



Cycling Together: Heritage, Communities, and Local Value

The Inclusive Cycling Tourism Handbook



Interreg
Danube Region



Co-funded by
the European Union



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Introduction.....	4
Overview of Inclusive Border Cycling Tourism	4
What does inclusive mean?	5
What is the added value of this Handbook?	8
How this solution can change the current situation	10
The importance of maintaining cycling trails and integrating local cultural heritage and products.....	13
Optimal local maintenance scheme for cycling trail	17
Infrastructure development and upkeep.....	17
Infrastructure development priorities for cycling tourism	18
Community involvement in trail maintenance	21
Tested methods for integrating local cultural heritage and products	23
Implementation methodology for community involvement in trail maintenance	23
Implementation methodology for tangible heritage integration	27
Principles for successful tangible heritage integration	31
Implementation methodology for integrating local products into cycling tourism.....	33
The role of local products in cultural heritage.....	33
Integrated Pilot Summary: Testing Inclusive Cycling Tourism Models.....	41
Overview	41
Maintenance Pilots: Developing locally-based cycling route maintenance models.....	42
Overall concept and methodology	42
Participant involvement and stakeholder engagement	43
Route selection and testing implementation	44
Good practices and lessons learned	48

Storytelling pilots: integrating cultural heritage into cycling tourism	51
Overall aim and approach	51
Participant involvement as contributors and storytellers	53
Route selection and thematic development	54
Methodology: From community contribution to digital implementation .	61
The Slovak example as a good practice	63
Results and participant feedback in Storytelling Pilots	65
Participant experiences	65
Good practices and lessons learned in Storytelling	66
Identified areas for development in storytelling	68
Local Product Pilots: Integrating local culinary and artisanal products into cycling tourism	69
Overall concept and methodology	69
Participant involvement and stakeholder engagement	71
Route selection and testing implementation	72
Findings across pilot locations.....	73
Feedback collection and quality of assessment	75
Good practices and lessons learned.....	76
Joint evaluation	78
Evaluating the Inclusive Cycling Tourism Method	78
Joint evaluation of methods and pilot results	78
Considering different status of cycling routes	79
Outcomes and effects on the current situation.....	82
Necessary incentives for effective and sustainable social inclusion	83
Institutional and financial incentives	83
Economic Incentives and Support Structures	84
Incentives for effective, sustainable social inclusion	85
Conclusion	86

Introduction

Overview of Inclusive Border Cycling Tourism

The Inclusive Border Cycling (IBC) project addresses complex demographic challenges faced by border areas within the Danube Region. These areas are plagued by outward migration, particularly of young and qualified individuals, leading to an ageing society and an increase in less mobile and vulnerable groups, such as ethnic minorities, including Roma, elderly people, people living in poverty, disabled individuals, and youth in remote areas. In this context, the project explores how border cycling tourism can become not only a tourism development tool, but also a practical instrument for strengthening social inclusion in remote border areas.

Cycling tour with children in Lunga, Timis County, Romania
© Constantin Duma



What does inclusive mean?

Inclusive border cycling tourism is an approach that ensures cycling routes and their associated tourism offerings are accessible, welcoming, and beneficial to all members of society, including disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. In the context of the Inclusive Border Cycling (IBC) project, inclusivity means:

Social integration

Creating meaningful employment and participation opportunities for marginalised communities, including elderly people, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, disadvantaged youth, and economically vulnerable individuals. Stories are designed to strengthen identity, evoke the past, and develop personal connections to routes, landscapes, and culture in ways that are accessible and meaningful to all social groups. This also means that vulnerable local groups are not only considered as target groups but are actively involved as contributors to cycling tourism development, storytelling, local product integration and route-related activities.

Accessibility

Ensuring that cycling infrastructure, information, products, and services are physically and digitally accessible to people of diverse abilities and backgrounds.

Economic equity

Guaranteeing that tourism benefits are shared equitably across local communities, particularly supporting small and micro-enterprises and vulnerable populations. This includes creating opportunities for local producers, small businesses and vulnerable community members to participate in tourism value chains generated by cycling routes.

Cultural Respect

Valuing and preserving local heritage, traditions, and authentic community voices while preventing cultural commodification. The project aims to showcase the rich histories and traditions of various ethnic and cultural groups living along the Danube. This includes collecting and sharing local legends, folk customs, historical events, and personal stories to ensure that every community's voice is heard.

Environmental stewardship

Promoting sustainable practices that minimise environmental impact while supporting conservation of natural resources.

Linguistic Diversity

The project ensures that collected stories and information are available in multiple languages. Multilingual access not only enriches the visitor experience but also contributes to broader understanding and appreciation of the region's cultural heritage. All stories and information are made available in at least three languages: the native language of the area, English, and a neighbouring country's language relevant to the story. The experiences and methodologies collected in this Handbook will provide an important basis for the later development of the Transnational Social Inclusion Model (TSIM), which will build on tested approaches for the systematic and active inclusion of vulnerable local groups in border cycling tourism.

Inclusivity in cycling tourism is not an add-on feature but a foundational principle that strengthens the overall resilience, authenticity, and long-term sustainability of regional tourism development.



What is the added value of this Handbook?

1. Practical, evidence-based guidance

Drawing from real-world pilot testing across Hungary, Austria, Romania, Slovakia and Croatia, the Handbook offers tested methodologies and actionable recommendations for integrating local products and stories into cycling tourism while ensuring social inclusion.

It also serves as a methodological and evidence-based foundation for the later development of the Transnational Social Inclusion Model (TSIM), based on the pilot experiences, tested approaches and lessons presented in this document.

2. Comprehensive framework

It addresses the complete value chain from product quality standards and local producer support to community engagement, and sustainable development outcomes.

3. Transnational perspective

The Handbook synthesises experiences across multiple border regions of the Danube Region, offering insights into how different territorial, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts affect cycling tourism development.

4. Integration of vulnerable groups

Rather than treating social inclusion as an add-on, the Handbook places vulnerable populations at the centre of development processes, placing explicit emphasis on mechanisms for engaging disadvantaged populations as active contributors to tourism development, not passive beneficiaries.

5. Methodological tools

The Handbook provides tested methodologies for pilot testing, evaluation frameworks, quality assurance systems, and monitoring mechanisms.

6. Integration of multiple dimensions

The Handbook uniquely combines three critical elements: storytelling and cultural heritage valorisation, local product integration, and trail maintenance, demonstrating how these components work together to create sustainable, inclusive cycling tourism. These dimensions correspond to the main thematic building blocks from which the future TSIM will be developed: the integration of local cultural assets and brands, the enrichment of border cycling tourism supply, and the creation of sustainable, locally based maintenance schemes for cycling trails.

This Handbook provides a comprehensive, evidence-based framework for developing inclusive cycling tourism in border regions. This framework combines traditional cycling tourism with the experience of storytelling and the incorporation of local products, all while paying attention to the quality and inclusivity of the planned routes, stories, and products. In the Handbook, IBC project partners present the structure, conditions, and findings from testing for each element of the framework separately (storytelling, local product integration, maintenance). During the testing of each component, it became clear that the true experience is achieved when all elements of the framework function properly and build upon one another.

How this solution can change the current situation

Starting point:

Border regions of the Danube area face significant challenges, including demographic decline, limited economic opportunities, fragmented tourism initiatives, inadequate cycling infrastructure, and social exclusion of vulnerable groups.

Despite possessing rich natural and cultural heritage assets, these remote border areas often fail to market these assets effectively on international platforms, preventing them from driving socio-economic development. Local societies in rural areas live with their heritage being a natural part of the environment and therefore often do not recognise its value and potential for external visitors.

Existing initiatives are fragmented and frequently hindered by local scepticism, even though well-preserved cultural assets and untouched natural environments are clear attractions along the border regions.

By documenting tested initiatives and practical methodologies, this Handbook helps identify how these assets can be activated through cycling tourism while ensuring that vulnerable local groups are involved in a systematic, visible and meaningful way.

The transformation:

This Handbook presents an integrated approach that transforms these challenges into opportunities through:

Economic revitalisation:

By connecting local producers, artisans, and service providers to cycling tourism value chains, the approach creates new income sources and employment opportunities.

Pilot activities demonstrated that cycling tourists spend more on local products, accommodations, and food compared to other traveller types, directly benefiting small-scale producers, especially when local products and personal encounters are integrated into the visitor experience.

Cultural heritage valorisation:

The storytelling methodology enables communities to recognise, document, and present their cultural assets in engaging formats. Through pilot implementations, over 350 participants experienced story-based cycling tours in seven pilot border areas, that transformed everyday landscapes into spaces of cultural experience, reflection, and learning. A local producer can become a channel of cultural-heritage valorisation as well, by turning traditional knowledge, raw materials, and local practices into visible, attractive, and economically viable products and experiences.

In practice, this means linking what you produce (food, crafts, textiles, etc.) to the history, landscape, and identity of the place where you operate

Infrastructure enhancement:

The maintenance methodologies provide practical frameworks for improving cycling route quality through community involvement. Pilot testing in three countries identified and addressed accessibility issues, safety concerns, and signposting gaps, making routes more welcoming for vulnerable groups, including elderly cyclists and those with reduced mobility.

Social cohesion:

By actively involving vulnerable groups as storytellers, evaluators, local producers, service providers and maintenance participants, the approach strengthens community identity and creates platforms for intergenerational dialogue and cross-cultural understanding.



*Picture frames along the Vulkanland Route 66 showcase special highlights
© Thermen-Vulkanland*

Sustainable development model:

The integration of cycling tourism with local value creation, cultural preservation, and social inclusion creates a self-reinforcing system where tourism development benefits local communities while protecting and showcasing what makes border regions unique.

