



2023 TOP 100 GOOD PRACTICE STORY

Title: Blessings Over Bunkers: How Aphrodite Taught Albanians to Fall In Love Again
With Their Hidden Heritage

Destination, Country: Municipality of Belsh, Albania

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

The Story in a picture:

A tribute to the goddess Aferdita above her underwater shrine



Summary:

During the turmoil of dictatorial rule, the people of Belsh, along with the rest of Albania, were compelled to abandon their millennia-old religions, cultures, and histories.

However, the tide turned with the remarkable discovery of a hidden 2,300-year-old underwater shrine dedicated to the Goddess Aphrodite, known as Aferdita in Albanian. The people of Belsh not only battled to protect this ancient treasure but also wholeheartedly embraced the lost customs of their ancestors with an annual festival.

This renaissance not only reignited a vibrant sense of community spirit and a deep connection with their ancestral heritage but also transformed Belsh's Lake Seferan into an enchanting tourist hotspot. This paved the path for impactful public-private collaborations, fuelling the growth of sustainable tourism.



Good Practice Story:

Destination description:

Nestled in the heart of Albania lies Belsh, a quaint municipality enveloping just under 200 km² of scenic wonder. Our landscape is adorned with a necklace of 84 karst lakes, gently undulating hills crowned with olive trees, and a rich rediscovered cultural heritage that defines our identity. Our 33,632 residents of mostly farmers and fishers, noted for their warm-hearted hospitality and tranquil demeanour, welcome visitors with open arms and hearts.

In Belsh, we are not just custodians of our natural and cultural treasures; we are their ardent protectors. Our centrepiece is Lake Seferan – featuring a 2,300-year-old underwater shrine to an Illyrian goddess. We strive to intertwine our tourism efforts seamlessly with the preservation of our magnificent lakes, the safeguarding of our ecosystems, and the protection of our historic landmarks.

In our quest to foster responsible tourism, we sought the inclusion of our local community's voice and vision. Our commitment lies in fostering tourism that pays homage to our rich past and paves the way for a sustainable future.

Issues faced:

For several decades, Belsh bore the brunt of stringent, destructive policies that left an indelible mark on both the physical and cultural landscape of our destination. The richness of our Ottoman, Roman, and Illyrian history was obscured by a ruler that sought to sever all connections to our past. This included banning religions and the destruction of over 2,000 religious monuments across the country. As a result, our destination's vibrant heritage, especially the sacred worship of the Goddess Aphrodite, locally known as Aferdita, was systematically erased, creating a void in our cultural identity.

Moreover, the environmental repercussions of the previous era were extensive. The erection of thousands of bunkers across the landscape of Belsh drastically altered its natural beauty and tranquillity. The focus on achieving unrealistic agricultural quotas led to the rampant exploitation of our beautiful aquatic ecosystems and the deforestation of our lush hillside landscapes.

In the aftermath of this difficult era, Belsh faced multiple obstacles on the road to reclaiming our cultural identity and transitioning to an economy based on sustainable tourism.

At a local level, scepticism initially took root among residents. A combination of factors, the eradication of our cultural heritage and the prolonged isolation from the outside world contributed to an initial resistance towards change. The proposal to unearth our past and pivot towards sustainable tourism was met with scepticism by some, who questioned the practicality and profitability of such a shift.

On the logistical front, we had a dearth of adequate infrastructure to support tourism. Basic amenities, like lodging, eateries, and recreational facilities, were scarce or non-existent.

We were further hampered by a lack of institutional support and limited funding. Our local government with limited resources and expertise to undertake significant preservation and development projects. Moreover, external sources of funding were hard to come by, given the uncertain political climate in the country.

Methods, steps, and tools applied:

Upon emerging from the collective amnesia under the previous regime, the people of Belsh yearned to reconnect with their cultural heritage while encouraging economic revitalization.

A relic of hope and history rested protected beneath the waters of Seferan Lake - the ancient Shrine to Aferdita, shielded from the destructive zeal of the past. The shrine was first discovered in 1974 during a drought but was elusive to the would-be destructors. The ancient Illyrian pilgrimage site from the echoes of 300 BCE, stood as one of the few surviving religious monuments in the country.

