú-Bihar faces significant challenges (as the other regions involved in the project), including low population density outside Debrecen, a slightly aging population and substantial emigration trends. Hajdú-Bihar's educational infrastructure is relatively strong, with

Debrecen hosting a vibrant university population. The economy is predominantly focused on the third sector, although agriculture still plays an important role. The region also demonstrates an emerging focus on sustainable tourism, capitalizing on its thermal waters, natural reserves and rural heritage. Despite this potential, currently the activities remain moderate, with tourism intensity and diversity still below EU averages. Overall, Hajdú-Bihar County presents considerable natural and cultural richness, its sustainable development will depend on its ability to address the challenges highlighted. (Systemic Design Lab, 2024)

Nouvelle-Aquitaine, France

Nouvelle-Aquitaine, located in southwestern France, is the largest administrative region of the country, covering approximately 84,000 square kilometres and comprising twelve departments. Officially established in 2016 through the merger of Aquitaine, Limousin, and Poitou-Charentes, the region encompasses a variety of landscapes, from Atlantic coastal zones to inland rural and mountainous areas. Bordeaux is the region's capital and major centre for economic, educational and cultural activities. The region is characterised by a relatively low population density compared to the national average and an aging demographic structure. Economically, nouvelle-Aquitaine is dominated by the service sector, though agriculture, forestry, viticulture and tourism continue to represent important components of the regional economy. The area possesses a rich cultural and gastronomic heritage, with strong influences from Basque traditions and Atlantic coastal culture. Climatic trends reveal a gradual warming over recent decades, consistent with broader patterns observed across continental Europe. Tourism is a significant sector, particularly concentrated along the coastline and in the Pyrenees, with a strong seasonal variation. Strategies aimed at promoting sustainable tourism and diversifying tourist flows are currently being developed.

Central Ostrobothnia, Finland

Located in western Finland, Central Ostrobothnia is a sparsely populated region covering less the 3% of the national territory. The region capital, Kokkola, founded in 1620, reflects the area's historical ties to both Swedish and Russian rule, a legacy still visible today in the region's bilingualism. The landscape is characterized by flat agricultural plains intersected by river networks, extensive forests and a rapidly rising coastline due to post-glacial rebound. Demographically, in this area live just over 53,000 inhabitants, with an aging population and a relatively low density of 13.6 inhabitants per square kilometre. Economic activities are dominated by the third sector, although forestry and agriculture retain an important presence. Educational infrastructure is primarily public and while the region has a relatively balanced student population across school levels, university attendance remains modest. Tourism, while still limited in intensity compared to EU averages, is seen as a potential lever for sustainable regional development. Efforts focus on promoting nature-based tourism, coastal and maritime heritage and the cultural traditions of the area, such as Kaustinen's UNESCO-recognized folk music. The region's development policies increasingly emphasise sustainability, innovation and diversification to counter demographic decline and strengthen socio-economic resilience.

3.3 Good practices

As introduced before, regions are required to identify and collect at least four Best Practices to present to the Systour partners during the field visits, providing an opportunity for the research team to jointly evaluate and determine the most impactful practices. This method is embedded into the project framework and supports the transferability of knowledge among stakeholders of different countries.

The presented Good Practices are each carefully evaluated based on five parameters rated on a scale from one to five. The parameters chosen are: Grade of Innovation, Employment generation, Environmental sustainability, Diversification of tourism flows and Transferability and replicability. The results are visually represented in the spider graphs, making explicit the performance of the single GP on each parameter, offering a clear overview of the strengths as well as the potential areas of enhancement.
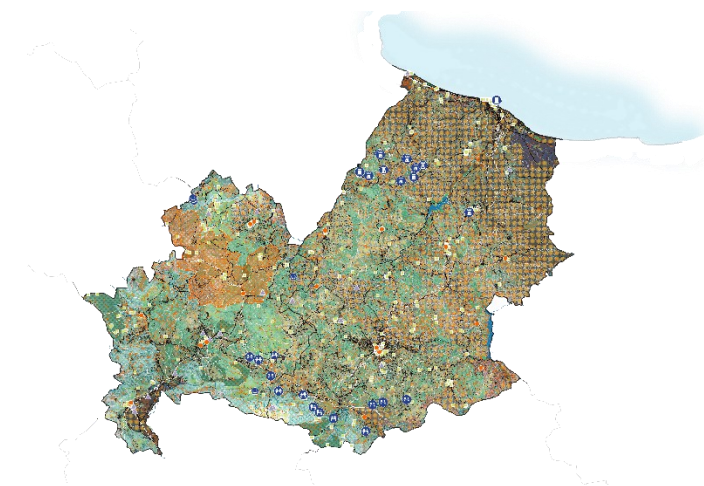
Molise, Italy

Figure 8: Mapped Good Practices, Molise Region (source: SYSTOUR)

GP 1: Path of the 7 Churches

A cultural and tourism itinerary connecting seven locations in Basso Molise, focusing on Serbo-Croatian linguistic minority communities. It enhances historical and religious heritage, promotes slow tourism and supports local regeneration.
Overall score: 3.5/5
Highest value: 4.3/5 (Transferability & Replicability)
Lowest value: 2.6/5 (Degree of innovation; Employment generation)

GP 2: Rika Cooperative in Montemitro

An initiative to counter depopulation by creating a community cooperative which has reopened essential services (bar, minimarket) and designed a scattered hotel project. It fosters employment, niche tourism and preserves the village's Croatian cultural identity.
Overall score: 3.8/5
Highest value: 4.1-4.0/5 (Transferability & Replicability; Employment generation)
Lowest value: 3.1/5 (Diversification of tourism flows)

GP 3: Borgo Tufi scattered hotel

Revitalization of an abandoned village through a scattered hotel model, developed via a public-private partnership. The project boosted local economy, created new business (organic farming business, brewery, residential care home) and reversed depopulation trends and zero unemployment rate.
Overall score: 4.2/5
Highest value: 4.6/5 (Degree of innovation; Employment generation)
Lowest value: 3.6/5 (Environmental sustainability)

GP 4: The Water Route: a religious and nature-based experience

A thematic route linking ten villages through the region's water heritage, connecting Marian sanctuaries and fostering intercultural and interreligious dialogue. It promotes sustainable tourism and is supported by EU-founded projects.
Overall score: 3.5/5
Highest value: 4.1/5 (Transferability & Replicability)
Lowest value: 2.6/5 (Employment generation)
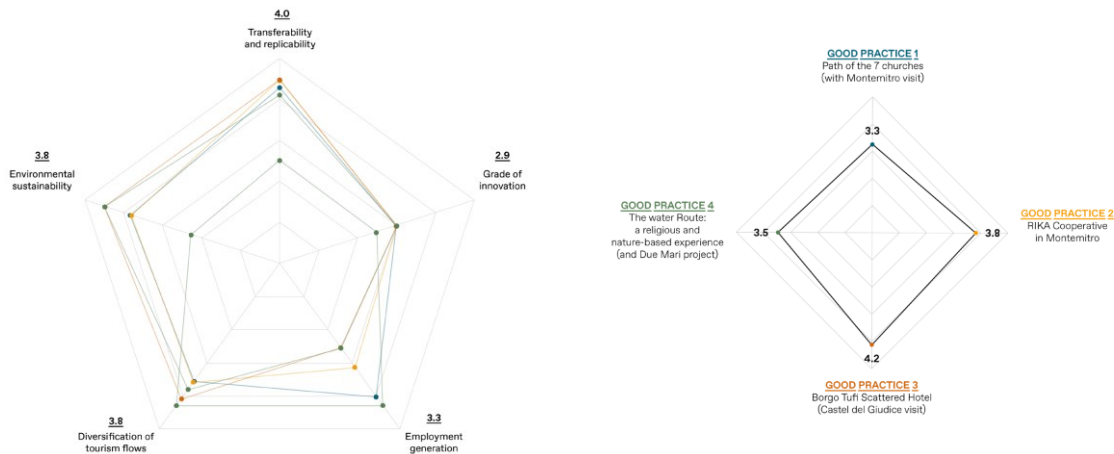
(Systemic Design Lab, 2024)

The good practices presented by the Italian region were evaluated positively overall, particularly the Borgo Tufi scattered hotel and the RIKA Cooperative, projects that demonstrate particular attention to the community and revitalisation of the social fabric. The evaluations determined that the area with the highest score was Transferability & Replicability with 4.1 points, while Employment Generation was the lowest with an average of 3.4 points.

Lea-Artibai, Spain
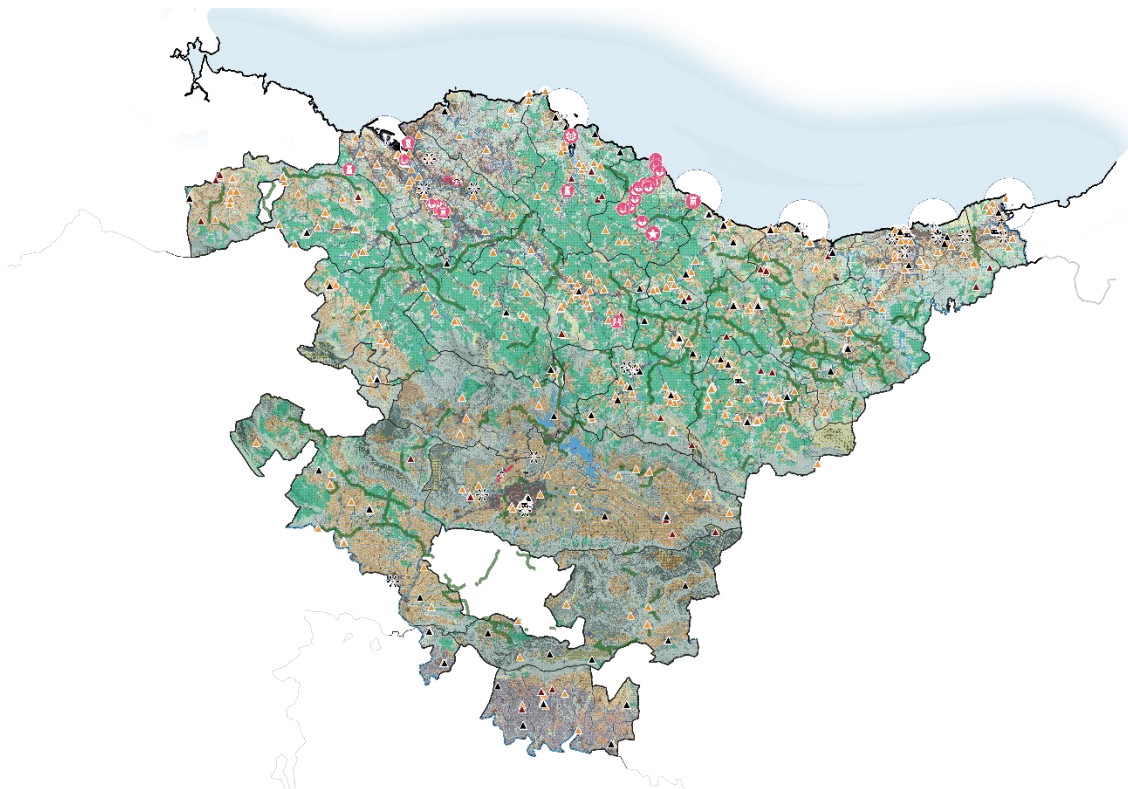
Figure 9: Mapped Good Practices, Lea-Artibai Region (source: SYSTOUR)

GP 1: Lea-Artibai Fest

The Lea-Artibai Fest is a low-season event promoting sustainable and experiential tourism in the Lea Artibai region. By offering local food tastings and cultural heritage learning opportunities, paired with uncommon activities, it aims to distribute tourist flows, extend visitors stays and foster community involvement. Over time, it has strengthened local pride and enhanced the authenticity of the experience for tourists with the growing local participation.
Overall score: 3.8/5
Highest value: 4.6/5 (Transferability & Replicability)
Lowest value: 2.6/5 (Degree of innovation)

GP 2: Lea Trail

The Lea Trail project enhances the natural and cultural industrial heritage of the Lea Valley by creating a sustainable tourist trail of 23 km across six municipalities. Supported by local communities and Next Generation funds, it promotes new businesses development, regional revitalisation and balanced tourism.
Overall score: 3.8/5
Highest value: 4.5/5 (Environmental sustainability)
Lowest value: 3.5/5 (Degree of innovation; Employment generation)

GP 3: Biscay Coast Bus

This Good Practice promotes sustainable practices starting from eco-friendly transport and thematic experiences along the Basque coast during the high season months in summer. Through local collaborations, KM0 packed lunch and small-group excursions, the initiative distributes tourist flows more evenly across the territory, fostering environmental awareness and support to local businesses.
Overall score: 3.5/5
Highest value: 4.1/5 (Transferability & Replicability)
Lowest value: 3.0/5 (Degree of innovation)

GP 4: Urdaibai Biosphere Reserve and sustainable tourism strategy

The Tourist Viewfinder promotes sustainable exploration of the Urdaibai Biosphere Reserve by offering an interactive map of tourist resources tailored to visitors' interests. It improves responsible tourism while protecting the area's rich natural ecosystems and reinforce local economy fabric, helping position Urdaibai as a model of sustainable development.
Overall score: 4.1/5
Highest value: **5**/5 (Environmental sustainability)
Lowest value: 3.6/5 (Employment generation)

GP 5: Flysch of Biscay

This proposal encourages geoturism along the Biscay coast by highlighting its remarkable geological heritage. Through interpretative activities and the valorisation of geological sites, the initiative raise a deeper public understanding on the subject and encourages the conservation of the unique natural landscapes.
Overall score: 3.7/5
Highest value: 4.5/5 (Environmental sustainability)
Lowest value: 2.8/5 (Transferability & Replicability)

GP 6: Gobernance: Bizkaia working groups

In the Basque Country, sustainable tourism development is promoted through coordinated efforts between central and provincial government, emphasising collaboration with stakeholders. At central level, tourism boards involving public institutions and private sector representatives defin strategic actions, mainly in marketing. Provincially, the Bilbao Bizkaia Action Group foster sectoral collaboration across various tourism areas. The overall goal is to position the region as an authentic, sstainable destination by 2025, enhancing local development, community well-being and economic growth, with tourism seen as a driver of cohesion and cultural valorisation.
Overall score: 3.5/5
Highest value: 4.3/5 (Transferability & Replicability)
Lowest value: 2.6/5 (Employment generation)

GP 7: Talent retention – Talentatu project by Leartibai Fundazioa

The Talent Retention project, led by Leartibai Fundazioa, promotes STEAM education to strengthen youth engagement and regional development, with a particular focus on empowering women. By connecting students with local industries and professionals through talks, activities, company visits, the project manage skills development, highlight career opportunities and supports the retention of young, educated talent in the region. Initiatives like specialised training programs also create real employment pathaways.
Overall score: 3.8/5
Highest value: 4.5/5 (Transferability & Replicability)
Lowest value: 2.8/5 (Diversification of tourism flows)

GP 8: Maritime heritage in Lekeitio (HERICOAST Interreg Europe)

In response to the decline of it traditional fishing sector, Lekeitio launched a project in 2005 focused on sustainable tourism development through the preservation and enhancement of its maritime heritage, natural landscapers and cultural assets. The initiative, driven by strong citizen involvement and public-private collaboration, has revitalised local identity, diversified the economy and inspired similar heritage-based tourism projects along the Basque coast.
Overall score: 3.6/5
Highest value: 3.6/5 (Environmental sustainability; Employment generation)
Lowest value: 3.0/5 (Diversification of tourism flows)

GP 9: Murals in Ondarroa

Kamiñazpi, a neighbourhood on the outskirts of Ondarroa created in the 1950s, became home to many fishermen from other Spanish and Portugal regions. To revitalise the area, the city council launched the Muralist Residency program, offering selected artists a three-week stay to create murals that reflects the municipality's identity. The project emphasises community participation, with residents approving the artworks. So far, three murals have been completed and the initiative will continue to expand.
Overall score: 3.1/5
Highest value: 4.0/5 (Transferability & Replicability)
Lowest value: 2.6/5 (Employment generation)
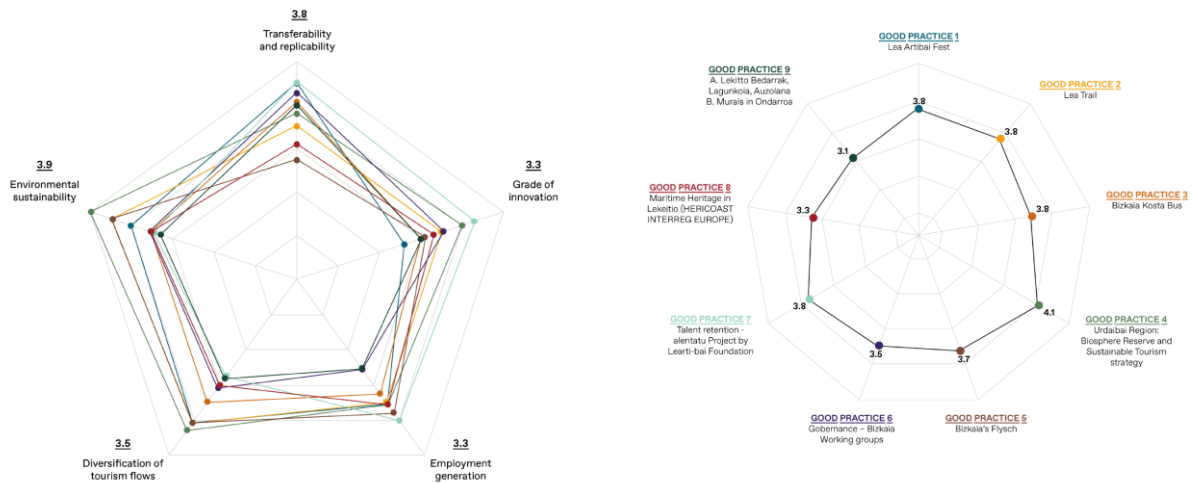
(Systemic Design Lab, 2024)

The numerous good practices presented by Lea Artibai focus on promoting the natural and cultural heritage of the area, as also highlighted by the highest score in the Environmental Sustainability field, with an average of 3.9 points. On the other hand, Grade of Innovation and Employment Generation received the lowest average score of 3.3 points.
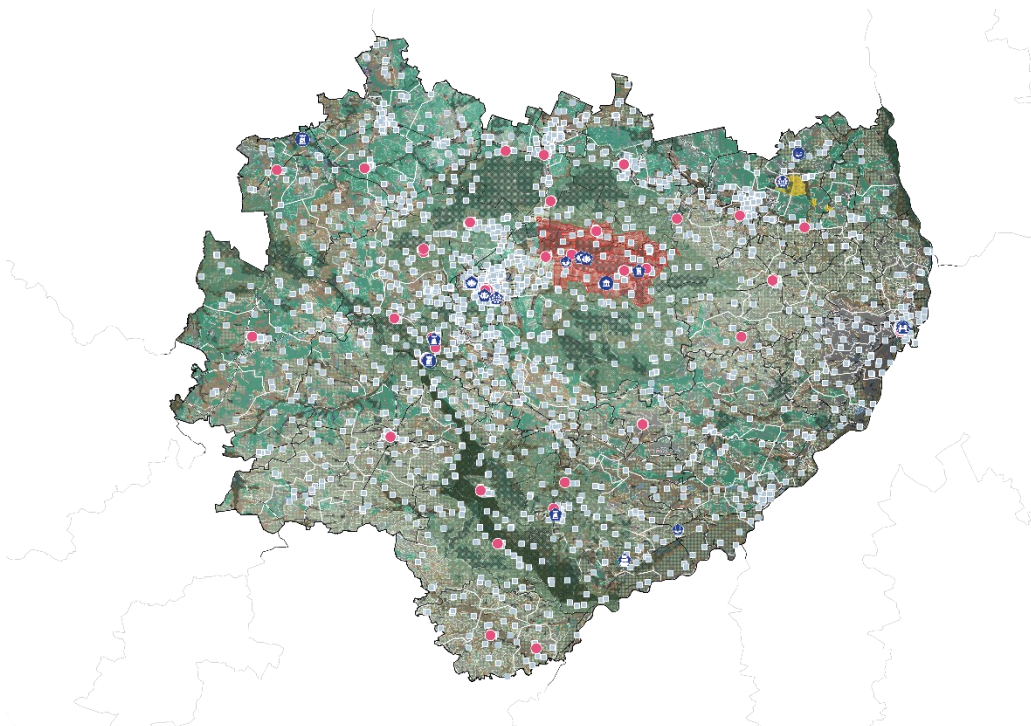
Świętokrzyskie, Poland

Figure 10:Mapped Good Practices, Świętokrzyskie Region (source: SYSTOUR)

GP 1: Sandomierz Apple Trail

The Sandomierz Apple Trail is a 200 km thematic route designed to promote cultural, agricultural and natural heritage of the Sandomierz region. Primarily intended for motorised means of transport but with short sections accessible by bike or on foot, the trail connects historic sites, agritourism farms, wineries and local business many of which preserve long-standing family traditions. Hosts offer services that are tailored to not just for tourists, but also to locals and returning residents. As a

collaborative marketing initiative, it fosters rural entrepreneurship and rural development.
Overall score: 4.1/5
Highest value: 4.3/5 (Transferability & Replicability; Diversification of tourism flows)
Lowest value: 2.6/5 (Degree of innovation)

GP 2: Bałtów tourism complex

This Good Practice is a family-oriented amusement park in the Kamienna River valley, developed following the discovery of fossilised dinosaur tracks. It features a wide range of attractions, including life-size dinosaur reconstructions, wildlife park with over 400 animals, miniature park of Polish castles, rollercoaster, prehistoric aquarium, 5D cinema and other various recreational facilities. The complex integrates education, nature and entertainment.
Overall score: 3.7/5
Highest value: **5**/5 (Employment generation)
Lowest value: 2.8/5 (Environmental sustainability)

GP 3: Historical metallurgical plant in Maleniec

Located in the Świętokrzyskie region there is one of Poland's best-preserved 19th-century industrial monument, restored for preservation and promotion as proof of the past industrial heritage of this territory. The museum offers educational, cultural and touristic activities, including blacksmithing and foundry workshops, thematic lessons and historical reenactments. As a result these initiatives, stimulates public understanding of traditional industrial techniques and support the transmission of artisanal and industrial knowledge.
Overall score: 3.7/5
Highest value: 4.3/5 (Degree of innovation)
Lowest value: 3.1/5 (Transferability & Replicability)

GP: 4 The Świętokrzyska Zagroda Kultury Harmonia

The Świętokrzyska Zagroda Kultury Harmonia is an interactive exhibition that immerses visitors in the life of a 19th-century local village. Multimedia installations and sensory experiences across four seasonally themed rooms help visitors to engage with traditional customs and rituals. Harmonia not only showcases the historical balance between humans and nature but also highlights its relevance for contemporary life, promoting a deeper appreciation of regional heritage.
Overall score: 3.5/5
Highest value: 4.1/5 (Diversification of tourism flows)
Lowest value: 3.1/5 (Environmental sustainability; Degree of innovation)

GP 5: The Ethnographic Park in Tokarnia

The open-air museum in Tokarnia spans approximately 65 hectares and features around 80 historic buildings from villages and small towns. Divided into thematic sectors representing different regions, the park offers an immersive experience of rural an urban life in past centuries. Visitors can explore and engage with the cultural traditions and heritage of the Kielce area thanks to workshops, events and festivals.
Overall score: 3.9/5
Highest value: 4.6/5 (Diversification of tourism flows)
Lowest value: 3.3/5 (Employment generation)
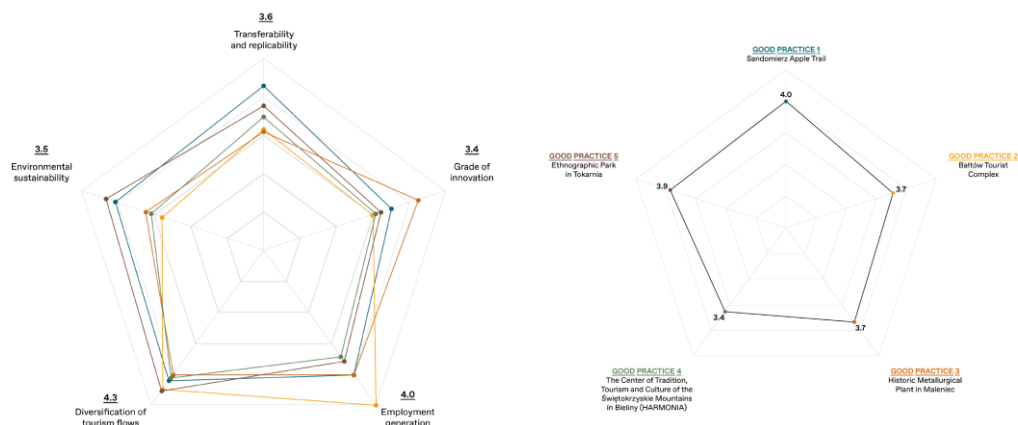
(Systemic Design Lab, 2024)

Poland presented its five best practices focusing mainly on tradition. The Bałtów tourism complex received a full score of 5/5 in the field of Employment generation, which is consistently one of the lowest-scoring areas overall. Overall, the highest average scores were in the Diversification of tourism flows category, with 4.3 points, while the lowest remained in the Degree of innovation category, with 3.4 points.
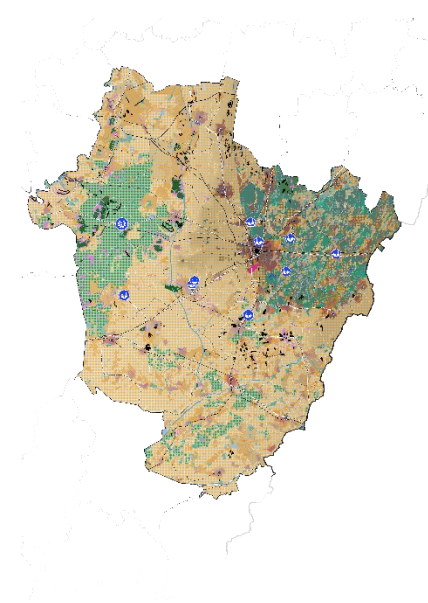
Hajdú-Bihar, Hungary

Figure 11: Mapped Good Practices, Hajdú-Bihar, Region (source: SYSTOUR)

GP 1: Derecske Adventure Garden

The Derecske Adventure Garden exemplifies an innovative approach to sustainable tourism by combining environmental conservation with regional development. Located within the company Bold Agro Ltd., the initiative serves both as a local attraction and a model of responsible tourism practices. With the promotion of natural and cultural assets, like the apples orchard, and by fostering community involvement, the project enhances visitor experiences while contributing to the socio-economic vitality of the area. Its success highlights the potential of tourism to support environmental stewardship and sets a reference point for sustainable tourism strategies internationally.
Overall score: 3.7/5
Highest value: 4.3/5 (Transferability & Replicability)
Lowest value: 3/5 (Degree of innovation)

GP 2: Brunch event series in Hajdú-Bihar: meet county tastes

This second Good Practice promotes the County's local gastronomy and cultural heritage. It is design to revitalise gastrotourism, highlighting traditional dishes and ingredients by offering authentic culinary experiences. The series supports local producers and artisans providing visibility to them and fostering community pride. Through the celebration of local flavours, the events attract both residents and tourists, strengthening the regional economy and position as gastronomic destination.
Overall score: 3.6/5
Highest value: 4.5/5 (Transferability & Replicability)
Lowest value: 3.0/5 (Degree of innovation)

GP 3: Hike in Hajdú-Bihar: first steps toward greenway development

The "Hike in Hajdú-Bihar" program, developed by the Hajdú-Bihar County Government, promotes sustainable tourism by encouraging exploration of the county's natural heritage along the 205 km Alföld Blue Trail. Through the "Green Pass of Hajdú-Bihar", participants collects stamps as they complete trail sections, with the incentive for those who finish the route within a year. The initiative supports local economy by involving rural municipalities, producers and accommodation providers and it exemplifies a successful model of tourism promotion combined with environmental conservation and community development.
Overall score: 3.7/5
Highest value: 4.6/5 (Environmental sustainability)
Lowest value: 2.6/5 (Employment generation)

GP 4: Hungarospa Hajdúszoboszlói zrt.

The company, under the leadership of CEO Enikő Czegle-Pinczés, manages Europe's largest spa complex in Hajdúszoboszlói, Hungary. The organisation is a key player in the local tourism sector, attracting international visitors with its therapeutic waters and extensive spa and wellness services, thus significantly contributing to the region's tourism appeal.
Overall score: 3.2/5
Highest value: 4.3/5 (Diversification of tourism flows; Employment generation)
Lowest value: 2.3/5 (Environmental sustainability)

GP 5: Hortobágy National Park and Hortobágy Nature Conservation and Gene Conservation Nonprofit Ltd.

