



**Good Practice Story Title:** Bela Krajina TOGETHER. Proud and united destination for preserved nature and quality authentic offers.

**Destination:** Bela Krajina

**Country:** Slovenia

**Submitting Organization:** Bela Krajina Development Information Centre

**Category:**

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

**Destination description:**

Bela Krajina, located in the southeastern part of Slovenia, is a border region with Croatia. It encompasses approximately 3% of the Slovenian territory, 595 km<sup>2</sup>. The area is predominantly karst, and increasingly forested, the central part of the region is a low karst plain, confined to the north with two karst plateaus and to the south to the border river Kolpa. The destination consists of the municipalities of Črnomelj, Metlika, and Semič. Approximately 26.000 inhabitants live in the region. 46% of the landscape of Bela Krajina is classified into Natura 2000, a special natural protection regime in Bela Krajina presents the two landscape parks, the Lahinja Landscape Park and the Kolpa Landscape Park. The Kolpa River represents the main tourist attraction in the destination. During the summer months, the river attracts numerous visitors to its shores and is the main motive to come to Bela Krajina. Bela Krajina is also known for its quality wines, local cuisine, preservation of its unique cultural heritage, and folklore customs.



### Summary of Good Practice Story:

Bela Krajina is a typical small Slovene destination. It has a lot of nature, mostly rural population, and strong authentic traditions. Although on paper the destination was sustainable (Green Destination Gold), and boutique, the disconnected activities and mismanagement caused consequences. The COVID-19 pandemic and government measures to assist Slovenian tourism have caused the first instances of over-tourism, negative environmental impacts, advice against bathing in the Kolpa River, the main attraction of the destination, revealed inadequate destination management. Stakeholders responsible for tourism development in the destination reacted quickly and by 2022, commissioned an evaluation of the previous strategic document and period, and analyzed the offerings. The evaluation of the offers and destination management revealed that it is necessary to start developing and managing tourism more strategically and above all more guided. The first step was to establish a destination management organization. With the significant engagement of all stakeholders, including developers, tourism providers, financiers, and the local population, a new tourism strategy was adopted. This strategy prioritizes collaboration at the destination level and emphasizes the well-being of guests, providers, and residents of Bela Krajina. The strategy defines measures, that mainly improve the quality of life of the local population and nature conservation, return to sustainable tourism, and foremost to good destination management. Bela Krajina returned to its sustainable principles, a strong emphasis on the preservation of the Kolpa River, which is from 2024 bathable in all areas.

### Issues faced:

Bela Krajina is a distinctly seasonal destination, the majority of overnight stays happen in July and August, when the Kolpa River attracts visitors. Bela Krajina is a relatively unknown tourist destination, as it lacks large hotel complexes and major tourist attractions apart from the Kolpa River. Consequently, the destination's tourist offer is not developed professionally, there is little collaboration between tourist providers, and a lack of strategic management and leadership of the destination. Three municipal institutes managed the destination, and the employees performed destination management tasks in addition to their regular duties, unrelated to tourism development. The majority of sustainable principles remained on paper, in practice, tourism was going in its direction. The turning point occurred between 2019 and 2022, during the COVID-19 pandemic when tourism vouchers were introduced in Slovenia to encourage domestic tourism. Due to the vouchers, which allowed Slovenian citizens to enjoy free overnight stays, Bela Krajina experienced excessive visitor numbers, as it garnered tremendous interest among citizens as an affordable destination. During this time, the reality of the tourism offers and the inadequacies in destination management became evident. Visits during summer increased significantly and were not evenly distributed throughout the entire calendar year. In 2019 there was a shortage of accommodation capacities, which suddenly and uncontrollably increased in 2022. However, this increase was not aligned with sustainable development and the professionalization of the offers. All of this led to excessive visitation along the Kolpa River, resulting in poor microbiological analysis results of the bathing waters. This was due to the insufficient municipal infrastructure in the riverside settlements and too much pressure on the existing municipal infrastructure. This is the first time in the history of bathing water quality measurements (since 2007) that this has happened, and shows how poorly sustainable development has been implemented in the



whole region. Consequently, in 2022, the Environmental Agency of the Republic of Slovenia advised against swimming in the Kolpa River. The situation was a shock and harmed tourism providers and residents, who expected better and quicker responses and actions from decision-makers.

