



2023 TOP 100 GOOD PRACTICE STORY

Title: Mysteries of submerged villages – Sail on precious pieces of the Šaleška Valley's past

Destination, Country: Šaleška Valley (cities: Velenje and Šoštanj, website: <https://www.visitsaleska.si/en/>), Slovenia

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

The Story in a picture:

Sail on Velenje Lake with an electric boat and virtually dive into the past. In the middle of the lake you put on VR Glasses and experience the ruins of the submerged villages.



Summary:

The boutique 5-star experience at The Coal Mining Museum, including sailing on Velenje Lake, a virtual dive into the past, and a culinary experience at the Vista overlook just above the water surface, takes approximately 4 hours. Guests are welcomed in front of The Coal Mining Museum of Slovenia by a tour guide miner at the start. Descending 160 meters underground, visitors watch a digital presentation of the sinking surface and village. Upon completing the tour, a boat awaits them on the shore of Lake Velenje. In the middle of the lake, they don VR glasses to experience a virtual dive into lost villages. After returning to shore, they can explore the edges of Šalek valley from the Vista overlook, where the experience concludes with a culinary treat featuring selected local treats.



Good Practice Story:

Destination description

Brief background of the destination.

The Municipality of Velenje lies in the Šalek Valley in Northern Slovenia. Surrounded by hills up to 1.100 m high, it is rich in brown coal, which was the basis for the rapid urbanisation and industrialization of the valley from 1950 onwards. The city has a population of 33,500 inhabitants. Our valley has a total of approximately 100,000 overnight stays per year.

Until the 1990s, air pollution from the thermal power plant in the neighbouring municipality Šoštanj was the major ecological problem in the valley. Emissions affected the quality of air, water, soil and plants, making the valley one of the most polluted areas in Slovenia in the 1980s. In 1987, the municipality adopted environmental sanitation programmes for water, air, and soil. Additionally, a quality monitoring-information-system and gas and water cleaning treatment plants. Other measures to prevent the pollution of lakes and soil have been implemented. This effort has led to a clean and safe environment. Today, Velenje is one of the cleanest environments in Slovenia. The main sustainability challenge the city faces today is how to protect this hard-earned clean environment.

Velenje has won EU Green Leaf Award 2024, taking part in the EU Mission 100 Climate Neutral and Smart Cities, and faces a transition from a coal mining region to new green perspectives. Our motto is "from black to green & bright". We are proud members of the Slovenia Green Family and hold the Slovenia Green Gold certification. This is another confirmation that we are on the right path in developing sustainable tourism practices.

Sustainable tourism is also reflected in the development of new 5-star tourism products. We have received the Slovenia Unique Destination label from the Slovenian Tourist Board for three of these products. They are based on the authentic story of the Šaleška Valley. Velenje represents the coal mining story and Šoštanj showcases the heritage of the leather industry. In the past, Šoštanj was home to one of the largest and most prestigious leather factories in Europe. These products have been recognized with international awards. More: <https://www.visitsaleska.si/en/experiences/green/>

Top attractions: Coal Mining Museum of Slovenia, VISTA – Park with the View, Velenje Beach, Velenje Castle – Velenje Museum, and Tanning Museum in Šoštanj.

More: <https://www.visitsaleska.si/en/the-valley-of-salek/worth-seeing/>

Issues faced

Problems/issues solved with the Good Practice Story.

We wanted to preserve the stories of the past and the cultural heritage of the destination.

A boutique tourist product is based on the authentic story of the Šaleška Valley and represents the identity of the destination (coal mining). It was created on the basis of digital innovation of cultural heritage (old mine shaft). The aim of the project was to preserve cultural heritage and develop an authentic story.

The partners in developing the experience were: Arctur, AV Studio and Alpe Adria Vita. Providers from Gorenje Gostinstvo, Slovenia Coal Mining Museum, Velenje Coal Mine, Velenje Water Sports Club and Velenje Museum participate in the Secrets of Sunken Villages product.

Arctur helped us with the technology, Alpe Adria Vita assisted with the storyline, and the Boat Sports Club made the boat ride on Lake Velenje possible. Without the tour through the Coal Mining Museum, the experience wouldn't be as memorable. The Restaurant Jezero offers local, culinary, and traditional delicacies.

The product also won the Slovenia Unique Experience award:

The commission, among other things, wrote: "The product is a historical treat for everyone interested in a behind-the-scenes look at the region that provides energy to practically the whole of Slovenia." Through the experience, the visitor can better understand the still alive industry of this region, as well as the specific air that accompanies them throughout. The experience is faithful to the history and identity of the place. It is not just about presenting points but is built on respect for the greatness of the coal mining industry and for the residents who, in accordance with the spirit of expectation of the "new era," were forced to leave their own homes. (...)

Driving along Lake Velenje takes on a special dimension when you realize that you are passing through three sunken villages, especially considering that the submersion of these villages was also a toll for providing energy to the entire Slovenia—an aspect particularly relevant in the current times of fluctuating energy prices.