Hortobágy National Park, the largest in Hungaryand UNESCO World Heritage site since 1999, preserves the unique landscapes and biodiversity of the Great Hungarian Plain. Managed by the Hortobágy Nature Conservation and Gene Conservation Nonprofit Ltd., the park plays a key role in protecting native habitats, supporting bird migration routes and promoting environmental sustainability through conservation and educational initiatives. Toghether, these efforts ensure the park's significance as both ecological and cultural landmark.
Overall score: 3.6/5
Highest value: 4.5/5 (Environmental sustainability)
Lowest value: 2.6/5 (Employment generation)
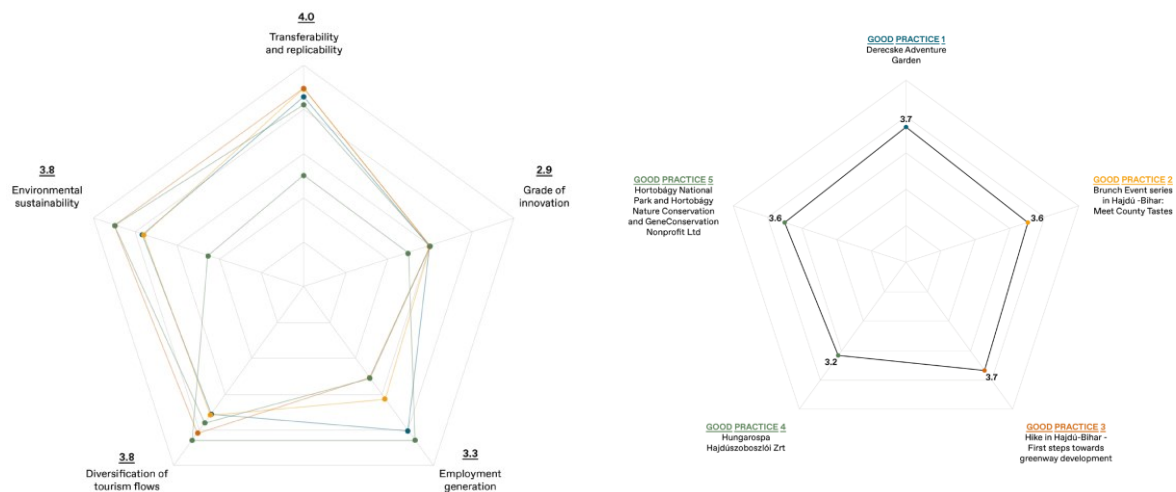
(Systemic Design Lab, 2024)

Hungary presented its experiences focusing on the region's natural and landscape heritage, scoring highest values in the Transferability & Replicability category with 4.0 points, and lowest in the Degree of Innovation category with 2.9 points.
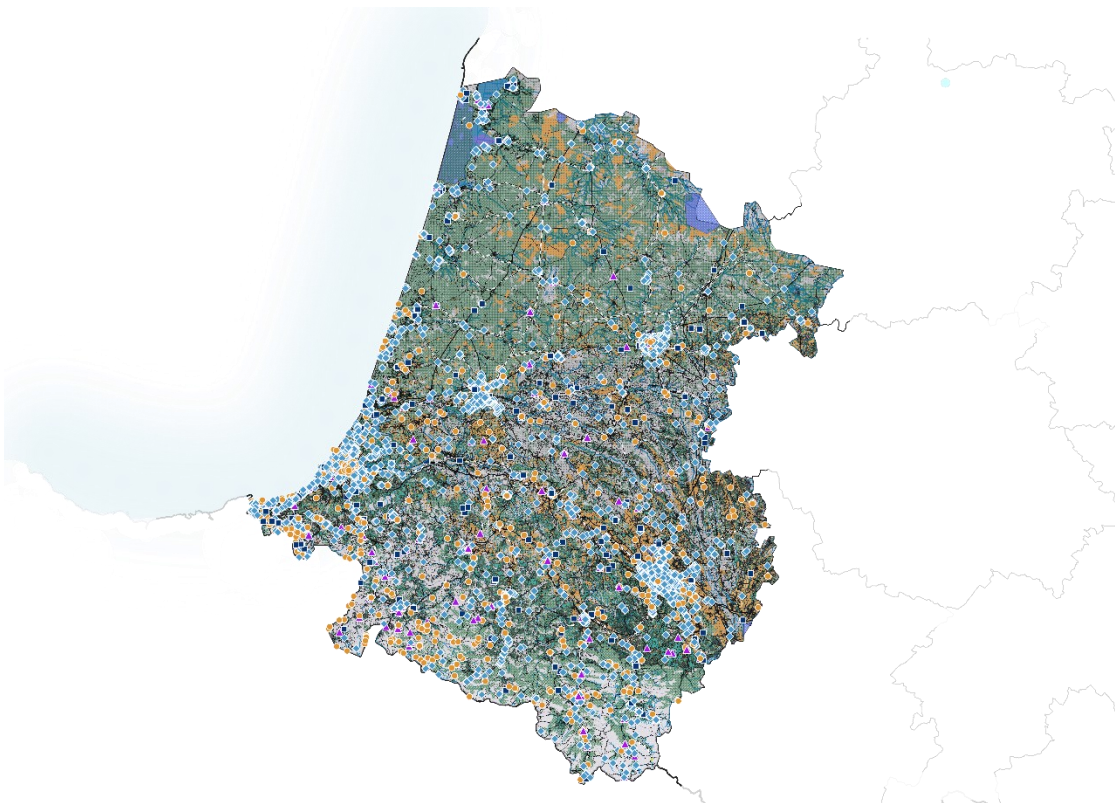
Nouvelle-Aquitaine, France

Figure 12:: Mapped Good Practices, Nouvelle-Aquitaine/Landes & Pyrenee Atlantiques, Region (source: SYSTOUR)

GP 1: Sejour Bas Carbone (Low carbon trips)

In response to the high reliance on carbon-intensive transport among visitors, the Regional Tourism Centre (CRT) of Nouvelle-Aquitaine has developed 25 low-carbon tourism packages in the Gironde and Basque sub-regions. These offer, created through public-private partnership, promote destinations accessible by train and activities based on soft mobility options. The initiative also prioritises operators committed to sustainability standards. The CRT uses a greenhouse gas emissions

calculator to objectively assess and monitor the carbon footprint of tourism activities, aligning with national and regional low-carbon strategies. Launched as an experimental phase, the project expected results will support its expansion to other sub-regions.
Overall score: 4.1/5
Highest value: 4.6/5 (Environmental sustainability)
Lowest value: 3.8/5 (Degree of innovation)

GP 2: Stratégie mobilité sur le territoire de la Communauté de Communes du Haute-Béarn

The Communauté de Communes du Haut-Béarn (CCHN) has implemented a sustainable mobility strategy through a simplified mobility plan. Key measures include expanding free on-demand transport services (TAD) across eleven municipalities, promoting carpooling via partnership with Klaxit and enhancing active mobility infrastructure. Founded by the Versement Mobilité, the strategy improves accessibility, foster social inclusion and supports environmental goals, offering a model for sustainable rural mobility development.
Overall score: 4.0/5
Highest value: 4.3/5 (Transferability & Replicability)
Lowest value: 3.8/5 (Degree of innovation; Employment generation)

GP 3: Seignanx.com

The "Seignanx.com" project in Seignanx introduces an innovative model for local tourism offices, creating a hybrid space designed for both residents and visitors. Beyond traditional visitor services, it offers shared workplaces, a local resource centre and meeting facilities to encourage community engagement and interaction between locals and tourists. Supported by a multi-stakeholder association, Seignax.com emphasizes transparent governance and has symbolically repurposed the old post office building. It also promotes participatory tourism through the collective creation of a tourist map using Open Street Map, reinforcing community involvement in shaping the visitor experience.
Overall score: 3.9/5
Highest value: 4.5/5 (Transferability & Replicability)
Lowest value: 3.5/5 (Environmental sustainability)

GP 4: Label Vignoble et Découverte

The "Vignoble et Découverte" label, established by Atout France in 2009, promotes wine tourism destinations offering high-quality, coherent visitor experiences focused on viticulture. With a three years duration, it recognises and ensures quality continuity in the work of territories with strong collaboration among tourism, cultural and agricultural stakeholders. The label supports sustainable tourism by enhancing local assets, encouraging responsible practices and promoting economic development in wine regions. With over 70 certified territories as of 2024, it exemplifies a structured approach to thematic tourism that strengthen destination attractiveness while preserving regional identity. (Domaine de Soustres, 2023)
Overall score: 3.4/5
Highest value: 4.1/5 (Diversification of tourism flows)
Lowest value: 3.0/5 (Environmental sustainability; Degree of innovation)

GP 5: Masgot Village: a cultural village management by a citizen association

The Village de Masgot, located in Fransèches, is a heritage site notable for its 19th-century granite sculptures by stonemason François Michaud. Since 1987, the association "Les Amis de la Pierre de Masgot" has managed the site, developing hybrid services including a reception-boutique-bar, creative workshops and stone-cutting activities. Recognised as an "Espace de vie sociale", the place promotes

social cohesion through local initiatives. With 34,000 visitors annually, four employees and significant volunteer support, the association advances a socially responsible, community-based model of cultural tourism rooted in heritage preservation and the social economy.

Overall score: 3.3/5
Highest value: 3.8/5 (Transferability & Replicability)
Lowest value: 3.1/5 (Employment generation; Environmental sustainability; Diversification of tourism flows)

GP 6: Monparc: a digital tool for natural park discovery

InfoParks is a mobile application designed to facilitate the discovery and preservation of natural areas by engaging citizens through intuitive, contextualised educational tools. Adaptable to various environments, rural, coastal, mountain and peri-urban, it promotes sustainable tourism, environmental awareness and citizen mobilisation. The app supports local engagement, encourages hiking and foster the protection of sensitive territories using an accessible and participatory approach.
Overall score: 3.3/5
Highest value: 3.8/5 (Transferability & Replicability)
Lowest value: 2.3/5 (Employment generation)

GP 7: Tourisme Lab, a projects' incubator and stimulator in the tourist sector

The Tourisme Lab, initiated by the Nouvelle-Aquitaine Region fosters innovation in the tourism sector through events, challenges and project calls promoting public-private cooperation and sustainable transformation. Supporting around 50 businesses annually, it provides resources and sectoral expertise to help sturt-ups and companies develop competitive, territory-aligned tourism projects. Its incubator program, "inspiring Projects for an Innovative Tourism", mentors every year 10 start-ups focused on pioneering tourism solutions.

Overall score: 3.9/5
Highest value: 4.5/5 (Degree of innovation)
Lowest value: 3.6/5 (Environmental sustainability; Diversification of tourism flows)
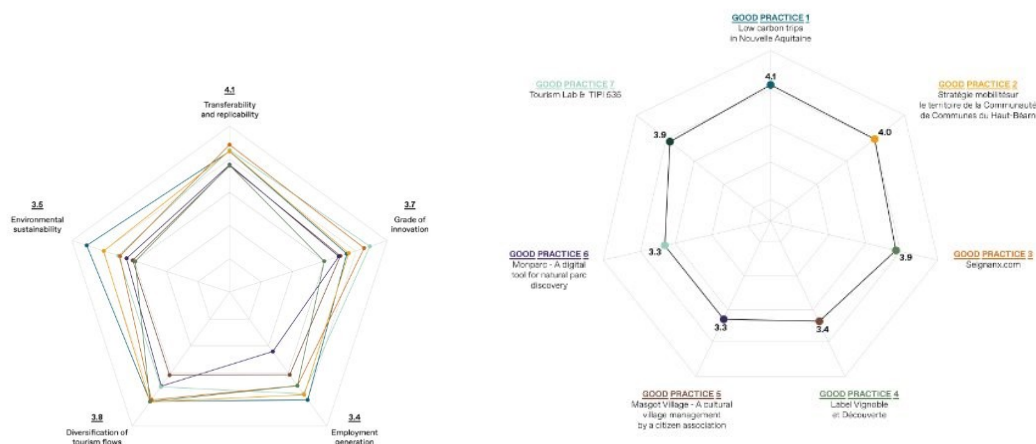
(Systemic Design Lab, 2024)

The Good Practices presented by France focused on concrete actions and activities for the development of tourism in the region, examples of shared planning and entrepreneurship that can become tools and ideas for the other partners. It's not surprising then that they scored highest in the Transferability & Replicability category with 4.1 points. The least convincing category was Employment Generation with 3.4 points.

Central Ostrobothnia, Finland

Figure 13: Mapped Good Practice, Central Ostrobothnia, Region (source: SYSTOUR)

GP 1: Training based seminars: Regional Council of Central Ostrobothnia

The Regional Council of Central Ostrobothnia organises educational seminars to enhance practical skills in collaboration with local partner. A key initiative is the annual Nature Tourism Seminar, co-organised with the vocational school and local entrepreneurs under the Federation of Educational of Central Ostrobothnia. In 2024, the seminar was held alongside the Central Ostrobothnia Tourism Forum, emphasising sustainable tourism practices. Given Finland's strong environmental connection and appeal for nature tourism, these events provide updated knowledge, promote best practices and foster networking among stakeholders. Activities include presentations, collaborative planning and guided national park visits led by students from the nature guide training program.
Overall score: 3.5/5
Highest value: 4.6/5 (Transferability & Replicability)
Lowest value: 2.6/5 (Degree of innovation)

GP 2: Project funding: Adventure Bus

The Regional Council of Central Ostrobothnia, responsible for coordinating regional development and managing national and EU funds, supports tourism project aligned with the provincial strategy. Among these initiatives, the Adventure Bus project was launched to enhance accessibility to the destinations sustainably. During the summer of 2022 and 2023, the service provided low-cost transportation, allowing visitors to bring bicycles and explore surroundings areas. The project received positive feedback for promoting inclusivity, supporting tourism business growth, reducing private traffic emissions and encouraging collaboration between tourism and cultural operators.
Overall score: 3.7/5

Highest value: 4.5/5 (Diversification of tourism flows)
Lowest value: 2.8/5 (Employment generation)

GP 3: Advocacy and cooperation: tourism strategy supporting maritime tradition and coastal tourism (Lighthouse Island)

In Central Ostrobothnia, tourism development emphasises the preservation and promotion of maritime traditions and coastal heritage. The city of Kokkola, historically a major 18th-century maritime centre, plays a key role with initiatives such a the conservation of the old wooden town Neristan, the visibility of Tankar Lighthouse Island and the protection of the coastal dunes of Vattajanniemi and Ohtakari. Projects like the SALMI QR app and the destination of Kokkola as a National City Park enhance sustainable coastal and cultural tourism.
Overall score: 3.1/5
Highest value: 3.6/5 (Diversification of tourism flows)
Lowest value: 2.1/5 (Degree of innovation)

GP 4: Flexible collaboration to promote Kaustinen Fiddle Playing and related practices in tourism

In this region, the Kaustinen fiddle tradition, recognised by UNESCO in 2021 as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity exemplifies the efforts in supporting cultural sustainability and tourism development. As a vital element of regional identity, it fosters tourism through dedicated initiatives such as the Folk Arts Centr, the Museum of Finnish Folk Music Instruments and the Kaustinen Folk Music Festival, while preserving cultural authenticity.
Overall score: 3.2/5
Highest value: 3.8/5 (Transferability & Replicability)
Lowest value: 3.0/5 (Degree of innovation)

GP 5: Regional promotion of nature tourism and sustainable fishing and wilderness tourism (natural park and sauna) Salamajärvi National Park

According to the tourism strategy of the region, it aims to position itself as a sustainable nature tourism destination. Building on traditions such as fishing, tourism development focuses on offering authentic experiences, preserving natural and cultural heritage and encouraging low-emission travels. Cooperation with educational institutions I key to training experts in nature tourism. Services are developed sustainably, using existing infrastructure to minimise environmental impact, while promoting longer stays and efficient resource use. High quality experiences are based on local knowledge, research and strong collaboration among operators.

Overall score: 3.3/5
Highest value: 4.1/5 (Environmental sustainability)
Lowest value: 2.8/5 (Degree of innovation; Employment generation)
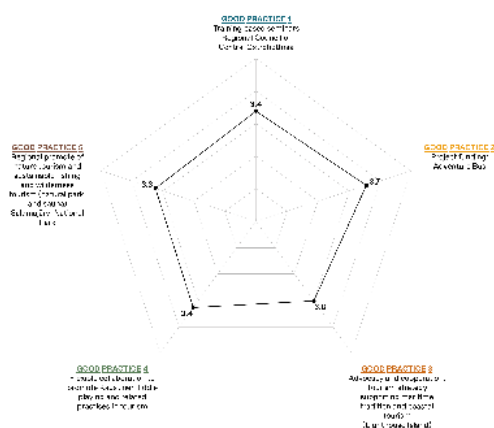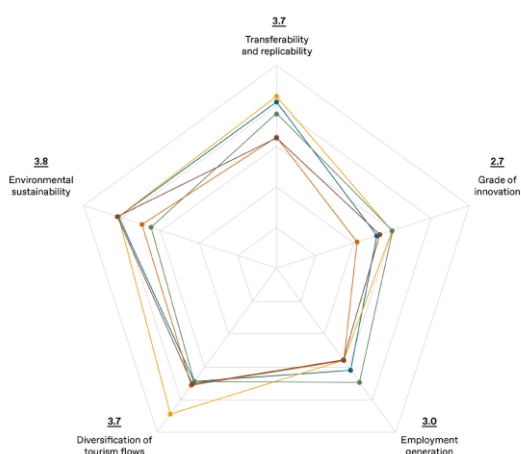
(Systemic Design Lab, 2024)

The Finnish region presented its Good Practices covering various aspects of the territory, from natural heritage to established musical traditions. The highest average score was in the Environmental Sustainability category with 3.8 points, while the lowest scores were given to the Degree of Innovation category with 2.7 points.

3.4 Visualise complexity

In the context of sustainable tourism development, the use of a holistic approach is crucial to address the complexity of territories. Viewing a destination as an integrated system of environmental, economic, cultural and social components allows for a deeper understanding of the interconnections and dynamics that shape its evolution. The systemic reading helps overcome fragmented perspectives, enabling the development of strategies to be more coherent and aligned with local needs.

Within this framework, the visualisation of complexity plays a crucial role. Through the *complexity maps* (Aulisio, et al., 2024), it becomes possible to effectively represent the connections among the various elements of the tourism context. Visualisation not only facilitates the identification of recurring patterns and emerging properties but also fosters a shared and accessible understanding of the state of the art among all stakeholders involved. This common ground is essential for promoting collaboration and the co-definition of target interventions.

Data-driven co-design emerges from this approach as a concrete way to boost co-creation with stakeholders (cit). The systematic integration of both qualitative and quantitative data into the design process enables more informed decision-making, supporting the development of solutions that are grounded in the real need of communities. The active involvement of public authorities, residents, tourism operators and visitors is therefore guided by collective intelligence, enhanced by data. This approach improves the quality and effectiveness of strategies over time, steering tourism initiatives towards models of development that are truly sustainable, equitable and capable of underline the peculiarities of each territory. (Lalli, n.d.)

3.5 SYSTOUR and the focus on experiential design

This thesis research directly integrates with this perspective, building upon the project's holistic diagnosis and complexity maps, developed within the project framework and used as initial reference, to narrows its focus to the experiential dimension of tourism. Through the mapping and analysis of tourist experiences, the work explores how cultural, environmental and social factors shape visitors' perceptions and contribute to the sustainable development of territories. This approach, combined with systemic thinking, identifies key leverage points for the design of tourism experiences that are deeply rooted in local context and capable of generating lasting value for communities.

Focusing this research on the experiential dimension of tourism means addressing the very core of the travel experience: the moment in which visitors truly engage with the destination. By mapping and analysing the range of activities offerings available across the different regions, this study identifies gaps and areas for improvement in the tourism offer, not only the existing assets. Aligned with the systemic approach of SYSTOUR, the emphasis is put into the importance of fostering meaningful between people: locals, travellers, institutions and operators. Tourism, in this perspective, become a platform for social exchange, cultural dialogue and local development.

Through the identification of peculiarities, challenges and opportunities, this work provides concrete support to policymakers and practitioners, offering useful tools for the evaluation, planning and monitoring of tourism experiences and a reflection on possible future visions that could be

implemented. The tools are developed through a data-driven approach, a pillar of the project, both qualitative and quantitative from the previous work. The ultimate goal remains to contribute to the development of tourism models that are both sustainable and capable of generating long-term value for local communities, while improving the quality of experienced for visitors.

4. Methodology approach

This chapter presents the methodological approach supporting the analysis, detailing the interconnected stages that structured the research, from the initial theoretical framing to the focus on a selected case study. (Figure 14) The research design was conceived to provide a systematic and impartial examination of the phenomenon, primarily adopting qualitative methods and integrating digital tools for the organization, interpretation and visual communication of the collected data.

4.1 Introduction to systemic methodology

The reality that appears in front of us today is not a simple system bound by cause-and-effect relationships alone, but on the contrary, it is a complex system strongly influenced by several variables, which require a broad and holistic understanding, encompassing the entire context. The definition of a system provided by Donella Meadows (2008), researcher and member of the Club of Rome, is that of a set of interconnected components working together to achieve a common purpose or function. The fundamental idea is therefore that the parts of the system, interact with each other, and that these interactions generate changes and actions that will irrevocably affect the other parts and the system itself. Complex systems are therefore characterised, as opposed to simple ones, by numerous components and subsystems, intricate interconnections and non-linear and hardly predictable behaviour. We can therefore say that 'the whole is greater than the sum of the parts' (Capra & Luisi, 2020), and that the solutions that are proposed must take into account the complex interactions and interdependencies of the different elements in relation also to the context. The five pillars of systemic design, which we then find in spatial design and planning, are:

1. Inputs and Outputs: this focuses on the analysis of inputs and outputs of the territorial system, examining the flow of resources, energy and information entering and leaving the system. Understanding the origin of these makes it possible to assess the level of sustainability and efficiency in the use of resources, waste management and environmental impacts on the territory, so that nothing is wasted.
2. Humanity Centred Design: emphasis is the human being, with priority given to the environmental, social, cultural and ethical context, for harmonious coexistence with all living beings, as elements that are part of a larger ecosystem.
3. Relations: the relations and interdependencies between the parts of the system generate the system itself, highlighting the emergent properties, meaning those properties that are generated in the interaction between the parts and that cannot be deduced by looking at the individual elements. Ecosystems, communities, industrial clusters, tourism continuously intersect and connect with each other.
4. Autopoiesis: the term refers to the system's property of self-regulation and self-sustainability, so that solutions once designed can adapt and evolve independently of external inputs. Through the arrival of new challenges and changes, the system can become more resilient and sustainable by providing feedback mechanisms, continuous and adaptive learning processes.
5. Acting locally: This is a fundamental pillar in the implementation of sustainable spatial development projects. It is based on the recognition of the specific characteristics, needs and opportunities of each territory. Through the active involvement of local stakeholders, attention to the specific context and the co-creation of solutions adapted to the area's conditions and challenges, local knowledge, resources and skills can be harnessed. This approach fosters a

sense of ownership and responsibility, enabling the local community to take the lead in the transition process. 'Think globally, act locally', this claim emphasises the importance of thinking about global challenges, starting with change in the local context.
(Bistagnino, 2011)

The application of the methodology involves first analysing the selected rural territories and their experiential tourism offerings, then identifying good practices through a co-design process implemented with local stakeholders and project partners. The subsequent mapping and cataloguing of the collected data allow for assessing how well the current offerings respond to the principles of experiential tourism, helping to determine gaps and opportunities. Based on the insights, the study proposes systemic strategies and solutions designed to foster sustainable territorial development, following a structures and iterative design process. The specific tools typical of the systemic design methodology, like the complexity maps and challenges & opportunities map, developed from the territorial holistic diagnosis were carried out by SYSTOUR research team.
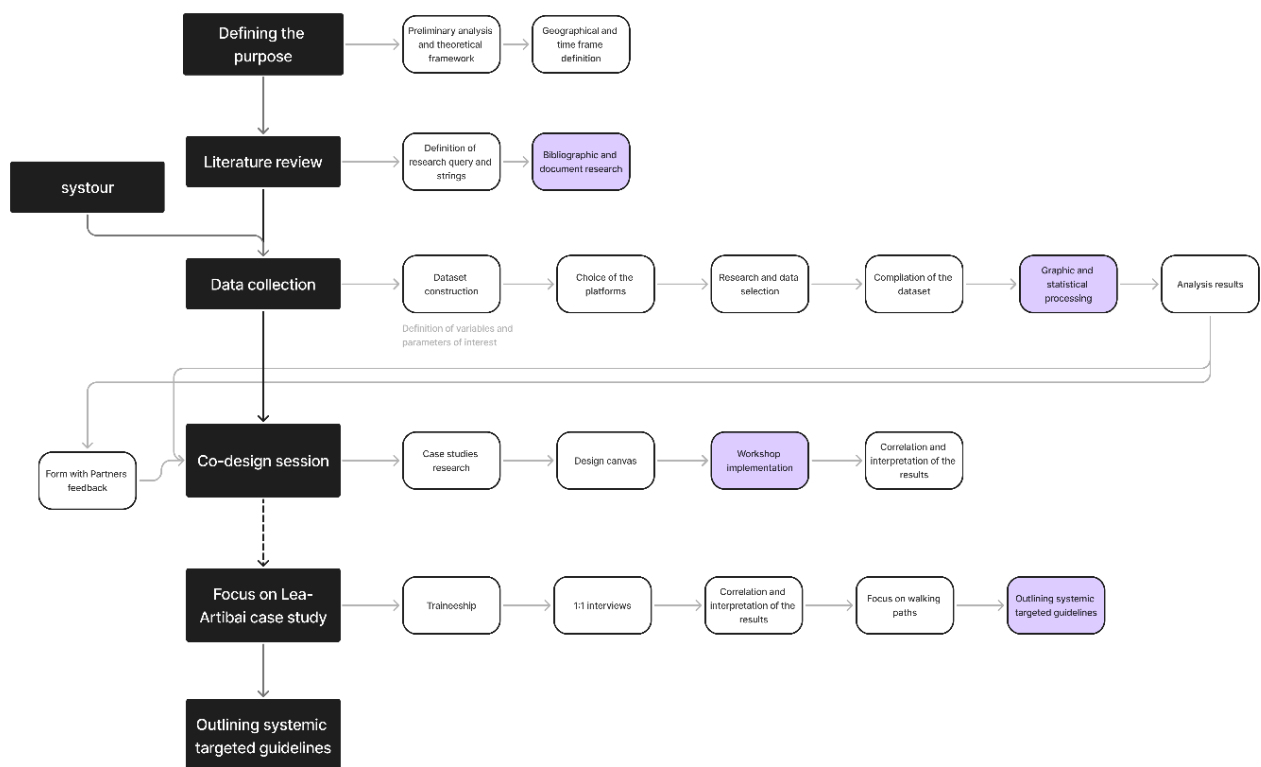
Figure 14: methodological process (personal elaboration)

4.2 The structure of the conducted analysis

The thesis work is composed of four macro-sections, divided into eight chapters: the first part of the literature review, followed by the analysis of experiences, the third on the development of the co-design workshop and the last part which includes and the focus on the case study of Lea-Artibai Region as part of an internhip.

The first part regarding the literature review has been an exploration of the topic regarding sustainable tourism in rural areas of Europe, its main challenges, the approaches and tools already existing that guides the efforts, outcomes and opportunities to a sustainable development in the industry.
The second macro-section, considering the case study of the European project SYSTOUR, Systemic

approach for sustainable tourism strategies in rural areas, reports on the research work and mapping of experiences in the six European countries where the project is taking place. The experiences were initially selected by the Tripadvisor platform and then extended to other national platforms to make the work more complete. These 90 mapped experiences, 15 for each country, have been catalogued and then analysed according to pre-defined indicators, which will be further analysed and explained in Chapter 5.4. The evaluation of the experiences provided a general overview of the offer of touristic experiences, making possible to identify common trends, gaps and potential areas of improvement in the way local tourism narratives are constructed and communicated.

The results gained from this analysis has been presented to the international partners of Systour, during an online Learning Event, on 12th February 2025, opening the possibility to explore the theme of experience more in-depth. From the insight gained after the presentation through a shared form, two visual tools were developed on Figma software, to facilitate a collaborative discussion on the challenges and opportunities associated with experience-based tourism. These two canvases were proposed during the Interregionalworkshop held in Turin on 27 and 28 March. The Systemic Policies Model Canvas is the first one, designed as a practical tool for start a discussion on systemic policies and actions that could be planned to implement sustainable development on the field of experiential tourism. The second canvas, the Systemic Vision Model Canvas, open and broaden the discussion on the theme with a vision for the future, a creative and imagination exercise to help visualise the impact and the hopes of the strategies in 25 years from now.

The workshop was carried out through the methodology of a Twin Brew World Café, both for the topic of experiences and short-term rentals. A World Café is an established facilitation method designed to enhance dialogue, co-creation, share responsibility and belonging among the participants. It provides a structured yet flexible format that fosters meaningful, dynamic conversations around specific topics, encouraging them to engage actively and share their own perspectives. By rotating participants across small discussion groups, the World Café enables the progressive refinement and evolution of ideas, ultimately contributing to the emergence of a shared understanding and collective insights. On a practical side, each table had the canvases and facilitators for the assigned topic and the partners and participants to the activity were divided into two twin groups. After 20 minutes of discussion, partners changed table the first time to discuss the Policies Canvas and after other 20 minutes they changed it again to finish with the Vision Canvas.

After the session, all post-it notes and shared inputs collected were systematically analysed, processed and synthesised with the support of AI-based tools. This method enabled the facilitators team to efficiently organise the qualitative data, identify key themes and insights and deliver a structured output and visual interpretation within a short time frame for immediate feedback with the partners.

The final part includes the development of the case study focus during a two-month internship at Leartibai Fundazioa, SYSTOUR Spanish partner, a public-private institution that focus on territorial development with focus on different aspect, among which tourism cover a growing sector. The Lea-Artibai region was chosen because it is already advanced in many tourism practices, showing a structured, collaborative and holistic approach at both local and regional level. The case offers a concrete example to observe how experiential tourism strategies are applied and provides practical insights that complement the broader analysis, bridging theoretical research and practical application.

The internship has provided the opportunity to access to local data and materials to deepen my research, and to contextualise and validate on-desk research data, carrying out on-field interviews with local actors and observe some of the good practices and experience the territory, both as a tourist and as a researcher. The one-to-one interviews were conducted mostly in person, with some exceptions with online meetings or written answers to my questions via email. The results were synthesized, with the help of AI-based tools to cluster and process the information, with resulting

mind maps were the connections and emerging properties were highlighted. The second tasks that was implemented was a systemic focus on walking paths, in particular the Lea Path, as to outline some guidelines with a sustainable and regenerative point of view.

5. Online platforms analysis

5.1 Introduction to the web platforms

This chapter is situated within the broader systemic analysis conducted in this thesis, which explores the dynamics of rural and experiential tourism. Specifically, it offers a focus investigation into how digital platforms shape the promotion, communication and perception of local experiences. This dimension not only complements the literature review but also responds to an ongoing trend in destination development, where technological innovation, participatory engagement and platform-based strategies increasingly influence the competitiveness, sustainability and inclusivity of tourism systems.

5.2 Tripadvisor

Tripadvisor is one of the world's best-known and most widely used online platforms (*About TripAdvisor*, n.d.), where users can share their experiences, leaving reviews and ratings on accommodation, restaurants, tourist attractions, experiences to enjoy in their chosen destinations and many other categories. Founded in 2000 by Stephen Kaufer, Langley Steinert, Nick Shanny and Thomas Palka, it has become one of the most trusted platforms for discovering new destinations and planning trips.

5.2.1 The successful model
The website's operating model is based on a collaborative model rooted in user-generated content (UGC). Registered users of the platform can contribute by posting written reviews, ratings (on a scale of 1 to 5) and uploading personal photos that help to provide a more authentic and realistic view than official promotional content. Given the widespread use of Tripadvisor, these ratings and reviews can have a significant impact, both positive and negative, on establishments and destinations. The model's success is therefore based on the platform's ability to capture a large number of opinions and comments that are posted every day and use this data to create a ranking to help users make decisions more easily in an information-saturated environment. (de Sandoval, 2024) Recently, the company has been focusing on new initiatives by implementing Artificial Intelligence, with a personalised itinerary generator, creating a subscription programme for customer loyalty and developing new partnerships with tech companies to enhance data analysis and thus plan increasingly targeted and effective campaigns. (The big marketing, s.d.)

