

I. General Characteristics of the Practice

1. Title of the practice (instrument/project)

Rural Houses Net

2. Location of the Good Practice

2.1. Country	Spain
2.2. NUTS1	Castilla y León
2.3. NUTS2	Avila
2.4. City	248 Municipalities of Avila Province
2.5. Organisation	Casas de Gredos and Avila County

3. Precise theme/issue tackled by the practice

Job creation in rural areas related to cultural resources preservation through old buildings refurbishment for a sustainable tourism.

4. Key words

Culture, preservation, sustainable, tourism, rural houses

5. Objectives of the practice

Fixing rural population through job creation, preserving local culture with rural houses net.

6. Detailed description of the practice

6.1. Origin/background

The province of Avila is located in the Southern part of Castilla y Leon Region, over 100 km far from Madrid. Is a province with elderly population in rural areas, integrated by 248 municipalities. It has three main areas, the plateau in the North, the Mountains in the South and the World Heritage City in the centre. The main resource of the province is the Tourism, based on the natural, cultural and gastronomy resources, furthermore, considering the close 6 million inhabitants of Madrid, Avila province is a destination for inside tourism, mainly at weekends with short stays due to the fact mainly tourist are coming just to the capital as a part of a route across the World Heritage Cities, and because the lack of proper accommodations during several years in the rural areas in order to attract a different profile of visitor, a nature lover, in company of the family with longer stays. Lack of a centralised service for booking accommodations in the province.

6.2. Bodies involved

"Casas de Gredos" Booking center, Municipalities, Avila County Council

6.3. Problem tackled

From 70's up to early 90's the rural areas suffered an important decrease of population, migration to the capital or to Madrid, jointly with elderly own population, so most of buildings were in ruins, without any future for young people there. Then in the early 90's a public initiative by the Avila County Council set up an initial little net of rural houses, most of them owned by the municipalities, as old

teacher house, old doctor house, old school buildings, they were restored with public money, and then rented through a booking center called "Casas de Gredos" as a way for incomes for those little municipalities, as well as as a way for rural job creation, mostly female rural jobs, directly or indirectly related with this rural houses net. When the owner it was a municipality the Avila County Council paid in advance the refurbish and new items dotation, then according with the booking a % it was recovered by the County Council up to pay the whole cost, then it became an incomes source for the municipality, apart from a way for fixing local population and generate other opportunities as restaurants, services,.....etc.

6.4. Target of the practice

Set up rural houses net for fixing rural population, preserving cultural heritage by refurbishing old buildings.

6.5. Target groups

Little rural municipalities, local SME's: outdoor activities, restaurants industry, Tourist and nature lovers, policy makers,...etc.

6.6. Detailed content of the practice

The Avila County Council through this initiative set up firstly a little net of rural houses in order to provide visitors a different profile of accommodations for getting longer stays in our province in contact with nature, and as a way to refurbish those ancient buildings otherwise would be lost forever, so the restoration works were financed by the public body and later recovered through the a % of the incomes, controlled thanks to the Booking Centre set up as another added value for owners in charge of keeping this activity within the proper Rural Tourism Development, preserving the environment, boosting promotion and development to guarantee a high standard of quality, preservation of architectural heritage according with local tradition, as well as assessment for managing those little companies in terms of using new technologies for commercializing directly to the costumer in their own origin markets. Nowadays Avila has the higher number of rural houses in Spain, over 800, the booking centre was transferred to private owners in 2006 in order to compete in an open market in similar conditions.

This net of rural houses, became the way to keep in good conditions those old public buildings like the doctor house, priest house, teacher and school house, old workshop buildings what nowadays is a kind of little industrial tourism resource. All those refurbish works should be done according with traditions and using local materials by local SMEs, in order to create local jobs, as well as mostly of people employed are women, since they have the most difficult conditions to access to jobs. Most of all this solution is a way to keep the little village "alive", providing high standard quality services to their customers, although the level of innovation is still a weaknesses in most of the cases, as well as the need to open the market to a more European profile, through friendly green facilities, English skills, etc.....

The booking center it means, apart from a job creation itself, an added value and a link with the natural resources (routes, interpretation centres,...), cultural resources (festivities, cultural sites,...) gastronomy resources (restaurants, local products...), so a way to provide to the customer an integrated package for spending wonderful days in a peaceful region, so to increase overnights, then the economic wealth so fixing population thanks to job creation in rural areas.

6.7. Financial framework

aprox. 90.000 euros/year for the booking centre.

6.8. Timescale

Start: 1995

7. Evaluation

7.1. Results and outputs of the practice

Number of houses belonging to the booking center: over 300 houses. Job creation: no data at level of rural houses, at the booking service directly 3 people (reduced due to crisis).

7.2. Main strengths (success factors)

Main Strengths: the success factors are the public-private initiative, the added value of the services provided since there are synergies with other sectors in order to provide integrated packages, the initial co-financing for refurbish the old houses coming from public funds and recovered later with the bookings.

7.3 Main weaknesses

Weaknesses: low level of using technology or innovation, big companies providing the same service, lack of training on other languages skills for opening the offer to other European markets, potential speculations from non local people just trying to make quick profits without respecting traditions and culture neither quality standard.

7.4 Difficulties encountered

Competence with other regions offering the same, joining interest among different stakeholders like hotels, rural houses, restaurants. Difficulties for associations within the sector and with complementary sectors like agrofood, outdoor activities.

7.5 Lessons learned from the practice

Need of increasing the quality of the service instead of quantity, priority to tackle the visitor profile to adapt the offer for increasing the overnight ratio Awareness of a good long term strategy to preserve the natural and cultural resources.

7.6 Recommendations for improvement

Innovative approach for increasing the competitiveness of the SME companies involved, as a tool for adapting the offer in a more flexible way, use of new technologies. Differentiation from other offers, from a smart approach, look for an environmentally friendly visitor profile.

8. Other relevant information

<http://www.casasgredos.com/cdg/catalogo.php>

9. Contact

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II. Transferability of the practice

10. Key factors associated with the regional context

Collaboration between public-private stakeholders, Community engagement, Value of cultural resources.

11. Other key factors for the success of the good practice

Strong associations between owners, as well as collaboration between Public body with the municipalities and private owners. Combination of resources for offering integrated packages to market: accommodation + activities + gastronomy.

12. Factors that might hamper the transfer of the good practice

No, so far as we know.

13. General judgment of the practice

13.1. Degree of innovation	Neutral
13.2. Transferability	Very good
13.3. Cost/benefit ration	Good