Sunken villages, which began sinking due to intensive ore mining in the 1950s, are unique in Europe. Their integration into the tourist narrative is an exemplary instance of best practices, demonstrating how tourism can gently rejuvenate the industrial landscape without unnecessary sensationalism, giving it a higher added value. Through the experience, guests involuntarily sense all the wounds inflicted on this landscape and its people by the societal demand for energy. (...) The wow effect is also evident in the epilogue of the experience: lunch at Vista, offering a stunningly beautiful view of otherwise still operational industrial plants. After this experience, the visitor perceives them in a completely different light, and they even become strangely beautiful in their own way.

The experience unveils the moving life stories of villagers and miners who paid a high price for the rich coal deposit, having to give up their villages and homes. This left indelible and highly emotional traces on many. The mystery of the sunken villages was encountered on the ground as an emotional experience, which, in a very human way and without judgement, explains the present and the past. It also explains the bitter marks left on this degraded landscape by centuries of active mining.

Methods, steps, and tools applied

Solutions implemented to address the sustainability problems or issues.

To preserve the cultural heritage, we scanned the object of the old mine shaft and prepared a 3D model.

We aimed to offer visitors a historical and informative perspective on how entire villages sank due to coal mining, giving insights into the formation of the lakes.

With the help of the digitization of cultural heritage, we developed a story and designed a tourist product.

Key success factors

Critical elements that led to successfully solving the issues.

We connected an authentic story with the digitalization of cultural heritage.

More information about the experience (key success factors):

The tour of The Coal Mining Museum, Sailing on Velenje Lake and the virtual dive into the past takes approximately 4 hours. At the start the guests are greeted in front of The Coal Mining Museum of Slovenia by a tour guide miner. After dressing appropriately, the guests are escorted to the elevator, which leads into the mining tunnel.

160 meters underground the guests are greeted by a grandson from one of Velenje's miners. He tells them all kinds of stories about how miners spent their days and what mining is today.

In the tunnel, an underground train allows guests to observe all the features of the mine. Within the cave section, guests can view a digital presentation of the submerged surface and village. Technical subjects are also explained in the miner changing room and the museum's bathroom. The guided tour continues past Škale Lake and the unique garden section of Velenje, concluding at the final destination of Velenje Lake. At the event space Vista on the lake's shore, guests are greeted by a boat, which they board to experience a virtual dive into a lost village beneath them.

After returning to the shore, guests can ascend the Vista lookout tower. From there, they can see the entirety of Velenje lake and a portion of Škale lake. On the tower, guests have the option to purchase a variety of local treats, and enjoy a culinary conclusion.

The tour of The Coal Mining Museum presents the process of understanding the lives of miners and learning about the village that once existed and its villagers.

Website: <https://www.visitsaleska.si/en/products/mysteries-of-submerged-villages/>

Lessons learned

Challenges faced while implementing the Good Practice and their solutions.

It was a challenge for us to connect all the providers and obtain materials about the sinking village's history.

Achievements and Results

Direct and indirect results of the Good Practice.

Our location attracted visitors seven times in 2022, totaling 124 individuals who sought this unique experience. The visits occurred once in May, four times in June, once in July, and once in August.

The tour has been visited three times in 2023, totaling 32 visitors to date. Specifically, on the 24th of April, there were six visitors; on the 9th of June, there were twelve visitors, and on the 10th, there were fourteen visitors.

The visitors were very satisfied with the tour.

Tips for other destinations

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

The key to success lies in combining authentic tourist guides, the destination's tourist offerings, and the implementation of digitized storytelling for cultural heritage, coupled with effective product development.

Recognitions and Additional references

Recognitions and awards the Good Practice received and supporting evidence.

The tour is rated as one of the unique Slovenia experiences with five stars and is recommended by Slovenian Tourist Board. It also won the BIGSEE TOURISM DESIGN award in 2022.

BIG SEE is the newest and most exciting platform that systematically researches, evaluates and promotes creative projects in South-Eastern Europe. It unites 19 countries and 350 million people. It represents a unique community for the discussion and development of the cultural, economic and political roles of the region and their impact on the globalized world. The platform is managed by the Big Institute within the Center for the Creative Economy of Southeast Europe, which is the organizer of the Big Architecture, Wood Icon, Creative Tourism and Month of Design festivals.

Lovely trips - Italy:

<https://medium.com/lovelytripsblog/alla-ricerca-di-mondi-scomparsi-nella-valle-di-%C5%A1alek-3c35fd375ef8?source=rss----66d0eccf73cb---4>, TU Magazin – Serbia:

<https://tumagazin.rs/2022/07/27/tajne-potopljenih-sela/>, PLANET TV - Slovenia:

<https://siol.net/planet-tv/planet-na-obisku/planet-na-obisku-se-vraca-tokrat-bomo-obiskali-salesko-dolino-video-605774> Photos: <https://we.tl/t-vxoYssJfP7> (credit: Peter Marinšek)

Videos: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJrRV5X9h2c>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0_4CdUafto

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djldLByDxxw&list=PLcdcuVY8_8iqEsfafWSUgc3yAvAzm5qXe&index=29