1. Protection: The first major step taken by the community was lobbying for the protection of Lake Seferan. It wasn't until 2002, a decade after the transition to democracy, that the Ministry of Culture afforded Lake Seferan protected status. Simultaneously, underwater archaeologists further excavated and authenticated the submerged Shrine. This exploration revealed life-sized statues of the goddess and an array of exquisitely crafted figurines symbolising the timeless human pursuit of love, beauty, and fertility.

2. Cultural Revival: The annual Aferdita Festival was initiated in 2017 by the municipality of Belsh to celebrate and reintroduce this cultural element to the community. The event rejuvenated ancient traditions, like the figurine offering ritual, and encouraged active participation from local artisans, dancers, and musicians.

3. Tourism Development: Acknowledging the potential of Lake Seferan's cultural significance, the municipality of Belsh, in partnership with the Albanian Development Fund, USAID, and the Embassy of Sweden, began constructing an economic model centred around sustainable tourism. This included promoting the establishment of guesthouses, restaurants, and an amphitheatre, all embodying the theme of Aferdita.

The information and resources for this project were diverse. The historical data and local traditions were collated from elders within the community, whereas the underwater archaeological research was professionally conducted to authenticate the findings. Had another generation passed, much of the local traditions could have been lost. For tourism development, the municipality liaised with tourism experts from USAID and the Swedish Embassy, leveraging successful tourism models from similar contexts.

In every stage, the community remained central to the project. Despite initial scepticism, infrastructure gaps, and limited institutional support, the efforts of the people of Belsh have culminated in a successful blend of cultural heritage preservation and sustainable economic growth.

Key success factors:

1. Healing from the Ground Up: Community-driven Transformation

Emerging from a dark era, our community was left bearing deep psychological and physical scars and grappling with a collective amnesia that threatened to erase our rich heritage. But instead of merely

concealing these wounds, we decided to address them, turning pain into healing and rejuvenation through the rediscovery of our long-forgotten traditions. In an interesting departure from tradition, it was the older generation who turned to our youth, trusting in their resilience and dynamism to help rekindle and perpetuate our ancient heritage.

2. Cherishing the Genuine: Building an Authentic Tourism Model

Resisting the temptation to mimic the tourism models of other destinations, we took a different route - a route carved out by a thorough understanding of our unique assets. We engaged in community asset mapping, an approach that took into consideration not only the physical aspects of our environment, but also the cultural richness we were beginning to rediscover. This combination of natural beauty and cultural wealth set us apart and became the foundation of our unique tourism model.

The result is a sustainable tourism model that is true to our roots, respectful of our environment, and beneficial for our community members. And while our journey towards sustainability continues, we believe that our efforts have set a robust foundation for future growth, with our community at the heart of it all.

Lessons learned:

Our journey towards cultural revival and sustainable development was marked with several hurdles. However, we acknowledge that these challenges were crucial learning points that guided our strategies, strengthened our resilience, and shaped the destination that Belsh has become today.

1. Cultural Reclamation: We learned the importance of reclaiming our obscured and fragmented cultural heritage. The task required diving deep into our past and unearthing the hidden gems of our history, a challenging yet rewarding endeavour. By collaborating with historians and archaeologists who operated free from past constraints, we uncovered our heritage. The underwater excavation of the Aferdita Shrine, despite its slow and resource-intensive process, highlighted the value of patience and perseverance. This pivotal discovery became a beacon of cultural connection and the centrepiece of our tourism initiatives.

2. Sustainable Tourism Development: Transitioning to sustainable tourism underscored the need for balancing economic development with environmental conservation. The journey from agrarian roots to a tourism model posed a challenging mix of infrastructural needs, financial investment, and skill development. Leveraging public-private partnerships and seeking the expertise of international agencies like USAID and the Swedish Embassy taught us the power of collaboration. These partnerships helped us create a balance between growth and conservation.

3. Community Involvement: The importance of inclusive community involvement became clearer as we navigated slower-than-anticipated progress and resistance from some community members. Drawing from the Participatory Analysis and Community Action framework of the US Peace Corps, we learned the value of open dialogues and active community participation. Ensuring locals were trained to manage new facilities highlighted how shared responsibility can alleviate scepticism, promote job creation, and foster community ownership.