The most common issue encountered, which has led to a slowdown in the development and advancement of the platform, has been the high number of fake accounts and untruthful reviews, which can damage the reputation of experiences and destinations.

The platform is therefore an intermediary between tourism supply and demand, between travellers and businesses that want to promote the destination and facilitates transactions.

From the point of view of those promoting their products, it becomes a tool to get to know their customers and understanding their travel needs and expectations through monitoring tools such as BigData insight, API, adv displayer, widgets and other functions for managing their accounts and customer relations, from responding to reviews to handling complaints.(Yoo et al., 2016)

5.2.2 Sharing economy and participatory marketing

The power of sharing in the internet age is revolutionising our society and the tourism market. Tourists no longer trust solely institutional, one-way communication, whether from companies promoting their products or destination management organisations offering new experiences and unmissable trips. In fact, such communication has the opposite effect, coming across as anachronistic and ineffective. The ease and multi-directional nature with which users can find information online means that they are well informed, and this has opened up a C2C (consumer-to-consumer) communication channel, where sharing content about their travel experiences triggers a process of "co-creation" of the tourism product. Participatory marketing strategies focus on user engagement, stimulating interaction and targeted actions, such as calls to action, newsletter subscriptions and sharing experiences through reviews. Those who share their impressions online contribute in all respects to the creation of the image and reputation of the experience, destination, restaurant, etc., alongside the messages and content conveyed by promotional bodies. Josep Ejarque, destination management expert and founder of Four Tourism, states in his book Social Media Marketing for Tourism that users who already know the destination are considered more credible and authoritative than those who want to advertise, as they understand the position and needs of those who want to enjoy their holiday. (Ejarque, 2015)

All this user-generated content (UGC) is exploited as a form of low-cost promotion and as a catalyst for word-of-mouth advertising (WOM). According to a report by Text100 (Text100, 2012), 63% of tourists rely on recommendations from family and friends when choosing their holiday destination. We can therefore see that there are several sources of trust, which can be divided into two different categories: people we know directly, either physically or not, such as members of online groups or communities with whom we can interact and who therefore enjoy credibility despite the physical distance, and the second category consisting of people with whom we have no relationship but whom The current tourism market requires detailed and accurate information; it is not enough to arouse curiosity and attract attention to ensure that users "buy the product". Postmodern tourists want reliable and comprehensive sources. Physical touchpoints, such as hotels or tourist boards, are perceived as "biased", distant and partial sources, which is why they prefer the opinions of those who, on the same level as those doing the research, have already tried and tested the experience and can recommend it or not. The 2021 Nielsen Global Online Survey on Trust Value and Engagement (The Nielsen Company, 2021) shows an increase in trust in advertising among Millennials and Gen X, but 88% of consumers prefer to rely on information written online by other users. The question that arises from these data is: what drives so many people to actively produce and share content related to their travel experiences, even in the absence of a tangible return? This behaviour is part of a broader cultural paradigm, in which the value of the experience is amplified when it is shared with a social network, whether virtual or real. It represents a human need to narrate oneself, receive social recognition and feel part of a community. In this scenario, digital platforms such as TripAdvisor or social networks play a fundamental role in providing the tools for sharing, as well as the narrative and visual codes that guide the ways in which experiences are recounted and perceived. (Agalliu, 2023)

5.2.3 How are experiences presented?

The participatory structure of Tripadvisor enhances the credibility of shared information and contributes to the experiential dimension of tourism by drawing attention to personal narratives and responses. On the side of tourism operators, the platform enables to position their offering within a competitive and highly visible marketplace, with the only competition generated by the algorithm, based on visibility, relevance and recent reviews, that reward certain experiences over others, influencing the exposure and engagement and ultimately compete in their success. This underscores the important for those who manage the businesses profiles to actively monitor and respond to user

feedback, maintaining constant quality and adapt their digital presence based on trends and expectations.

The section "Things to do" is categorised by type (e.g.: cultural tours, nature excursions, culinary experiences, etc), location, duration and popularity. Operator often optimise the appeal of their experiences through SEO-approved titles and descriptions and visual storytelling that aligns with the expectation of a global, digital audience. Descriptive texts usually aim at emphasising the uniqueness and authenticity of the experiences, using persuasive vocabulary that evokes immersion, emotional connection and local engagement, key themes of experiential tourism.

Visualisation plays a crucial role in influencing consumer decision. Tripadvisor integrates a multi-layered visual strategy composed of high-resolution images and video contents, user-uploaded media and iconography, like the badges for "Top Experiences", "Traveler's choice", or thematic filters like "Hidden Gems". These visuals hints enhance the perceived value and credibility of an experience and guide user's attention toward curated or recommended content. Moreover, user reviews often include images and specific storytelling elements that reinforce or contest the official narrative provided by the operators, creating an interactive and dynamic environment.

5.3 National or internal tourism platforms

"Destination management consists of the coordinated management of all the elements that make up a tourism destination (attractions, amenities, access, marketing and pricing)" (UNWTO, 2025)
According to UNWTO, DMOs are defined as public or semi-private entities that today oversee, not only marketing and promotion of a destination, as was their main role in the past, but also broader strategic planning, coordination and management. DMOs have evolved into leading organizations that embraces a wide range of activities, shifting towards lead is a holistic and comprehensive approach, in which many stakeholders and shared interests collaborate to ensure the sustainability and competitiveness of the tourist destination.

The ultimate goal of a DMO is to act as strategic leaders by developing a coordinated, coherent strategy and collective vision, which involves the actors actively working on the destination, not only its industries, policies and decision makers but also residents and the local community. This requires them to effectively collect and connect expertise and resources from their partners and other actors operating in the destination, leaving the independence to follow their path, to bring back innovative solutions and points of view.

Importantly, this evolution aligns closely with the concept of Smart Destination, which is founded on five pillars: governance, innovation, technology, accessibility and sustainability. These pillars emphasise the need for destinations to adopt digital and data-driven approaches that can respond dynamically to the complex challenges of contemporary tourism. Within this framework, digital platforms, such as TripAdvisor and the different *Visit*... play a central role. They function not only as marketing and promotion tools but also as instruments for gathering real-time feedback, enabling co-creation of experience, monitoring visitor satisfaction and informing more adaptive governance models.

After describing what a DMO is and what are its main objectives, it is necessary to examine how DMOs work to promote destinations and their offering on online platforms. The platforms chosen for each region studied in this research will be further illustrated in chapter 5.5.
The growing demand for personalised tours and travel experiences, is calling for a transformation in how DMO approaches their offer and how they present to their audience. The Digital DMO Model (Paperkite, 2025) offers a strategic framework that redefines the role of the DMO, shifting that of a promotional intermediary to an experience enabler. This model is particularly relevant in the context of experiential tourism, where authenticity, emotional resonance and co-creation are pivotal. According to Paperkite, a digital DMO should operate as an ecosystem builder, creating framework that integrates

various digital touchpoints, including websites, social platforms and third-party apps, to support a seamless and engaging visitor journey and allowing destinations to remain responsive to shifting consumer expectations. In this context, platforms such as Tripadvisor can play a complementary role alongside official destination platform. Tripadvisor offers valuable functionalities for comparing offerings, identifying emerging trends, gathering peer-to-peer insights and monitoring both opportunities and potential pain points. Rather than serving as mere promotional channels, these platforms increasingly function as tools for coordination, engagement and adaptive management. This shift reflects broader changes in how destinations are perceived and promoted, where platforms become tools for coordination and engagement, rather than instruments of top-down control. The management of digital presence is therefore increasingly based on monitoring, content curation and enabling structured participation from various stakeholders, including travellers themselves.

In the context of this thesis, the analysis of experiential tourism relies heavily on how these platforms structure, present and promote local experiences. Platforms shape visitor expectations and influence decision-making processes, serving as key intermediaries between DMOs, local providers and travellers. Moreover, they provide spaces where local narratives, user-generated content and participatory feedback loops can enhance both the visibility and the perceived authenticity of the destination.

5.4 Database

Building on these conceptual foundations and proceeding in an organised way with the analysis of this research, it was necessary to create a database aimed at cataloguing and analysing the tourist experiences available across different platforms for the six countries involved in the SYSTOUR project. The data sources selected were Tripadvisor as an international platform alongside the other selected national DMO platforms, allowing the comparison and better understanding the range of offerings. This approach helps us see how the different regions promote themselves and the experiences, to a global audience. To be eligible for selection and cataloguing, the experiences must be considered as organized activities proposed by an entity and accompanied by a guide. They cannot be activities that tourists can carry out independently. For example, visiting a museum on one's own is not considered a valid entry, whereas a guided tour of the same museum can be included in the database.
Data were extracted manually and organized in structured spreadsheets. For each Region, we analysed 15 experiences selected based on the order in which they appeared on the platform.

5.4.1 The database construction

A database can be defined as an organised collection of logically related data, where its primary function is to enable the storage, organisation and efficient retrieval of data. It serves as the foundation for the data analysis process and for drawing meaningful insights and evaluations. Through the use of a Database Management System (DBMS), it becomes possible to ensure data integrity, consistency and security over time. (Rolando, et al., under submission)

This paragraph presents the design process of the database developed for the classification and analysis of tourist experiences on the different platforms, previously described. The process is structured into three interconnected phases: conceptual design, logical design and physical design. Each phase contributes to the creation of a robust data model, capable of supporting both knowledge preservation and the development of decision-support tools.

In the **conceptual design** phase, the main entities and relationships relevant to the study of tourist experiences were identified. These included key concepts such as the experience itself, its location, thematic categorisation, target groups and qualitative aspects. Figure 15 illustrates the E-R diagram of the database: Online platforms entity (Tripadvisor and the national platforms), with six attributes as the countries of each region , is connected to who is proposing the experiences (Proposing Subject)

though the relationship of the promotion. The Proposing Subject is also the one who organises the experiences. The compiler is more of an external entity as it evaluates both the Proposing Subject and the experiences. This phase provided a semantic framework, rooted in the research objectives and was used to define what data needed to be represented and why.
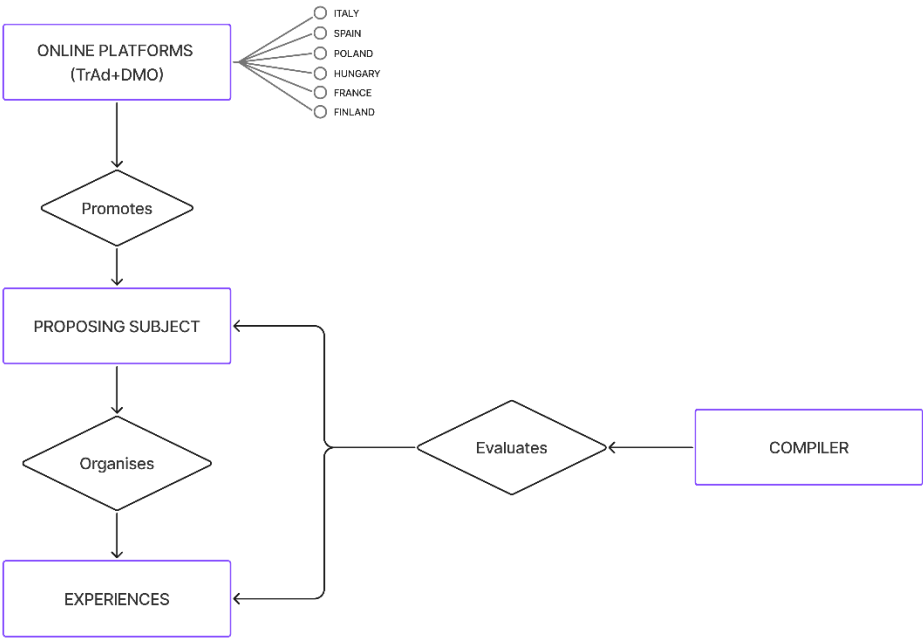

Figure 15: E-R diagram (personal elaboration)

The **logical design** phase translated these conceptual elements into a structured format. While the database was implemented as a flat table in Excel software, its internal logic reflects a relational approach. Each row represents a distinct tourist experience, while the columns define attributes corresponding to the entities previously identified. The design also carefully avoids redundancy and ensures internal coherence across variables.

Finally, the **physical design** is documented in a partially described in the metadata sheet, which act as a bridge between the logical structure and its operational form. For each variable, the metadata define the data structure (field name), content description, value format (open/close values) and example. This layer is essential not only for data integrity and transparency, but also for ensuring reusability and scalability.

5.4.2 Metadata

Metadata provide structural information about the dataset, such the name and type of the experience, availability, ticket price (when applicable), accessibility level, presence of live or written guides, available languages, duration, and target age group. In this section, we will analyse how they contribute to the overall quality and understanding of the results.

EXPERIENCES OFFERED IN THE SYSTOUR REGION				
Macrocategory	Data content	Data value		Source
Variable		Data Type	Levels	
IDENTIFICATION				

ID	Alphanumeric identification code, composed of a country prefix and a progressive identification number	Text	*SPA001, SPA015, ...*	*compiler*
COUNTRY	Country where the experience is located (first three letters)	Text	ITA, POL, UNG, FRA, SPA, FIN	*compiler*
COMPILER	Initials of the person who filled in the database (Name and surname)	Text	SDM, AB, AA, ...	*compiler*
DATE	Date record compiled	Date		*compiler*
PLATFORM	Platform on which the experience is promoted	Text	TripAdvisor, Visitmolise, Leartibai.turismo, ...	*compiler*
WEBSITE	Link to the experience on the platform	Text		*compiler*
EXPERIENCE PROVIDER				
ATTRACTION/E XPERIENCE	The proposed activity is identified either as an experience or as a physical attraction to visit.	Text	ATTR, EXP	*compiler*
EXPERIENCE NAME	Title of the experience as indicated on the platform	Text		*compiler*
PROPOSING SUBJECT	Organization or company proposing the experience	Text		*compiler*
PUBLIC/PRIVA TE	Indicates whether the organization is public or private	Text	PU, PR	*compiler*
PARTNERS	If applicable, external subjects involved in the experience and their respective roles	Text	yes/no/NA	*compiler*
SCALE	specification of the geographical scale covered by the experience.	Text	Local, Regional, National, European, Global	*compiler*
AREA OF INTEREST	Specification of the geographical area of interest and the potential reach of the experience	Text	National, International	*compiler*
EXPERIENCE PROFILE				
TYPES OF EXPERIENCES OFFERED	Description of the main characteristics of the experience, indicating the type of proposed activity.	Text	Tour, Nature, Tastings (food&drink), Architecture and Museums, Events and Festivals, Sport	*compiler*
Region/County /group of municipalities	Predefined region, county or group of municipalities where the experience is located	Text	Hajdú-Bihar, Nouvelle-Aquitaine/ Landes & Pyrénées-Atlantiques, Molise, Świętokrzyskie, Lea-Artibai, Central Ostrobothnia	*compiler*
Municipality	Specification of the municipality where the experience takes place, and possibly the related province	Text		*compiler*

Availability	Availability throughout the year, as recorded at the time of data collection	Text	Always available. Not available, Seasonal, NA	*compiler*
Duration	Duration of the experience indicated as hours.minutes	Number		*compiler*
Age range	Minimum and maximum age range requires to participate in the experience	Number		*compiler*
Ticket	Whether a ticket is required to purchase or book.	Text	Yes/no/NA	*compiler*
Price	Ticket price per day	Number		*compiler*
Languages	Language(s) in which the experience is delivered	Text	*Spanish, English*	*compiler*
Accessibility	Level of accessibility indicated on the platform	Text	No (not specified), yes (for all), no (wheelchair), no (visually impaired), no (hearing impaired), no (not self-sufficient), NA	*compiler)*
Informative material	Availability of a written guide, brochure, or live guide	Text	GDV (live guide), GS (written guide), NO, NA	*compiler*
EVALUATION				
Valorisation	the experience makes possible to learn about, deepen and enhance local heritages and activities	Text	YES/NO/NA	*compiler*
Local reality	the experience is promoted by a local reality (at the most the region it belongs to)	Text	YES/NO/NA	*compiler*
Natural resource	the experience is based on a unique/rare natural feature of the territory	Text	YES/NO/NA	*compiler*
Testimony	the experience allows to get in touch with the local population (direct testimonies), narratives	Text	YES/NO/NA	*compiler*
Mobility	the experience allows to explore the territory through sustainable means of transport	Text	YES/NO/NA	*compiler*
Youth/women	the experience promotes/is promoted by/from the work of women/youth realities	Text	YES/NO/NA	*compiler*
Diversification	the experience is delivered in different ways, depending on the needs of different target groups	Text	YES/NO/NA	*compiler*
Digital	the experience incorporates technologies to make the experience more complete/smart/virtual	Text	YES/NO/NA	*compiler*
Climate change	the experience raises awareness on climate change	Text	YES/NO/NA	*compiler*
Plastic free	the experience reduces the environmental impact of plastic	Text	YES/NO/NA	*compiler*

Enogastronomy	the experience promotes traditional food and beverage-related experience	Text	YES/NO/NA	*compiler*
Food accessibility	the experience is designed to accommodate diverse nutritional and dietary requirements	Text	YES/NO/NA	*compiler*
Inclusivity	the experience facilitates the accessibility to this area to more types of people/different types of abilities	Text	YES/NO/NA	*compiler*

Table 3: Metadata description (personal elaboration)

The database was validated by cross-referencing values with the original sources and by conducting internal consistency checks. This ensures the reliability of the information and minimized the risk of errors or misinterpretation. It was designed as a tool to support ongoing updates and future integration of additional data as they become available and needed, enabling it to become a dynamic resource for further evaluations and comparative analysis.

5.5 Analysis results

The cataloguing of experiences across the various platforms contributed to build a comprehensive overview of the current state of experiential tourism in the six partner regions. The data collection process led to the identification of a total of 90 experiences, with 15 selected for each region. Experiences were initially chosen from the international platform TripAdvisor, due to its widespread recognition and use among a global audience as previously mentioned in paragraph 5.4. Subsequently, the offering was further explored through the official regional platforms managed by the respective DMOs, resulting in the analysis of nine different regional websites.

To produce a summarised outcome suitable for presentation to project partners during the online Learning Event, on February 12th, 2025, a visual representation of the collected experiences in each region was developed. This infographic displays key information, including the thematic classification of the experiences into six thematic areas:

- Tour: guided tours of cities and villages, organised trips to explore the regions, guided tours of points of interest, thematic tours, walks around towns or historical sites, touristic buses, etc.
- Nature: outdoor experiences and activities that let explore the natural heritage and landscapes and promote its preservation, guided visits to natural reserves and parks, falls, geological formations and caves, etc.
- Food and Beverage Tasting: experiences that promote local food and beverage traditions, products (food, wine, beer, cider, etc.), cuisine, and the production processes that are behind it
- Museums and Architecture: guided tours and organised experiences that can be related to the museums or architectural sites, castles, historical and specialised museums, ruins, churches and cathedrals, etc.
- Festivals and Events: events that celebrate local traditions and truly connect visitor and locals
- Sport: sportive and active experiences that can be done on the territories, both indoors and more common outdoors.

Although certain experiences presented thematic overlaps, especially among the categories of sport, nature and tours, each was assigned to a single primary category to avoid duplication.

Key data points related to each individual experience were represented using a system of symbols and colours, as illustrated in the legend of Figure 16. Experiences were grouped according to the platform

through which they were promoted. For each experience, the specific municipality and the broader territorial scale were identified, categorised as local, regional and national.

Additional indicators include the availability of the experience at the time of data collection, classified as always available, only during specific times of the year (seasonal), currently unavailable or not specified (NA), as well as whether prior booking was required. Lastly, information regarding the type of promoting entity was recorded, distinguishing between public and private organisations.

Subsequently, the various experiences were evaluated according to a set of common criteria. The aim was to assess both the current state and the future potential of the experiences in relation to the key principles of sustainable tourism and the SYSTOUR project, with the addition of specific elements tailored to the experiential tourism sector. The criteria analysed are as follows:

- Valorisation: the experience makes possible to learn about, deepen and enhance local heritages and activities
- Local reality: the experience is promoted by a local reality (at the most the region it belongs to)
- Natural resource: the experience is based on a unique/rare natural feature of the territory
- Testimony: the experience allows to get in touch with the local population (direct testimonies), narratives
- Mobility: the experience allows to explore the territory through sustainable means of transport
- Youth/women: the experience promotes/is promoted by/from the work of women/youth realities
- Diversification: the experience is delivered in different ways, depending on the needs of different target groups
- Digital: the experience incorporates technologies to make the experience more complete/smart/virtual
- Climate change: the experience raises awareness on climate change
- Plastic free: the experience reduces the environmental impact of plastic
- Enogastronomy: the experience promotes traditional food and beverage-related experience
- Food accessibility: the experience is designed to accommodate diverse nutritional and dietary requirements
- Inclusivity: the experience facilitates the accessibility to this area to more types of people/different types of abilities

For the purpose of the analysis, the qualitative values YES, NO, NA assigned to the specific attributes of the experiences were converted into numerical values, specifically 1 for Yes, 0 for No and NA remaining as not applicable. This transformation enabled a quantitative analysis of the dataset, allowing for the calculation of statistical indicators such as mean and standard deviation. This numerical approach also facilitates the generation of comparative charts and visual representations of the results.

Molise – Italy
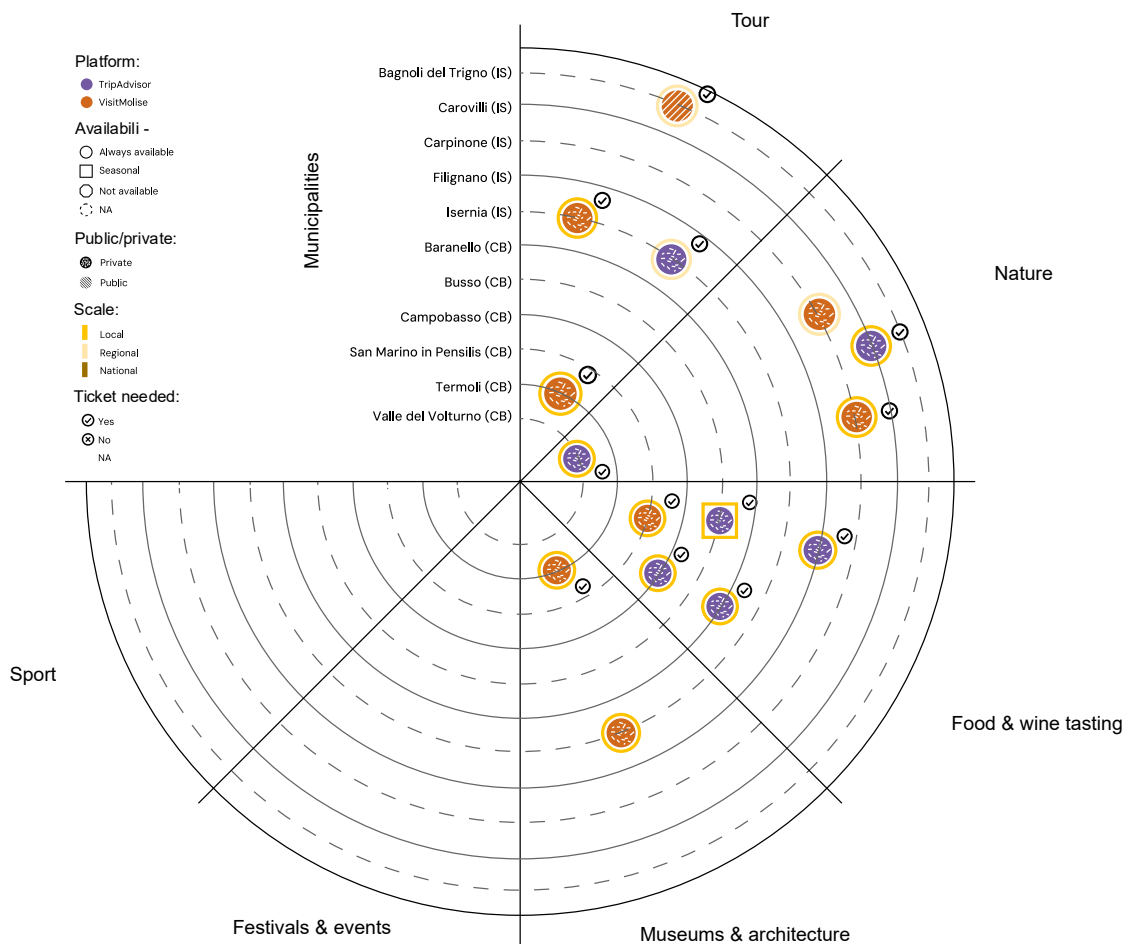
Figure 16: Molise radial graph (personal elaboration)

The results obtained from the analysis of the Molise region are consistent with a vision of rural and experiential tourism. In fact, we can see that experiences related to Food & Wine tasting are the most common among the categories, as evidenced from the data collected, as one third of the experiences are related to this. On the other hand, no experiences were recorded under the Sports or Festivals & Events categories. This is partly due to the fact that some experiences overlap thematically, particularly between sports, nature, and tours, but were assigned to only one main category to avoid duplication.
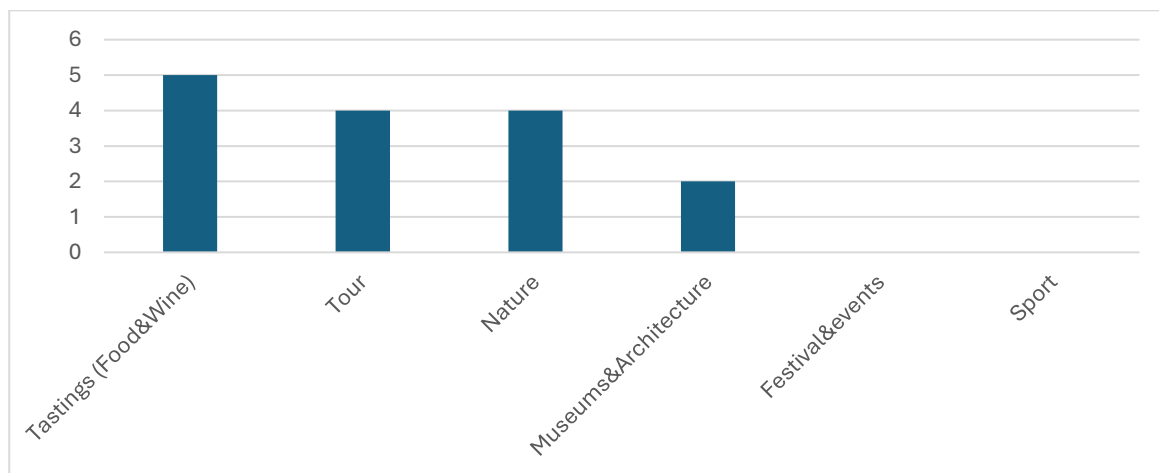
Figure 17: Experiences type, Molise region (personal elaboration)

Furthermore, the distribution between the two promotional platforms appears to be balanced, with a slight predominance of experiences promoted through VisitMolise, the regional DMO platform. This balance reflects an alignment between the official destination offering and the independent initiatives of various local actors who promote their experiences on Tripadvisor.

Regarding the geographical scope of the experiences, 67% (Figure 18) are concentrated at the local scale, confirming the commitment of local tourism operators to enhance their territory and primarily targeting national tourist flows (60%). The remaining 40% of the experiences, however, demonstrate a clear intent to expand beyond national borders, presenting offerings suitable also for international visitors (Figure 19).
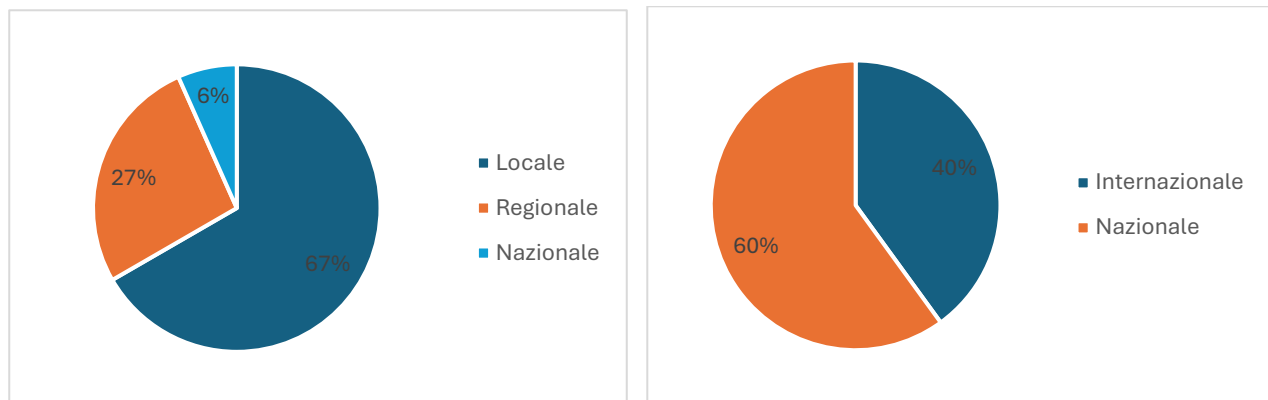
Figure 18: geographical extension of the experiences, Molise region (personal elaboration)

Figure 19: Influence area, Molise region (personal elaboration)

The offering is available year-round in 87% of cases, with only two experiences being seasonal, one of which is specifically tied to the truffle hunting season, which follows defined periods and modalities. Almost all the experiences are promoted by private organisations, with only one exception involving a public entity, which increases the overall competitiveness on the market. This, combined with the presence of several multi-day tour packages, that include additional services such as meals and accommodation, contributes to a relatively high average daily price per person, amounting to approximately €92.

Moreover, what emerges from the evaluation of the various experiences is primarily a strong focus on the local development (Figure 20), both in term of territorial promotion and in business involvement, an aspect that will be consistently observed across all the regions analysed. In the case of Molise, particular emphasis is also placed on fostering meaningful interaction between tourists and the local community, encouraging encounters that promote the sharing of traditions and daily life in a mutually enriching exchange.