The importance of maintaining cycling trails and integrating local cultural heritage and products

Cycling tourism is a growing and flexible segment of the tourism industry, where cyclists' primary motivation for traveling is to connect with the landscape and other cyclists. The Transnational Marketing Strategy developed as part of the IBC project provides a detailed overview of the various segments of cycling tourism. The effectiveness of cycling tourism as a development tool depends critically on three interconnected elements: quality infrastructure, meaningful cultural experiences, and authentic connections with local products and communities.

Infrastructure as foundation: Quality cycling trails form the essential foundation for any cycling tourism initiative. Without safe, accessible, and clearly marked routes, even the richest cultural offerings and finest local products cannot attract or retain visitors. Infrastructure quality directly impacts visitor satisfaction, safety, and the ability of vulnerable groups to participate in cycling tourism.

However, trail maintenance is a persistent challenge in rural border regions. Budget constraints, limited skilled labour, and seasonal usage patterns create pressures that threaten infrastructure quality.



Gravel ride in the countryside, Hungary
© Chripkó Lili

The IBC approach addresses this by:

- Demonstrating how quality cycling infrastructure creates measurable local development value that can justify public and private investment.
- Establishing community maintenance models that build local ownership and employment.
- Integrating trail maintenance into broader regional development strategies.

Cultural heritage as identity and experience:

Cultural heritage provides the distinctive identity that differentiates one cycling route from another. In an increasingly competitive tourism market, infrastructure alone cannot create memorable experiences. Stories, traditions, and cultural narratives transform cycling from mere physical activity into meaningful journeys of discovery and connection.

The IBC storytelling approach recognises that cultural heritage encompasses both tangible elements (archaeological sites, historical monuments, buildings) and intangible attributes (practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills, traditions). By integrating these elements into cycling routes through place-based storytelling, the project creates layered experiences where landscape, movement, and narrative converge.

Local products as economic and cultural bridges:

Local products serve multiple functions in inclusive cycling tourism. Economically, they create direct revenue streams for small-scale producers and artisans. Culturally, they function as tangible expressions of regional identity, allowing visitors to literally taste, touch, and take home the essence of a place. Socially, they provide platforms for interaction between visitors and local communities.

Integrating local gastronomic and craft products into cycling tourism creates powerful multiplier effects:

Direct economic impact:

Cyclists purchase products at rest stops, undertake guided producer visits, and book experiential workshops, generating immediate revenue.

Value chain strengthening:

Visibility and demand encourage local producers to upgrade facilities, improve quality, and formalise operations, strengthening entire regional supply chains.

Tourism extensionification:

Product stops extend visitor routes, increase dwell time, and encourage longer stays, multiplying spending per visitor.

Cultural transmission:

Hands-on experiences with local producers, tastings, craft demonstrations, and story-based tours create emotional connections that enhance visitor satisfaction and encourage word-of-mouth promotion.

Employment diversification:

Product integration creates employment opportunities for diverse skill levels and physical capacities, extending workforce participation to groups traditionally excluded from tourism.

*Difficult driving conditions must be clearly marked
© Thermen-Vulkanland*



Optimal local maintenance scheme for cycling trail

Infrastructure development and upkeep

Cycling route quality directly influences visitor satisfaction, repeat visitation, and willingness to spend money on products and experiences. Poor infrastructure, potholes, unclear signage, unsafe road sections, and inadequate rest areas create negative experiences that undermine all other tourism development efforts.

Yet maintenance funding is a chronic challenge in rural border regions:

- Public budgets are constrained.
- Trail usage is seasonal, making year-round maintenance investment difficult to justify.
- Responsibility fragmentation among multiple municipalities, private landowners and tourism organisations creates coordination difficulties.
- Maintenance skills and labour are scarce in ageing rural populations. In this context, local maintenance should be understood not only as physical repair work, but also as a coordinated route quality monitoring and response system. Community members and vulnerable groups can play an important role in identifying problems, reporting maintenance needs, supporting minor non-technical tasks and providing user-based feedback, while technical or safety-critical interventions remain the responsibility of competent authorities or professional service providers. This can increase trail ownership among community members along the cycling route.

Infrastructure development priorities for cycling tourism

When planning tourism packages and marking out routes, it is important to be aware of the quality of the roads to be used, as their condition can significantly affect the travel experience. The following aspects should be taken into account when assessing the quality of routes:

1. Continuity

Physical disruptions make it impossible or difficult to travel, forcing cyclists to dismount or face unsafe situations.

Indicators:

- Broken surfaces requiring dismount;
- Barriers without bypass options;
- Steep climbs and descents are difficult to elderly or less fit cyclists;
- Interrupted route sections requiring detours;
- Dangerous crossings without safe alternatives.

2. Signposting

Adequacy of route marking, directional signs, and information panels.

Indicators:

- Missing or damaged signs at critical decision points;
- Dirty or faded signage reducing legibility;
- Inconsistency between physical signage and digital maps/apps;
- Lack of distance indicators or difficulty markers;
- Missing safety warnings at hazard points.

3. Surface and width

Route surface quality and path width adequacy.

Indicators:

- Damaged or excessively rough surfaces that make cycling difficult;
- Paths too narrow for safe passage, especially for adapted cycles or hand cycles;
- Surface material inappropriate for route type;
- Excessive obstacles (roots, rocks, debris);
- Poor drainage is causing persistent wet sections.

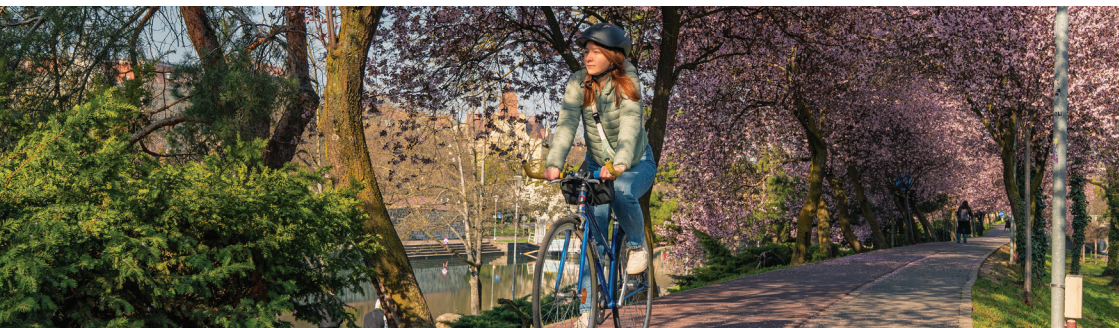
4. Access to attractions

Ease of reaching key sites and amenities along routes.

Indicators:

- No designated secure bicycle parking at attraction sites;
- Attractions not accessible for people with disabilities or reduced mobility;
- Unclear or missing directions to attractions from the main route;
- Long distances between the main route and significant attractions without connecting route;
- Lack of rest facilities near major attractions;
- Lack of information about attractions along the main route.

Spring Along the EV13 in Timisoara
© Vasile Oacheș



5. Overall attractiveness

Route safety, aesthetic quality, and experiential value.

Indicators:

- Routes along busy roads exposing cyclists to traffic danger, dust, noise, or air pollution;
- Monotonous landscapes without variation or interest points;
- Lack of shade or weather protection on long sections;
- Absence of rest areas or viewpoints;
- Absence of exit points which allow cyclist to shorten the trip, be picked-up etc.;
- Poor lighting on sections requiring evening/early morning use.

The problems identified during the assessment can be classified into three priority levels:

Level 1 - Significant issues: Require immediate attention as they pose safety risks or severely limit accessibility. Examples include dangerous crossings, broken surfaces forcing dismount, impassable sections (floods, roadworks, etc.) or completely missing critical signage.

Level 2 - Medium issues: Should be addressed in medium-term planning as they reduce comfort or attractiveness but don't present immediate dangers. Examples include narrower-than-ideal paths, faded signage still partially legible, or limited rest facilities.

Level 3 - Small issues: Desirable improvements that enhance experience but don't critically limit usability. Examples include aesthetic enhancements, additional comfort features, or supplementary information panels. This gradation system enables pragmatic prioritisation of limited maintenance resources while ensuring critical issues receive appropriate attention.

Community involvement in trail maintenance

A defining feature of the IBC approach is the active involvement of local communities, particularly vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, in trail maintenance activities. This approach serves multiple purposes: it builds local capacity, creates employment opportunities, strengthens community ownership of cycling infrastructure, and ensures maintenance priorities reflect actual user needs.

At the same time, community involvement should be organised within a clear coordination framework. Local residents, NGOs and vulnerable groups can contribute most effectively when their roles are well defined, when reporting channels are simple, and when responsibilities between municipalities, route managers and community actors are transparent. Rationale for community involvement.

Social inclusion: Incorporating local disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in maintenance provides multiple benefits, including enhancing social inclusion, creating job opportunities, and fostering community ownership of public spaces. For groups facing barriers to traditional employment, including long-term unemployed, people with disabilities, marginalised ethnic backgrounds, disadvantaged youth, maintenance roles offer valuable work experience, skill development, self-fulfilment and income.

Local knowledge: Community members, especially those living near or regularly using routes, are best positioned to notice issues before they become major problems. This “local custodianship” creates early warning systems for maintenance needs while empowering residents to take ownership of cycling infrastructure.

Cultural sensitivity: Local community involvement ensures maintenance activities respect cultural sites, traditional practices, and community values, avoiding unintended damage to heritage assets.

Resource allocation: Involving volunteers and community groups supplements limited municipal maintenance budgets, enabling more frequent inspections and minor repairs without proportional cost increases.

Capacity building: Training community members in maintenance tasks develops transferable skills valuable for employment in tourism, public works, and related sectors. This is particularly impactful for youth and marginalised populations.