### **Solution:**

The municipalities of Bela Krajina and the public institutes operating in the tourism sector have begun taking action. One of the initial solutions was establishing a DMO (Destination Management Organization) department, operating within the framework of a single institute. RIC Bela Krajina, within which the DMO operates, has initiated activities to prepare a new tourism development strategy for the destination, with the main focus on improving the quality of life of residents and nature conservation. This includes evaluating the past strategy, analyzing the current offerings, and conducting in-depth interviews and stakeholder workshops. We began actively developing connecting products and projects that present an additional offer outside the main season, spread our visits, and prioritized destination providers. The new strategy is bottom-up and does not promise a lifeline for tourism, but focuses on measures to preserve natural and cultural heritage, integrated action within tourism, quality of tourism services, and well-established destination management.

### **Methods, Steps, and Tools applied:**

With the aim of improving the organization of destination development and avoiding negative impacts on the nature of the White Landscape, the following steps have been taken:

#### **1. Evaluation of the Bela Krajina Tourism Strategy 2018-2022**

The first step of improving the organization of destination development and avoiding negative impacts happened with the evaluation of the previous strategy. The evaluation happened in 2022 and was carried out by an external contractor. For this purpose, in-depth interviews with the client (RIC Bela krajina), online and field research, interviews with 18 interviewees, and an online survey among tourism stakeholders of the destination Bela krajina were carried out. The evaluation focused on the achievement of the operational and strategic objectives and key performance indicators and was an ongoing assessment of the realization of the vision for tourism in the Bela Krajina2022+. The evaluation identified successful projects that will be the basis for further development and promotion of the destination, as well as challenges that the destination needs to address in the next strategic period. The evaluation showed that we need an appropriate model for the organisation of tourism - an effective DMO, a new strategic document, more intensive management of the area along the Kolpa River, etc.

#### **2. Workshops and round tables for tourism operators and other stakeholders in tourism to improve the quality of the tourism offer based on sustainable tourism development**

From 2020 to 2024 together with our partners we have organized a series of workshops for tourism providers and other stakeholders aimed at improving the quality of the tourism offer and developing tourism towards sustainable development. The workshop results were taken into consideration in the



preparation of strategic documents. We have held workshops on Sustainable planning and development of tourism facilities in line with the needs of the environment, the local community, and visitors, and improving the quality of services - The right approach to preparing projects for the development and construction of different accommodation facilities, and participated in a round table on Preserving the natural and cultural heritage of the Kolpe Valley from the perspective of tourism and agricultural development.

### **3. Measures to manage the quality of bathing waters on the Kolpa River**

In May 2022, the Government of the Republic of Slovenia published the Bathing Water Quality Management Measures Program for the Kolpa - Primostek bathing area, due to the non-achievement of bathing water quality standards for 2022-2026. The main measures are the establishment of municipal facilities in the areas along the river and inspections of the discharge and treatment of sewage effluents. The Municipality of Metlika obtained a building permit in 2024 and started the construction of a sewage treatment plant in the problem area.

### **4. Establishment of the DMO**

The first step to uniform development and strategic destination management happened in 2022 when the municipalities Črnomelj, Metlika, and Semič established the Destination Management Organization (DMO). activities and the wages of the three employees, who exclusively work on destination management tasks. The latter is a crucial step to the strategic management and leadership of the destination, tailored to all involved stakeholders. The initiative to establish the department came both from the economic sector and the public institutions for tourism, that operate in the destination.

### **5. Analysis of the state of tourism in the destination Bela Krajina**

In 2023, an external contractor analyzed the state of tourism in the destination Bela Krajina. As part of the analysis, workshops were also held with providers in the destination. The analysis described changes in the volarization of natural values and cultural heritage in tourism and the organization of tourism. The secondary tourism offer, tourist arrivals during the period of the previous strategy, and marketing and promotional activities were analyzed. The analysis showed that seasonality has increased and that the Kolpa River remains the main attraction and motive for arrival. The analysis revealed that the existing offer should be combined into integral tourism products, which would have a positive impact on the off-peak season. The destination is dominated by tourism operators whose livelihoods are not primarily dependent on tourism; as a consequence, motivation, professional skills and the level of integration and cooperation are lower. There are more and more providers with different approaches, but for the time being, they remain a minority. As in all destinations, providers in Bela Krajina would like to see more cooperation and networking with public tourism authorities, their support, and domestic and especially international promotion.

### **6. Strengthening the promotion of the product Open Doors of Bela Krajina**

As the main theme of the destination visit, we identified experiences of nature and culture, which we used as a basis for developing additional offers. The experience Open Doors of Bela Krajina was



developed with the intention of seasonal adjustment. Open Doors of Bela Krajina enables visitors to experience interesting adventures (wine tasting, herbal experiences, canoeing, beekeeping, etc.) every day of the week, at different locations, and it excellently connects the tourist offers of the destination.

