



# 2023 TOP 100 GOOD PRACTICE STORY

**Title:** Preserving Paradise: The Timeless Legacy of Bom Jesus do Monte

**Destination, Country:** Braga, Portugal

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**In the category:**  Destination Management     Environment & Climate     Thriving Communities  
 Nature & Scenery     Culture & Tradition     Business & Marketing

**The Story in a picture:**

This picture shows Bom Jesus do Monte. On the bottom left, it is possible to observe the funicular, on the bottom center, we have the top of the staircase of five senses and, on the center, the iconic Bom Jesus Church.



**Summary:**

The Municipality of Braga has, on its territory, the monumental complex of Bom Jesus do Monte, ex-libris of the city. It certainly is the grandest, the most majestic, the most symbolic and the most poetic monument built in Europe, where religious, baroque, rococo and neoclassical architecture stands out.

Managing an asset of this importance does not come without its difficulties and this Good Practice Story reflects all the exhaustive work that is being done to preserve this Paradise. Bom Jesus do Monte has more than 600 years of rich history, maintaining a pretty immaculate state of conservation until today. For it to be where it is today, thriving and improving everyday to become a sustainable and pleasant tourism attraction, there were several success factors that contributed to its current state.

Join us on Preserving this Paradise!



## Good Practice Story:

### Destination description

*Brief background of the destination.*

Braga is a municipality in the Northern Regional of Portugal, which has 193.324 inhabitants and a total area of 183,4 square kilometers. It is a city of enormous beauty and heritage wealth, which combines tradition with innovation, memory with youth, creativity with tradition.

With over 600 years of rich history, it has one of the oldest Sacro-Montes in Europe and the flagship of the Minho region, the Bom Jesus. Braga is home to the oldest cathedral in Portugal and it was the mother house of the Benedictines, the Monastery of Tibães.

Braga presents places that, for its intrinsic devotion and beauty, are imposed as landmarks of obligatory reference and visit. The Sanctuary of Sameiro, Bom Jesus and Falperra, based on an appealing religious base, are surrounded by ecstatic green spaces and paradisiacal landscapes.

The Roman legacy is another of Braga's attractive factors, often called the 'Portuguese Rome', due to its origin in the Roman city of Bracara Augusta. Known for its distinguished churches, splendid 18th century houses, gardens, parks and leisure spaces, Braga's long history is visible in all the splendour of its monuments, museums and churches.

To visit Braga is to make a journey through time within modernity. Ancient city of traditional religiosity - always imposing in its richness and majesty - lives hand in hand with entrepreneurship and young spirit in such vital areas as culture, commerce, gastronomy, industry and services.

Enjoy Braga! From here leave to discover Gerês, the North of Portugal and Galicia, but come back... Come back because here you are in the epicentre to everything.

In Braga, feel good, in this welcoming, close, distinct and complete land!

### Issues faced

*Problems/issues solved with the Good Practice Story.*

The Municipality of Braga has, on its territory, the monumental complex of Bom Jesus do Monte - UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site, ex-libris of the city. It certainly is the grandest, the most majestic, the most symbolic and the most poetic monument built in Europe, where religious, baroque, rococo and neoclassical architecture predominate. It is an architectural and landscape complex that has been rebuilt and extended over more than 600 years. It is essentially defined by a long and complex via sacra route, which stretches along the slope of Monte Espinho, taking the pilgrim through chapels that house sculptural groups evoking the Passion of Christ, fountains, statuary and formal gardens.

Managing an asset of this importance does not come without its difficulties and Bom Jesus do Monte was not any different. On its early days, there were two options to get up to the sanctuary, either on foot, which was physical daunting and time consuming or via "train". This "train" was composed by vehicles on horse-drawn rails that had to have its traction complemented by oxen on the steep ascent on days of greater affluence and was quite expensive to the common visitor.