Participants of the pilot cycling tour at the Roman military camp in Iža, Slovakia
© Ekopolis Foundation



Tested methods for integrating local cultural heritage and products

Implementation methodology for community involvement in trail maintenance

Step 1: Identify vulnerable and disadvantaged groups

Understand local context and determine who vulnerable groups are, ensuring inclusivity in planning:

- Identify groups such as low-income families, people with disabilities, marginalised ethnic groups, women, youth, and elderly.
- Engage community leaders and local organisations to help identify vulnerable individuals and groups, their needs and possible way of involvement.

Outcome: Comprehensive list of local disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, along with their needs and interests.

Step 2: Build partnerships and collaborations Create a collaborative environment where vulnerable groups, local authorities, and other stakeholders work together:

- Partner with local NGOs, community-based organisations, local businesses, and authorities.
- Involve local cycling clubs, environmental groups, and tourism organisations.
- Establish a local advisory board with representatives from vulnerable groups, local authorities, and cycling tourism experts.

Outcome: Network of stakeholders working together with shared goals of inclusion and sustainable tourism.

Step 3: Capacity building and skills development Empower local disadvantaged groups with the skills and knowledge needed to actively contribute to cycling route maintenance and complementary activities:

- Organise training sessions on basic cycling route maintenance, including repairing paths, installing signage, using the trail management and alert applications and managing rest areas.
- Develop skills workshops in areas like bicycle repair, guiding cycling tourists, and hospitality services.
- Facilitate access to certifications or training, improving employment prospects in tourism, hospitality, and environmental management.

Outcome: Local disadvantaged groups develop marketable skills, improving economic independence and participation in maintenance.

Step 4: Economic incentives and support structures provide economic opportunities for local vulnerable groups through cycling tourism-related activities.

- Create micro-enterprise opportunities such as bicycle rentals, guiding services, selling local food or handicrafts along routes.
- Develop payment structures for maintenance work done by local vulnerable groups, ensuring fair compensation.
- Integrate groups into tourism-related events such as cycling festivals, cultural activities, or local tours.

Outcome: Creation of sustainable local employment opportunities and a strong, diversified local economy tied to cycling tourism.

Step 5: Incorporate inclusive design and accessibility ensure cycling routes and related activities are accessible and inclusive of people with different abilities and needs.

- Design cycling routes with universal accessibility in mind (smooth surfaces, low-gradient paths, accessible rest areas).
- Provide training on creating accessible cycling tourism experiences for people with disabilities.
- Install facilities such as ramps, bike storage, restrooms, and food stalls catering to a range of abilities.

Outcome: A more inclusive and accessible cycling infrastructure welcoming tourists from diverse backgrounds, including those with mobility challenges.



Pribehy Dunaja Danube stories

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Bol na tomto mieste
most cez Dunaj?



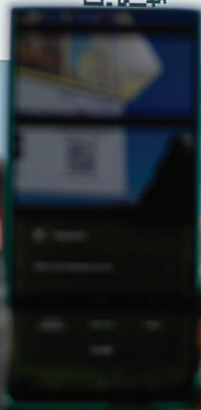
ev6.ekopolis.sk/lzs


Volt-e ezen a helyen
római hid a Duna fölött?



ev6.ekopolis.sk/izh


Was there a Roman bridge
across the Danube
at this location?



Implementation methodology for tangible heritage integration

Step 1: Identification and inventory

The first step is to compile a list of local cultural values, using existing databases, local knowledge, and previous initiatives. If resources are incomplete or fragmented, additional desk research and community data collection should be carried out to ensure that all important and interesting values are identified. Of course, it is recommended to apply a preliminary thematic screening to ensure that the selected values are aligned with the characteristics of the cycle route and the tourism objectives.

The inventory process should document:

- Location and GPS coordinates of tangible heritage sites.
- Physical address and accessibility information.
- Type of heritage (archaeological site, historical monument, building, artifact).
- Current condition and preservation status.
- Cultural and historical significance.
- Tourism relevance and potential for integration into cycling routes.
- Existing interpretation or presentation materials.
- Stakeholder ownership or management responsibility.

Step 2: Assessment for digitisation potential

Not all tangible heritage requires digitisation, but the following criteria indicate strong candidates:

- Heritage that is fragile, inaccessible, or at risk.
- Sites where physical interventions are not possible or desirable.
- Heritage with complex spatial or temporal dimensions that benefit from 3D visualisation.
- Objects or sites where augmented or virtual reality can enhance understanding.
- Heritage is distributed across multiple locations that can be virtually connected.
- Sites with limited physical infrastructure for visitor interpretation.

Step 3: Selection of appropriate digital technologies

Based on the heritage characteristics, accessibility requirements, and target audiences, select appropriate technologies:

Heritage type	Recommended technologies
Inaccessible sites	Virtual tours, VR experiences, 3D models
Ruined or transformed buildings	AR overlays showing historical appearance, before/after comparisons
Small objects or details	3D digitisation, holographic projection, interactive zoom features
Dispersed heritage along route	Mobile web app with GPS-triggered content, QR codes at locations
Underground or interior spaces	360-degree photography, virtual tours
Landscape transformation	Animated presentations showing change over time

Step 4: Digital content production working with technological organisations or similar specialists, produce high-quality digital assets:

- Conduct professional photography and videography;
- Create 3D scans of objects, buildings, or landscapes;
- Develop 3D models based on historical documentation for re-constructed or disappeared heritage;
- Produce animations showing temporal changes or processes;
- Gather archival materials (photographs, documents, testimonies);
- Record audio content, including expert narration and personal testimonies;
- Ensure all content meets accessibility standards.

Step 5: Integration with Storyportal

Upload all digitized content to a Storyportal (such as the one created as part of the IBC project (Danube Cycling Storyportal - <https://danubestoryportal.eu/>), or an equivalent platform), ensuring that:

- Multilingual metadata and descriptions;
- GPS tagging linking digital content to physical locations;
- QR code generation for on-site access;
- Compatibility with mobile devices;
- Appropriate file formats and compression for quick loading;
- Attribution of sources and copyright compliance.

Step 6: Physical on-site elements

Install minimal physical infrastructure to connect cyclists to digital content:

- QR code plates on existing cycling signposts or information boards;
- Information boards with simplified web addresses for those without QR scanning capability;
- Weather-resistant materials (UV-resistant plastic or stainless steel);
- Strategic placement ensuring visibility without environmental intrusion;
- Consistency with existing cycling route signage and branding;
- Readable for people with sight issues.

*Old Town Đurđevac, Croatia
© Koprivnica Križevci County*



Principles for successful tangible heritage integration

Authenticity and accuracy

Digital presentations must be based on rigorous research and accurate information. Work with historians, archaeologists, and cultural heritage specialists to ensure content validity. Clearly distinguish between documented facts, informed reconstructions, and interpretative elements.

Accessibility and Inclusivity

- Design digital solutions to accommodate diverse users:
- Elderly visitors who may have limited digital confidence;
- People with visual or hearing impairments;
- Persons with disabilities requiring assistive technologies;
- International visitors needing multilingual access;
- Users with varying levels of historical or cultural knowledge;
- Cyclists who need quick, digestible content during brief stops.

Complementarity, not replacement

Digital elements should enhance, not replace, the physical experience of visiting tangible heritage sites. The combination of physical presence, digital interpretation, and live narration creates the most powerful and memorable experiences. Digital tools are most effective when they:

- Refer to the place where the visitor is located and to the view he/she sees;
- Reveal what is invisible (underground structures, disappeared buildings);

- Show temporal change (historical versus contemporary appearance);
- Provide additional layers of information accessible on demand;
- Support pre-visit preparation and post-visit reflection;
- Enable access for those who cannot physically visit the site.

Sustainability and maintenance Plan for long-term sustainability of digital heritage assets:

- Use standard file formats that remain accessible as technology evolves;
- Maintain servers and platforms hosting digital content;
- Update content as new research emerges;
- Monitor and replace physical elements (QR codes, information boards) as needed;
- Ensure institutional commitment to ongoing platform management.

A quick stop at a local farmer's cottage, Hungary
© Chripkó Lili



Implementation methodology for integrating local products into cycling tourism

The role of local products in cultural heritage

Local products, particularly gastronomy and traditional crafts, represent living expressions of intangible cultural heritage. They embody regional identity, traditional knowledge, and the relationship between communities and their environment. Within the IBC project, local products served not merely as commercial offerings but as narrative anchors that connect tangible heritage sites with everyday life, personal memories, and community traditions.

The integration of local products into cycling tourism offers, transforms these products from simple consumables into experiential elements that enrich cultural understanding and support local economies. When cyclists taste traditional dishes or encounter local crafts along their route, they engage with heritage in immediate, sensory ways that complement historical narratives and digital interpretation.

Step 1: Inventory of local products with cultural significance

Identify local products that possess cultural, historical, or traditional significance beyond their commercial value:

- Traditional foods and beverages: Dishes, ingredients, or preparation methods specific to the region.
- Artisan crafts: Textiles, ceramics, woodwork, metalwork, or other handmade products.
- Agricultural products: Crops, livestock products, or preserved foods tied to local farming traditions.
- Natural resource products: Items derived from the sustainable use of local natural resources.

For each product, document:

- Name (local and in other relevant languages);
- Production location and geographic distribution;
- Historical origins and cultural significance;
- Traditional production methods versus contemporary practices;
- Seasonality and availability;
- Producers, farmers, or artisans currently maintaining the tradition;
- Stories, legends, or memories associated with the product;
- Potential connection points to cycling routes;
- Photos of typical appearance.

