



Good Practice Story Title: Bringing businesspeople together

Destination: Alto Minho, Portugal

Country: Portugal

Submitting Organization: CIM Alto Minho

Category:

- Destination Management
- Nature & Scenery
- Environment & Climate
- Culture & Tradition
- Thriving Communities
- Business & Marketing

Destination description:

Alto Minho is Portugal's northernmost territory, located by the seaside and composed of ten municipalities. It has 36 km of coastline, 16 blue-flagged beaches, and delightful maritime villages. Inland, there are idyllic settings like majestic mountains and lush green valleys that amaze residents and visitors (more than 90% of the territory is undeveloped). The wide variety of freshwater streams also invites diving or practising riverside leisure activities. Key attractions include historical and monumental buildings, a rich and varied gastronomy complemented by local Vinho Verde wine, and traditional festivities, with Romaria de Nossa Senhora da Agonia being the most well-known in Portugal. Visitors can experience this intensely by staying in rural lodgings or manor houses that offer closer contact with nature and traditional livelihood. Discover the abundance of life in natural areas (including protected areas and Natura 2000 network sites) and quiet surroundings by walking or cycling the eco-paths and eco-tracks and visiting the Peneda-Gerês National Park (PNPG). PNPG is Portugal's only national park, with three of its five municipalities located in the Alto Minho region. This park has been classified as a Transboundary Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO since 2009. Alto Minho is a unique environmental excellence territory fully certified by the European Charter of Sustainable Tourism (ECST) since 2015.





Although cultural richness, traditions, and heritage are significant, it is nature that underpins many businesses (136 tourism animation agents and 44 maritime tour operators), most of them SMEs and many related to maritime resources (in the broad sense, not only regarding the sea and its resources).

Summary of Good Practice Story:

Alto Minho is renowned for its natural beauty and is a popular destination due to its potential for sea and river activities. Despite its four nautical centres (canoeing, rowing, sailing, and surfing) and rich maritime heritage, these assets had not been fully utilised. The pandemic revealed significant challenges: business owners struggled to collaborate, lacked marketing resources, and depended heavily on word-of-mouth promotion. Additionally, it became clear that businesses needed to enhance their operations through certification and capacity building.

Given Alto Minho's existing Nautical Station, CIM Alto Minho recognised an opportunity to unite businesses, promote their products and services, and provide tools for competitiveness. As the entity responsible for the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism (ECST) in seven municipalities, CIM Alto Minho leveraged its knowledge and consortium to improve tourism offerings and encourage collaboration among business owners.

Issues faced:

CIM Alto Minho identified several barriers preventing business owners from maximising their potential and offering quality services. These included:

- ✓ Lack of activity planning, leading to unorganised and inconsistent services.
- ✓ Predominance of SMEs lacking the scale to compete individually and the equipment to accommodate groups.
- ✓ Insufficient connectivity among businesses.
- ✓ Need to promote the subregion to combat seasonality and highlight its year-round potential for nature and nautical tourism.
- ✓ Lack of business certification.
- ✓ Need for structured tourism packages including accommodation, F&B, and tailored experiences.
- ✓ Requirement for initiatives combining nautical, environmental, and cultural activities.

Solution:

CIM Alto Minho revitalised the Nautical Station initiative, initially reached through an application to Fórum Oceano, which oversees the recognition and management of nautical stations. Post-COVID, the network expanded to include 34 partners from diverse sectors (SMEs, associations, municipalities). As part of the *Rede de Estações Náuticas* (nautical stations network) internationalisation project, CIM Alto Minho aimed to enhance the region's tourism offerings and business capabilities.





The Alto Minho Nautical Station set forth the following objectives: valuing local territory and communities; capitalising on knowledge networks for inter-territorial transfer; projecting Alto Minho nationally and internationally; promoting Alto Minho as a sustainable destination; boosting local, regional, and national economies.

Methods, Steps, and Tools applied:

The Nautical Station was revived in 2022, with the responsible technician regularly sharing information about financing, workshops, training, and other resources with partners. Partners were also encouraged to share their activities for dissemination by CIM Alto Minho.

CIM Alto Minho began promoting its partners due to their enormous potential and the need for partners to improve their services and products. A leaflet with a QR code was created for use at fairs, with minimal printing due to sustainability concerns.

CIM Alto Minho participated in fairs such as Nauticampo in Lisbon and Boot 2023 in Düsseldorf, Germany, promoting partners and the subregion, particularly to attract tourists in the low season. Partners were invited to attend or send promotional material to CIM to disseminate their products and services through the visitors.

From 2022, partners received training and capacity-building opportunities, including workshops with Turismo de Portugal, Porto e Norte de Portugal tourism board, and Fórum Oceano. Activities organised included:

- ✓ A Fam Trip by CIM Alto Minho from 24-28 November 2022, titled "Connect with Alto Minho: Positioning Alto Minho as a winter destination," with participation from a TimeOut journalist, Galician bloggers, and vloggers from Northern Europe.
- ✓ Organising and hosting German, French, and Dutch journalists and tourism operators in Alto Minho (Workshop organised with Fórum Oceano and the regional tourism board).
- ✓ Support for Fórum Oceano in hosting the Inaugural Regatta of the Maritime Saint James Way in Viana do Castelo in June 2022.
- ✓ Hosting the Vera Cruz caravel in Viana do Castelo, open for school and group visits, focusing on sailing, shipbuilding, and nautical history.
- ✓ EU WeMED_NaTOUR Capacity Building Programme, carried out with the support of Fórum Oceano, as part of a project application with Turismo de Portugal as a partner in an international project involving four countries.

The main tools have been the Nautical Station platform and direct communication with partners. CIM Alto Minho integrates partners into ongoing projects, recognising economic dynamism as key to quality-of-life improvements.



- ✓ Integrate more businesses into the Nautical Station.
- ✓ Promote Alto Minho as a nautical destination in international markets through targeted communication campaigns.
- ✓ Implement a quality system for personalised visitor reception.
- ✓ Continue advocating for environmental protection and sustainable management of natural resources, turning conserved heritage into a financial asset for future generations.
- ✓ Implement the new action plan.

Achievements and Results:

- ✓ A platform uniting partners and promoting their activities.
- ✓ Enhanced collaboration and resource-sharing among businesses.
- ✓ Promotion at national and international fairs, increasing visibility and business opportunities.
- ✓ Growing recognition of the importance of certification among business owners, with several already certified and others in the process.
- ✓ Membership in the national network “Rede de Estações Náuticas,” facilitating international promotion.

Other achievements include:

- ✓ Improved local quality of life through job creation and enhanced living conditions.
- ✓ Specialisation of Alto Minho as a tourism destination.
- ✓ Reduced seasonality in tourism.
- ✓ Added environmental, social, and economic value to the territory.
- ✓ Events and educational initiatives continue to bolster Alto Minho's commitment to nautical activities.
- ✓ Data from 2022 revealed a decrease to 43% of overnight stays concentrated in July-September, reflecting successful efforts to spread tourism throughout the year. Municipal projects consistently favour the territory and its residents, with numerous awards recognising environmental, social, and economic achievements.

Lessons Learned and Advice:

Collaboration is key; working together solves common issues. While training for business owners is crucial, understanding their schedules and persistently encouraging improvement is necessary. Continuous effort is essential to maintain progress, strengthen partnerships, and convey the importance of certification and sustainability. Networks and memorable off-peak experiences are vital for Alto Minho's future.

Recognitions and Additional References

CIM Alto Minho recently renewed the recognition of Alto Minho as a Nautical Station and awaits the official announcement. Future plans include attracting new partners and implementing a new Action Plan.