With time, comes the most visible threat, degradation, which cannot be dissociated from an everlasting necessity, money. Monuments like Bom Jesus do Monte suffer a lot from deterioration,

caused by nature and also from the human presence. Due to its historical importance and significance, preserving a monument like this one we have in Braga is fundamental to maintain a legacy, to keep the tourism activity and to keep the city's identity alive. However, conservation work like this requires significant amounts of money, which are not always easy to obtain and usually take considerable time to become available.

Nowadays, we live in a globalized world where it is much easier for people to move around. This is easily confirmed by the growing numbers of tourists traveling annually. Braga has developed a lot in terms of tourism and it is now one of the biggest references when it comes to religious tourism. This development has also been reflected in the number of tourists coming to Bom Jesus do Monte. With the tourist numbers increasing, some problems arose, such as the elevated number of cars getting up to the sanctuary, thus rising carbon emissions in that area and also growing the risk of forest fires.

Managing tourism assets is now more demanding than ever and the Municipality of Braga, together with the Confraternity of Bom Jesus, is constantly taking the appropriate measures to preserve this pristine location, placing it as a world-class tourism attraction without ever harming its identity, its value and its people.

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### Methods, steps, and tools applied

*Solutions implemented to address the sustainability problems or issues.*

In order for Bom Jesus do Monte to still be this incredible tourism asset, very well-preserved and protected from the negative impacts of tourism, several initiatives were implemented throughout the years. These initiatives include:

- ➔ Construction of the Bom Jesus Funicular - The Lift of Bom Jesus (Elevador do Bom Jesus) is a funicular standing over a slope, and is composed of two booths that move over railways connected by a cable. Working as counterbalance of one another, both go up and downhill alternately and simultaneously along two parallel tracks over a course of 274 meters. Each booth has the capacity to 39 people, including the driver. It is the oldest in the world (inaugurated on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 1882), still in service, powered by a water counterweight system. Promoted by a pioneering businessman from the city, Manuel Joaquim Gomes, it was designed from afar by the Swiss engineer Nikolaus Riggenbach, but the greatest merit went to the young Portuguese-French engineer Raul Mesnier de Ponsard, who interpreted the drawings received by mail and tested possible solutions on the hillside;
- ➔ Creation of a vehicle entry control that allows to guarantee that the load capacity of cars and buses inside the Sanctuary is not exceeded;
- ➔ Construction of bus and car parks, taxed depending on the vehicle:
  - 1€ for cars;
  - 10€ for buses with less than 29 seats;
  - 15€ for buses with more than 29 seats.
- ➔ Encourage people to use the funicular in order not to bring their cars to the Sanctuary;
- ➔ Focus on support infrastructures on Bom Jesus do Monte:
  - Construction of a Picnic Park;
  - Creation of a "Centre of Memories" (Museum);
  - Creation of a specific space for local artisans in "Casa das Estampas";
  - Rehabilitation of Accesses;
  - Rehabilitation of Hotels;