Through these lessons, we've seen Belsh transform from a forgotten commune into a beacon of sustainable tourism and cultural reconnection. As we look to the future, we plan to apply these lessons across other lakes in Belsh, nurturing tourism that stays true to each village's unique character.

Achievements and Results:

The transformation at Lake Seferan has served as a beacon of inspiration, igniting a surge in entrepreneurial activity and revitalising our local economy. New guesthouses and hotels have emerged along the lakeside, intermingled with delightful farm-to-table eateries and welcoming cafes. Thanks to assistance from the Ministry of Agriculture, our farming community has diversified their produce beyond a single crop. The cultivation of high-demand commodities such as saffron has augmented economic growth and complemented our cultural heritage.

This economic revitalisation is best seen in the blossoming tourism sector. Where once our visitor numbers were negligible, we now welcome an average of 3,500 guests every weekend. This reflects a significant increase and extends beyond the typical summer season. Couples seeking a tranquil retreat now find solace in Belsh, drawn by its distance from Tirana's hustle and bustle and its unique blend of heritage and serenity.

On the social and cultural front, an amphitheatre has been built as a nod to our historical connection with the Aferdita Shrine and Lake Seferan. This establishment serves as a venue for cultural events, further enriching the experience of both our community and our visitors. Moreover, we have introduced a new festival designed to connect the community with its ancient past. This celebration of continuity and unity goes beyond recent cultural divides, fostering a sense of shared identity and community cohesion.

From an environmental perspective, we have made significant strides in the preservation of our natural resources. We have established a scenic bike and footpath around our central lake, encouraging exploration on foot or wheel. Initiatives such as bike-share and kayak rental ventures, supported by GIZ and launched by our globally exposed youth, have become key components of our green tourism model. This focus on sustainable exploration complements our preservation efforts and supports the continuity of our cultural heritage.

Our journey doesn't end here. We are fostering collaborations with the University of Tirana, the Ministry of Culture, and the Municipality of Belsh to discover and preserve additional historic sites. An example is the ruins of a Roman bathhouse, the development of which could lead to thematic guesthouses in its vicinity. This once unimaginable feat has now become a possibility, underlining the extent to which sustainable tourism rooted in our aquatic cultural history has transformed our reality and exceeded our expectations.

Tips for other destinations:

Our journey doesn't advocate replicating specific elements like constructing an artificial lake or recreating a shrine to an ancient goddess. The crux lies in celebrating and leveraging your locale's authentic cultural assets.

While outside funding can offer an initial thrust to launch programs, long-term sustainability and expansion fundamentally hinge on the local community's trust and belief in the destination's vision. Instead of promoting completely foreign concepts, delve into the values and traditions already cherished by your community.

Remember, sustainability is not merely about physical transformation; it's about a deeper, intrinsic connection to the community's identity. A thoughtful, comprehensive exploration may just lead to

the rediscovery of a hidden gem that had been overlooked all along. A treasure that could become the centrepiece of your unique and sustainable tourism narrative.

Recognitions and Additional references:

Lake Seferan's public-private partnership has become a model in the 100 Villages Program of the Albanian Government. Other villages around Albania now try to replicate Lake Seferan's success.

Signalling further success, the Albanian Development Fund recently concluded Phase 1 of its ambitious Dumrea Ecopark project at another lake in our region. An exciting addition to our community's offerings, the ecopark boasts charming cabins, hiking trails, e-bike and kayak rentals, and a welcoming cafe nestled by the serene Marines Lake. This achievement is a tangible embodiment of our ongoing journey toward sustainable economic and tourism growth.

News Story: Aferdita Festival 2022

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sLAlqM79x4k>

News Article: Lake Seferan Eco-Tourism Development

<https://www.monitor.al/seferan-fshati-i-bekuar-nga-aferdita/>

News Article: Describes the first Aferdita Festival organised for the first time by the Municipality of Belsh

<https://top-channel.tv/2017/05/22/ekonomi-ne-festen-e-aferdites-ne-belsh/>

Municipal Facebook Post: Announcing the first time Aferdita Festival was being held at Seferan Lake

https://www.facebook.com/bashkiabelsh2015/photos/pb.100070792033127.-2207520000./1539832982757103/?type=3&locale=sq_AL