Consistent with the category featuring the highest number of experiences, the *Food & Wine*-related activities achieved a positive score of 8 points, reflecting the centrality of local gastronomy in the experiential offering. Similarly, the mobility category also reached a score of 8, underlining a commitment to promoting soft and sustainable transport options for discovering the region's natural heritage, as well as diversifying the offer to accommodate different types of visitors. On the other hand, the categories with the lowest scores were those related to digitalisation, plastic-free practices, food accessibility and social inclusion, highlighting areas for potential improvement in the future development strategies.
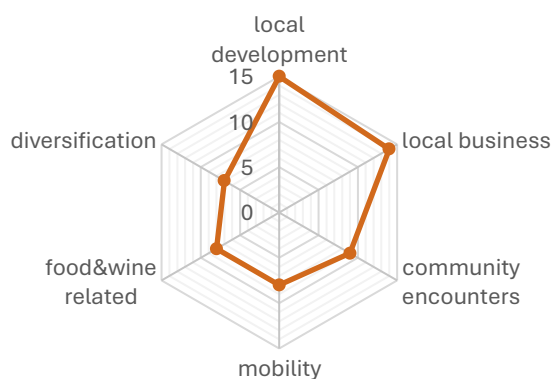
Figure 20: most significant fields of focus emerged from the evaluation, Molise region (personal elaboration)
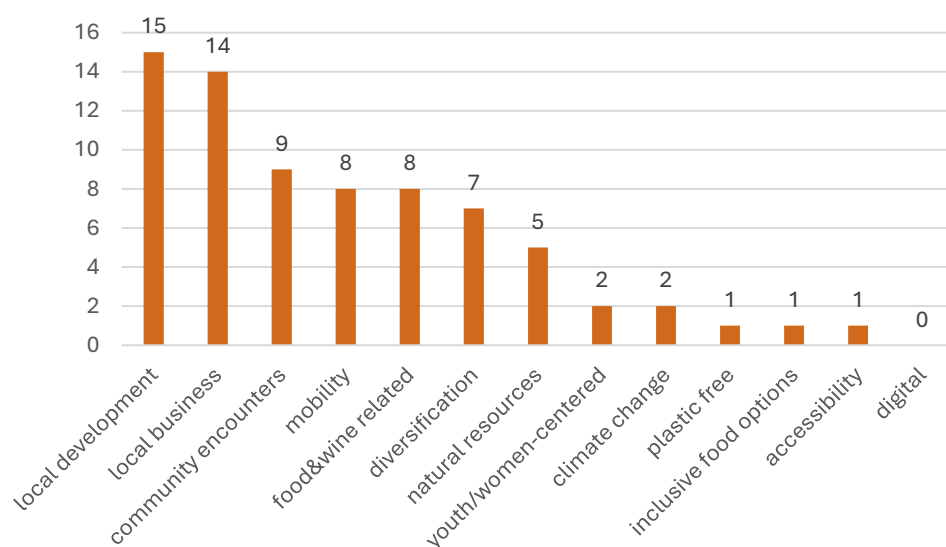
Figure 21: total evaluation of the experiences in the different field of study (personal elaboration)

By adding up the scores for each row, and therefore for each individual experience, the result is a ranking of the most virtuous experiences among those analysed, which then allowed for a comparison with the Best Practices proposed by the partners for SYSTOUR.

For the Italian region, the highest-rated Good Practice is *Planta Tour* with a score of 8. It is a guided tour to discover the natural and landscape heritage of Bagnoli del Trigno (IS), structured around the knowledge of local plants that have shaped the territory and the lives of its inhabitants over centuries, creating a bond of awareness between tradition and innovation. In addition to the guided tour, the programme includes workshops and tastings of ancient flavours and local traditions. The experience is a seasonal, full-day event conducted in Italian, suitable for participants of all ages. It represents an interesting example as it involves not only tourists and occasional visitors but is also provides an opportunity for local residents to deepen their knowledge of the area and contribute to the cultural exchange.

The second experience, with a score of 7, is *Flavours of the Sea Tour in Termoli*, located in the coastal town of Termoli. This guided tour explores the town's oldest district and port, a vital hub for trade and cultural exchange over the centuries. The visit includes a tour the historic shellfish purification plant and then to the local fish market, allowing visitors to immerse themselves in the culinary and maritime traditions of the area. The three-hour tour can be booked and taken throughout the year and, importantly, is also offered in LIS (Italian Sign Language), making it a more inclusive experience.

The third Good Practice selected, which also scored 7 points, belong to the category of food and wine experiences and is an *Oil Tasting* experience at the Marina Colonna farm in San Martino in Pensilis (CB). The tasting is complemented by a guided tour of the centuries-old olive groves and the estate farm, renowned for the high quality of its raw materials and traditional, sustainable production methods. The visit is available in Italian, English and French.

These tours, primarily centred around local food and wine traditions, differ significantly from the good practices proposed by the region for the SYSTOUR project. This divergence may be attributed to the nature of the platforms analysed, which tend to feature experiences with more immediate tourist appeal while the partners' contributions often prioritise other thematic or structural elements aligned with broader sustainability or innovation goals.

Lea-Artibai – Spain
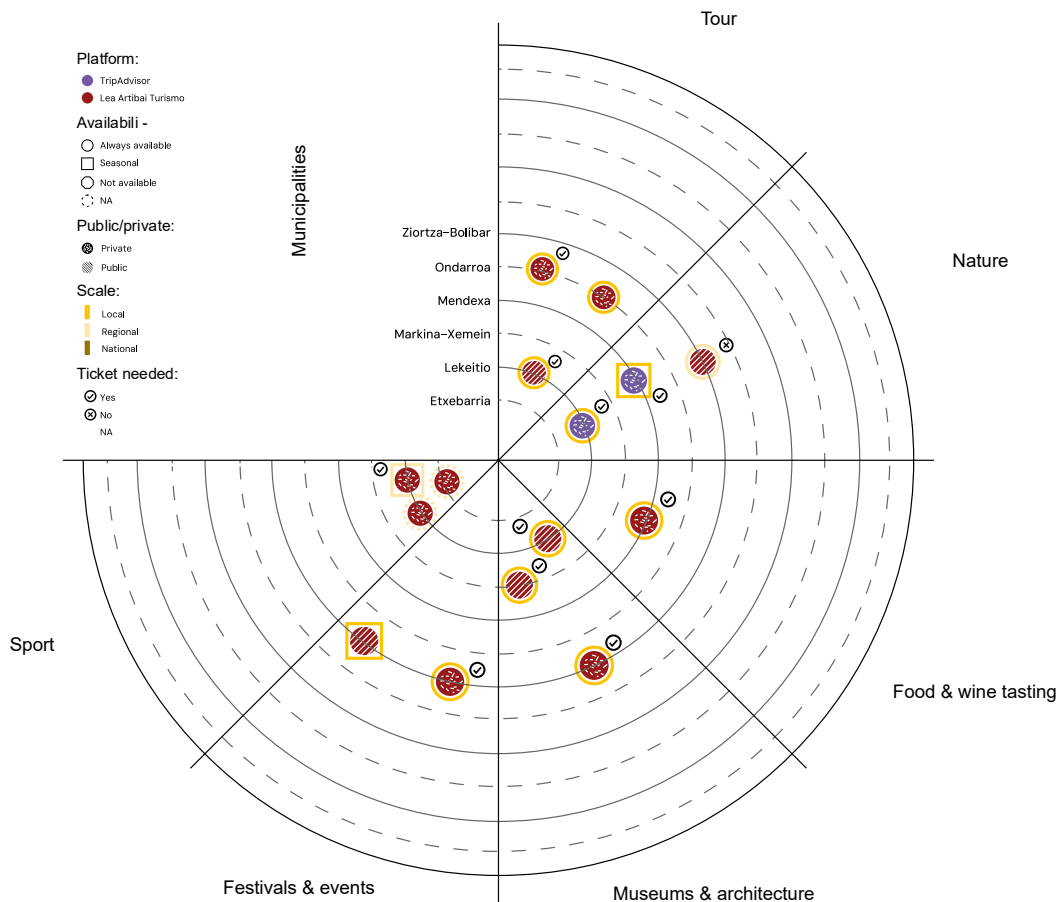
Figure 22: Lea-Artibai radial graph (personal elaboration)

The Spanish County of Lea-Artibai is characterised by experiences that are more evenly distributed across the various categories, with the exception of Festivals & Events and Tastings, which are less represented. It's interested to note that Tastings and food-related experiences is the less represented category as the Basque Country is one of the most renown places for its cuisine, there are 24 restaurants with at least one Micheline star, for a total of 34 stars (Euskadi Basque Country, 2022). But the products and recipes from land and sea are a fundamental part of the Basque identity.
As a result, the majority of organised activities focus on nature and outdoor experiences, highlighting a strong connection with the landscape and open-air environments (Figure 23).
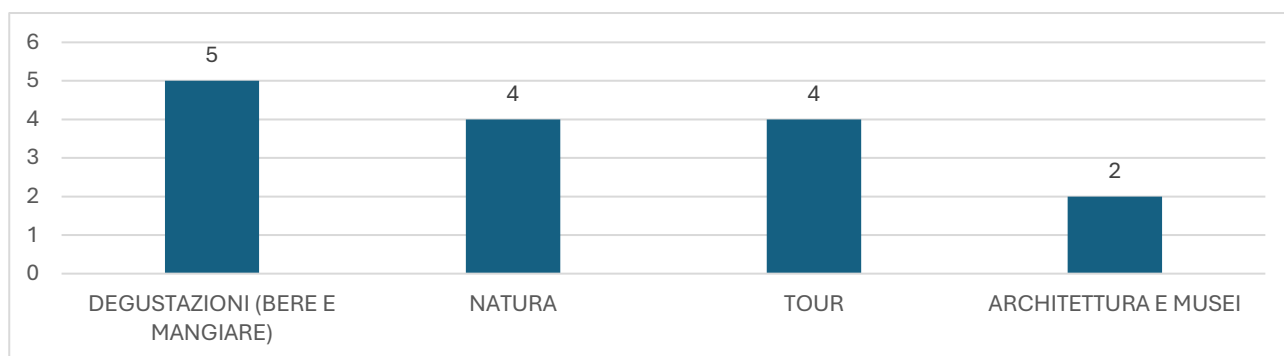
Figure 23: Experiences type, Lea-Artibai region (personal elaboration)

The 87% of the experiences were promoted through the Leartibai Turismo platform, while only two experiences, that satisfied the criteria, were founded on TripAdvisor (Figure 23). The DMO platform, managed by the Leartibai foundation, promotes all the touristic information of the comarca, including a section for the experiences, divided into Nature with offering for Active Tourism, Natural Heritage and Routes, Heritage that comprehend Cultural Heritage, Museums and Visits, and the last section for highlighting the peculiarity of Basque Identity. Each experience has a brief description, contact information and useful links.
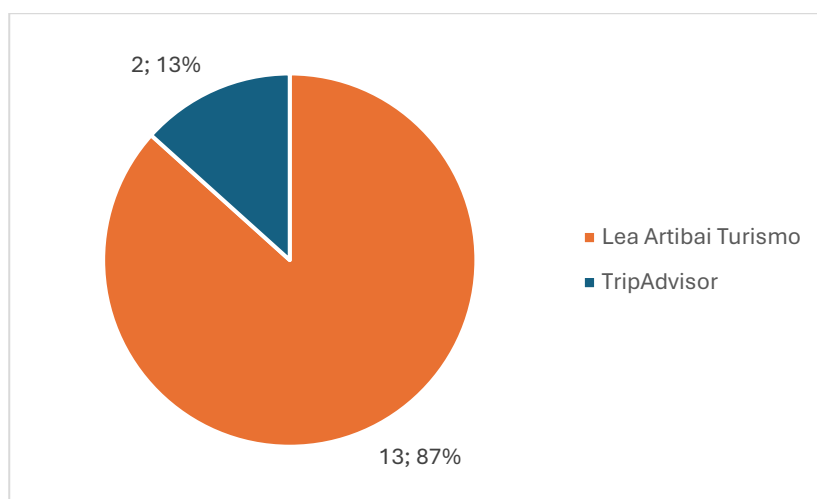
Figure 24: Platforms, Lea-Artibai region (personal elaboration)

The organisations promoting the activities are almost entirely private, with one exception of a public entity, and the activities are available throughout the year (87%), although some outdoor activities may be more difficult at certain times of the year and are therefore part of the seasonal offer (13%). (Figure 25).
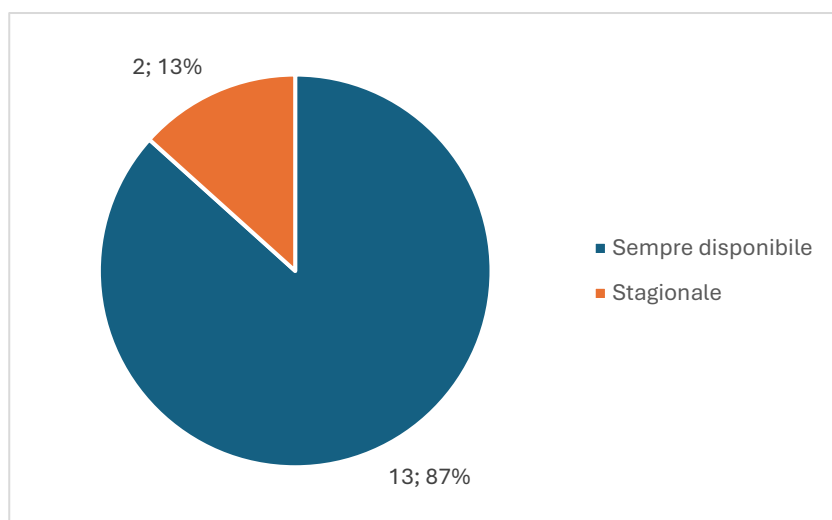
Figure 25: Availabilty, Lea-Artibai region (personal representation)

Despite the strong preservation and promotion of the Basque language (Euskera), the area of influence of the experiential offer extends to 60% of an international audience (Figure 26), with experiences extending locally in 67% of cases, regionally (Bizkaia) in 27% of cases and finally nationally in 6% of cases, with a single experience. (Figure 27).
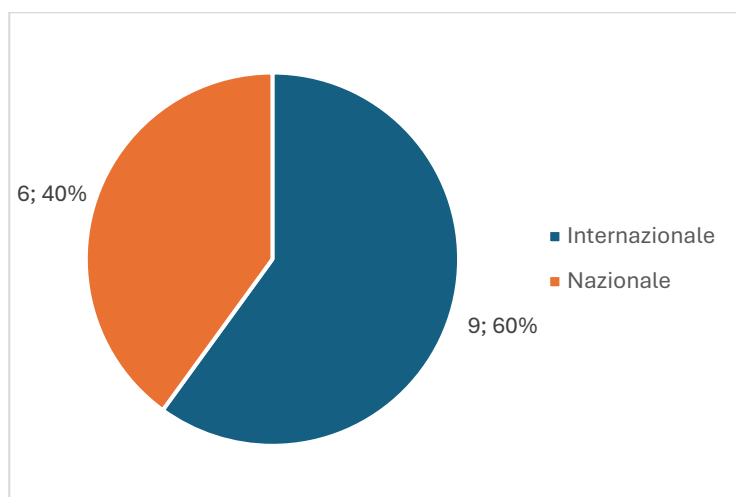
Figure 26: Area of influence, Lea-Artibai region (personal elaboration)
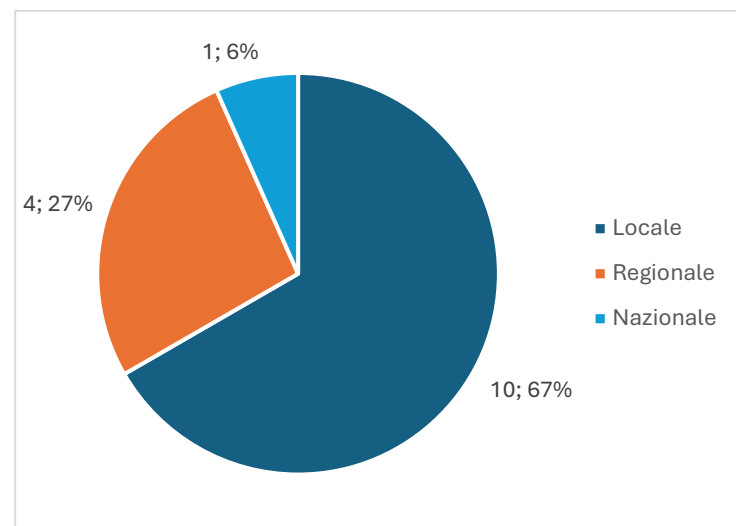
Figure 27: Scale, Lea-Artibai region (personal elaboration)

The experiences offered are also quite affordable, with an average price of €6.30, and the need to book in advance or purchase an admission ticket was reported as positive for one-third of the experiences.

The bar chart (Figure 28) highlighted the total scores across the different field of investigation. The highest ones are recorded in the areas of local development and local business, both reaching the top value of 15, indicating a strong emphasis on initiatives supporting the local economy and community growth. Natural resources follow with 6 points, alongside mobility and diversification, showing moderate attention toward environmental aspects and offering varied tourism experiences. Other fields registered some relevance, progressively with lowering scores, with digital, inclusive food options and accessibility as the least addressed.
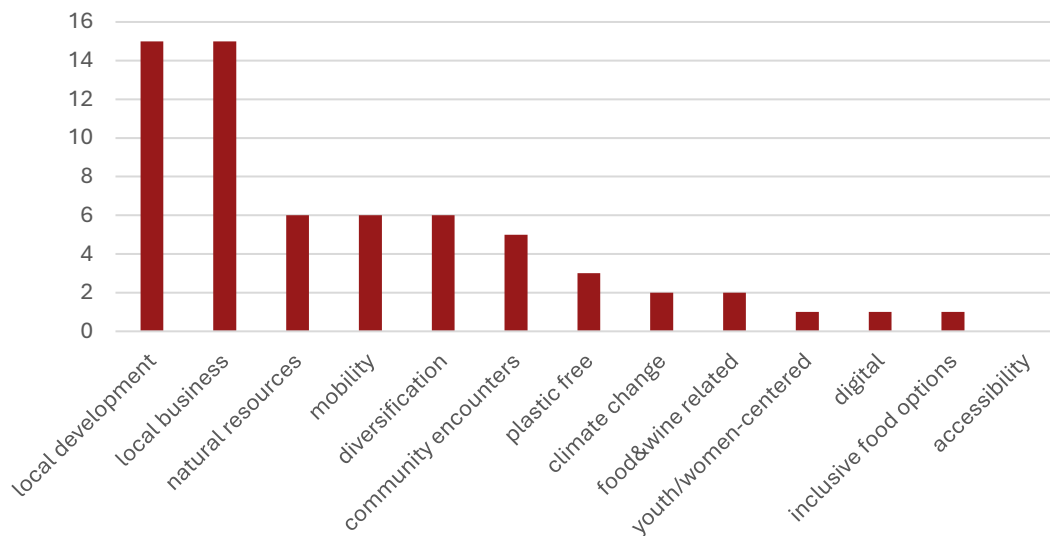
Figure 28: total scores across different field of investigation, Lea-Artibai region (personal elaboration)

The resulting Good Practices, showcase how local offerings tend to emphasise active engagement with the natural surroundings.

The first example is the *Wine and Fish Route*, which scored 6 points, a walkable path connecting inland areas of Ziorta-Bolibar, the starting point in the comarca, to the two coastal towns of Ondarroa and Lekeitio. The route retraces the ancient trade route for transporting goods from the ocean such as fish and seafood, with wine, cheese and vegetables that were grown and produced in the inland villages of the province. The GR 38 merges with the Lea Path, proposed by the Spanish partner as a Good Practice, in the version that arrives in Lekeitio, thus integrating the history of the Lea River, which was of fundamental importance in the industrial and metallurgical development of the neighbouring villages. The trail is accessible all year round, with walking times ranging from 5 to 8 hours depending on the length of the route. Information and signage along the route are mainly provided in Euskera and Spanish, with QR codes commonly providing links to the translation in English and French.

Continuing with nature-related experiences, *Ur Lekeitio* is a local association specialising in active tourism that offers sports activities for all needs and levels, from water sports such as SUP, canoeing and sea kayaking to hiking and mountain exploration. The experiences last between 1.5 and 3 hours on average and cost €27 on average. Accessibility for people with disabilities is not indicated. This GP has a rating of 5 points and ranks third compared to the following experience.

In fact, *Axpe Cider House* scored 6 points with its food and wine tour of Basque cider culture. The facility is a family-owned business, where it is possible to reserve the Txoko for grilling, wood-fired cooking and unlimited cider and Txakoli wine. The tour consists of a visit to the vineyard and orchard

where the raw materials for their flagship products are grown, followed by a discovery of all the stages of production. The experience ends with a tasting of cider and some typical foods.
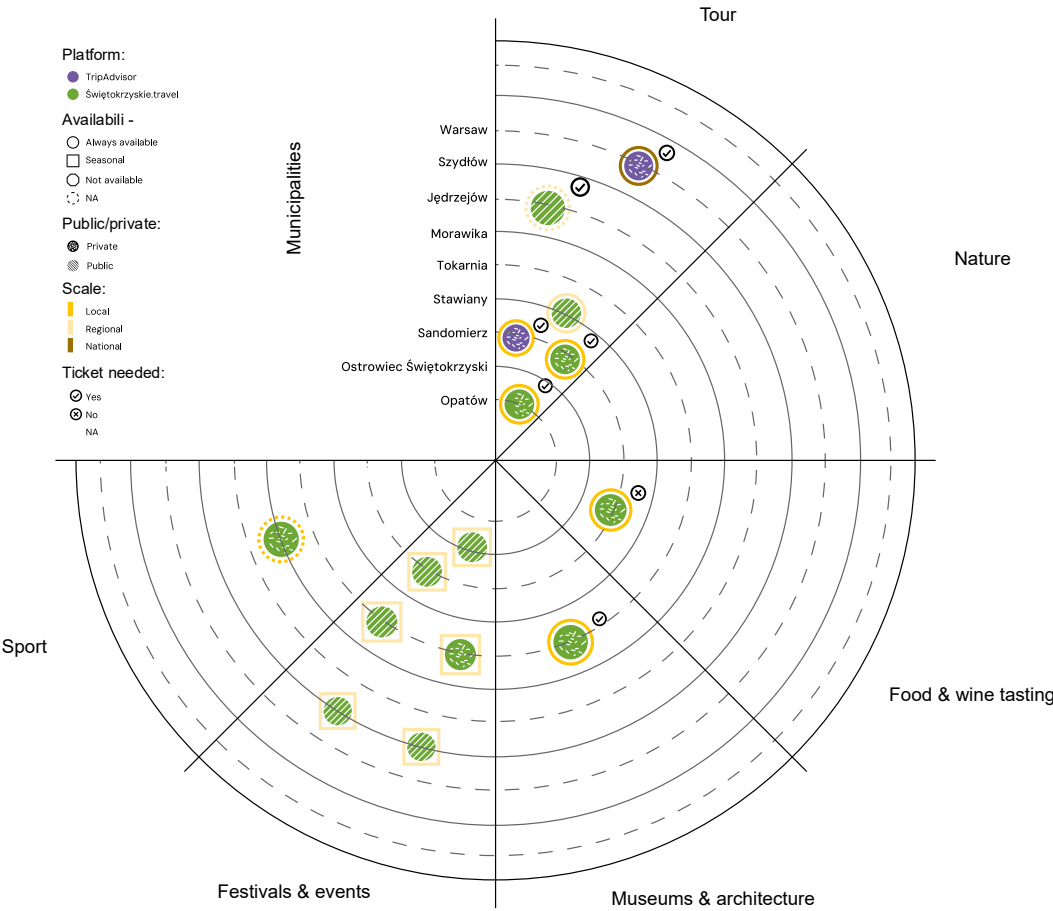
Świętokrzyskie – Poland

Figure 29: Świętokrzyskie radial graph (personal elaboration)

The results on the analysis on the polish region of Świętokrzyskie, display a notable emphasis on local festivals and events with 6 experiences in this one field, making it stand out from other regions. Guided tours also represent a significant portion of the classified experiences, also with 6 experiences recorded. Interestingly, no nature-related experiences were identified during the analysis, an uncommon data, giving the natural heritage of the region and the presence of the Świętokrzyski National Park. (Figure 30Figure 29)
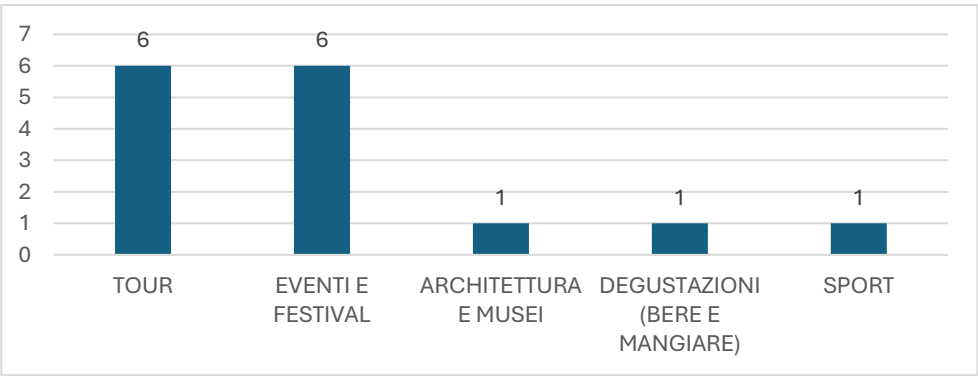
Figure 30: experiences type, Świętokrzyskie region (personal elaboration)

The analysis of the legal structures of promoting organisations confirmed the previous chart, as festivals and events are organised by public entities, while the others are private activities. (Figure 31)
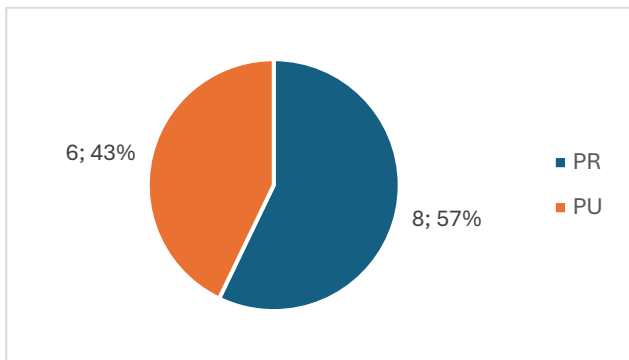
Figure 31: legal structure of the promoting organisation, Świętokrzyskie region (personal elaboration)

The majority of the experiences (87%, as visible in Figure 32) were promoted on the DMO platform Świętokrzyskie.travel. However, navigating the website is not straightforward, as it lacks a dedicated section for experiences and is instead organised by thematic categories and geographical area.
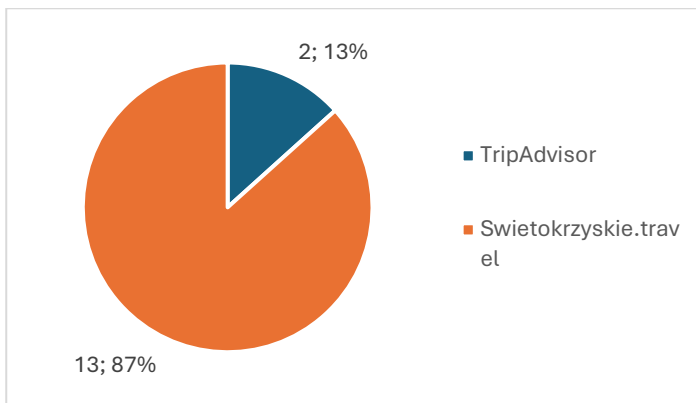
Figure 32: platforms, Świętokrzyskie region (personal elaboration)

Compared to the other regions analysed, the scale area of the experiences appears to be predominantly regional (67%), rather than local or national (Figure 33). However, the area of influence remains balanced mainly targeting national audiences and those designed for international visitors with 7 and 8 cases respectively.
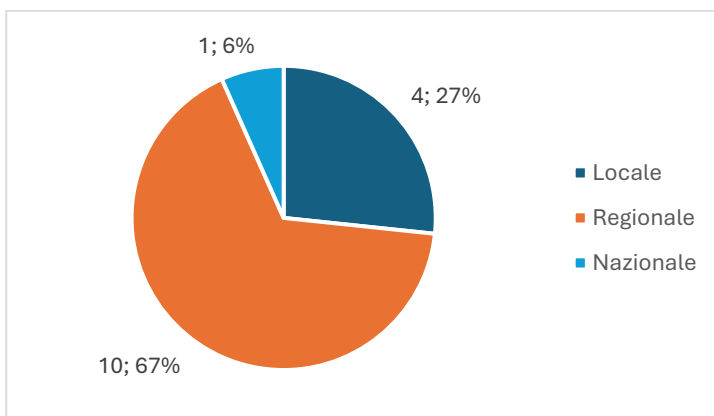
Figure 33: scale area, Świętokrzyskie region (personal elaboration)

Finally, only six experiences required booking in advance, with an average daily price per person of €56,6. This price was dictated by the presence of a few guided tours lasting several days, which raised the average price due to the comprehensive nature of the service.

Figure 34: most significant fields of focus emerged from the evaluation, Świętokrzyskie region (personal elaboration)

The overall evaluation of the experiences reaffirms the commitment to action that stimulate the local economy, strengthening the link between tourism and the local productive context, and confirming the relevance of these dimensions within the development of the project's regions.

Among the selected good practices, two are particularly relevant as they align closely with the types of experiences proposed within the framework of the project, reinforcing the region's focus on cultural and community-based tourism.

The first one, is the *Ethno-business* Good Practice in Tokarnia, an open-air museum that offers an immersive journey through cottages and historic buildings that showcase traditional rural life. Visitors are introduced to local heritage through displays of popular tools, storytelling sessions focused on everyday practices and the opportunity to actively engage in folk games and activities. The guided tour is always available throughout the year, but it is offered only in Polish, so it is not accessible to international people and has a ticket cost of €4,7 (price converted in euros from the national currency, złotys). This experience scored 7 points in the evaluation rating.

The *Apple Trail of Sandomierz* is the second experience proposed with 6 points, a 200 km thematic tourist route across the Sandomierz district. Given its length, the route has been designed for motorised tourists, but shorter sections can also be explored by bike or on foot. The trail passes across rural towns, fruit orchards and river valleys, offering visitors the opportunity to discover the rich cultural and natural heritage. Along the route, the territory offers agritourism farms, wineries, where visitors can explore traditional and modern fruit-growing techniques, taste local produce, and visit wine cellars.