Step 2: Link products to cultural heritage narratives

Local products should not be presented in isolation but woven into broader cultural heritage narratives. Identify connections between products and:

- Historical events (e.g., traditional preservation methods developed during periods of scarcity);
- Landscape and environment (e.g., river-based fish stew reflecting Danube culture);
- Ethnic and cultural diversity (e.g., products introduced by specific ethnic communities);
- Traditional livelihoods (e.g., mill products representing grain processing heritage);
- Seasonal rhythms and agricultural cycles;
- Family and community traditions;
- Border-specific characteristics (e.g., products that crossed borders despite political divisions).

Step 3: Engage local producers and artisans as partners

Successful integration requires meaningful partnership with those who produce, prepare, or craft local products:

Identify and map producers

Locate active producers, farmers, restaurants, or artisans who maintain traditional practices or offer authentic local products. Prioritise those with:

- Strong local knowledge and personal connections to traditions;
- Willingness to engage with visitors and share stories;
- Capacity to accommodate small groups or cycling tourists;
- Locations accessible along or near cycling routes;
- Speaks more languages (at least the one from behind the border and English, if possible).

Build trust and shared understanding

Local producers often have limited experience with tourism product development and may initially perceive participation as burdensome rather than beneficial. Effective involvement depends on:

- Early communication about the goals to be achieved and mutual benefits;
- Clear definition of roles, expectations, and time commitments;
- Realistic discussion of potential economic outcomes;
- Respect for producers' operational constraints and seasonal rhythms;
- Recognition of their expertise and cultural knowledge.

Storytelling during the pilot cycling tour in Comlosu Mic, Timis County, Romania
© Timis County



Co-develop experiential offerings

Work with producers to design experiences that are authentic, manageable, and enriching:

- Demonstrations of traditional production or preparation methods;
- Tastings or meals featuring local products;
- Opportunities for visitors to participate in production processes;
- Storytelling sessions where producers share personal or family memories;
- Sales opportunities allowing visitors to purchase products.

Step 4: Spatial integration along cycling routes Plan the physical and temporal integration of local product experiences within cycling itineraries:

Integration model	Description
On-route stops	Brief stops at producers' locations for tastings, demonstrations, or purchases. Works well for bakeries, farm shops, craft workshops along the route.
Meal destinations	Longer stops at restaurants or food producers offering traditional meals. The meal becomes a story anchor and social gathering point.
Endpoint experiences	Culminating experiences at the end of a cycling stage, such as traditional dinners, craft demonstrations, or producer visits.
Event-based integration	Integration with existing community events, festivals, or markets featuring local products.



Tasting poppy seed pastries at a poppy seed producer in Patince, Slovakia
© Ekopolis Foundation

Consider practical requirements:

- Distance and difficulty level from the main route (if it is not on route);
- Secure bicycle parking near producer locations;
- Timing that respects both cycling pace and production schedules;
- Weather contingencies (indoor spaces for tastings or demonstrations);
- Group size limitations based on producer capacity;
- Advance booking requirements;
- Payment and pricing arrangements.

Step 5: Develop narrative content connecting products to heritage

Create story content that positions local products within cultural heritage narratives:

- Product origin stories: When, how, and why did this product develop in this region?
- Traditional knowledge: What skills, techniques, or knowledge are required to produce it?
- Personal and family narratives: How have individuals or families been involved in producing or consuming this product across generations?
- Cultural and social significance: What role does this product play in terms of local identity, celebrations, or everyday life?
- Transformation and continuity: How has production or consumption changed over time? What has been preserved?
- Border-specific dimensions: How have borders, migration, or cultural exchange influenced this product?

Ensure narratives are:

- Based on research and documentation (archival sources, oral histories, expert consultation);
- Validated by producers and local cultural actors;
- Accessible to visitors with varying background knowledge;
- Available in multiple languages;
- Appropriate in tone (avoiding romanticism or cultural appropriation).

Step 6: Create integrated presentation materials

Develop materials that support the interpretation of local products within the cycling tourism experience:

- Storyportal content: Upload product related stories to a Storyportal (such as the one created as part of the IBC project (Danube Cycling Storyportal - <https://danubestoryportal.eu/>), or an equivalent platform), including photographs of products, production processes, and producers; video demonstrations or interviews; visualizations, historical images or documents; GPS coordinates linking to producer locations.
- On-site interpretation: Information boards or QR codes at producer locations or nearby rest points; brief explanatory texts suitable for quick reading; visual materials (photographs, diagrams) illustrating production processes.
- Producer support materials: Simple talking points or story prompts producers can use when welcoming visitors; multilingual product descriptions; information about cultural or historical significance for sharing with visitors.

*House of Gibanica in Pomurje, Slovenia
© Development Centre Murska Sobota*



Integrated Pilot Summary: Testing Inclusive Cycling Tourism Models

Overview

This Handbook synthesizes the outcomes of three pilot testing activities conducted across the Danube border regions between 2025 and early 2026. The pilots explored innovative approaches to cycling tourism through maintenance improvements, storytelling integration, and local product engagement. A total of seven countries participated: Croatia, Austria, Slovenia, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia, with each pilot stream combining a common methodological framework with locally adapted implementation. The underlying principle across all activities was the active involvement of vulnerable and underrepresented groups not merely as participants, but as genuine contributors and decision-makers in shaping tourism experiences.

The pilots demonstrated that successful cycling tourism development requires an integrated approach combining infrastructure quality, authentic narrative experiences, and genuine economic engagement with local communities. This report details the methodology, implementation, findings, and lessons learned from each pilot stream, with particular attention to selected pilot examples that illustrate transferable methodological lessons.

Maintenance Pilots: Developing locally- based cycling route maintenance models

Overall concept and methodology

During the implementation of the project, three pilot maintenance schemes were implemented to develop and test locally-adaptable, user-centred maintenance models for border cycling routes. The initiative was implemented in three countries: Croatia (Osijek), Austria (Vulkanland), and Slovenia (Pomurje). The overarching objective was to develop maintenance models that are not only technically sound but also socially inclusive, with particular attention to vulnerable users such as elderly cyclists, less experienced riders and socially disadvantaged groups.

The methodology was built on a shared evaluation framework based on consistent criteria applied across all sites. Each pilot route was assessed against five key dimensions:

1. Continuity of the route (interruptions and forced dismounts);
2. Signposting (clarity, completeness, and consistency with digital maps and apps);
3. Surface and width (safety and comfort considerations);
4. Access to attractions (bike parking, accessibility features), and
5. Overall attractiveness (noise, dust, pollution, and perceived safety).

This standardized approach enabled meaningful comparison across contexts while allowing for practical adaptation to local conditions. This framework was consistently applied across pilot regions, while allowing contextual adaptation to reflect local infrastructure and environmental conditions.

The selection of pilot routes deliberately included challenging sections representing real-world cycling conditions. Routes featured steep climbs, mixed-traffic sections, forest tracks, and points of access to attractions, ensuring that testing conditions authentically reflected the daily challenges faced by diverse user groups.

Participant involvement and stakeholder engagement

Participant recruitment followed a structured yet locally adapted approach, ensuring diversity in both user experience and social background. Across all pilots, the inclusion of vulnerable groups was not treated as a secondary aspect but as a core methodological principle.

Elderly cyclists (60+) were recruited in all three countries as central participants, providing essential feedback on safety, comfort, and accessibility issues that purely technical assessments often overlook. Their experiential insights proved particularly valuable in identifying barriers invisible to standard engineering evaluation.

Young cyclists and students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, also participated across the pilots. In Croatia and Slovenia, this included youth at risk of social exclusion, whose perspective highlighted usability challenges for less experienced riders and revealed how infrastructure failures disproportionately affect those with fewer resources to circumvent obstacles.

Stakeholder engagement was comprehensive, involving local NGOs, route managers, civil engineering students, public authorities, and tourism organizations. This multidisciplinary approach enriched the evaluation process by integrating technical, regulatory, community-based, and tourism perspectives into a coherent assessment framework.

Route selection and testing implementation

The testing procedure in all locations relied on mixed-group participation combining elderly users, younger participants, and technical experts cycling together. This combination proved highly effective, merging experiential observations with technical expertise. Participants systematically assessed routes according to the standardized criteria, documenting problematic areas through photographs and GPS tracking, then participated in structured group discussions capturing their experiences and identifying improvement priorities.

Croatia (Osijek): On 7 November 2025, a 17-kilometer urban section of the Amazon of Europe Bike Trail (daily stage S12) within Osijek was tested by 10 participants comprising 4 elderly cyclists and 6 civil engineering students. The route focus was urban conditions and critical sections affecting vulnerable users.

Austria (Vulkanland): Two separate testing activities were conducted. The first, on 25 April 2025, involved a 4-day long-distance tour from Villach to Grado (210 km) with elderly cyclist participation, providing exposure to varied infrastructure contexts across extended distances. The second pilot activity on 25 August involved a 70-kilometer circuit on Route 66 with nine elderly participants, allowing for more intensive feedback on specific sections.

Slovenia (Pomurje): On 29 October 2025, a 25-kilometer route near Negova Castle was tested by six participants representing a cross-section of user types: youngsters, elderly participants, and local stakeholders. The selected route, “Pot med vrelci življenja,” represents an important regional cycling tourism asset, connecting natural and cultural attractions with varied terrain.

Feedback collection and quality of assessment across pilot actions
Despite the geographic and contextual diversity of the three pilots, participants identified remarkably consistent issues alongside appreciated strengths. Feedback collection combined several complementary methods:

- On-site observations and informal discussions during the ride.
- Structured questionnaires completed at designated break points.
- Group discussions and joint evaluation sessions after the ride.
- Photo documentation of critical infrastructure issues.

This multi-layered approach ensured that both immediate impressions and more reflective assessments were captured.