- Rehabilitation of the Kid's Playground;
- Rehabilitation of the Lake's Bar.
- ➔ Heritage requalification: Chapels, Staircase, Basilica with the High Choir and the Bell Tower, the equipment and informative materials, which allow for a better management of the experience of the visit and the cultural activity;
- ➔ Inventory of Plant Species;
- ➔ Creation of a Forest Fire Prevention Plan;
- ➔ Creation of a Management Plan for Bom Jesus do Monte;
- ➔ Qualification and a better operationalisation of workers;
- ➔ Creation of a mobile app for the Sanctuary and a virtual tour of the interior of the Basilica - This not only allows the curious to get to know Bom Jesus, but also offers schools the possibility to explore this World Heritage with their students, through more interactive lessons and assignments;
- ➔ Focus on Environmental Protection:
  - Cleaning of the woodlands;
  - Guaranteeing the local community access to green spaces and the control of fire risk;
  - Renovation and installation of more sustainable and efficient lighting systems (interior and exterior), with the transition to led lamps;
  - Protection of biodiversity with the planting of native trees and the removal of invasive species;
  - Protection and recovery of water springs and mines, ensuring the sustainable use of water;
  - Promotion of local handicrafts for sale in "Casa das Estampas";
  - Raising awareness among believers to avoid wax burning;
  - Elimination of plastic bags and the use of recycled paper bags in "Casa das Estampas";
  - Exchange of combustion equipment for electric equipment.
- ➔ Classification of the Sanctuary of Bom Jesus do Monte as a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site, in 2019;
- ➔ Launch of the "Essence of Bom Jesus" - an air freshener with the scents of trees, moss and earth. This is part of a strategy Braga has been trying to promote in its companies, which is innovation and creation. This product is now being promoted by Braga's Tourism;
- ➔ Creation of a Biomass Water Heating System, which makes use of forest waste from the Bom Jesus Forest, to benefit the hotels in the area;
- ➔ Implementation of tourist pressure monitoring systems (in progress) – This will allow the Municipality of Braga to identify, in real time, the areas of greatest affluence and create corridors to disperse people to other areas of the Sanctuary with less pressure, in order to provide a more equitable distribution of tourists by the different spaces;
- ➔ Mini Bus service (in progress) – Bom Jesus do Monte aims to implement a mini bus service to reduce the number of cars reaching the Sanctuary.

### Key success factors

*Critical elements that led to successfully solving the issues.*

Bom Jesus do Monte has more than 600 years of rich history, maintaining a pretty immaculate state of conservation until today. For it to be where it is today, thriving and improving everyday to become a sustainable and pleasant tourism attraction, there were several success factors that contributed to its current state.

To begin with, the unique characteristics of Bom Jesus already contribute significantly to the success

that it has: its multiplicity of attractions, a unique landscape and architectural set, with religious, cultural, natural, tourist and leisure dimensions. It can be considered as an unrepeatable place. There must be very few places that combine all these dimensions in the same space, of extreme beauty and balance with an exceptional universal value.

It is also important to highlight that a place like this would be nothing without the hard-work and dedication of the people involved. Strong partnerships, clear communication and a team of workers who, over the years and every day, look after the unique beauty of this space are a key success factor for solving any issues that might occur. Without the Confraternity of Bom Jesus, responsible for the management of the site, this success would not be possible. Their cooperation make the municipality's work much easier.

Another key success factor is the Braga's Sustainable Strategic Vision for its future. Braga's mission is to be recognised as a real 'smart & trendy city', positioning itself as an innovative city based on its entrepreneurial dynamics of technological basis and integrated in a technological region. Braga is positioned as a happy city which gains body by its quality of life indexes, sustainability and social and cultural dynamics.

Lastly, there are two important factors that should also be highlighted. The first one has to do with the successful application of Bom Jesus do Monte as a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site, in 2019. This attracted visibility and notoriety to the territory but has also brought a lot of responsibility for its decision makers. Such a prestigious distinction obliges everyone to work even harder to maintain its integrity and to contribute for a better future. This application has led to the implementation of some of the measures mentioned previously, such as the Management Plan, the Forest Fire Prevention Plan or the Species Inventory. The second factor is funding. Despite being hard to obtain, funds are crucial for a monument of this magnitude to be as preserved as it is. Without them, this Good Practice Story surely would not be possible.

### Lessons learned

*Challenges faced while implementing the Good Practice and their solutions.*

Managing a World Heritage Site with over 600 years does not come without its challenges. Portugal has been quite affected with the scourge of fires over the last years and, in 2017, Bom Jesus do Monte faced its biggest challenge to date!