The third Good Practice recorded for the Polish region (rating: 4 points), that differs from the ones proposed by the partners, is the guided tour of the *Underground Tourist Route* in Opatów. The visit explores the dungeons of Opatów, built during the city's prosperous period as a trading hub. After years of neglect, the city renovated the route resulting in a 335-meter-long underground tourist route with 46 chambers. The tour is 45 minutes long and it cost €6 (price converted)
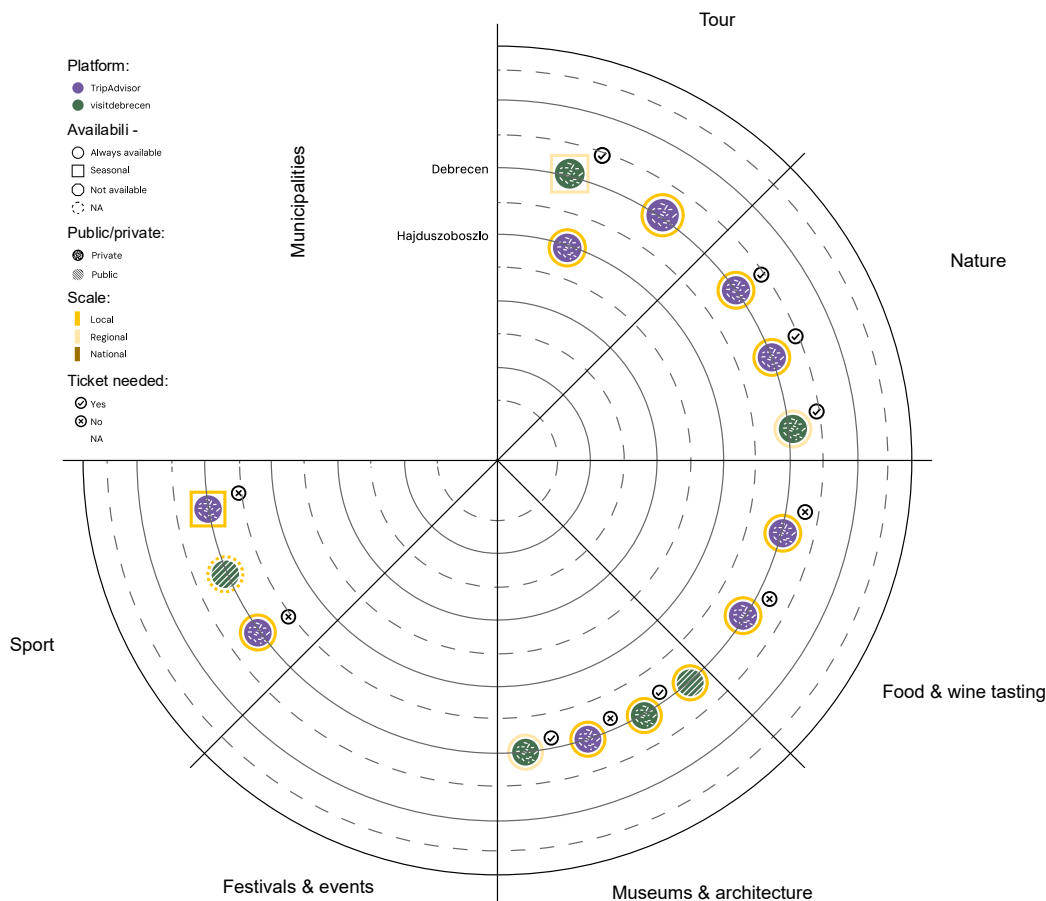
Hajdú-Bihar – Hungary

Figure 35: Hajdú-Bihar radial graph (personal elaboration)

In the Hungarian Hajdú-Bihar County, nearly all the identified experiences are concentrated in Debrecen and its surrounding areas, with a particular emphasis on architecture and museums, while a lack of offers in the Festival&Events category has emerged in the analysis (Figure 35). The internal platform, visitdebrecen, served as a main official source of tourist information for the area. The platform proved to be easy to navigate, particularly due to its dedicated section for local experiences and the "see&do" category. The experiences selected on the platform although represent the 40% of the total, as shown in Figure 36.
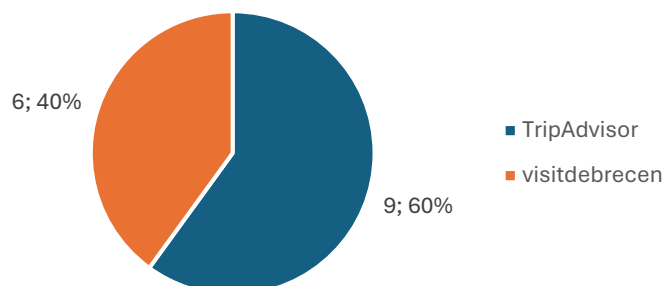
Figure 36: Platforms, Hajdú-Bihar region (personal elaboration)

Consistently with this geographical concentration around the capital city, 11 of the collected experiences are set at a local level, while 3 are structured tours extending to the regional level. One experience, however, did not provide sufficient information and was therefore marked as NA (Figure 37)
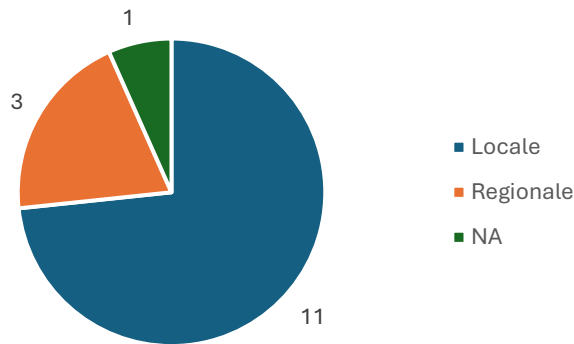
Figure 37: Scale area, Hajdú-Bihar region (personal elaboration)

The area of influence of the collected experiences is predominantly international, with 9 experiences targeting international visitors. This is mainly due to the availability of multilingual services, despite the rural character of the area, which nonetheless benefits from its connection to the urban context of Debrecen. In 87% of the cases, the experiences are promoted by private businesses, ensuring year-round availability in 73% of the cases, while 13% are seasonal. Additionally, two experiences were either unavailable at the time of data collection, despite still being promoted on the platform, or lacked sufficient information, thus marked as NA. (Figure 38)
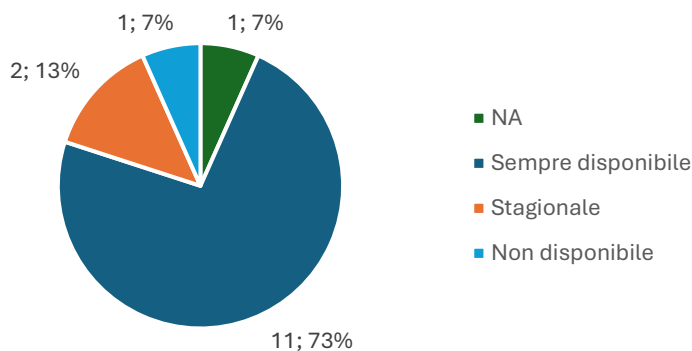
Figure 38: Availability, Hajdú-Bihar region (personal elaboration)

Differing slightly from the trends observed in the other regions, 33% of the experiences in the Hungarian region are offered free of charge and do not require advance booking. However, the average daily price per person remains relatively high, at €105,5 (converted in euros), as the paid experiences predominantly consist of sull-day private tours, which naturally involve higher costs. (Figure 39)
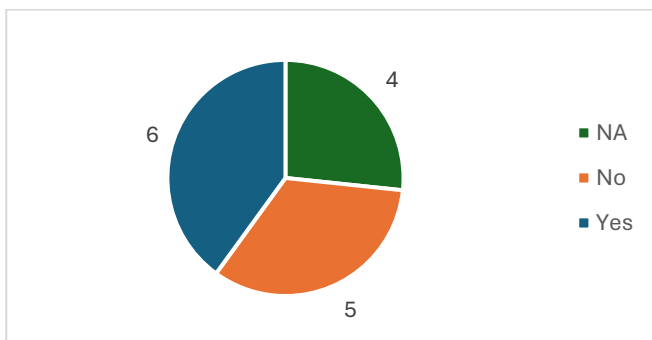

Figure 39: Need for a ticket, Hajdú-Bihar region (personal elaboration)

In contrast with the trends observed in other regions, this case study showed lower ratings even in typically high-performing categories such as local development and local business, suggesting potential gaps in the offer, as Figure 40 illustrates.
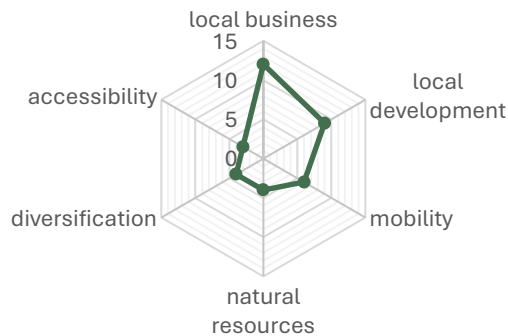

Figure 40: most significant fields of focus emerged from the evaluation, Hajdú-Bihar region (personal elaboration)

The good practices that emerged from the analysis point in a different direction with reference to the larger category of Museums&Architecture, highlighting experiences more closely related to nature, with a specific focus on the Hortobágy National Park. This contrast suggests a potential underrepresentation of nature-based tourism in the available listings, despite its relevance at the regional level.

These findings are further supported by the Good Practices emerged from the evaluation, the *Private tour to Debrecen and Hortobágy National Park* and the *Beaver safari and the magic of Hortobágy*. The former is a walking tour to explores Debrecen's historical landmarks and the Hortobágy National Park, where visitors can experience the "csikós" horse show, visit the Herdsmen Museum, and take a carriage ride through the vast plains. The experience is available with guides that speaks several languages (German, Russian, Portuguese, English, Italian, French and Spanish), and has a cost of €376. The latter, still inside Hortobágy National Park, offers a close look at Eurasian beavers in their habitat. The experience includes a boat trip on the Hortobágy River, where participants can observe the ecosystem and the diverse local wildlife. The activity can be booked all year round at €228 for a 4-hour tour. Both experiences has scored 6 points.
The third selected Good Practice is *Huskeebike* a rental service for segway scooters, a sustainable mobility option to discover Debrecen and the surrounding nature. The average time of the activity is 2 hours and it is not accessible to everyone.

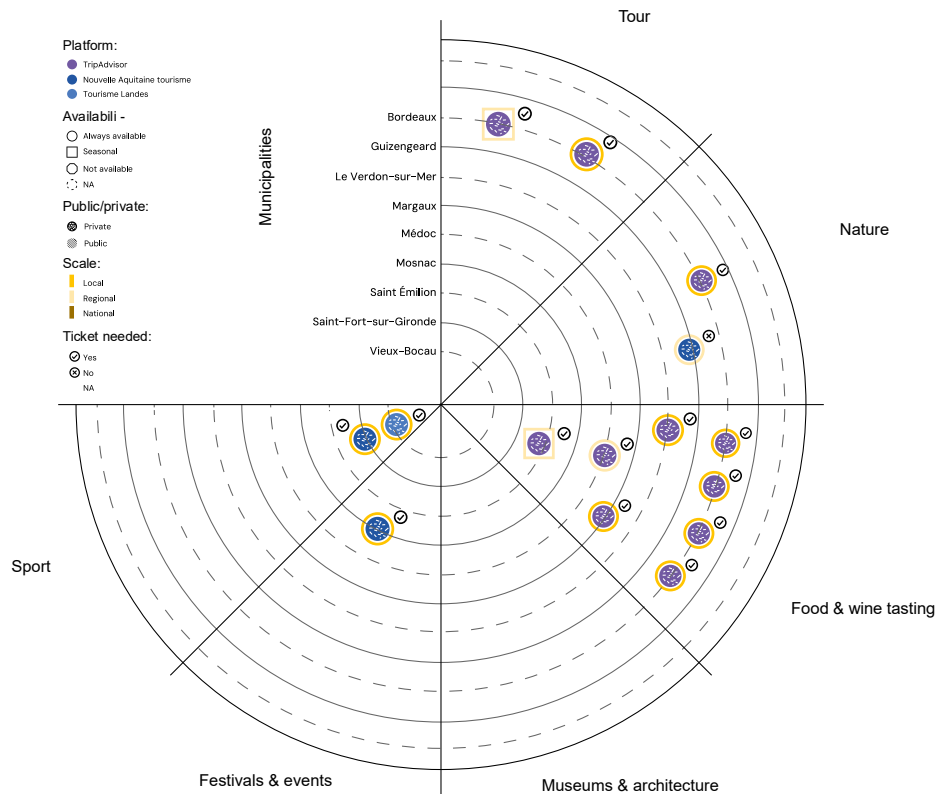**Nouvelle-Aquitaine/ Landes & Pyrénées-Atlantiques – France**

Figure 41: Nouvelle-Aquitaine/ Landes & Pyrénées-Atlantiques radial graph (personal elaboration)

The experiences identified in France are primarily focused on food and wine (Figure 41), aligning with the widespread perception of the country as a destination known for its culinary excellence. While this aspect is well covered, especially on Tripadvisor, focus on nature and rural-related activities are largely covered in the DMO platforms, Nouvelle Aquitaine Tourisme and Tourisme Landes (Figure 42), highlighting a discrepancy between the two strategies of promotion, one more consumeristic and easily profitable, the other more aware of a local sustainable development of the sector and the wellbeing of the inhabitants.
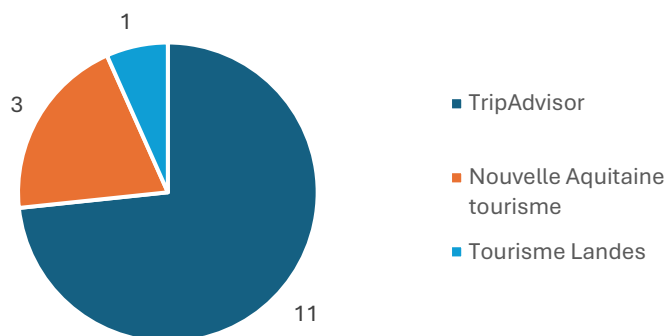

Figure 42: Platforms, Nouvelle-Aquitaine/ Landes & Pyrénées-Atlantiques region (personal elaboration)

This region is the only one that has scored a 100% of private companies that promotes the experiences, as 73% of them are located at a local level as shown in Figure 43.
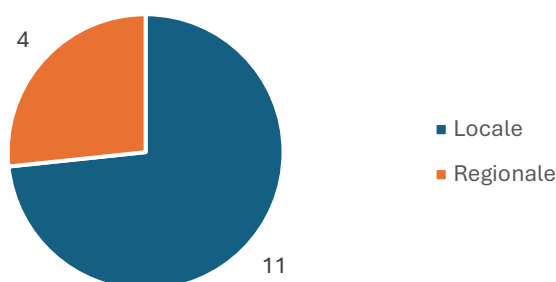
Figure 43: Scale, Nouvelle-Aquitaine/ Landes & Pyrénées-Atlantiques region (personal elaboration)

A significant majority, 80%, of the experiences are always available to be enjoyed (Figure 44), with previous booking. The average price is up to €73,84 per person.
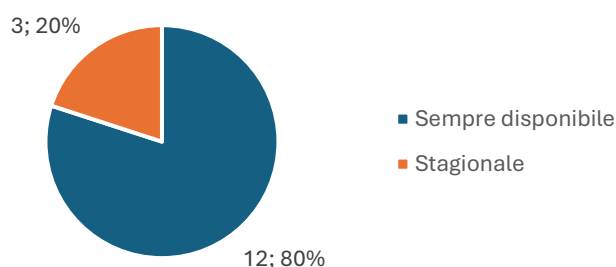

Figure 44: Availability, Nouvelle-Aquitaine/ Landes & Pyrénées-Atlantiques region (personal elaboration)

The evaluation of the French region highlighted the importance of local development and confirmed the relevance of the food & wine category. However, one of the main gaps identified concerned food accessibility, which should be improved given the significance of the sector and the growing awareness around these issues, particularly in relation to dietary choices and the increasing prevalence of food allergies.
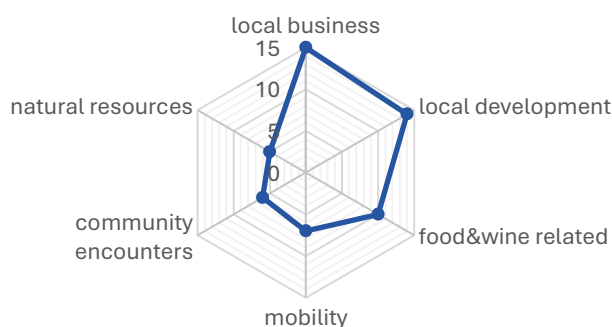

Figure 45: most significant fields of focus emerged from the evaluation, Nouvelle-Aquitaine/ Landes & Pyrénées-Atlantiques region (personal elaboration)

Based on the conducted evaluation, the three emerged good practices for the French region combine cultural heritage, outdoor activities and enogastronomy.

The *One-day e-bike tour with wine tasting,* scoring a total of 7 points, explores the Saint-Émilion wine region by electric bike, integrating sustainable mobility with guided visits to historic châteaux. The inclusion of wine tastings and a picnic among the vineyards enriches the sensory dimension of the

experience and creates a strong connection between landscape and local tradition. Despite the experiential richness, the price of €174 per person makes it a premium offer, potentially limiting accessibility to certain visitor groups. The experience is offered in French and English, broadening its appeal to international tourist, although no specific measures were identified regarding accessibility or inclusion.

The second is the *Small group wine tasting and Châteaux tour*, with a rating of 6 points. The experience located either in Saint-Émilion medieval village or in the Médoc area, follows a similar format as above, combining visits to emblematic locations with tastings and educational workshop on wine-making techniques. The reduced group size encourages interaction but also contributes to higher costs, with a price of €100 per person. The experience is available in French and Englis but, againg, accessibility features remain limited.

Cruise with a glass of wine and canelé in Bordeaux, is the third, 6-points rating as well, Good Practice. It offers a different perspective by sailing past Bordeaux's architectural landmarks while enjoying a canelé pastry and a glass of wine, successfully integrating culinary and cultural elements in the same experience. With a more affordable price of €19 per person and availability in multiple languages, it represents a more accessible product for a broader audience. While attractive, it remains primarily focused on leisure, lacking the deeper engagement with local producers or community interaction seen in other best practices.

If the objective of tourism strategy, consistent with the good practices proposed within the SYSTOUR project, is to promote a more distinctive and region-specific narrative, it becomes essential to highlight other dimensions of the tourist offer, such as nature and outdoor activities. These aspects can contribute to a more diversified and sustainable representation of the territories involved.

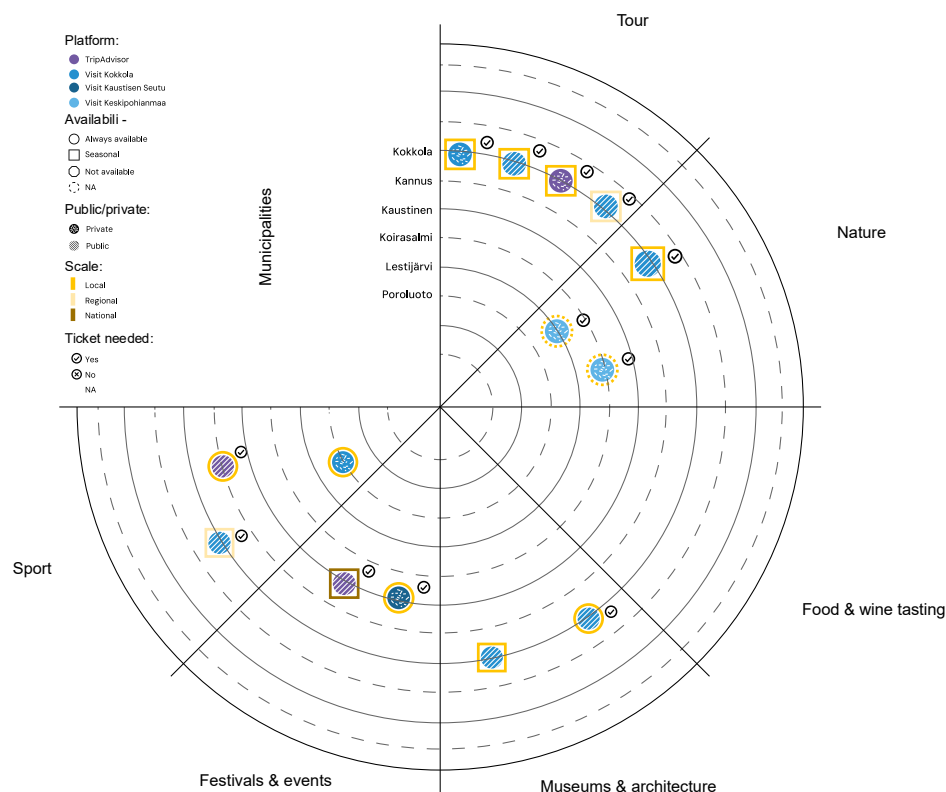## Central Ostrobothnia- Finland

Figure 46: Central Ostrobothnia radial graph (personal elaboration)

The Finnish region of Central Ostrobothnia stands out for its dominance of outdoor experiences, with a clear absence of tasting-related activities (Figure 46). Nature remains the common thread across the various categories, with guided tours in natural settings, open-air festivals and outdoor sports activities with a direct connection with the surrounding environment. Due to the seasonality of weather conditions, the availability of the experiences is currently limited (Figure 47), but the ongoing shift in climate patterns could lead to milder temperatures over longer periods, potentially representing an opportunity to extend the tourism season and diversify the offer throughout the year.
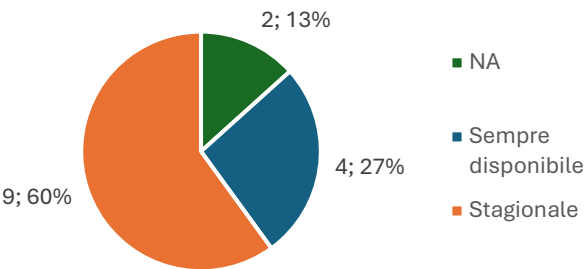

Figure 47: Availability, Central Ostrobothnia region (personal elaboration)

Differing from other regions, the experiences of Finland are for the majority (60%, Figure 48) promoted by public entities, though three different internal online platforms: Visit Kokkola, the most popular one, Visit Keskipohinmaa and Visit Kaustinen Seutu. This choice to use different website could be perceived confusing for visitors, especially international, as the information are spread across the web. (Figure 49)
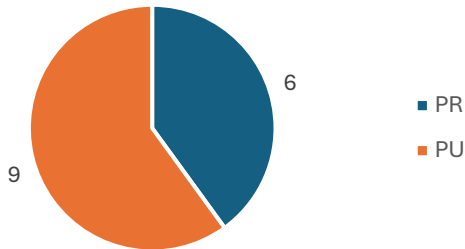

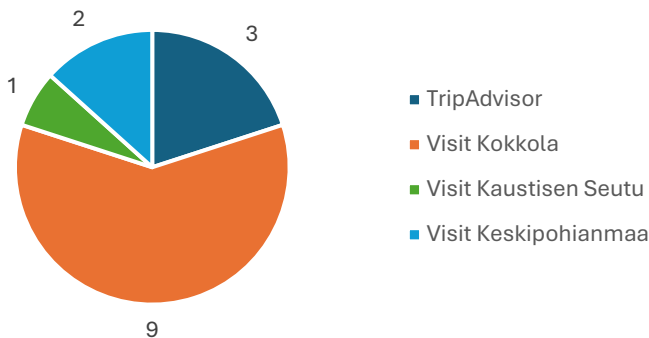*Figure 48: Public and private organisations, Central Ostrobothnia region (personal elaboration)*

Figure 49: Platforms, Central Ostrobothnia region (personal elaboration)

The data also support the importance of tailoring the information to a broader audience as 80% of the experiences are destined to international visitors as shown in Figure 50
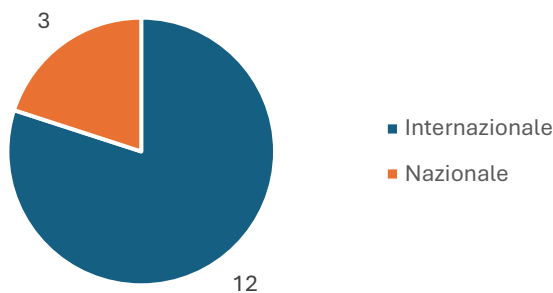
Figure 50: Area of interest, Central Ostrobothnia region (personal elaboration)

In addition, a significant proportion of the experiences (87%) requires advance booking, with an average daily cost of €99,64 per person (Figure 51).
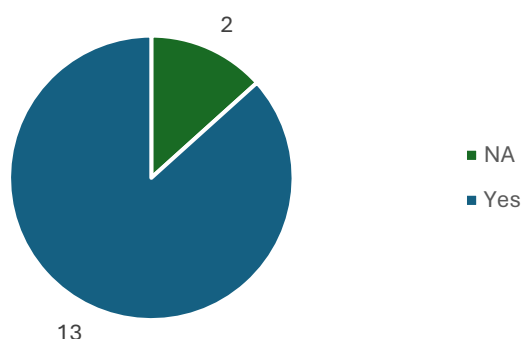

Figure 51: need for a ticket, Central Ostrobothnia region (personal elaboration)

The evaluation of Central Ostrobothnia's experiences segue il trend delineato fino a questo punto con un'enfasi sul local business, vediamo però che il local development ha ottenuto un punteggio alto ma leggermente inferiore alle altre regioni. Anche la categoria natural resources ha ottenuto un punteggio di 6 punti, nonostante l'importanza di questa categoria. C'è una mancanza completa di youth and women-centred activities, che non era stata registrata nelle altre regioni. (Figure 52)
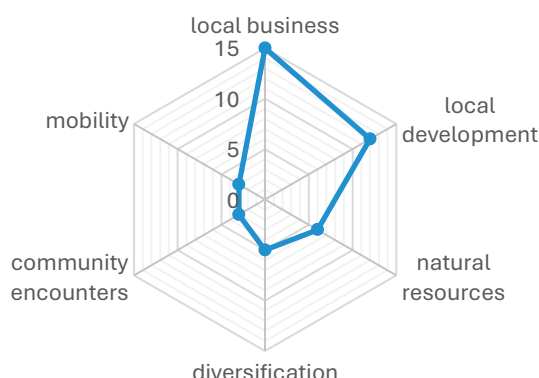
Figure 52: most significant fields of focus emerged from the evaluation, Central Ostrobothnia region (personal elaboration)

The *Kaustinen Folk Music Festival* (rating 5) represents one of Finland's most renowned cultural events, bringing together both Finnish and international folk artists. In addition to the concerts, the programme includes workshops, cultural activities and local gastronomy. The festival remains a seasonal event, limited to summer. Information on languages available during the festival is currently

limited to Finnish and English and no specific inclusive practices were identified. The ticket prices vary depending on the event, with daily access typically costing around €50.

The *Lighthouse Isle of Tankar* tour, with a score rating of 4, offers an immersive nature-based experience, combining maritime heritage with local culture. Travelling aboard the M/S Jenny, visitors can reach the Island of Tankar, where they can visit the historic lighthouse, the local Seal Hunting Museum and enjoy additional services such as a sauna. Despite its appeal, the tour operates only during specific periods due to the weather and seasonal conditions, limiting its availability. The experience is mainly offered in Finnish, with English guide available upon request and the price is around €30 per person for the boat tour, with additional costs for optional activities.

The third selected Good Practice scored 4 points: the *Guided seatrout fishing tours in the archipelago of Kokkola*. It gathers a more specialised audience of sportfishing enthusiasts. Led by Andreas Forsberg, a third-generation fisherman, the experience provides both guided fishing trips and boat transfer services to nearby islets. This tour is particularly valuable in terms of preserving and transmitting local fishing traditions, contributing to a form of experiential tourism rooted in personal stories and local knowledge. But its accessibility remains limited, both in terms of language and inclusiveness. Pricing is tailored to small groups and private bookings, depending on the chosen activity.

The selected examples of good practices reinforce the trend, confirming the strong connection between nature and local traditions and culture. This emphasizes Finland's unique positioning as a destination for nature-based tourism, although it also highlight the potential to diversify the offer by integrating other thematic dimensions such as gastronomy-related activities.

General evaluation

The overall evaluation of the experiences, conducted through the set of criteria listed above, including the degree of local engagement, support for communities and the environment, as well as sustainability in areas such as mobility and climate change, has revealed a variety of outcomes.

On the positive side, almost every experience demonstrates a strong connection to the local context, actively contributing to the development of both the territory and its communities as illustrated in Figure 53.

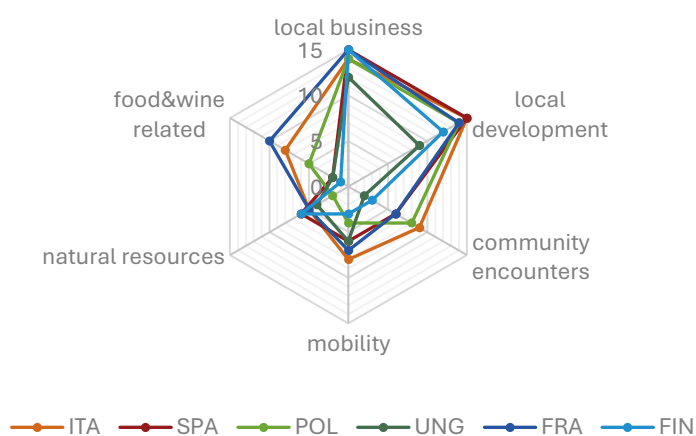*Figure 53: most significant fields of focus emerged from the evaluation for each region (personal elaboration)*

However, several critical issues have also emerged. These include limited accessibility, insufficient support for initiatives led by young people and women, and a lack of attention to the digital dimension.

Moreover, there is a need for greater emphasis on raising awareness around climate change and promoting sustainable practices. (Figure 54)
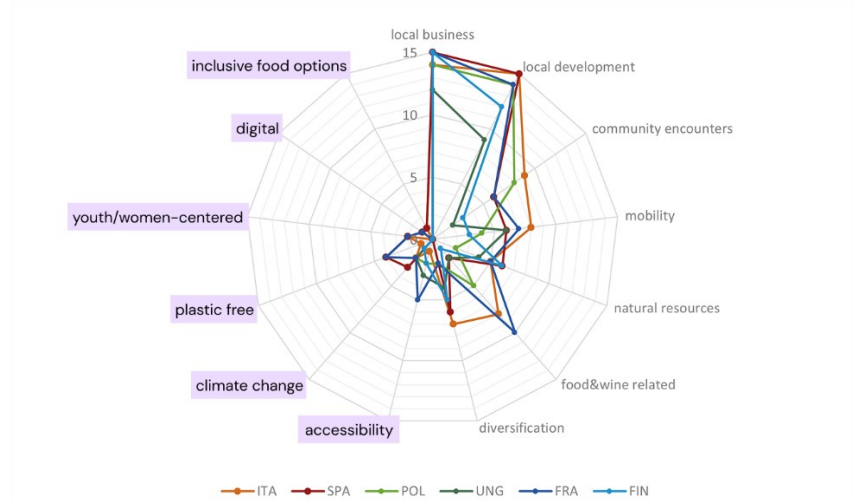

Figure 54: Limitations and gaps: areas for improvement (personal elaboration)

Looking at the analysis as a whole, several key areas emerge as priorities for future development. First, it is necessary to work on the diversification of the tourist offer to cover a broad range of categories and thematic areas. This would help create a more balanced and resilient offer, capable of meeting the needs of different visitor profiles and generating added value for local communities.