Participants of the pilot cycling tour in Mosonmagyaróvár area, Hungary
© Ekopolis Foundation



The methodology proved robust across different contexts. The pilots confirmed that user-based evaluation provides insights that differ significantly from purely technical assessments. The validation of user-based evaluation as a highly effective method for identifying practical improvement needs. The use of mixed participant groups proved especially valuable, as it enabled the combination of subjective user experience with technical expertise. Participants found the evaluation criteria easily understandable and applicable, and even those without technical background could identify issues affecting their cycling experience. The process remained low-cost, requiring minimal specialist training, yet produced actionable, specific findings grounded in authentic user experience.

Common strengths: Participants across all pilots valued scenic quality, where present, and appreciated sections with good infrastructure and clear signposting. Natural and cultural landscape features were consistently mentioned as contributing to route attractiveness.

Recurring issues: Three categories of problems emerged consistently. First, signposting lacked consistency. Signs were often missing, unclear, or didn't align with digital maps and apps, creating navigation uncertainty especially for less familiar cyclists. Second, surface quality issues were widespread, including uneven surfaces, gravel sections lacking proper compaction, and mixed surface types requiring sudden transition. Third, safety concerns arose repeatedly, particularly at road crossings, sections with mixed traffic, and inadequately lit urban segments.

Croatia (Osijek): Elderly cyclists reported having to dismount on steep slopes, particularly problematic given limited alternative routes through the city. Night-time cycling felt unsafe due to poor lighting in sections without dedicated infrastructure. Civil engineering students identified specific irregularities of bicycle path construction standards, particularly in sections that were too narrow for safe two-way cycling or mixed pedestrian-cycling use without clear separation.

Austria (Vulkanland): Silver generation participants reported high volumes of car traffic on adjacent roads, creating noise and safety concerns even on dedicated cycle sections nearby. Narrow passageways and steep climbs requiring dismounting were noted, as was poor signage to attractions that might otherwise justify detours. Accessibility to attractions was frequently mentioned; landmarks and facilities of interest were often either not visible from the route or required navigation off established paths.

Slovenia (Negova): Participants identified disruptions on forest and gravel segments with slippery steep surfaces creating hazard zones for less confident cyclists. Surface quality inconsistency was pronounced on this route, with sections of excellent asphalt adjacent to poorly maintained gravel. Signposting was insufficient and inconsistent, and notably, QR codes on information boards were frequently non-functional, undermining digital wayfinding alternatives.

*EXPANO Pavilion in Pomurje, Slovenia
© Development Centre Murska Sobota*





*Rest during a cycling tour in Kravany nad Dunajom, Slovakia
© Ekopolis Foundation*

Good practices and lessons learned

The maintenance pilots confirmed that the applied methodology is cost-effective, easy to replicate and adaptable to different regional contexts. They also reinforced the importance of regular, participatory maintenance assessments involving a broad range of stakeholders. The standardized evaluation framework proved scalable and transferable, supporting consistent data collection across regions.

The pilots demonstrated that maintenance assessment is most effective when it integrates technical criteria with real user experience. Mixed participant groups combining elderly cyclists, young users and technical experts produced the most comprehensive and actionable results.

Direct involvement of vulnerable users generates actionable insights. Issues identified by elderly cyclists and less experienced riders are not merely subjective preferences but reflect real barriers to safe, comfortable cycling. What may appear minor in a technical assessment, a slightly narrow section or inconsistent surface can significantly impact whether certain users can confidently and safely use a route.

Across all regions, participants consistently appreciated:

- Safer, segregated cycling infrastructure.
- Clearly marked and continuous routes.
- Opportunities to combine cycling with meaningful stops and experiences.
- A sufficient number and quality of rest areas along the route.

The shared criteria sheet effectively translates subjective experience into comparable, structured data. By providing consistent evaluation dimensions, the framework enabled different user types and geographic contexts to contribute to a coherent understanding of route quality without imposing rigid assessment procedures.

Mixed-group participation improves assessment quality. When elderly users, younger participants, and technical experts cycled together, their interactions generated mutual learning elderly participants understood technical constraints, while students and engineers gained insight into how abstract standards translate into real usability challenges.

Accessibility and route quality are foundational to inclusion. Improving cycling conditions benefits not only vulnerable groups but enhances the experience for all users. When elderly cyclists can comfortably and safely use a route, the route likely serves the broader cycling public well.

Based on pilot findings, recommendations for future implementation include:

- Shorter standard cycling distances for routes used by vulnerable groups,
- Improved crossing design particularly at high-traffic intersections,
- Enhanced signposting with digital backup systems,
- Consistent surface quality maintenance, and better lighting in urban segments,
- Improving micro-level infrastructure (shade, water access, rest points),
- Strengthening connections between technical maintenance and user experience,
- Expanding stakeholder involvement, including local communities and service providers.

Regular repetition of such testing with diverse participant groups is essential for maintaining quality standards and identifying emerging issues.

Relax at the bistro in Kravany nad Dunajom
© Ekopolis Foundation



Storytelling pilots: integrating cultural heritage into cycling tourism

Overall aim and approach

The partners of the IBC project have developed and tested an inclusive, storytelling-based approach to integrate local cultural heritage both tangible heritage sites and intangible cultural traditions into border cycling routes while actively involving vulnerable groups and local communities. Six countries participated: Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia, Slovakia, Romania, and Serbia, each implementing pilots adapted to their specific cultural and geographical contexts.

The storytelling approach combined a common overarching framework emphasizing inclusivity and place-based narrative with strong local adaptation. Rather than imposing a standardized storytelling format, the methodology encouraged each region to develop narratives reflecting local cultural identity, historical significance, and community values. This balance between consistency and flexibility proved essential for achieving authentic engagement.

The pilots recognized an important distinction often overlooked in tourism development: that storytelling serves not primarily as entertainment or marketing, but as a mechanism for community self-representation, cultural preservation, and creating meaningful connections between visitors and places.



*Storytelling visit in the historical steam water pump facility in Patince, Slovakia
© Ekopolis Foundation*

By prioritizing authentic, locally-rooted narratives, the pilots sought to demonstrate that cycling tourism can function as a vehicle for cultural dignity and intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Combining cultural heritage with digital tools takes outreach to a whole new level, especially when it comes to engaging younger generations. However, digitization not only makes the presentation more appealing, but can also greatly aid in understanding individual stories.

Participant involvement as contributors and storytellers

A core principle differentiating the storytelling pilots from conventional cultural tourism was the active role of vulnerable and marginalized groups not as audiences but as genuine contributors and storytellers. Elderly participants contributed personal memories and historical knowledge, creating narratives with authenticity difficult to achieve through external research alone. Disadvantaged youth, including Roma community members, shared contemporary perspectives on place and identity, enriching the multicultural dimension of stories. Persons with disabilities participated as both testers and contributors, ensuring that storytelling content and delivery methods were more accessible.

This participatory approach served dual purposes: it generated richer, more authentic narratives while simultaneously affirming community voice and dignity. Participants experienced storytelling not as outsiders consuming narratives about their place, but as community members whose knowledge and perspective shaped how their heritage was represented.

Stakeholder partnerships extended across cultural institutions, tourism organizations, municipalities, universities, and NGOs, creating multidisciplinary collaborations

Visit of the herb farm in Kravany nad Dunajom, Slovakia
© Ekopolis Foundation



Route selection and thematic development

Stories were deliberately anchored to real locations along established cycling infrastructure, primarily EuroVelo routes and the Amazon of Europe Bike Trail ensuring that storytelling served to enhance authentic travel experiences rather than disrupting cycling routes or requiring major detours. Accessibility was a consistent consideration in route selection, with preference given to sections with existing dedicated cycling infrastructure where vulnerable users could safely stop and engage with stories.

Serbia - City of Sombor

Route selection: Routes in and around Sombor were chosen for their flat terrain, safe cycling infrastructure and compact urban rural structure, enabling a coherent itinerary that links the city with nearby villages without any need for new infrastructure. The selected sections have low traffic intensity and a calm environment to support inclusive participation, especially for elderly cyclists.

Thematic development: Four interlinked stories were selected to form a single itinerary: the monumental painting The Battle of Zenta, the Danube Swabian Museum, traditional fish stew (riblji paprikaš), and Lemeški kulen from the nearby village of Svetozar Miletić. Together they combine museums, gastronomy and multicultural heritage to reflect Sombor's borderland character and create an inclusive narrative that is both tangible (sites, food) and intangible (memories, identities).

Storytelling visit in the historical steam water pump facility in Patince, Slovakia
© Ekopolis Foundation





*Ethno Estate Karlovčan, Ferdinandovac, Croatia
© Matt Nelson*

Croatia - Koprivnica-Križevci County

Route selection: The pilot route followed existing sections of the Amazon of Europe Bike Trail and EuroVelo 13, integrating both walking and cycling segments to match different abilities. Three locations (Koprivnica, Đurđevac, Molve) formed a walking itinerary, while Hlebine, Gabajeva Greda and Komatnica formed a cycling itinerary, all arranged in a logical spatial sequence and accessible by bike or on foot.

Thematic development: Six thematic story locations were developed, focusing on medieval legends, Ottoman-era conflicts, Marian devotion, settlement legends, mythological creatures of the Drava and narratives about historic floods. The stories deliberately mix documented history with oral traditions and mythology to present a layered interpretation of the Podravina landscape and its cultural memory along the chosen routes.



*Participants of the pilot cycling tour in Gottlob, Timiș County, Romania
© Constantin Duma*

Romania - Timiș County Council

Route selection: The pilot used the Lunga - Jimbolia section of EuroVelo 13 and an additional focus site in Otelec, all located close to the border and representative of Iron Curtain heritage. Routes from 8 to 40 km were designed with alternative shorter and longer options to accommodate different physical capacities while keeping all thematic stops on or near the main cycling corridor.