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of October 2017, broke out a fire that consumed 1.200 hectares of land. The Sanctuary of Bom Jesus do Monte was not affected by this brutal catastrophe, because the Bom Jesus Confraternity permanently manages and cleans the forest. This has led to changes in the management system, consubstantiated by the following measures:

- ➔ Acquisition of 2 hectares of lands, to create a security strip to help control the spread of forest fires;
- ➔ Plantation of 2000 native species trees to control the propagation of fires;
- ➔ Creation of a Forest Fire Prevention Plan;

As mentioned above, the funicular functions through a water counterweight system, making it 100% sustainable. In the lands above the sanctuary, there is no scarcity of water, which enables the funicular to work all year round. However, it could happen that, in summer months, especially when precipitation levels are lower, the water coming from the mines nearby is not sufficient to continue with the funicular's normal functioning system. If that happens, an electric water bobbing system is used to pump the water back to the top of the descent, enabling the funicular not to stop its activity.



Accessibility is also one of the priorities for the entities managing Bom Jesus do Monte. Nowadays, a person on a wheelchair cannot enjoy the beautiful experience of riding the funicular. However, there is already a project in place to change that! Soon enough, the conditions will be created for everyone to enjoy all Bom Jesus do Monte has to offer in the same way!

## Achievements and Results

*Direct and indirect results of the Good Practice.*

In 2019, Bom Jesus do Monte was classified as an UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site, based on its historical and cultural relevance and due to the good work that has been developed over the years. This might be its greatest achievement and a clear indication of what is pretended for the future! The good condition the Sanctuary and the surrounding area are in a direct consequence of all the activities described in this Good Practice Story. The goal is to preserve this status and to work hard to make Bom Jesus a better place everyday.

Nonetheless, it's not just distinctions that results are made of. These can also be quantified through numbers. Here are some numbers regarding Bom Jesus' activity:

- ➔ In 2018, Bom Jesus do Monte received 1.2M visitors;
- ➔ In 2022, Bom Jesus do Monte was visited by 1.5M people! Welcoming this huge amount of people would not be possible without good management;
- ➔ In 2022, the funicular was used by 390.000 visitors, almost equaling the pre-pandemic when the funicular was used by around 405.000 visitors (2019);
- ➔ In the months of April, May and June 2023, the funicular has already matched 2022 numbers and the total number of users is expected to be surpassed by the end of the year;
- ➔ Bom Jesus do Monte currently employs 150 workers, responsible for managing and protecting the area.

Furthermore, Bom Jesus also has a big impact on the city's economy, not only by the revenue generated but also for the number of people that it attracts to Braga. Many tourists decide to visit Bom Jesus do Monte first and only then visit the city centre.

## Tips for other destinations

*Your suggestions or recommendations for other destinations facing the same issues or implementing similar solutions*

The tourism industry is nothing without people. Therefore, people should be in the core of any tourism-related project. As mentioned before, some of Braga's key success factors are the strong partnerships, the clear communication and a team of motivated and qualified workers who give their best everyday. This interaction should not be restricted to workers but extended to the whole community. Giving residents a voice in the tourism development will be a huge asset for any destination wanting to become more sustainable.

In our view, it is also extremely important to have a Sustainable Strategic Vision for the future. This will allow a diagnosis of the current situation and lead to establishment of clear goals and objectives, that will be supported by concrete measures in order for those to be achieved. Braga has sustainability as one of the main pillars of its strategy and the results are being very positive. As mentioned before, Braga is positioned as a happy city which gains body by its quality of life indexes, sustainability and social and cultural dynamics.

## Recognitions and Additional references

*Recognitions and awards the Good Practice received and supporting evidence.*

Bom Jesus do Monte has been recognized with the following two distinctions:

- ➔ UNESCO World Culture Heritage Site (2019)
- ➔ “Cinco Estrelas Regiões” Award, in the category “Heritage and Sites”

Visual evidence of Bom Jesus do Monte can be found in a shared folder:

- ➔ <https://1drv.ms/f/s!AkYyoqacPRQNjd5eSQUqDwTgWCPZgQ>