Accessibility is another crucial aspect that deserves greater attention. Designing inclusive experiences is not always straightforward, but it is increasingly necessary, especially in internal and rural areas. These territories offer valuable opportunities to move away from overtourism while providing dedicated and immersive experiences. Nevertheless, as shown in Table 4, the proportion of accessible experiences remains limited, only the 14% (13 of 90) is completely accessible, even though the criteria refer only to physical disabilities and wheelchair users, indicating a clear margin for improvement. In addition, particular attention should be given to both physical and mental accessibility but also include aspects such as dietary needs, cultural inclusion and language diversity, aligning with the growing awareness of these issues among tourists.

How many experiences are accessible?	NA	NO (non-autonomous)	NO (sot specified)	NO (wheelchair)	SI (for all)	Total
FIN	13				2	15
FRA	3			7	5	15
ITA	5		1	5	4	15
POL	12			2	1	15
SPA	12	1	2			15
HUN	8		5	1	1	15
Total	**53**	**1**	**8**	**15**	**13**	**90**

Table 4: number of accessible experiences (personal elaboration)

Finally, another relevant element is the consistency of the experiences promoted across the different platforms and ensuring a coherent and recognisable image of the destination is essential to strengthen its positioning, particularly when reaching international audiences. Offering multilingual services represents an essential component of this process, as it increases the attractiveness of the experience and improves engagement. Figure 55 illustrates the incidence of the different platforms used by regional operators, in which we can see that Świętokrzyskie.travel and Leartibai Turismo

promoted each 13 experiences out of 90 followed by Visit Kokkola with 9. The biggest slice of the pie chart is Tripadvisor, as the communal platform for all regions.
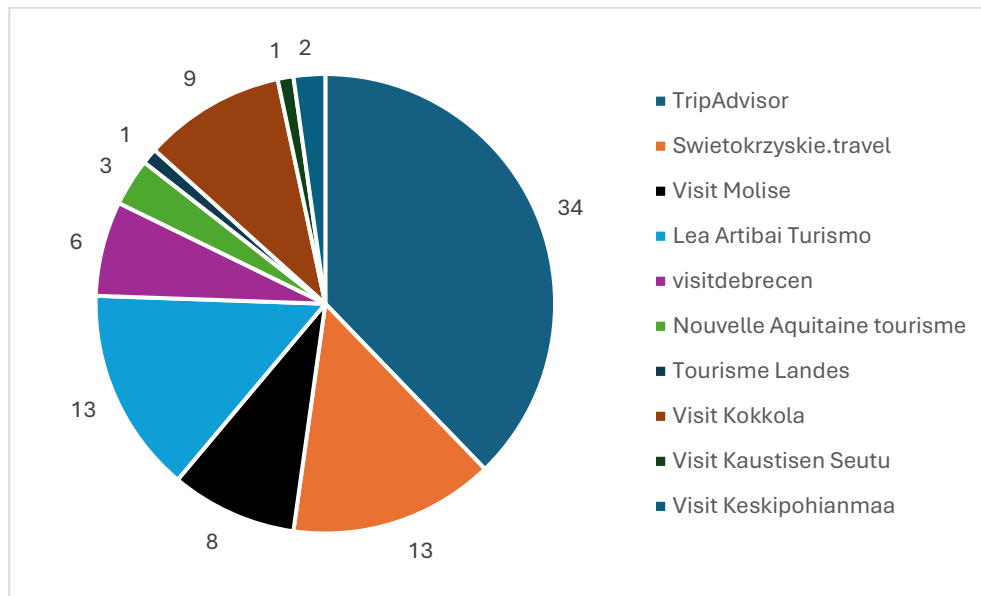

Figure 55: Online platforms incidence (personal elaboration)

These insights align with the goals of the SYSTOUR project, as it promote more sustainable, distinctive and accessible tourism models, while enhancing the specific identity of each territory.

5.6 Follow-up survey: feedback and insights from project partners

As previously mentioned in chapter 4.2, the results of this analysis were presented to the international partners of SYSTOUR project during the private session of the online Learning Event with the title *Innovative Business Investments, Green Jobs and Challenges in Revitalizing Depopulated Areas* held on February 12th, 2025. This moment provided an opportunity to explore experiential tourism in greater depth and stimulate a reflection among partners. To further investigate their perspective and collect strategic feedback on the conducted analysis on online platforms, a Google Form was subsequently shared with regional contact people. The form served to validate the findings and gather both quantitative and qualitative insights, enriching the discussion and guiding future project developments.

5.6.1 Methodological introduction

The survey has been conceived as a hybrid data collection tool, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches in alignment with participatory and systemic design methodologies for territorial development (Jones, 2014; Manzini, 2017). Its purpose is twofold: to investigate stakeholders' perception, practices and strategic visions regarding the enhancement of tourism experiences in rural and inner areas and concurrently to validate the research methodological approach employed within the SYSTOUR project.

Following systemic design principles ((Bistagnino, 2011);(Dell'Era et al., 2020)), the survey adopts a multi-scalar structure that reflects the complexity of experiential tourism ecosystem. It begins with personal and organizational profiling, proceeds to gather feedback on communication tools, research methodology and promotional strategies and concludes with reflective questions concerning long-term development trajectories. This approach is consistent with the ideas of Soft System Methodology (Checkland & Scholes, 1990), which emphasises the exploration of diverse worldviews in addressing complex and ill-structured problem contexts, such as sustainable tourism governance.

The integration of open-ended questions draws on participatory design transitions (Spinuzzi, 2005) and design thinking methodologies (Brown, 2009), enabling the emergence of tacit knowledge, local narratives and destination-driven innovation practices. Additionally, the collection of feedback on best practices and visual communication strategies is inspired by the use of cultural probes (Gaver et al., 1999), which are particularly effective in the exploratory phase of user-centered research for capturing subjective and inspirational data.

The question is also grounded in the principles of human-centred service design (Stickdorn, et al., 2018), aiming to foster the co-construction of shared narratives around the value of tourism in underrepresented regions. Stakeholders are in this way engaged not merely as informants, but as active contributors to the co-design of future policy and development strategies.

5.6.2 Structure of the survey

The survey consisted of a total of 26 questions, organised into three main sections. The first section aimed to collect general information about the profile of the respondents, while the second focused specifically on the topic of touristic experiences. The third and final section was dedicated to gathering inputs on future perspectives and defining potential next steps for the project.

The second section was further divided into three subsections:

- *General Feedback*: aimed at collecting comments on the effectiveness of the presentation itself and the visual tools employed;

- *Research Approach & Methodology*: designed to delve into the research framework, particularly focusing on the online platforms analysis and the adopted methodology;

- *Experiences Promotion Activity*: which try to explore in greater detail the promotional activities related to touristic experiences, both on digital platforms and through other channels.

Overall, the survey included 16 closed-ended questions, 4 of which were formulated according to the 4-point Lickert rating scale, which avoids neutral positions and encourages clear positioning by participants, and 9 open-ended questions, ranging from short to long answers. The questions are listed below:

Question ID	Question	Data value		
		Question Type	Typology	Levels
S1Q1	Which is your country?	Close	Drop-down list	*Italy, Spain, Poland, Hungary, France, Finland*
S1Q2	Which is the Region you belong to?	Close	Drop-down list	Molise, Lea-Artibai, Świętokrzyskie, Hajdú-Bihar, Nouvelle-Aquitaine/ Landes & Pyrénées-Atlantiques, Central Ostrobothnia
S1Q3	Which is your organization/company?	Open	Short answer text	
S1Q4	And your job role?	Open	Short answer text	
S2aQ1	Have you ever conducted analyses on tourism experience before? If yes, could you specify how in the "other" slot?	Close	Checkboxes	Yes, No, Other

S2aQ2	How clear was the presentation in communicating the research objectives?	Close	Likert scale	1=Not clear, 2=Slightly clear, 3=Fairly clear, 4=Very clear
S2aQ3	Did you find the visual elements (maps, tables, charts) effective in conveying the data?	Close	Likert scale	1=Not effective, 2=Slightly effective, 3=Fairly effective, 4=Very effective
S2aQ4	Which is the most useful and clear?	Close	Checkboxes	Radial data visualisation, Spider graph or radar graph, Images, Other
S2aQ5	What aspects of the presentation did you find most interesting or useful?	Open	Long answer text	
S2aQ6	Where there any points you would have liked to be explored in more detail? If yes, could you specify which ones in the "other" slot?	Close	Checkboxes	Yes, No, Other
S2bQ1	How appropriate do you find the use of Tripadvisor and national platforms as a basis for analysis?	Close	Likert scale	1=Not appropriate, 2=Slightly appropriate, 3=Fairly appropriate, 4=Very appropriate
S2bQ2	What additional data sources or methods would you suggest to strengthen the research?	Open	Long answer text	
S2bQ3	Does my categorization of experiences (e.g., food & wine, nature, cultural heritage) align well with how internal area tourism should be studied?	Close	Likert scale	1=Not well at all, 2=Slightly well, 3=Fairly well, 4=Very well
S2bQ4	Which is the main category of experiences your region is focusing on, at the moment?	Close	Checkboxes	Tour, Nature, Sport, Food & wine tasting, Festival & events, Museum & architecture, Other
S2bQ5	Which categories of experiences would you like to focus on the most in future planning?	Close	Checkboxes	Tour, Nature, Sport, Food & wine tasting, Festival & events, Museum & architecture, Other
S2bQ6	Do you recognize the Good Practices identified in the analisys?	Close	Checkboxes	Italy: Planta tour, Flavours of the Sea Tour in Termoli, Oil tasting at Marina Colonna Spain: Wine and Fish route, Axpe cider house, Ur Lekeitio Poland: Ethno-business, Apple Trail of Sandomierz, Underground Tourist Route Hungary: Private tour to Debrecen and Hortobágy National Park, Beaver safari and the magic of Hortobágy, Huskeebike

					France: One-day e-bike tour with wine tasting, Small group tour or wine tasting and Chateaux tour, Cruise with a glass of wine and Canelé in Bordeaux Finland: Kaustinen Folk Music Festival, The Lighthouse Isle of Tankar, Guided seatrout fishing tours in the archipelago of Kokkola
S2bQ7		Do you want to suggest some other Good Practices? (not already mentioned in the SYSTOUR project) *Please write name, link and address*	Open	Long answer text	
S2cQ1		Do you promote experiences in your job or does your organization?	Close	Multiple choice	Yes, No
	S2cQ2	If yes, do you use Tripadvisor or do you rely on DMO (Destination Management Organization) platforms?	Close	Multiple choice	Only Tripadvisor, Only DMO platforms, Both (mostly TripAdvisor), Both (mostly DMO platforms), Equally, Other
	S2cQ3	If you use DMO platforms, which ones in particular? (you can add more in the last slot)	Close	Checkboxes	Visit Molise, Lea Artibai Turismo, Swietokrzyskie.travel, visitdebrecen, Nouvelle Aquitaine tourisme, Tourisme Landes, Visit Kokkola, Visit Kaustisen Seutu, Visit Keskipohianmaa, Other
S2cQ4		Which other communication channels do you primarily use to promote experiences (e.g. social media, websites, printed material, etc.)? Please specify which ones	Open	Long answer text	
S2cQ5		Which is your vision for the implementation of sustainable local experiences useful for the territorial development?	Open	Long answer text	
S3Q1		Do the research findings align with your vision for local tourism development?	Close	Multiple choice	Yes, No
S3Q2		Can you suggest other/some tools to design and implement policies for touristic development?	Open	Long answer text	
S3Q3		What are the lessons learned from other partners so far?	Open	Long answer text	
S3Q4		Do you want to give any more feedback?	Open	Long answer text	

Table 5: Survey's questions (personal elaboration)

A total of 5 participants provided the requested feedback, one representative for each partner region, except for the Hungarian partners that didn't respond. The profile of the organisations is for the 60% local public entities, one foundation and one association. The profile of each survey's participant instead is illustrated in Table 6.

Country	Organisation/company	Job role
Poland	Marshall Office of the Świętokrzyskie Voivodship	Chief specialist in tourism
Finland	The Regional Council of Central Ostrobothnia	Project manager and tourism coordinator
Spain	Leartibai Fundazioa	General Director
France	APESA	Research engineer
Italy	Molise Region - Tourism Department	Project Manager (External)

Table 6: profile of the interviewee (personal elaboration)

5.6.2 Main results and insights

The following results are based on a structured summary of responses collected through the Google Forms and exported via Google Sheets, were subsequentially reviewed and synthesised to identify recurring patterns and thematic trends. Both closed and open-ended responses were examined to provide a comprehensive understanding of participant's perspective, highlighting key insights into the evaluation of the event, the current state of experiences offer in their regions and proposals for future directions of the research.

Close-ended questions

The presentation of the research findings was positively received [S2aQ2], as most participants rated the clarity of the research objectives and the effectiveness of the visual elements highly, with particular appreciation for the radial data visualisation [S2aQ3; S2aQ4]. These were, for the totality (100%) of the respondents, the most useful and informative components, especially in illustrating territorial differences and gaps in tourism offerings, such as the underrepresentation of food&beverage-related experiences in certain regions. The analysis is also relevant as 50% of the partners report that had not conducted similar research but find also a confirmation in the other half as it confirms the relevance of the project.

S2aQ1: Have you ever conducted analyses on tourism experience before? If yes, could you specify how in the "other" slot?
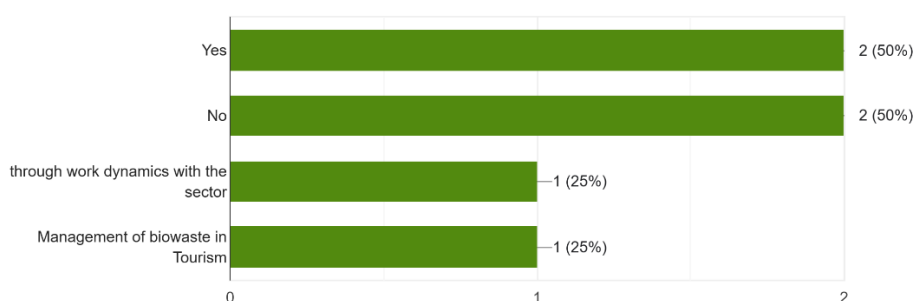
4 risposte

Figure 56: S2aQ1 question on similar analysis (personal elaboration)

On the theme of the analysis of the tourist experiences, respondents generally agreed with the categorisation of tourism experiences into themes such as nature, food & wine and cultural heritage [S2bQ3]. The use of the platforms like Tripadvisor and national tourism portals was considered

appropriate [S2bQ1], as most of them are actively involving in the promotion of experiences [S2cQ1], with a preference on using DMO platforms [S2cQ2]. The current focus in many regions was on nature-based and gastronomic experiences [S2bQ4], with a growing interest in expanding toward cultural events and immersive local traditions [S2bQ5]. Having previously conducted the fields visits, partners' identified most of the Good Practices emerged from the analysis [S2bQ6].

S2bQ5: Which categories of experiences would you like to focus on the most in future planning?
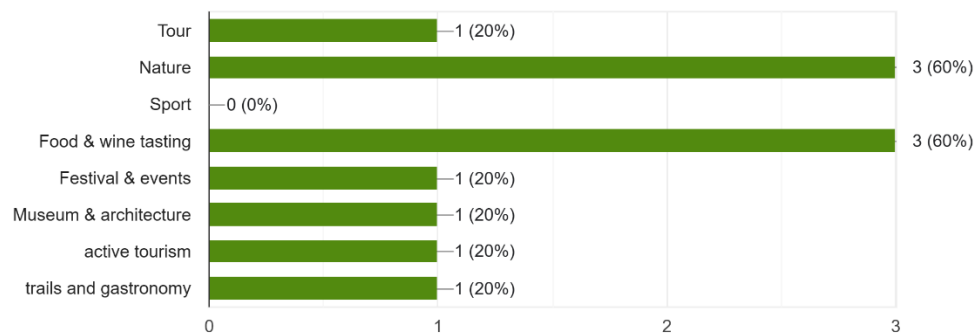5 risposte

Figure 57: S2bQ5 question on future focus themes (personal elaboration)

The only closed-ended question S3Q1 of the last section on vision alignment, confirmed the major vision of partners that the research findings aligned with their own vision for local tourism development, reinforcing the relevance of the study's approach and conclusions.

S3Q1: Do the research findings align with your vision for local tourism development?
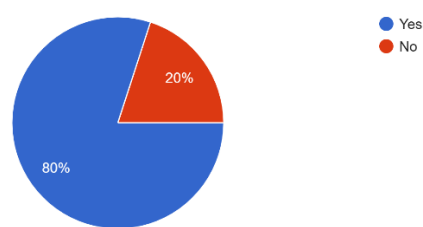5 risposte

Figure 58: S3Q1 question on alignment with research findings (personal elaboration)

Open-ended questions

The open-ended responses provided deeper qualitative insights into participants' perspectives, allowing for the emergence of various themes and suggestions. The responses were skimmed through a text mining process with the use of an AI-based tool, in order to organise them into thematic categories.

Following the close questions on the presentation aspects, participants highlighted the value of the territorial analysis of tourism experiences, the clarity of the radial visualisations and the ability of the slides to convey complex information in a concise and accessible format, but with some difficulties in the interpretation of the spider graphs [S2aQ5]. Some respondents expressed a desire for more detailed exploration of topics regarding local community's acceptance of tourism experiences [S2aQ6], on this matter, while only a few new Good Practices were suggested, one notable example

was the initiative *Di Borgo in Borgo*, proposed as a replicable model of community-based tourism by Molise region [S2bQ7]. At the same time, the methodology involved in carrying out the research was considered valid but some of the partners suggested to incorporate data from other platforms such as Airbnb, Booking and local tourism observatories, as well as integrating interviews with local tourism offices as an additional qualitative method [S2bQ2].

Social media platforms, institutional websites and printed materials were the most frequently cited communication channels. These tools were seen as essential for reaching both local and international audiences. [S2cQ4]

To develop a new strategy and vision for sustainable tourism, recurring themes underlined the importance of aligning such development with local community values, promoting ecofriendly itineraries, revitalising historic villages, supporting agrotourism and permaculture and enhancing wellness and adventure tourism. Water resource valorisation was also mentioned as a key opportunity [S2cQ5]. To achieve these objectives, participants suggested a range of tools such as participatory decision-making platforms, GIS and Destination Management Systems (DMS), Community-Based Tourism (CBT) models, sustainability certifications (e.g., EU Ecolabel), innovation labs, and interactive maps, tools that could support tourism policy-making process [S3Q3].

Final feedback on the presentation and on SYSTOUR project emphasised the importance of learning from other regions and the value of in-person visits to observe good practices, as they are more impactful than the theoretical description alone [S3Q4; S3Q5].

Final considerations

What emerges from this analysis is a shared aspiration toward a more meaningful, territorial and sustainable models of development. Interestingly, while the closed-ended data confirms a general alignment with the research framework and tool presented, the open-ended responses enrich this picture by surfacing diversities, such as the desire for deeper community integration or the call for more varied data sources, that point to a maturing discourse around tourism planning.

This dual-layered feedback suggests that experiential tourism is no longer seen merely as a product to be promoted, but as a process to be co-designed with local actors, embedded in territorial identity and continuously adapted through learning and collaboration.

6. Designing the system - co-design workshop

Based on the results of the structured analysis of experiential tourism data, the qualitative insights gathered through the survey and the previous desk analysis of the literature on experiential tourism, emerged the importance of rethinking the system with policies and interventions aimed at supporting the sustainable development of territories and experiences themselves. We can see how the phenomenon of experiential tourism in Europe's inner and rural areas present itself as a complex evolving system, shaped by a wide array of interrelated cultural, economic, environmental and social factors. To thoroughly understand its dynamics, it is essential to adopt an approach capable of capturing these interconnections and offering an integrated view of the territorial system. In this context, the systemic approach emerges as a methodological tool that goes beyond traditional liner cause-effect logic, embracing a multidimensional and network perspective.

6.1 Canvas design

To translate this systemic vision, it was necessary to conceive and design tools that would facilitate the analysis and communication in order to arrive at the co-design of new tourist experiences or the creation of an ecosystem of services to support them.

The Canvas models adopted in this research are grounded in the methodological principles of the Systemic Design Framework developed by the Design Council (UK) (2021). This framework expands upon the well-known Double Diamond model by integrating systemic thinking into each phase of the design process. It emphasizes the importance of exploring complexity, reframing challenges, co-creating solutions, and catalysing change through collaborative and iterative practices. Drawing from this approach, the Canvas tools used in this study are designed to support both operational and strategic reflection, enabling stakeholders to map interdependencies, identify leverage points, and co-design sustainable trajectories for experiential tourism in rural and inner areas.
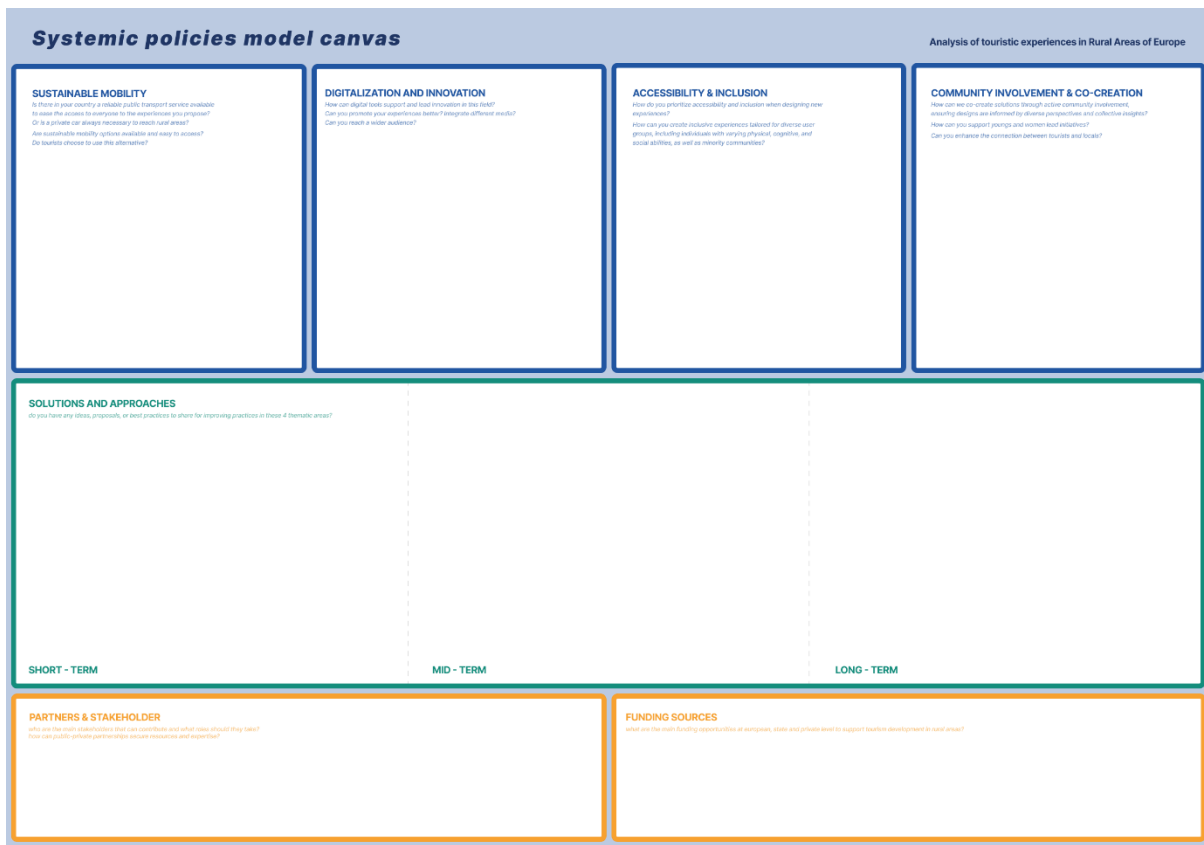

Figure 59: Systemic Policies Model Canvas (personal elaboration)

The first Canvas tool, named **Systemic Policies Model Canva** (Figure 59) was designed by combining the systemic design logic of the tenth tool of Design Council Toolkit *Regenerative Business Canvas* (Figure 60) with the pragmatic structure of Business Model Canvas of Figure 61 (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010) and the Digital Policy Model Canvas (EU Gov Lab, Figure 62). This hybrid approach allows for both strategic foresight and operational clarity, with a more grounded and practical nature, to identify and evaluate the challenges and opportunities of experiential tourism in internal areas that could be the turning point for strategic planning in policy-making, on the four relevant themes emerged from previous researches and the assessment of the C&O emerged from the Complexity Maps during Finland's field visit to be better understood and deeper analysed.

Figure 60: Regenerative Business Model Canva (source: Design Council Toolkit)

Figure 61: Business Model Canva (source: Strategyzer)

Figure 62: Digital Policy Model Canvas (suorce: the GovLab)

The categories of intervention are:

- Sustainable mobility: explore how sustainable mobility options can help to access the different places of the Regions and become a part of the experiences
- Digitalisation and Innovation: focus on how digitalization can support and lead innovation, which are the challenges and how can we reach a wider target
- Accessibility and Inclusion: identify challenges and opportunities in designing accessible and inclusive experiences
- Community involvement & Co-creation: explore how active community involvement can reveal new opportunities in design, creating meaningful connections between tourists and local communities

After assessing the issues and potential pain point of each category, the canvas offers a space to brainstorm and find new solutions and approaches to face them from a different an improved point of view, collocating each proposal within a timeframe of intervention, as in short-, mid- and long-term, to even further anchor the news ideas into practice.

The two remaining slots are dedicated to Partners&Stakeholders that can contribute and take part in the definition and realisation of the proposed policies or intervention, specifically the role within the project, and the Funding Sources to specify the main funding opportunities at a European, National and private level to support tourism in the regions.
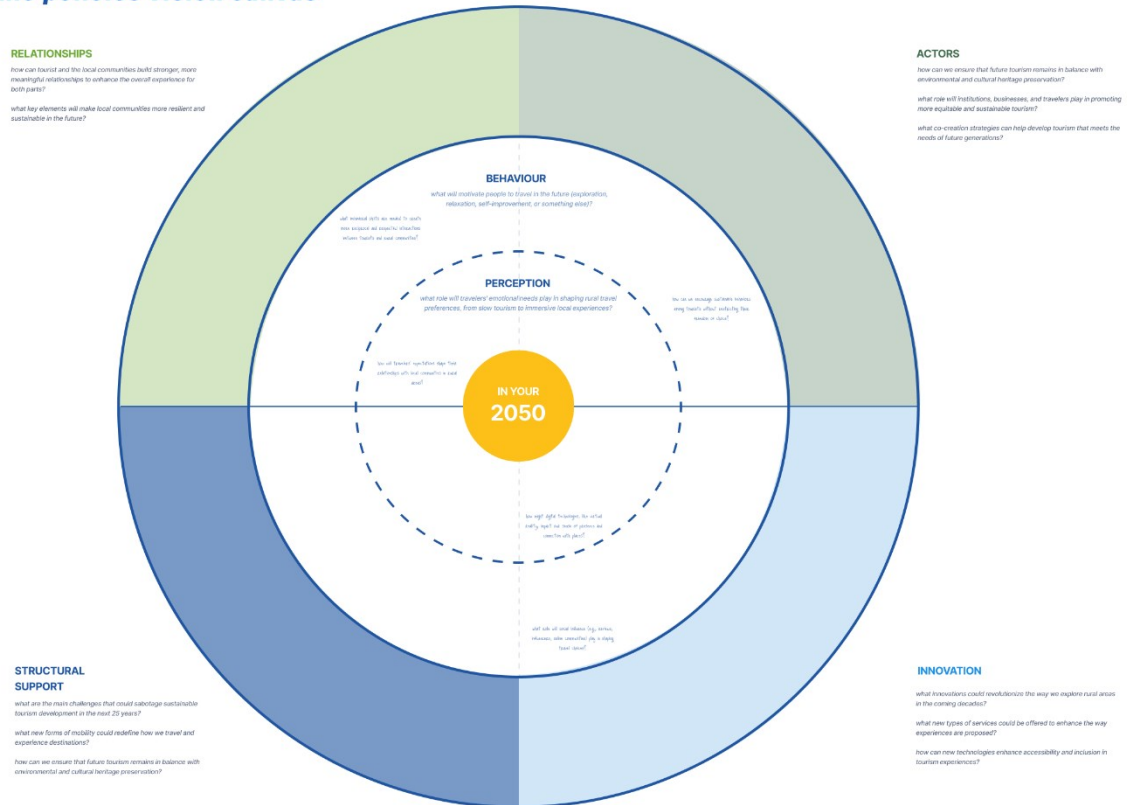
Figure 63: Systemic Policies Vision Canvas (personal elaboration)

The second Canvas tool, the **Systemic Policies Vision Canva** (Figure 63), serves to expand and deepen the discussion by projecting a long-term vision. "How do you imagine the ideal rural tourism experience in 2050?" was the question to start the discussion around this tool, functions as a creative and imaginative exercise, designed to help stakeholders visualise the potential impacts and aspirations of current strategies over a 25-year horizon. Design with the reference of the third tool of Design Council Toolkit *Future Vision* (adapted from Jennie Winhall, Figure 64), the shape is in contrast

with the one illustrated before, the circular shape allows to imagine more creative and disruptive scenarios, always with a holistic perspective, where ideas can be connected and overlapped into different categories.
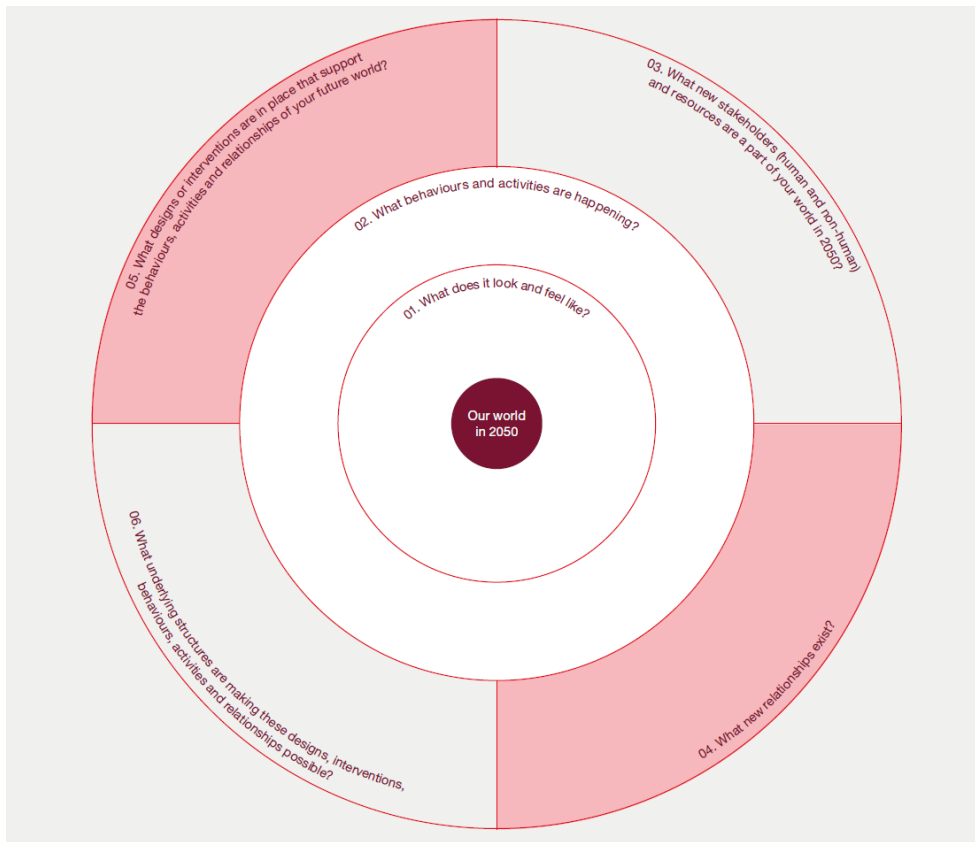
Figure 64: Future Vision Canvas (source: Design Council Toolkit, Jennie Winhall)

The canvas has to be read from the centre, starting with the Perception section, that explores how travellers' emotional needs, with a personal perspective, such as the desire for connection, authenticity, and well-being, will influence future preferences in rural tourism, encouraging the identification of actions that can be taken in the present to positively influence public discourse and cultural attitudes. Moving in the second circle, Behaviour domain explores the shift in behavioural aspects, the motivation that will push tourists to travel in future, maybe imagining them as active participants in local life. Then the four external thematic categories focus the attention to emerging and actual trends and topics to be explored in a sustainable way.