Thematic development: Four thematic tours were defined as forced departures, preserved roots, stories from behind the barbed wire, The path of friendship and the dawn of democracy all rooted in 20th-century border history, deportations, illegal crossings and post-1989 change. In Otelec, this was expanded with an artistic memorial concept (Windows of Hope) and stories of the 2005 floods, linking collective memory and contemporary identity to the same route framework.



*EuroVelo 6 near Iža in Slovakia
© Ekopolis Foundation*

Slovakia - Iža Patince Radvaň nad Dunajom Moča area

Route selection: Six locations along the EuroVelo 6 Slovak-Hungarian border section (Iža Patince Radvaň nad Dunajom Moča area) were selected, all reachable from the main river-side cycling route and already marked with cycling signposts. QR plates were placed directly on existing signposts, so the route remained exactly the standard EuroVelo 6 line but enriched by thematic stops.

Thematic development: A single overarching theme, Stories of the Danube River and Local Inhabitants, guided story development, with six stories covering the presumed Roman bridge, the 1965 flood, rescue of a steam pumping station, the life of shipping entrepreneur József Böszörményi, royal granaries in Moča and a reconstructed Slavic fortified settlement. The emphasis was on personal and community relationships with the river, combining archaeology, industrial heritage and local memory into a coherent Danube-centred narrative accessed digitally on site.

Hungary – Szentgotthárd area

Route selection: The pilot used multiple sections of EuroVelo 13 in Western Hungary (Őrség Vendvidék Hetés, including Magyarbüks, Szentgotthárd, Apátistvánfalva, Bödeháza/Jósec) and later Baranya (Mohács, Drávaszabolcs, Szaporca, Kiszakabfalva, Barcs) all chosen for their border-zone character and sparse settlements. The main two-day testing route in the Szentgotthárd area was deliberately planned to cross the state border twice to contrast today's open borders with the historical narratives of restriction.

Thematic development: Stories focused on post-World War II and Iron Curtain experiences: life in an abandoned village (Magyarbüks), transformed settlements under border control (Szentgotthárd), everyday life as a border guard (Apátistvánfalva), cross-border identity (Hodoš) and divided communities and deportation (Jósec/Bödeháza). Thematic development intentionally juxtaposed multiple viewpoints displaced residents, guards, minorities to show the complexity of border history along the same cycling line.

A little break in a pleasant setting, Hungary
© MAD Studio Kft.



Slovenia - Pomurje region

Route selection: A 57 km e-bike route in the Pomurje region connected three emblematic sites Grad Castle, the Rotunda in Selo and Babič Mill on the Mura River chosen for their representativeness of regional heritage and their location within an existing slow-mobility tourism area. E-bikes were used to make the relatively long distance accessible to participants with differing physical capacities, while keeping all story sites on a single continuous loop.

Thematic development: Three symbolic stories The Vase with Flowers (Grad Castle), The Birdhouse (Rotunda) and The Stork (Babič Mill) were created as narrative anchors for each site. These stories weave together historical facts, local legends, religious symbolism and traditional livelihoods into an accessible, metaphor-rich narrative of Pomurje as a crossroads of coexistence, craftsmanship and close ties to the river landscape.

Participants taking a break and filling their water bottles from a natural well in Negova, Slovenia
© Development Centre Murska Sobota



The route's integration of story, product, and cultural artifact created a holistic experience, participants didn't merely learn about Cold War history but encountered its physical remnants, understood the region's agricultural identity, and appreciated contemporary craft traditions, all within the authentic cycling journey. This integration of tangible heritage (bunkers, museums, craft objects) and intangible heritage (Cold War narratives, contemporary village life, agricultural knowledge) created a layered cultural experience.

The methodology reflected sophisticated understanding of long-distance cyclist psychology: they are typically fatigued, thirsty, hot, often pedaling in direct sunlight, passing many points of interest during a single day that blur together by evening. Rather than lengthy on-site information or complex digital systems, the QR approach provided basic, accessible information that could be read in the shade on a mobile phone, an unexpected but significant benefit particularly for older cyclists uncomfortable standing in direct sun while studying information boards.

Stories themselves drew from extensive community consultation, with village mayors recommending individuals (predominantly seniors) knowledgeable about local history. In-person interviews with these contributors were recorded and transcribed, forming the basis for detailed research and story development. Stories passed through multiple drafting iterations, with contributors reviewing and refining texts to ensure historical accuracy and appropriate emphasis. Multimedia components were gathered from contributors, academic institutions, and third-party sources, creating richly illustrated narratives despite brief text.

Methodology:

From community contribution to digital implementation

The Slovak pilot is presented here as an illustrative example, as it provides a clear and transferable case of community-based storytelling combined with QR-based digital implementation.

The process consisted of clearly delineated phases:

Community identification and consultation: Mayors, museums and historians were initially contacted to identify suitable story contributors. Given that most were seniors less accustomed to digital communication, subsequent contact prioritized phone calls and personal meetings. This care in initial engagement set the tone for subsequent collaboration.

Assignment and interview: Contributors received written assignments identifying topics for story development emphasizing local people, history, and circumstances connected to regional geography. However, rather than requesting written submissions (potentially burdensome), the team conducted in-person interviews where stories were discussed, recorded, and later processed in detail. This approach balanced documentation with accessibility.

Comprehensive research phase: Following community input, rigorous desk research was conducted lasting several months. Available academic sources, online materials, and related publications were reviewed; stories were cross-checked with academic institutions, historians, mayors and relevant stakeholders, ensuring historical accuracy and appropriate contextualization.

Draft development and refinement: Story texts were developed through two approaches depending on contributor preference: either the team drafted texts for contributor review, correction, and supplementation, or contributors provided initial drafts for editorial refinement. This flexibility accommodated varying comfort levels with written communication while ensuring quality output.

Implementation: Microsites were programmed, QR codes generated, and panels physically produced and installed.

Field testing: A volunteer group notably including three seniors tested the complete system, visiting each location, scanning QR codes, reading stories on mobile phones, completing questionnaires, and participating in recorded on-site discussions. A final evaluation session occurred at a restaurant, allowing relaxed reflection on the overall experience.

*The plate with QR codes linked to the story, Moča, Slovakia
© Ekopolis Foundation*



The Slovak example as a good practice: QR microsite system offered specific advantages for cycling tourism applications:

Scalability: Additional stories and locations could easily be added without replacing panels or obtaining new permits, enabling gradual network expansion.

Flexibility: Digital content could be updated, corrected, or expanded without modifying physical infrastructure. Story enrichment adding new sections, correcting details required only updating the linked webpage.

Cost efficiency: Both initial setup and subsequent modifications were significantly less expensive than full-scale information panels, representing an important consideration for resource-limited tourism organizations.



Danube Cycling StoryPortal on Mobile
© City of Sombor

Senior accessibility: Testing confirmed that even older participants with reduced eyesight could easily read mobile-optimized microsites. The ability to load pages and move into shade rather than standing in direct sunlight addressing an unanticipated but significant accessibility issue.

Multilingual support: The system easily accommodated multiple languages (Slovak, English, Hungarian), tested during field visits, enabling international cyclist engagement.



*Evening on the cycling tour on the bridge from Štúrovo to Esztergom, Slovakia
© Ekopolis Foundation*

However, limitations emerged:

Visibility: Small QR panels were less noticeable than full-scale information installations, potentially reducing spontaneous engagement. Addressing this requires intentional design, promotion strategies, and potentially gamification elements.

Digital infrastructure dependency: Reliable mobile signal and data connectivity were essential, presenting challenges near borders where signal may switch to non-EU networks incurring charges or access restrictions.

Digital literacy requirements: While testing showed QR code usage was not problematic even for less digitally-experienced participants, the system requires at least basic familiarity, potentially excluding some users.

Results and participant feedback in Storytelling Pilots

Across Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Serbia and Slovenia, the pilots successfully engaged diverse groups of participants, including people with limited mobility, persons with technical expertise, elderly people, youth with various backgrounds, and novice cyclists. Activities were organized around local cycling routes and combined short rides or site visits with storytelling exercises.

Participants produced a wide range of story formats from texts and photos to short videos and maps documenting both positive and challenging aspects of cycling. The stories captured themes such as history, customs of local ethnic groups, freedom, health, environmental awareness, and community connection.

Local partners reported several consistent outcomes:

- Strengthened community ties and growing awareness of inclusive cycling opportunities.
- Valuable local insights and qualitative evidence that can inform cycling planning and promotion.
- Contribution of stories and methodology to the development of an inclusive cycling storybook.

Participant experiences

Feedback collected from participants across all pilot countries demonstrated a high level of satisfaction with the methodology and format. Participants across countries appreciated the creative and inclusive nature of storytelling, noting it made cycling feel more approachable and less performance-driven. They valued the social and reflective aspects meeting new people, exchanging experiences, discovering routes, and recognizing shared challenges.

Many participants mentioned that contributing personal stories or opinions felt empowering, especially those typically underrepresented in mobility planning. Many of them reported that narrating and listening to cycling stories provided new perspectives on their cities and strengthened their sense of belonging within the cycling community. Participants found the format engaging and more interactive than standard workshops. Visual tools such as photos, sketch maps, or prompts made expression easier for those less confident in writing.

When facilitated step-by-step, even individuals with limited previous storytelling or digital skills found the activity intuitive. Sharing and listening to stories increased empathy and awareness of how differently people experience urban spaces depending on age, gender, or physical ability.

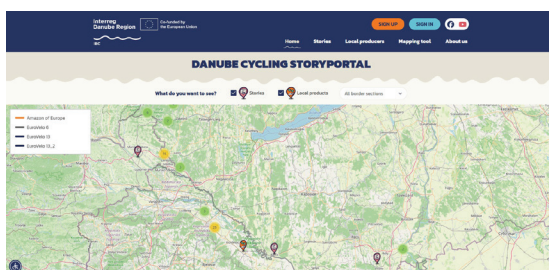
Good practices and lessons learned in Storytelling

Human-centred, personal narratives engage more powerfully than abstract historical accounts. Stories rooted in individual experience and community memory created emotional resonance and memorability difficult to achieve through conventional historical presentation. Of course, the necessary language skills are essential for this. At the same time, appropriate language support is important to ensure that stories remain accessible to both local and international visitors.