- Actors: identify the key stakeholders who will play a role in shaping the future. It encourages mapping of institutional, civic, and private actors, and reflecting on how they can be engaged, empowered, and aligned with the vision. This includes both traditional actors (e.g., tourism boards, municipalities) and emerging ones (e.g., digital platforms, community cooperatives).
- Relationship: exploring the social fabric of the system, the relationships that need to be built, strengthened, or reconfigured. It invites consideration of new alliances, partnerships, and networks that could support the vision.
- Innovation: considers the technological, social, and organisational role of innovation in enabling systemic change. It asks what kinds of innovation are needed, how they can be fostered, and what conditions are necessary to support a culture of experimentation and learning, like digital storytelling tools, new forms of participatory governance, or regenerative business models.

- Structural support: addresses the enabling environment: the legal, financial, and institutional structures that must be created or adapted to sustain the vision. It includes policies, funding mechanisms, regulatory frameworks, and organisational models. This field ensures that visionary thinking is grounded in feasible and supportive infrastructures

Together, these six fields form a comprehensive framework for systemic visions. By engaging with each domain, stakeholders can co-construct a shared vision that is not only aspirational but also actionable, rooted in a deep understanding of the interdependencies that shape complex territorial systems.

6.2 The Co-design workshop

During the final interregional SYSTOUR workshop, held in Turin on 27–28 March 2025, the two Canvas models were introduced and applied as part of a participatory session aimed at exploring systemic strategies for experiential tourism and short-term rentals. The participatory workshop was structured using a modified World Café methodology, referred to in this context as the **Twin Brew World Café**. The World Café is a well-established facilitation format designed to foster collaborative dialogue, shared learning, and the co-construction of knowledge among diverse participants (Brown & Isaacs, 2005). It is particularly effective in complex, multi-stakeholder environments, where the goal is to surface collective insights and build a sense of shared ownership over emerging ideas.

In this adapted version, the workshop was organised around two thematic tables, experiential tourism and short-term rentals, each explored through a sequence of structured conversations. Participants were divided into two parallel groups of about ten people, (the "twin" structure), each rotating through two discussion tables corresponding to the two Canvas tools: the Policies Canvas and the Vision Canvas, repeating this chance for two times, one for the topic of experiences and one for the Short-term rents one. Each session lasted approximately 20 minutes, after which participants rotated to the next table, allowing for cross-pollination of ideas and progressive refinement of perspectives.

Each table was facilitated by a moderator and equipped with the dedicated printed Canvas model to guide the discussion, post-its to fix the impressions and prompt that emerged from the discussion and coloured markers. This format enabled participants to engage deeply with each topic while also contributing to a broader systemic understanding. Despite the inherent complexity of this type of collaborative activity, the initial phase of the workshop unfolded with unexpected fluidity. This smooth start can be attributed to several enabling factors: the pre-existing familiarity among project partners, cultivated through previous joint activities; the quality of interpersonal relationships developed over months of remote collaboration; and, most importantly, the presence of a shared vision regarding the research objectives. These conditions fostered a collaborative, informal, and inclusive atmosphere in which all participants felt encouraged to contribute actively and meaningfully.
The use of visual tools such as Canvases aligns with principles of design-led facilitation, which emphasize the value of tangible artefacts in supporting dialogue, reflection, and synthesis (Manzini & Coad, 2015) (Sangiorgi & Prendiville, 2017).

By combining the dialogic structure of the World Café with the systemic orientation of the Canvas models, the Twin Brew format proved effective in generating both analytical depth and creative foresight. It also supported the emergence of shared narratives and actionable insights, which were later integrated into the strategic framework of the project.

6.3 Results

At the end of the activity, to enable timely validation and feedback from partners on the outcomes of their perspective and suggestions, the post-it notes and shared contributions were systematically

reviewed and synthesised using AI-assisted analytical tools. By leveraging digital support, the research team was able to transform raw inputs into a coherent and structured output, completed with a visual representation, within a short timeframe. This approach allowed for the efficient management of a large volume of qualitative data, uncovering recurring patterns and refining key thematic concepts.
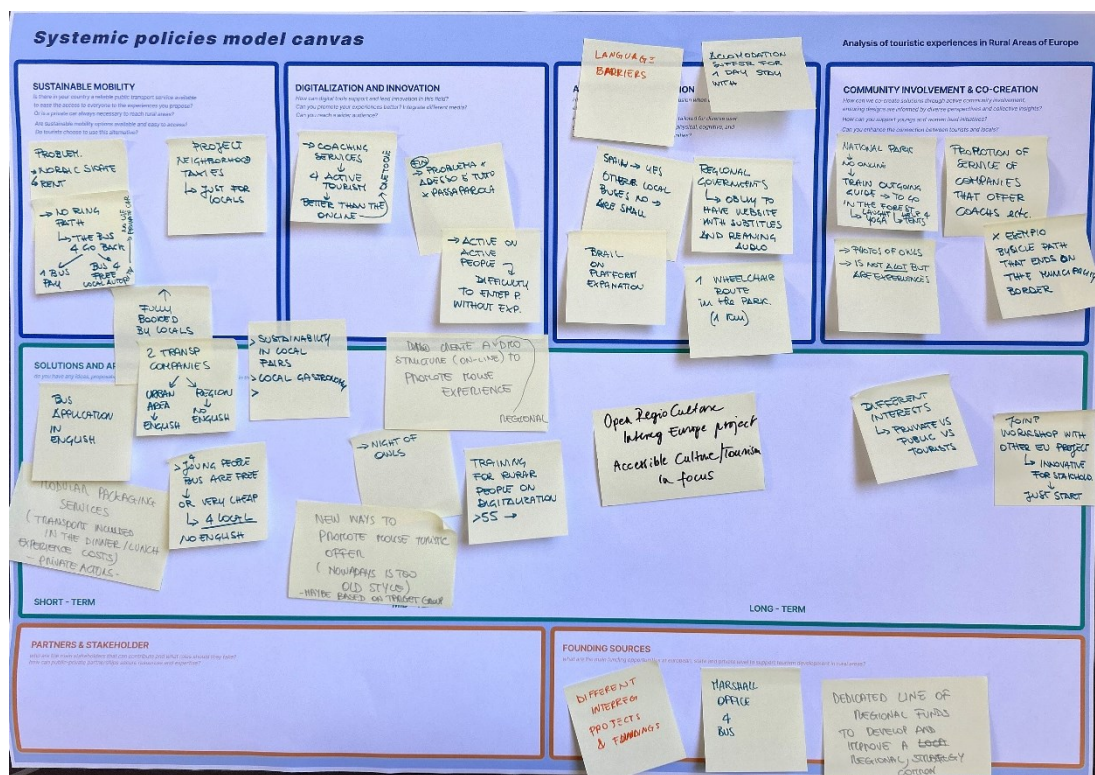
Figure 65: Workshop results on the Systemic Policies Model Canvas (personal elaboration)

The first Systemic Policies Model Canvas session revealed a set of recurring issues that reflect the systemic nature of tourism development in rural contexts. Among the most salient challenges in the Accessibility & Inclusion category were language and communication barriers, particularly between international visitors and local service providers and accessible information and experiences for people with different abilities. The persistent digital and physical divide affect rural destinations, with a lack of sustainable and accessible mobility options, as some are available just to locals or not well connected. Some experiences are promoted just by word-of-mouth, requiring specific efforts to digitalise the offer, making it broader available. In addition, some participants, underlined the issue of not having specialised and prepared local guides on tourism-related activities, like active tourism, which require at least a comprehensive basic knowledge on the territories and skills. The limited engagement of local communities in shaping tourism offerings, is also a matter of concern. These issues are compounded by infrastructural weaknesses and by concerns over the environmental and cultural sustainability of tourism growth.

In response to these challenges, participants proposed a range of pragmatic and forward-looking strategies. These included the development of multilingual and accessible-options information systems and training programs for tourism operators, the creation of digital platforms for booking and promotion, and the implementation of participatory models to enhance community involvement. Notably, several contributions emphasized the need for innovative mobility solutions, such as on-demand transport, modular packaging services and eco-friendly and affordable travel passes, as well as regulatory mechanisms to safeguard local heritage from overexploitation. The proposed solutions do not merely address isolated problems but reflect an integrated vision of tourism as a lever for territorial resilience.

It is important to acknowledge that the final two categories, Partners & Stakeholder and Funding Sources, were only partially explored during the sessions, only in the latter participants identify relevant sources of support in regional and European public funding, particularly through project-based calls and initiatives. This was primarily due to the dynamic and engaging discussions that emerged around the earlier themes, as well as the time constraints inherent to the activity format. Despite this, the canvas was intentionally designed as a scalable and reusable tool, allowing for future iterations in which all categories can be revisited and examined more thoroughly. The flexible structure makes it suitable for use in working groups or participatory settings, where it can support deeper reflection and more comprehensive exploration of each thematic area.

Figure 66: Workshops results on the Systemic Policies Vision Canvas (personal elaboration)

The second phase of the group work enabled the envisioning future-oriented systemic policies for sustainable tourism. This process involved rethinking the tourism landscape and deconstructing assumptions about the immediate future, an intellectually stimulating, yet complex task. Participant expressed a range of perspectives, from optimistic to dystopian, each contributing valuable insights that enriched the overall framework. The analysis of the result, aimed to uncover relational links between concepts, in line with systemic design methodology, revealing emerging properties and hidden connection across themes.

A recurring theme across the discussion was the desire to **reclaim interpersonal connection**s and the sense of community, elements perceived as increasingly fragile in today's fast-paced, hyper-digital world. Partners imagined a future in which tourism becomes a vehicle for rebuilding social bonds, fostering authentic encounters between visitors and local communities. This shared imaginary reflects a longing to return to the reality of presence, where people have time to rediscover themselves, connect with nature and engage in meaningful, immersive experiences.
At the same time, the role of technology was not dismissed but redefined. Rather than replacing human interaction, digital tools, particularly AI, were envisioned as a support system that take care of mechanical, repetitive or logistic tasks (e.g. itinerary planning, bookings, translations). This would free up time and mental space for travellers and hosts alike to focus on what truly matters: human connection, cultural exchange and personal well-being. This dual perspective suggests a balanced vision, one where technology enhances, rather than replaces, the human experience and where tourism becomes a regenerative practice that nurtures both people and territories.

In terms of **behavioural transformation,** the recognition of increased leisure time will be linked to a growing interest in slow travel and nature-based relaxation. This will reflect a broader societal shift in

values, reinforced by a redefinition of tourism success, from quantitative metrics like visitor numbers to qualitative indicators such as positive impact and well-being. This value shift calls for the development of impact-driven tourism models, where local production, sustainability, and community benefit are central.

Another key theme that emerged was related to **cause-effect relationship** between globalisation and cultural homogenisation. Participants addressed this by emphasising the need to promote cultural awareness, respect for local culture and heritage education, suggesting a strategic shift from mass tourism models toward culturally and locally based experiences that preserve identity and foster intercultural dialogue.

The canvas also revealed several **problem-solution dynamics**. For example, the decline of traditional tourist sites was met with the innovation of new attractions and adaptive reuse strategies. Similarly, environmental challenges, like climate change, will be addressed through regenerative ecological practices, including circular systems and the protection of biodiversity and agriculture.

Further insights highlighted **complementarity and mutual reinforcement strategies**. The alignment of inclusive infrastructure (like accessible routes) with technological innovation, suggest that digital tools can enhance equity in tourism. Moreover, the integration of tourists and local communities through shared spaces complements educational efforts to promote slow and respectful tourism, creating a virtuous cycle of social cohesion and mutual understanding.

Demographic trends also played a role in shaping the discussion. The emergence of 75+ age group as a growing tourism segment, underscored the need for tailored infrastructure and wellness-oriented experiences, reinforcing the importance of inclusive design and accessibility.

Finally, the vision of **a regenerative tourism loop**, where tourism actively contributes to the restoration of nature, culture, and local economies, was reinforced by proposals to preserve traditional knowledge and handicraft. This reflects a holistic view of tourism as a transformative force, capable of fostering resilience, cultural continuity, and ecological renewal.

As a further creative output of the workshop and a visual summary of the shared insights, a "postcard from the future" was produced using a generative prompt developed with artificial intelligence. The evocative vision of experiential tourism in 2050, illustrates a dual vision of rural Europe, where self-sustaining, nature-integrated communities foster meaningful interactions between locals and tourists through slow travel and cultural immersion, while a distant smart city skyline symbolizes the coexistence of advanced technology and ecological harmony. The prompt used to create the image is: "A futuristic postcard of rural Europe in 2050. In the foreground, lush landscapes host self-sustaining communities where tourists and locals connect through slow travel and cultural immersion. Eco-friendly infrastructure and circular systems blend with nature. In the background, a high-tech smart city contrasts with the rural vision."

Figure 67: Future vision for rural experiential tourism in 2050 (AI-generated)

This co-design process thus reinforces the value of systemic design approaches in tourism planning, particularly in contexts where traditional policy instruments may fall short in addressing multidimensional challenges. It also highlights the importance of embedding local knowledge and lived experience into strategic frameworks, ensuring that tourism development is not only economically viable but also socially equitable and ecologically responsible.

Although the two canvas models differed in their orientation, one action-driven, the other vision-based, their outcomes proved to be both coherent and complementary. Together, they reinforced and expanded upon the findings of previous analyses, offering a shared and multidimensional reading of the opportunities and challenges associated with experiential tourism in rural European areas. On one hand, the discussions highlighted the pressing need for targeted interventions in regulatory frameworks, infrastructure, and promotional strategies to bridge the persistent gap between urban and inner territories. On the other, participants articulated a forward-looking vision in which sustainable tourism is conceived as an ongoing, transformative process, rooted in authenticity, relational depth, adaptability, and territorial regeneration.

7. On-field analysis internship and case study

7.1 Leartibai as a virtuous case study

7.1.1 Why this internship

The decision to carry out an internship at Leartibai Fundazioa was driven by firstly, its active participation in SYSTOUR project, which offered a unique opportunity to work within a real case study directly linked to the research objectives of this thesis. Collaborating with an organisation deeply rooted in the rural context and actively involved in sustainable territorial development allowed for a direct confrontation with the practical challenges of translating systemic and sustainable approaches into concrete local actions. As the foundation focus is on rural development in different levels, it gave the opportunity to explore how experiential tourism could be positioned as a strategic element within broader local development plans.
The second key factor in this choice was the opportunity to complement the desk research carried out during the initial phase of this study with on-field research, enabling a better understanding of the dynamics between institutional actors, local stakeholders and tourism operator. The internship

represented therefore a bridge between academic research and applied project work, offering both practical learning and valuable feedback for the refinement of the thesis itself.

7.1.2 Lea-Artibai and Leartibai Fundazioa

The Lea-Artibai region, located in the Bizkaia province, Basque Country (Euskadi, in Basque), comprises 12 municipalities and approximately 26,000 inhabitants. Characterised by an ageing population and demographically stagnant population, even though incoming flows on immigrants are very positive, the comarca faces structural challenges related to education levels, economic diversification and innovation capacity. Despite these constraints, Lea-Artibai demonstrates a relatively low unemployment rate and a strong industrial legacy, particularly in sectors such as metalworking, rubber transformation and industrial equipment. The primary sector, including agriculture and maritime industries, remain significant but is undergoing structural decline.

Leartibai Fundazioa is a foundation based in the town of Markina-Xemein, operating specifically in the Lea-Artibai region, one of the most rural and traditionally productive areas of Bizkaia province. Its main mission is to foster the sustainable socio-economic development of the territory, supporting the local economy and promoting innovation in both traditional and emerging sectors. The foundation works under a multi-stakeholder governance model as an intermediary between local institutions, enterprises, cooperatives and European projects, helping to translate broader strategic objectives into concrete, locally adapted actions. Through actively participating in different European funding programmes, they support innovation, align with broader shared objectives and attract investments to the territory.

Its strategic action areas include rural development, tourism, commerce, entrepreneurship, talent attraction and industrial competitiveness, providing also consultancy services and supports in the implementation of the Lea-Artibai 2030 Strategic Plan. This plan outlines five key strategic lines: strengthening the industrial base, fostering emerging economic sectors, transitioning the fishing industry towards sustainability, developing sustainable tourism and consolidating a dynamic and competitive business network.

In response to the territorial dynamics, the region has developed a robust innovation ecosystem, anchored by three key institutions: the Leartiker Technology Centre (specialised in food and polymers tech) the Lea Artibai Ikastetxea vocational training centre and the foundation itself. Together, these institutions from the backbone of a strategic framework aimed at fostering sustainable economic development, social cohesion and territorial equity. In addition to its regional initiatives, Leartibai Fundazioa actively participates in European funding programmes, such as SYSTOUR, as a means to support innovation, foster cross-border collaboration, and attract investment to the territory.

7.1.3 Tourism in Lea-Artibai

The tourism landscape in Lea-Artibai is deep-rooted in Basque identity and is quietly emerging as a destination that reflects many of the values and preferences shaping contemporary tourism. The region's offer is diverse and authentic. From the fishing port of Ondarroa and Lekeitio to the inland valleys of forest trails and traditional farms, it invites visitors to slow down and connect with the surrounding places, its landscapes, its gastronomy and most of all, with its people, these elements that align closely with the motivations of today's travellers.

According to the IBILTOUR Ocio 2023 study (Basque Tour, 2024), which analysed tourist typologies across Euskadi, several visitor profiles resonate strongly with what Lea-Artibai has to offer. For instance, 16.4% of tourists in the Basque Country are drawn to coastal destinations during the summer, with a strong preference for nature-based activities (78%) and active tourism (71%). These

visitors typically stay between four and seven nights, making them ideal targets for the region's growing network of walking paths, outdoor experiences and rural accommodations.

Gastronomy also plays a central role in shaping travel decision. Nearly all urban (tourist whose main focus is exploring cities and urban contexts, like Bilbao) and international cultural tourists (99-100%) report enjoying Basque cuisine, though fewer engage in deeper gastronomic experiences, such as food tours or enotourism. This gap presents an opportunity for differentiate itself through immersive culinary offerings, particularly those linked to its fishing heritage, local markets and food production.

Another key insight from the report is the high rate of repeat visitation among domestic tourists. In fact, 86% of internal travellers are returning visitors, especially those from the Basque Country. Within the comarca, we can see this phenomenon in the coastal towns of Lekeitio, with the associated issues of second-houses rentals and the rising of house market prices. At the same time, this loyalty suggests a strong emotional connection to the territory and highlights the importance of maintaining quality, authenticity and community involvement in tourism development.

Other challenges that Lea-Artibai region faces are common to may rural destination and related to short average stays, seasonal peaks and limited visibility in international markets. For example, 38% of a category of international tourists, especially French, stays only one night and many of them do not engage in any cultural or nature-based organised activities, probably due to the lack of time or information. Addressing these gaps through better storytelling, infrastructure and targeted promotion could help extend stays and deepen visitor engagement.

7.1.4 Internship exploration

During my two-month internship in the Lea-Artibai region, I contributed to the broader reflection on sustainable tourism development by conducting a qualitative exploration of the local tourism ecosystem. While the official diagnostic phase of the regional tourism strategy was led by the consultancy agency Bizibiziki, my work focused on complementing this process through a systemic and experiential lens.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the current tourism landscape, I conducted five in-depth interviews with key local stakeholders from the tourism sector. These conversations provided valuable insights into the strengths, challenges and aspirations of the region. I then synthesised the main themes that emerged and analysed them using systemic design principles, with a particular focus on how they relate to the development of experiential tourism.

In the second phase of my work, as a request from the foundation, I concentrated on the region's network of walking routes, one of its most strategic tourism assets. I focused in particular on the Lea Path, conducting three additional interviews with individuals directly involved in its promotion. This allowed me to explore how the route is perceived and used, and how it could be further developed to support sustainable and regenerative tourism practices.

As a final output, I produced a set of systemic guidelines tailored to the context of Lea-Artibai. These guidelines aim to support the development of active and outdoor tourism in a way that balances the needs of visitors and residents, enhances local identity, and promotes environmental and social sustainability.

7.2 Stakeholders interviews

As the first part of the work on the strategic plan and to collect broader insights on Lea-Artibai, I encountered five local operators in the field of tourism with whom I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews, built upon the previous analysis and the shared outcomes of the co-design workshop. To formulate the questions, the S.M.A.R.T. methodology (Ahmad, 2012) has been applied, in order to have each question categorised at least in one of the Specific, Measurable, Achievable,

Relevant and Time-bound categories, helping tailor the questions to their roles and responsibilities within the local tourism ecosystem. Additionally, they were guided by the four pillars of sustainability, environmental, social, economic and cultural, to ensure a holistic understanding of the dynamics.

The interviews involved key stakeholders from the tourism offices of Ondarroa and Lekeitio, the regional tourism manager, hotel managers from Antsotegi and Silken and incorporated insights for Bizibiziki interviews with Lea-Artibai mayors. These were conducted all in person, except for one, which answers were given by email, reducing the interaction and possibility of deepening the topics, but still giving precious information.

Each conversation offered a unique perspective, highlighting both shared challenges and opportunities across the different municipalities and sectors, allowing the overall analysis with context-specific knowledge.

7.2.1 The interviews

This section presents the key findings from each interview, highlighting the main topics, positive aspects and challenges faced in shaping the experiences within the tourism system. The interviews with the mayors of the 13 municipalities of Lea-Artibai, were conducted by the Bizibiziki agency, sharing after some of the insights.

Ondarroa tourism office: In Ondarroa, the tourism offer focuses on cultural and nature activities, aiming at highlighting the town's specific characteristics with the port and maritime heritage as central elements. The support of local women's and youth initiatives is strongly emphasised, because of an intangible heritage tradition of working women, especially in the port and canning industries as they were the one managing the logistics and large shipments when fishermen were at the sea. The towns now value their resilience and hard work, through dedicated experiences and tours. The challenges highlighted limited resources for online promotion strategies, social media in particular, but also in promoting sustainable mobility, as there is a lack of services, like bike and e-bike rentals, that could support it.

Key experiences:

- Cultural tours and surrounding nature

Positive aspects:

- Authentic testimony from fishermen and port workers
- Supports local women and youth-led groups

Challenges:

- Lack of time and resources for online strategies (social media)
- Sustainable mobility options

Lekeitio tourism office: Lekeitio is as well a coastal town, with larger incoming flows of tourists, with summer and high season peaks that represent the major challenge at the moment, stressing the importance of maintaining a respectful balance between tourism development and the everyday lives of residents. Collaborating with private businesses is the second challenge, to work toward a shared goal, invest time and energies, but being aware of interests of each actor, to keep them engages in projects. The tourism strategy evolves around maritime culture (not industrial as Ondarroa) and local gastronomy, as the main aspect that could represent the town's identity. Positive aspects emerged from the interview are new incoming tourist trends, particularly of German and Dutch travellers that seek more chilled temperatures in summer. Promotion online and on-site is well managed, with

growing attention to languages accessibility and inclusivity toward different disabilities and informative material in braille.

Key experiences:

Maritime heritage, culture, language and local gastronomy

Positive aspects:

- Promotion online and on-site: language and inclusivity
- Incoming tourists trends

Challenges:

- Balancing and respect for locals' daily lives
- Collaborate with private businesses

Tourism manager at Leartibai: This interview highlighted both the tangible and intangible dimension of the region's tourism offer, including its natural landscapes, historical heritage and cultural practices. A central theme emerged is the importance of local pride, in the Basque language, traditions and community, elements that are the foundation of the tourism strategy. The interviewee emphasised that tourism should benefit local communities, rather than being solely shaped by visitors' expectations.
Several critical challenges were also addressed, such as the social impact of tourism, overcrowding during peak seasons, housing pressures and parking management. These issues are affecting residents' everyday life and is essential to find a balance also to foster a welcoming attitude toward tourists. The strategy also seeks to elevate Lea.Artibai natural heritage a its most distinctive and valuable asset.

Key experiences:

Historical/tangible heritage, nature, and intangible heritage (traditions, language), Leartibai Fest

Positive aspects:

- Authenticity and identity
- Collaboration with some private companies

Challenges:

- Social acceptance of tourism
- Addressing negative impacts (like houses, parking, overcrowding)

Antsotegi Hotel: locate within a restored 15th-century forge, Antotegi Hotel represents a compelling example of a sustainable rural tourism that successfully links heritage conservation with local development. In the interview, the manager expressed the embodiment of the facilities to a deep commitment to the territory, its culture and its history, offering guests an immersive experience that reflects the identity of the region. Through its rural accommodation and adventure packages, the hotel promotes longer stays and contributes to the redistribution of tourist flows across less-visited areas. Its operations support the local economy by prioritising the purchase of local products and maintaining active collaboration with regional initiatives such as Leartibai's.

Key experiences

- Rural accommodation, adventure packages

Positive aspects

- Promotes longer stays and redistribution of flows
- Support to the local economy (local products purchase)
- Collaboration with Leaktibai

Silken Hotel: this interview was conducted via email, but some interesting insights has come into view, regarding guests' preferences and the hotel facilities. The hotel offers a comfortable and strategic base for exploring both the coast and the wider region, as it is located in Lekeitio. Guests, primarily families, cyclists and walker, particularly value the surrounding nature environment and the sense of peace it provides. But the experience is mainly centred around seaside stays and guests seek personalised recommendations for local activities to connect with the area's cultural and natural richness. Positive aspects of the hotel facility are accessible room and the obtains sustainability certifications, such as BREEAM and Booking recognition. However, challenges remain, particularly in terms of strengthening collaboration with other local public and private actors, and in developing more personalized experience offerings for guests.

Key experiences

Seaside stays, recommendations for local experiences, nature and peace in the area
Positive aspects

- Some rooms are accessible
- Sustainability certification (Bream cert., Booking)

Challenges

- Collaborate with other private and public local actors
- Doesn't have personalised experiences offering

The following information concerns municipalities interviews.

Berriatua:

Strategic planning:
There is no particular culture of tourism but, specific actions have been developed that may be related to tourism. Berriatua's popular heritage has created an internet portal whose objective is the collection of working documentation on citizenship and heritage. Despite work being completed, it lacks of promotion planning on how to transmit this heritage to visitors.
- A catalogue of mountain routes has been created, but it's old-fashioned.
the maintenance of the routes causes problems.
- The reality of tourism lives far away, its trade mainly in industry.

Major projects or initiatives:
The road between Berriatua and Markina should be created (the recovery of the Royal Way).

Future challenges:
- We need to develop Euskera, Basque identity and tourism based on local identity.
- The resulting offer, at the local and even regional levels, all year round.
open it. "To be able to offer to the native what is shown to the outside."
Basically, that the tourism model is educational and linked to the local character.
- We must always seek to attract tourist routes from the reality of Ondarru.
even in a balanced manner.

Etxebarria:

Strategic planning:
- Tourist reality must be understood within the reality of Markina-Xemein and therefore within the

Camino de Santiago.
- No public tourism activities have been identified.

Major projects or initiatives:
- Munibe Palace tourist project.
- The red road that will unite Markina-Xemein and Etxeberri.

Future challenges:
- Create a network of routes that have united the region.
- Channelling the current situation/problems attributed to tourist reality: taxis…

Ispaster:
Strategic planning:
- The reality of tourism is based on natural and cultural heritage.
- Ogella Beach marks the tourist reality.
- Heritage days have been organized.

Major projects or initiatives:
- "Ispaster Basque Country" Project.

Future challenges:
- Create a tourist offer within the Ispaster Basque Country project.
- Strengthening local identity in front of Lekeitio.

Mendexa:
Strategic planning:
- No action related to tourism has been identified.
- The reality of tourism is linked to the management of the beach of Karraspio.

Major projects or initiatives:
- Lekeitio to Mendexa bus.

Future challenges:
- Attracting visitors to the campsites.

Lea ibarra:

The villages of Lea Valley have been studied together because tourist reality is understood through mutual cultivation.
Strategic planning:
- Tourism is seen as a tool to respond to the challenges associated with the reality of small towns.
- Even in the valley they experience a different reality in terms of tourism:
We feel the influence of Lekeitio.
- Tourism doesn't reach Aulesti.
- Munitibar: The Camino de Santiago marks the tourist reality.
- Aulesti, work is being done on the heritage on mountain routes (new interpretive panels and QR codes at various points in the village).
- The Lea route unites the villages touristically.

Major projects or initiatives:
- Project to digitize the route that will develop around the Next Funds within the Lea route (new brand, marketing strategy, web, route digitization, accountants).
- Climbing school on Mount Belartzandi.

Future challenges:
- Launch of the Bengolea Interpretation Center. Sustainability and profitability.
- It is a reality that must be understood in the context of small towns, that the arrival of visitors is an instrument for influencing the local economy and putting heritage into value.
- Balanced tourism that can be developed within municipal resources.

Lekeitio:
Strategic planning:
- There is a sense that tourist reality has reached its peak and that the change of profile "veraneante", which is part of the tourist reality that Lekeitio has always had, has particularly influenced it.
- No specific tourism strategy has been identified at the municipal level, but paused directions or readings of reality are needed to bring new opportunities to the table.

Major projects or initiatives:
- Modification of the PGOU for the delimitation of tourist housing.
- Linked to Next Funds:
- Mendiola shipyard recovery project.
- Parking work.
- Work on the remains of the island.
- Installation of renewable energies in the hostel.
- Lea Route.

Future challenges:
- Create a tourism model that affects popular culture.
- To diminish the present states of mass and to seek a balance with the habitability of the people.

Markina-Xemein:
Strategic planning:
This is a tourist reality linked to the Camino de Santiago, and the actions undertaken by the City Council must be understood in the context of the evolution of the road. We're the end of the stage.
- The subject of Tourist Use Housing is a matter of concern.

Major projects or initiatives:
- Linked to Next Funds:
a. The creation of a sensory species to explain and reform the church of Arretxinaga.
b. As part of the project for the reform of the old town, the tourist conditioning of the Town Hall Hall and the visitation of the old town hall.

Future challenges:
- We want to say it's a Basque area.
- To maintain a balanced tourist reality based on the size of the town and the resources of the city council.
- Delimitation of the subject of Tourist Use Housing (the PGOU is assessing the implementation of the modification).

Ondarroa:
Strategic planning:
- Specific actions have been taken in tourist reality. We're a fishing village.

Major projects or initiatives:
- Fishing documentary from Galicia.
- Literature itineraries.
- Murals (every year)

Future challenges:
- Focus on the Basque Euskera and Basque culture. The birth of a story of its own.
- Delimitation of the Tourist Use Housing issue.

Ziortza-Bolibar:
Strategic planning:
- They live tourism from a reality linked to the Camino de Santiago.
- Management of the Simon Bolívar Museum.

Major projects or initiatives:
- Work on the recovery of pedestrian roads.
- They want the concerts at the Zenarruza College to work as a regional event.

Future challenges:
- Promote local tourism, Euskera and our identity.

7.2.2 Results and insights

These interviews reflect similar results between the towns and municipalities and the interviews conducted with the tourism operators. The main insight from Bizibiziki interviews are summarised as it follows.

Connection to the Camino de Santiago: Several municipalities' tourist realities are notably linked to the Camino de Santiago. Etxebarria's tourism is understood within the context of Markina-Xemein and the Camino. Munitibar's tourism reality is marked by the Camino de Santiago. Ziortza-Bolibar lives tourism from a reality linked to the Camino de Santiago. Markina-Xemein's tourist reality is tied to the Camino de Santiago, being the end of a stage.

Concern and action regarding Tourist Use Housing (HUT): The issue of Tourist Use Housing is a matter of concern and action in multiple places. Lekeitio mentions the modification of its PGOU (General Urban Planning Plan) for the delimitation of tourist housing. Ondarroa mentions the delimitation of the Tourist Use Housing issue. Markina-Xemein identifies the subject of Tourist Use Housing as a matter of concern and is assessing the implementation of a PGOU modification for its delimitation. Lekeitio also specifically mentions regulating Tourist Use Housing as part of combating saturation.

Emphasis on Euskera, Basque identity, and local character and culture: There is a shared goal or focus across several municipalities to develop tourism based on Euskera, Basque identity, and local character. Berriatua needs to develop tourism based on Euskera, Basque identity, and local identity. Ondarroa's goals focus on Basque Euskera and Basque culture, seeking the birth of a story of its own. Ziortza-Bolibar aims to promote local tourism, Euskera, and their identity. Markina-Xemein wants to affirm it is a Basque area.

Development or recovery of routes and networks: Creating or improving routes and networks that connect areas or highlight heritage is a recurring theme. Berriatua mentions a catalogue of mountain routes, though it is old-fashioned and maintenance is an issue, and the recovery of the road between Berriatua and Markina. Etxebarria and Markina-Xemein mention the "red road" that will unite them. A general need is identified to create a network of routes that unite the region. The Lea route is highlighted as uniting the Lea Valley villages touristically, and there's a project to digitize this route. Ziortza-Bolibar is working on the recovery of pedestrian roads.

Leveraging natural and cultural heritage: Tourism is often based on existing natural and cultural assets. Ispaster's tourism is based on natural and cultural heritage, with Ogella Beach being

significant. The Lea Valley villages view putting heritage into value as a key aspect of tourism. Berriatua has worked on an internet portal for documenting citizenship and heritage.
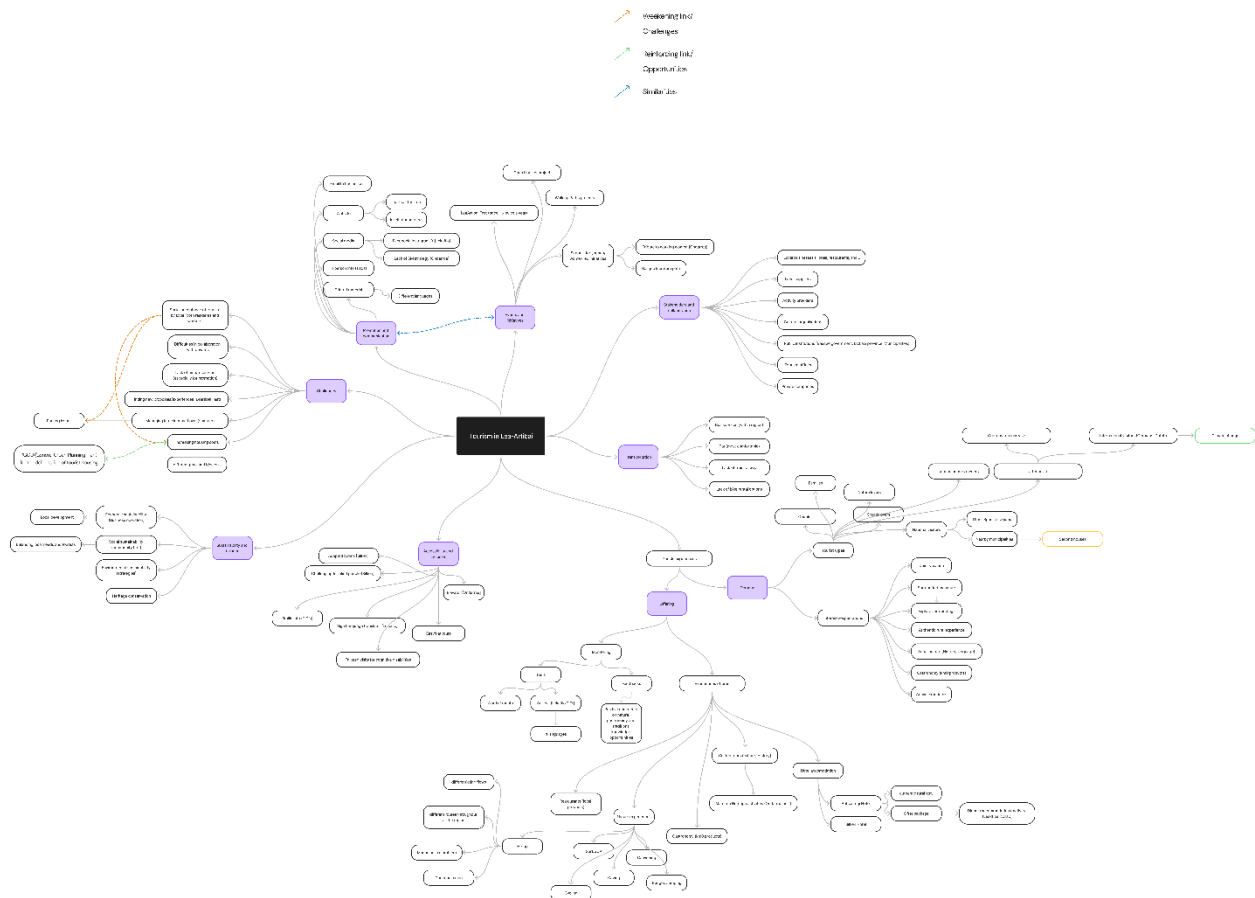
Figure 68: Complete mind map of the tourism context in Lea-Artibai (personal elaboration)

The themes emerged have been incorporated into a mind map, describing all the key themes emerged, to connect and find links and emerging properties with a systemic approach.

The mind map firstly reveals the richness of Lea-Artibai, natural and cultural heritage, including its agricultural landscapes, traditional know-how and historical heritage. It also emphasises the effort of local governance and stakeholders to work together, collaborate on the touristic development of the region, but sometimes the outcome seems fragmented and lacks coordination, as different interviewees underlined the difficulties but willingness to collaborate with each other. The multiplicity of actors, from public administration to local associations and small businesses, plays in fact a crucial role in shaping the tourism offer, but the difficulties of applying integrated strategies often limit the full exploitation of the potential of the area.

The tourist offer, currently present a wide range of activities, including outdoor experiences (e.g. hiking, cycling, canoeing, surf), guided tours In thematic areas, supporting especially maritime heritage and the work of men and women in the field, and local gastronomy with the promotion of local cuisine and km0 products. This meet quite will the demands from tourists, who happens to be predominantly domestic and from the surrounding towns and provinces. These tourists are generally interested in nature-based experiences to enjoy a quiet holiday immersed in nature and exploring the surroundings but tend to engage in short-term visits. This highlights both an opportunity and a challenge: on one hand, there is room to develop more immersive, longer stays, on the other, the current infrastructure may not yet fully support such developments.

Within the challenges identified, several critical issues stand out. These include the risk of fragmentation and acceptance of tourism by locals, both residents and business-related workers, that is connected with the management of large income flows in peak season, with related issues of parking and increasing housing costs due to renting and buying second houses, even though governments are acting to limit this phenomenon. Also, transportation and sustainable mobility is a challenge as the geography of the territory doesn't allow a railway, and most of the transfer are made by private cars. Bus lines are very efficient and the best sustainable option.

Promotion and communication of the offering and events and initiatives is a dividing issue. For informative materials, the first language is Euskera, with the translation in Spanish, as the pride in their language is very strong. This is a positive aspect, but it is challenging if the objective is to reach a more international audience. French and English are sometimes used but not all the material is available. Online presence is delivered through the DMO platform, and other websites for example from the tourism office of Lekeitio, but they lack a social media strategy, mostly due to time and resources. LeaArtibai Fest represents the main initiative that connects holistically the territory, offering a guided tour through the Lea-Artibai area, connecting first-sector businesses, cultural events and a perspective on places that are not usually available to see. This has also attracted locals to participate and engage with their knowledge of the territory, enriching the experience. The event is held once a year off-season, but they are trying to double the experience.

Accessibility and inclusion a themes that are taken into account, even though improvements could be made. From the adapted rooms at Silken hotel, to elevators and easy or flat tours for physically disabled users, and Braille informative material in tourism offices and the possibility to book a Sign Language translator for guided tours in Lekeitio.
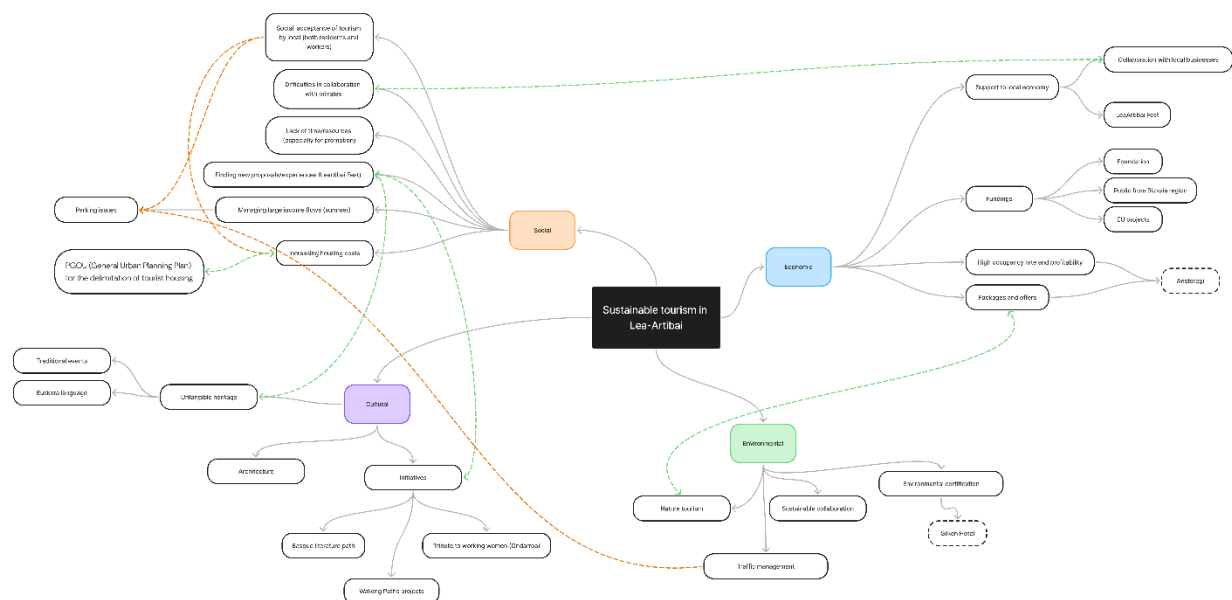
Figure 69: mind map of the sustainable connections (personal elaboration)

The second mind map elaborated focus on the interaction among the pillars of sustainability, social, economic, cultural and environmental dimensions, where challenges and emerging opportunities are strongly interdependent.
Governance emerges as a key challenge, limiting collaboration among stakeholders and affecting the cohesion of the tourism offer. This lack of coordination creates negative impacts across all dimension: it weakens community engagement, slows local economic development and both cultural valorisation and environmental conservation efforts. From a systemic perspective, this fragmentation also

represent the main leverage point for change. Strengthening collaboration could activate positive feedback loops, enhancing local pride and overall tourist experiences.

Economic opportunities lie in connecting tourism with local food production and crafts, generating shared value for both residents and visitors. At the same time, cultural revitalisation, can be supported by designing participatory, community-based experiences. These actions would implement both cultural continuity and social cohesion.

On the environmental sustainability theme, could be a goal and a benefit of coordinated tourism efforts. Protecting landscapes and biodiversity is essential to sustain the attractiveness of the region an requires integrated planning among all actors.

7.3 Walking paths focus

As we have seen from interviews and preliminary analyses, outdoor tourism and Lea-Artibai's natural heritage are a fundamental pillar of the region's tourist offering. Walking routes are the best way to immerse oneself in nature in a respectful and responsible manner. There are six main trails within the region that traverse coastal, rural and forested landscapes and can be explored on foot, and some of them can also be explored by bike, with a few variations. The six walking pats that pass within the territory of the region are: Lea Path, Wine and Fish Route, GR 123 Coastal Route, Camino de Santiago, Urko Trail and Amoroto-Santa Eufemia Route. Each of them provides a unique perspective on the territory, from riverside walks and pilgrimage trails to panoramic coastal hikes and rural heritage routes. In Figure 70 the mind maps show the main characteristics of the trails.

Figure 70: Walking path mind map (personal elaboration)

7.3.1 The Lea Path (GR 38.3)

As part of this internship project, and in response to a specific request from the Leartibai Foundation, the focus has been placed on the Lea Path. This path is an ongoing project, selected for its potential to deliver sustainable development and bring touristic flows in the inner areas of the region. It has also been selected as part of the Action Plan to be delivered as outcome of the SYSTOUR project.
This route, which follows the course of the Lea River from the inland village of Munitibar to the coastal town of Lekeitio, has been selected for a more detailed analysis. To deepen the research, a field visit has been beneficial to really see and experience the trail.

The Lea Ibilbidea, also known as the Wine and Fish Route, is an historic trail that traces the path once used by muleteers transporting fresh fish inland and returning with wine, salt, and grain from Rioja and Castile. Today, it has been revitalized as a cultural and ecological walking route. The trail passes through several towns and villages, including Aulesti, Gizaburuaga, and Amoroto, and features points of interest such as old mills, bridges, chapels, and traditional farmhouses. From the interview's insights, it is noted that the Lea Ibarra are working together to reach a common goal of increasing tourism flows as it is seen as a way to revitalise small towns like these. Munitibar, the start (or arrival) of the route, is a point of passage also of the Camino de Santiago, and as for other towns, it represents the only opportunity related to sustainable tourism.

To deepen the understanding of walking route planning and maintenance, I conducted three short interviews with tourism professionals from neighbouring comarcas: Durangaldea, Urdaibai, and Uribe. The findings helped contextualize the Lea Path within a broader territorial framework, with similar examples. The main issue highlighted by all the technicians is related to the maintenance of the paths and surroundings, that very often are not their competence, like the promotion. This gives less power over strategic decisions and limited access to more and different fundings opportunities. Furthermore, Urkiola Park in Durangaldea and the Natural Reserve of Urdaibai are protected areas and undergo to different policy regulations. One good example, in the latter, is the importance of cycling routes, as it has been dedicated a complete communication strategy, with a website and informative materials specific to this target of travellers.

7.3.2 Challenges and opportunities

Shaping a new experience, revitalising an ancient route can be a challenge, but Lea path has great potential. The analysis highlighted a set of critical challenges that currently represent a major obstacle. Firstly, there is the fragmentation of interests among stakeholders, including municipalities, tourism entities, landowners and local businesses, even though mayors have expressed the will to collaborate towards a shared vision, coordinating the strategies between different actors could be very complicated. Additionally, the route suffers from a lack of essential services and infrastructure, such as rest areas, water points, restaurants or bars, bike repair stations, particularly in the stages between towns and its more rural segments. Mobility remains an issue, as the fastest and comfortable way to reach the trail's access points is by car. Public transport is convenient if starting in Lekeitio, as the bus follows the same route direction as Lea Path, but coming from other directions could be difficult. Signage is often inconsistent or insufficient, making navigation difficult for visitors unfamiliar with the area. This is also correlated with a lack of coherent communication, promotion and visual identity, which weakens the path's recognisability and its appeal to a broader audience.

Figure 71: one type the of signalling (personal photo)

Maintenance seemed irregular, with some sections of the trail affected by overgrowth or surface degradation on the boardwalks, reducing the quality of the experience and possibly enhancing the risks of injures for visitors. Finally, the access to key entry points, like the start in Munitibar, represents another challenge. Public transport is convenient from Lekeitio, but the connection from other towns is difficult, restricting the accessibility for non-local visitors and incentivising the use of private cars, with the related issue of parking spots. Providing an increase of bus lines or shuttle service could improve the situation and guarantee sustainable mobility options.

Figure 72: Bengola energy centre (personal photo)

Despite the limitations, the Lea Path presents significant opportunities for regenerative territorial development and tourism innovation. One of its most compelling assets is the potential for storytelling rooted in the area's relationship with water and its industrial heritage, that characterise Lea's riverbanks from ancient times, which can be leveraged to create meaningful and personal visitor experiences, Bengola energy centre can be one point of interest and cultural heritage if open. In this context of shifting tourism trends, marked by a growing preference for quiet, uncrowded destinations, this route is well-positioned to attract specific targeted visitors, who seek authenticity, nature and cultural depth. The changes in climate and higher temperatures can be also took as an advantage, as the proximity with water and shaded forestry segments can offer a different way to escape hotter conditions.

Tourism can serve as a catalyst for improving local services, addressing this challenge, would mean generating benefits for both tourists and residents, with the positive outcome of demonstrate that it is a phenomenon that can bring social and economic perks. Walking, by its very nature, is a low-impact and regenerative activity, aligning with global priorities for climate-conscious and community-based tourism. If properly developed and promoted, the Lea Path could become a model for slow tourism in the Basque Country, fostering environmental management, social cohesion and economic resilience.

Figure 73: Lea river (personal photo)

7.4 Systemic guidelines

This section outlines the final set of guidelines developed as a result of the comprehensive analysis of walking routes, with particular emphasis on the Lea Path in the Lea-Artibai region. Building upon the insights gained from the study of path's geographical, cultural and socio-environmental context, these guidelines aim to provide a strategic framework for its sustainable development and long-term management. The proposed recommendations are intended to enhance the identity and accessibility of the Lea Path, as a mean to bring together communities and local people living and working along the path, ensuring alignment with regenerative and sustainable tourism and broader regional strategies.

Guideline 01: Promoting tourism awareness through strategic communication and community engagement

Objective:
To enhance public awareness and acceptance of tourism as an opportunity, to local stakeholders and citizens through targeted communication strategies and participatory initiatives.

Description:
Tourism development, particularly in culturally and environmentally sensitive areas such as Lea-Artibai, requires not only infrastructure and services but also the active support and understanding of local communities. This guideline emphasises the importance of supporting a shared vision of tourism as a driver of sustainable development, cultural exchange and local pride. Enhancing tourism in small towns like the ones along the Lea Path, means providing better services also for locals, like bars, restaurants, better connection transports and attract new investments. By implementing inclusive communication strategies and creating spaces for dialogue, Leartibai can play a pivotal role in shaping positive perceptions and encouraging community ownership of tourism initiatives.

Recommended Actions:

- Launch a communication campaign that frames tourism as a shared opportunity, using diverse media channels
- Organise a series of participatory meetings and workshops with residents, local business and maybe youth groups to co-design the path narratives and present the ongoing projects and progresses
- Develop educational materials and storytelling content that reflect local values, traditions of the path and its history.
- Monitor public sentiment and feedback through surveys and community forums to adapt strategies over time

Who is doing it well?
Bergamo Airport cycling path: the construction of a cycling path from the city centre to the airport is a great example of how sustainable mobility infrastructure can help promote tourism and community engagement. The path, it is a 15 minutes ride, can be used both by locals, as work travellers that has to fly often and maybe for short periods, so they do not have big luggage, and tourists that can rent bikes from the airport and explore the territory in a different way. The airport is completed with services such as bike parking, repair stations and signage. The promotion is made within the airport and inside the city centre. It is a relevant case study both for the promotion and the services that can benefits locals and tourists. (Milan Bergamo Airport, 2021)

Guideline 02: Balancing tourism flows through sustainable event and territorial promotion

Objective:
To address the imbalance between coastal overtourism and under-visited areas by promoting low-impact events and slow mobility experiences that enhance the visibility and attractiveness of the Lea-Artibai interior.

Description:
While coastal destinations often face the pressure of overtourism, many inland areas remain largely excluded from tourism flows, despite their cultural and environmental richness. Starting from this point, this guideline proposes the development of zero- or low-impact events, specifically designed to activate and promote the Lea Path and other walking routes. The inspiring model is the Leartibai Fest and could be the second event of the year (in low season) or a "spin-off" event, where tourists and citizens are invited to discover the paths and other points of interests (cultural heritage, production farms, gastronomy) while walking or cycling in the nature.

Recommended Actions:

- Design and implement a calendar of thematic, low-impact events along the Lea Path, aligned with local traditions and seasonal rhythms.
- Implements the tracks in an Wikiloc (or other platforms like Strava) official account of the DMO, to provide reliable information and connect it to the website platform directly.
- Promote the events through integrated campaigns.
- Create a credential (printed or digital) to have a stamp on different point of the path and start a sense of belonging and familiarity to returning travellers. It could be also a reminder to bring home

Who is doing it well?
eXtraBO: it is an initiative by Bologna municipality to promote outdoor and nature tourism in the surroundings but outside of the city, through materials, maps, suggested itineraries and experiences. It combine infrastructure development with a strong communication strategy offering curated itineraries, digital tools and inclusive trails. (eXtraBO, 2025)

Cammini aperti: is a italian initiative promoted by the Italian Ministry of Tourism and ENIT, aimed at enhancing lesser-known walking routes through free, low-impact events that celebrate local culture, nature, and community participation. By encouraging slow travel and sustainable discovery, the project brings visibility to under-visited areas while fostering local engagement and environmental awareness. (https://camminiaperti.net/)

Guideline 03: Enhancing paths infrastructure and services with a data-driven approach

Objective:
To address the lack of essential services along the Lea Path by identifying strategic nodes and implementing low-impact infrastructure supported by data analysis and co-mapping.

Description:
One of the main barriers to the usability and attractiveness of the Lea Path is the almost absence of basic services along the trail, such as rest areas, parking, transport connections. This guideline proposed a targeted approach to infrastructure development, focusing on the identification of strategic nodes, key points along the route where an intervention can maximise the impact.

Recommended Actions:

- Conduct a spatial analysis to identify strategic nodes for service enhancement along the Lea Path.
- Install sensors to collect data on visitor flows, peak passage times, and usage patterns.

- Organize community-led mapping events (e.g., mapping parties) to gather local knowledge and co-design service points (water, resting areas, facilities, points of interest, accessibility, local businesses, ...).
- Develop wayfinding systems and multilingual signage at key intersections.
- Implement light infrastructure such as rest stops, bike racks, and shuttle parking areas in selected nodes.
- Could be implemented a light system that allows to walk the path at night or organise an event to experience the trail at a different time of the day.

Who is doing it well?
Turismo Urdaibai: the destination office has decided to implement three sensors on strategic point on their paths, that can detect data about direction, day, month, hour of the day of visitor's passages. Also, three screens to ask visitors feedback, and basic personal information like nationalities, transports used to reach the destination. With these data they can take informed decision on promotion and interventions on the paths, like highlighting one place then others, to redirect flows.

Conclusion and future perspective

This thesis has explored the how experiential tourism can serve as a strategic tool for the sustainable development of rural areas in Europe. In a context marked by the widespread but destructive traditional mass tourism models and the rise of more conscious, experience-based travel, the research has highlighted the potential of rural territories to offer meaningful, local and community-driven alternatives. These alternatives are rooted in local identity, cultural heritage, natural and intangible patrimony, elements that contemporary travellers seek intensely. Through the lens of systemic design, the study has addressed the complexity of rural tourism ecosystems, recognising the interdependencies between communities, landscapes, governance structures and digital infrastructures. Sustainable tourism represents not just an innovative and sustainable way of travelling for tourist, but it is an opportunity to regenerate and sustain rural areas. In contrast with these premises, the promotion of experiential tourism in rural areas is challenged by limited systemic storytelling capabilities, fragmentation of digital tools and insufficient involvement of local actors in defining the offering.

Building on these limitations, the thesis aimed to investigate existing practices and co-design interpretative tools capable of highlighting the current experiential tourism offer. The first tool developed it's a database, designed as a means of collecting data and enabling both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Its purpose is to identify strengths and gaps in the current offer, providing a solid, objective foundation for further evaluations and strategic considerations. The database was conceived to be adaptable, updatable and scalable according to different context of use.
The second set of tools consists of the Systemic Policies Model Canvas and the Systemic Policies Vision Canvas. These were specifically designed to stimulate dialogue and co-design among diverse stakeholders, with the goal of shaping future policies and action in the field of sustainable experiential tourism.
The final design output is a set of guidelines, tailored to the Spanish region of Lea-Artibai but potentially scalable to other contexts. These guidelines propose concrete action for the development of systemic and regenerative tourism, with a particular focus on outdoor and walking paths experiences.
From a methodological perspective, the thesis demonstrates the value of combining traditional research methods with systemic design data-driven approaches. The integration of qualitative and quantitative tools allowed for a more nuanced understanding of tourism dynamics, while the participatory components ensured that local knowledge and perspectives were embedded in the

analysis. The use of AI-based tools for data processing and workshop synthesis proved particularly effective in managing complexity and facilitating collaborative decision-making. These innovations contributed to a more dynamic and responsive research process, capable of generating actionable insights in real time.

The research has revealed a multifaceted and evolving landscape of experiential tourism in European rural areas. Through the mapping of 90 experiences across six regions, several key insights emerged.

First, the analysis confirmed that rural tourism is deeply rooted in local identity and often reflect strong connection to the local context, reflected in community engagement, valorisation of natural resources. However, several gaps were also identified, including limited accessibility, low digital integration and insufficient attention to climate change and awareness-related activities. In fact, only 14% of the experiences were fully accessible, and youth- and women-led initiatives were underrepresented.

The co-design workshop using the Systemic Policies Model Canvas and Vision Canvas, confirmed the systemic nature of these challenges. Stakeholders co-identified key leverage points for action, such as sustainable mobility, digital innovation, and inclusive design and articulated a shared vision for the future of rural tourism. This vision emphasised regeneration, human connection, and the integration of technology as a supportive tool.

The case study of the Lea-Artibai region provided a concrete example of how systemic and experiential approaches can be applied in practice. The region's local identity, collaborative governance, and commitment to sustainability made it an ideal testing ground for the tools and strategies developed throughout the research. The strong local pride is the key to understand the strategic vision of the region and to raise awareness on tourism, often seen as an issue, and to guide behavioural change. The co-developed guidelines during the internship, particularly those focused on walking paths and outdoor experiences, promoted a different way of slow mobility with strong connection with nature. The main result with these action is to redirect touristic flows toward partially unknown inner municipalities, and to relieve some of the pressure of tourism in the coastal Town of Lekeitio and Ondarroa.

The framework that emerged could guide public bodies, DMOs and designers in structuring shared tools to rethink the tourist experiences of their rural destinations in a systemic and sustainable way, with particular attention to the themes of community involvement, digitalisation, innovation, accessibility, inclusion and co-creation. This thesis serves as a starting point for research in the field of experiential tourism and systemic design, providing models and tools that can be scaled and reused in other similar contexts. It is a call to action for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to embrace complexity, collaborate across boundaries, and design tourism systems that are not only sustainable, but truly regenerative.

As with any research, this study presents certain limitations. The sample of experiences analysed, while significant, could be expanded to include a broader range of territories and tourism typologies, and statistical data analysis. Similarly, the accessibility analysis focused primarily on physical aspects, leaving room for further exploration of cognitive, sensory, and cultural dimensions.
In the case of the co-creation workshop, the role and skills of stakeholders were all tourism-related. In future planning, it could be useful to have more variety to gain different perspectives and a more holistic view on the subject.

Future research could build on this foundation by incorporating longitudinal studies, user-centred evaluations, and cross-regional comparisons. There is also significant potential to explore the intersection between experiential tourism and other sectors, such as agriculture, education, and health, as part of a broader strategy for rural innovation.

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