Spatial anchoring is essential for authenticity and impact. Stories experienced at authentic locations where events occurred or cultural practices continue carry different weight than narratives encountered elsewhere. Cycling past Cold War bunkers while learning their history, or visiting agricultural producers near where products are grown, creates multisensory, embodied learning.

Inclusivity must be embedded throughout process design, not treated as an add-on. When vulnerable groups participate from initial concept through story development, testing, and refinement, the resulting narratives reflect diverse perspectives and accessibility needs are addressed throughout rather than retrofitted.

Digital tools are powerful complements to but not replacements for in-person experiences. Testing confirmed that participants preferred live, place-based storytelling with digital tools providing valuable support QR codes enabling access to information, multimedia enriching narrative, web connections enabling deeper research. However, digital content alone did not substitute for the embodied experience of encountering stories at authentic locations.



Danube Cycling Storyportal
© Westpannon NLtd.

Implementation requires substantial resources and sustained partnership. Some of the pilots required months of community engagement, research, story development, technical implementation, and



Digital visualization of the Roman Military Camp in Iža, Slovakia
© SUA, s.r.o.

testing. Such work cannot be rushed or conducted without genuine stakeholder commitment. However, the quality and authenticity of resulting experiences justified the investment.

Identified areas for development in storytelling

Analysis of pilot experiences revealed several areas requiring improvement and refinement for future implementation:

Methodological clarity: Clearer explanation of the purpose, process, and expected outputs of the storytelling activity should be provided at the outset. Explicit communication of how the collected stories will be used, and shared outcomes at local and project levels, is needed to maintain participant motivation.

Inclusive participation: Further efforts are required to involve underrepresented or vulnerable populations, particularly persons with disabilities, low-income residents, and migrants. Enhanced collaboration with local civil society organisations and community networks is recommended.

Digital and language support: Targeted assistance should be offered to participants with limited digital skills or language proficiency, including the provision of simple, accessible instructions, translation, and technical guidance.

Facilitation and time management: Additional time should be dedicated to trust-building and inclusive facilitation to ensure equal participation. Flexible scheduling or shorter field components may help overcome time-related barriers.

Ethical and data management considerations: Clear guidance on consent, anonymity, and the use of visual materials must be ensured. Sufficient resources should be allocated for systematic documentation, archiving, and transcription of participant stories.

Linkage and continuity: Greater emphasis should be placed on connecting local storytelling activities to broader regional or policy contexts. Providing follow-up sessions for refining stories and co-developing recommendations with participants could strengthen long-term impact.

Communication and representation: Guidance on inclusive language and fair representation of different social groups should be integrated into the facilitation process.

Local Product Pilots: Integrating local culinary and artisanal products into cycling tourism

Overall concept and methodology

This chapter presents the results of pilot activities carried out as part of the Inclusive Border Cycling (IBC) project, which aim to explore ways to integrate local culinary and artisanal products into cross-border cycling tourism. The overarching concept is grounded in the intersection of sustainable tourism development, regional economic strengthening, and social inclusion. Cycling tourism is not treated merely as a recreational activity but as a strategic instrument for activating local value chains, particularly in peripheral and border regions where economic opportunities are often limited.

Methodologically, the project builds upon a previously developed guideline that was tested through real-life pilot implementations across four countries. The purpose of this approach was not only to validate the applicability of the guideline but also to refine it based on empirical evidence. The methodology emphasizes the importance of embedding local products into tourism experiences in a way that is both economically viable and culturally meaningful.

A key methodological feature is the combination of structured planning with flexible, context-sensitive implementation. Pilot locations were selected based on criteria such as proximity to cycling routes, diversity of local products, infrastructure readiness, and stakeholder willingness. The integration of products relied heavily on experiential formats, including direct encounters with producers, storytelling, and interactive activities. Evaluation was conducted through a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative tools such as standardized questionnaires with qualitative methods including interviews, observations, and group discussions. This ensured both comparability and depth in the analysis of results.

*A local producer tells cyclists about the products made by the company, Hungary
© Chripkó Lili*





*Heritage weaving demonstration in local workshop, Hungary
© Chripkó Lili*

Participant involvement and stakeholder engagement

A central pillar of the pilot activities was the active and meaningful involvement of a diverse range of participants and stakeholders. The project adopted an inclusive approach, ensuring representation not only from cycling tourists and tourism professionals but also from local communities, small-scale producers, and vulnerable social groups. These included disadvantaged youth, ethnic minorities, and residents of rural areas.

Importantly, stakeholder engagement was not limited to passive participation. Local producers, for instance, were positioned as key actors within the tourism experience, serving as hosts, storytellers, and economic contributors. Their role extended beyond product provision to the co-creation of authentic and place-based experiences. Similarly, participants were engaged as evaluators, providing structured feedback on both the products and the overall tourism experience.

The recruitment and preparation of participants were carefully designed to support inclusivity and data quality. Strategies included collaboration with local networks, open calls, and targeted invitations. Pre-event briefings ensured that participants were informed about the objectives, evaluation methods, and practical aspects of the pilot activities. This structured yet inclusive approach contributed to the reliability of the findings and reinforced the participatory nature of the methodology.

Route selection and testing implementation

The selection of routes and the implementation of pilot activities constituted a critical dimension of the project. Routes were chosen based on their accessibility, existing or planned cycling infrastructure, and the availability of local products within a reasonable distance. However, the pilots revealed that route quality is not merely a logistical consideration but a fundamental determinant of the overall experience.

Different implementation formats were tested across the participating countries, reflecting the adaptability of the methodology. These ranged from multi-day cycling tours and guided rural routes to fair-based product testing and benchmarking study trips. Despite these differences, all pilots shared a common objective: to create meaningful connections between cyclists and local products through direct interaction and experiential learning.

The implementation typically involved thematic stops along the route, where participants engaged with local producers, sampled products, and explored cultural and natural heritage sites. In several cases, these activities were complemented by reflection sessions or training components, allowing participants to articulate their experiences and contribute to the evaluation process. This combination of physical activity, experiential engagement, and structured reflection proved to be a distinctive and effective feature of the pilot design.

*Participants of the pilot cycling tour at the former Iron Curtain on the Slovak-Austrian border, near Bratislava, Slovakia
Ekopolis Foundation*



Findings across pilot locations

The pilot activities conducted in Hungary, Romania, Croatia, and Austria provide a comprehensive and comparative perspective on the integration of local products into cycling tourism. While each location had its own specific context and focus, several common patterns and insights emerged.

In Hungary, the emphasis on multi-day, story-based cycling routes highlighted the importance of narrative and personal encounters in enhancing the tourism experience. Participants responded positively to the integration of cultural heritage and direct producer interactions, although infrastructural limitations were noted as a constraint.



A refreshing break at a local farm, Hungary
© Chripkó Lili

The Romanian pilot demonstrated the potential of cycling tourism to support rural development and cultural diversity. By linking agricultural production, creative industries, and ethnic heritage, the pilot created a multifaceted experience. However, challenges related to route infrastructure and signage indicated the need for further investment in enabling conditions.

Cycling in bloom in Banat
© Timis County



The Croatian pilot offered a distinct perspective by focusing on social inclusion. Conducted in a fair-based setting, it successfully engaged disadvantaged youth as active evaluators of local products. This approach confirmed that inclusive formats can generate meaningful participation, although it also revealed methodological limitations, particularly in the alignment of evaluation tools with non-cycling activities.

Đurđevac Sands, Đurđevac, Croatia
© Matt Nelson



In Austria, the dual approach of practical testing and benchmarking provided valuable insights into both local implementation and international best practices. The results highlighted the importance of small-scale, easily accessible product displays, as well as the need to increase the visibility and integration of local products along bike paths. Across all locations, the findings consistently pointed to the value of direct producer engagement, the effectiveness of small and flexible interaction points, and the critical role of storytelling in shaping visitor perceptions.



An oversized, walk-in wine bottle serving as a landmark for the region
© Thermen-Vulkanland

Feedback collection and quality of assessment

The evaluation framework used during the pilot activities was designed to take into account both measurable results and empirical findings. Quantitative data were collected using standardized questionnaires, which enabled the evaluation of key aspects such as product quality, authenticity, accessibility, and sustainability. These data provided a basis for comparison across different pilot locations and formats.

At the same time, qualitative methods played a crucial role in deepening the understanding of participant experiences. Open-ended questions, group discussions, and observational notes enabled the collection of nuanced feedback, including suggestions for improvement and reflections on the overall concept. The combination of these methods contributed to a comprehensive and robust assessment.

Nevertheless, the pilots also revealed certain limitations in the evaluation design. In particular, the use of standardized tools across different pilot formats sometimes resulted in mismatches, as demonstrated by the Croatian example. This highlights the need for greater flexibility in adapting evaluation instruments to specific contexts, while maintaining a level of comparability.

Overall, the quality of assessment can be considered high, as it was based on immediate feedback, diverse participant perspectives, and a systematic approach to data collection and analysis.

Good practices and lessons learned

The pilot activities generated a range of good practices that can inform future applications of the methodology. Among the most significant is the effectiveness of direct interaction between participants and local producers. Such encounters not only enhance the perceived authenticity of the experience but also strengthen the economic link between tourism and local production.

Another important practice is the use of low-threshold forms of integration, such as small-scale tasting stations or self-service stations. These micro-touchpoints are well-suited to cyclists' needs, as they provide convenient and flexible access to local products without disrupting the flow of cycling. Closely related to this is the role of storytelling, which emerged as a key factor in increasing the perceived value of products and fostering a deeper connection to the region.

Pilot actions have also demonstrated that inclusive participation is both feasible and beneficial when properly designed. The involvement of disadvantaged groups as active contributors, rather than passive recipients, enhances the social impact of tourism development and supports broader objectives of inclusion and empowerment.

At the same time, several challenges and areas for improvement were identified. The quality of cycling infrastructure, including factors such as shade, water availability, signage, and safety, was repeatedly highlighted as a critical enabler. Without adequate infrastructure, even well-designed product integration strategies may fail to deliver a satisfactory experience.

Visibility and communication also emerged as key issues. Many local products and attractions remained underutilized due to insufficient signage or lack of digital information. This points to the need for improved wayfinding systems and the integration of simple digital tools, such as QR codes and online maps.

Finally, the importance of methodological flexibility was emphasized. Different pilot formats require different approaches, both in implementation and evaluation. Future developments should therefore focus on refining the methodology to better accommodate diverse contexts while preserving its core principles.

*Lakeside Snapshot, Hungary
© Chripkó Lili*



Joint evaluation

Evaluating the Inclusive Cycling Tourism Method

The Inclusive Border Cycling (IBC) method outlined in the Handbook integrates trail maintenance, cultural storytelling, and local product engagement to promote sustainable tourism while prioritizing vulnerable groups. This chapter proposes a structured evaluation framework drawing from the document's pilot methodologies, focusing on measurable indicators across key dimensions. Evaluation ensures the method delivers on social inclusion, economic benefits, and long-term viability.

Joint evaluation of methods and pilot results

A core strength of the IBC initiative lies in the systematic evaluation across multiple regions and pilot types. Partners agreed on common evaluation dimensions that allow for comparison and mutual learning, including:

- Attractiveness and usability of routes and infrastructure.
- Relevance and impact of heritage stories.
- Appeal, practicality and sustainability of local product integration.
- Effectiveness of inclusion strategies and perceived respect for participants.
- Organisational feasibility and cost effectiveness of formats.

Data were collected in both quantitative and qualitative forms (ratings, open comments, organiser reflections). Joint analysis sessions enabled partners to compare similar pilots across borders (e.g. different story formats, different product integration models) and identify patterns such as:

- Short, clearly structured stories tend to receive higher ratings across age groups.
- Direct producer encounters are consistently valued more than anonymous tastings.
- Inclusion measures that address practical barriers (transport, equipment) are non-negotiable for reaching vulnerable groups.

These shared findings underpin the recommendations in this Handbook and increase confidence that they are not country specific but broadly applicable.

Considering different status of cycling routes

The Danube Region contains cycling routes at very different levels of maturity: some are internationally branded long-distance routes, others are emerging local loops.

The evaluation framework acknowledges this diversity and encourages partners to ask:

- What is realistic in this context in terms of infrastructure upgrades, maintenance and service development?
- Which story and product formats best match the type of route and its users (long distance touring cyclists vs. day trippers vs. local families)?
- How can pilot results from a more advanced route (e.g. with good infrastructure and strong flows) be adapted to a less developed one without creating unrealistic expectations?

By explicitly considering route status, the project avoided copy paste solutions and instead promoted adaptable models that can grow over time as infrastructure and markets develop.

Suggestions for evaluation

Adopt a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative metrics (e.g., surveys, usage data) with qualitative insights (e.g., participant feedback, interviews), as demonstrated in the Handbook’s pilots. Use standardized criteria from maintenance assessments like route continuity, signposting, and accessibility for consistency across implementations. Involve diverse stakeholders, including elderly cyclists, disadvantaged youth, and local producers, to capture inclusive perspectives and validate user-centred outcomes.

Quantitative indicators

Track objective data to measure method effectiveness:

Dimension	Key metrics	Data sources
Infrastructure quality	% of routes meeting safety standards; number of issues resolved (e.g., signage gaps, surface repairs)	GPS tracking, pre/post audits
Usage & Reach	Cyclist numbers; % from vulnerable groups; repeat visits	App analytics, entry logs
Economic impact	Revenue from local products; jobs created for marginalized groups	Sales records, employment surveys
Accessibility	% of stops compliant with universal design; satisfaction scores (1-5 scale)	checklists, questionnaires

These align with pilot findings where structured questionnaires quantified issues like narrow paths or poor lighting.

Qualitative assessment methods

Conduct post-pilot debriefs and storytelling sessions to gather narratives on experiential value, as in the Handbook's mixed-group rides. Analyse themes like community empowerment or cultural resonance via thematic coding of interviews. Employ feedback loops, such as QR-linked surveys at story points, to assess narrative engagement and identify inclusivity gaps.

Monitoring and continuous improvement

Implement annual audits using the handbook's priority levels (Level 1: safety risks; Level 2: comfort; Level 3: enhancements) to prioritize actions. Benchmark against baseline pilot data from countries like Croatia, Austria, and Romania for transnational comparability. Adjust based on lessons learned, such as enhancing digital accessibility for seniors or producer training.

Tracing the Line of Freedom in Banat
© Vasile Oacheș



Outcomes and effects on the current situation

Even within the limited time frame of pilots, several changes became visible:

- Local authorities reported increased awareness of the potential of cycling as a development tool, moving beyond viewing it only as sport or hobby.
- Producers and small businesses gained direct experience of hosting cycling related visitors and received feedback on their products, which encouraged some to adapt their offer (new packaging, different portion sizes, more explanatory storytelling).
- Vulnerable participants reported improved self-confidence and motivation to explore their own region. Some expressed interest in further engagement as volunteers or in training programmes.
- Cooperation between sectors (tourism, social services, culture, environment) intensified, leading to new plans for joint activities beyond the project scope.

These effects are important seeds for longer term change, even if a full assessment of impact requires further monitoring in the coming years.



Necessary incentives for effective and sustainable social inclusion

Institutional and financial incentives

For inclusive cycling tourism to move from pilot phase to mainstream practice, certain enabling conditions are needed:

Policy recognition

Inclusion goals, cycling tourism and local product promotion should appear explicitly in regional development strategies, tourism plans and sectoral policies. This legitimises investments and encourages institutions to allocate staff time.

Stable coordination structures

Ad hoc working groups are useful during projects but often dissolve afterwards. Creating permanent or long-term coordination bodies such as route management organisations or cross sectoral committees helps ensure continuity and shared responsibility.

Through the plains in Banat
© Constantin Duma



Financial tools for small actors

Micro grants, vouchers or simplified funding schemes tailored to the needs of small producers, NGOs and community groups can help them improve facilities, develop new products or host inclusive events. Administrative requirements should be proportional to grant size. Such tools may also cover small participation-related costs, such as transport, equipment, insurance, interpretation, product packaging, tasting materials, accessibility adjustments or basic digital visibility, which can otherwise prevent smaller actors and vulnerable groups from taking part.

Long term maintenance funding

Allocating part of tourism tax revenues, regional budgets or other sources to maintenance of inclusive cycling routes signals that infrastructure and related services are valued public goods, not one-off investments. Maintenance funding should also include regular route quality monitoring, replacement of signage or QR elements, and the upkeep of rest areas and accessibility-related facilities.

Without such institutional and financial incentives, inclusive cycling tourism risks remaining dependent on short term projects and the enthusiasm of a few individuals.

Economic Incentives and Support Structures

The goal is to provide economic opportunities for vulnerable local groups through activities related to cycling tourism:

- Create micro-enterprise opportunities such as bicycle rentals, guiding services, selling local food or handicrafts along routes.
- Develop payment structures for maintenance work done by local vulnerable groups, ensuring fair compensation - Integrate groups into tourism-related events such as cycling festivals, cultural activities, or local tours.

Outcome: Creation of sustainable local employment opportunities and strong, diversified local economy tied to cycling tourism.

Incentives for effective, sustainable social inclusion

Specific incentives can further promote social inclusion as a core quality criterion rather than a nice to have:

Recognition and visibility

Award schemes, public certificates or labels that highlight inclusive trail segments or inclusive businesses can motivate stakeholders to invest in accessibility and inclusive practices. Such recognition should be meaningful, with visibility on maps, websites and promotional materials.

Capacity building opportunities

Free or subsidised training in inclusive communication, accessibility, anti-discrimination, or co-creation methods can build competences among tourism actors, public staff and community groups.

Networking platforms

Regular meetings or online communities of practice where actors share experiences, tools and challenges can keep inclusion on the agenda and reduce isolation, especially in rural and border areas.

Monitoring and feedback loops

Integrating inclusion indicators (e.g. number of vulnerable participants, accessibility improvements, employment of disadvantaged groups) into routine monitoring provides evidence of progress and enables fine tuning of incentives.

Incentives should avoid creating excessive bureaucracy; they work best when simple, transparent and responsive to local realities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Handbook demonstrates that the integration of local products into cycling tourism represents a viable and promising approach to sustainable regional development. The pilot activities provide strong empirical evidence that such integration can generate economic, cultural, and social benefits when supported by appropriate infrastructure, stakeholder collaboration, and methodological design.

The findings highlight the importance of combining experiential tourism elements with structured evaluation and continuous learning. They also underscore the need for adaptability, as local conditions and pilot formats vary significantly. By taking into account the experience gained and refining the methodology accordingly, the approach developed within the IBC project can be adapted and extended to different regions, thereby contributing to the development of more inclusive and resilient tourism systems.

Gravel Horizons: Cycling Through Timeless Countryside
© Chripkó Lili



Notes

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Cover: Bobda Inspired by the Esztergom Basilica this mausoleum served as the burial place of the Csávossy, Vasile Oacheș

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