### **7. Collaboration**

We realized that for the success and improvement of the destination, cooperation is key. Tourist providers also stressed that cooperation is pivotal. Through various projects and initiatives, in collaboration with all three municipalities, local public tourism institutes, tourism industry stakeholders, and the interested public, we have established new interpretations of content and infrastructure in protected natural areas for education and awareness. We have created new sales channels for local providers and established new locations for presenting nature and heritage, developed new experiences based on local cultural and ethnological heritage (2023).

### **8. Bela Krajina Finest**

In 2023, we launched the territorial collective brand Bela Krajina Finest. It is a brand that represents the excellent, sustainable produced, processed, manufactured or offered local offer of the Bela Krajina destination. It is a brand that connects the excellent local offer of our region. It is a certification scheme carried out by external contractors and currently links 29 different providers of handicraft and food products.

### **9. Bela Krajina TOGETHER**

In 2024 we adopted the Bela Krajina Tourism Strategy 2024 - 2029, with the vision: Bela Krajina TOGETHER. Proud and united destination for preserved nature and quality authentic offers. The strategy is a key document that responds to the problems and challenges, that we detected in the past, and were manifested during the COVID-19 pandemic. The strategy sets 7 goals and 4 policies with 55 measures. Policy 1 establishes a model of coordinated, inclusive, and long-term sustainable tourism in the destination. Policy 2 sets the conditions for developing a common, coordinated, and high-quality tourism offering throughout the year. Policy 3 addresses green, sustainable themes such as mobility, climate change, and carbon footprint. Policy 4 builds a unified destination narrative and image, enhancing recognition.

In the coming years, we will measure the success of the strategy with seven performance indicators: we aim to reduce the seasonality of visits, extend the average length of stay, ensure that residents are satisfied with and supportive of tourism development, achieve high visitor satisfaction with the destination experience, ensure business stakeholders are satisfied with destination management, and increase the amount of collected tourist tax throughout the year.



## Achievements and Results:

### The most important achievements are:

- Establishment of the DMO department and securing permanent funding for its operation, and implementation of activities, with municipalities recognizing the importance of strategic destination management
- Confirmation of the new strategy with the key vision of TOGETHER, for which credit goes to all three municipalities and their municipal councils
- Networking between tourist providers into the common destination offer, in 2024 the product Open Doors of Bela Krajina had 26 tourist providers
- Returning to pre-pandemic visitor numbers (visits and overnight stays), with a slight but manageable increase
- Development of 7 new experiences based on the authenticity of Bela Krajina, preserving its natural and cultural heritage, one of which (Oton's Adventure) received the Big See Award
- Green light for swimming in the Kolpa River; in 2023, half of the official bathing areas had excellent water quality, while the other half had good quality.
- Increase in the number of overnight stays in May and September by 10 % compared to 2019 (a step towards deseasonalization).
- Additional infrastructure for interpreting natural heritage and conserving protected areas in the Lahinja Landscape Park, Krupa Spring, Black Olm Information Center
- Establishment of a store featuring products from local providers – Bela Krajina House of Local Delights (Municipality of Metlika, Association of Rural Women Metlika, Association of Vine Growers Metlika, Institute for Tourism, Culture, Sport and Youth Metlika);
- Establishment of a store featuring products from local providers – Bela Krajina House of Local Delights (Municipality of Metlika, Association of Rural Women Metlika, Association of Vine Growers Metlika, Institute for Tourism, Culture, Sport and Youth Metlika);
- Interpretation of natural and cultural heritage in Črnomelj – the Treasury (Municipality of Črnomelj, RIC Bela Krajina);
- Establishment of the territorial collective brand Bela Krajina Finest, which includes 39 providers and 100 products.

In the coming years, we will further focus on connecting offerings with an emphasis on sustainable mobility and interconnecting locations. We will continue to develop offerings that attract guests outside the peak season while enabling tourism providers to earn better and enhance their professionalism. Our priority remains caring for nature and sustainable development

## Lessons Learned and Advice:

We have realized that quick reactions and a main focus on detected issues are crucial. Successful destination development requires collaboration with key stakeholders. A significant amount of time and energy needs to be dedicated to tourism providers and stakeholders who co-create the





destination's story, never forgetting about the quality of life of residents. Stories, experiences, and destination management should be led and developed from the bottom up. Changes, new management approaches, experiences, and even promotion will only be successful if embraced by stakeholders within the destination. For the preparation of the content of the Bela Krajina TOGETHER strategy, we conducted over 20 interviews and held 3 workshops. Financiers must be connected in the management of the destination or have a shared understanding of the destination's needs and story. Only in this way will funding be continuous and satisfactory. With the approaches described above, destinations can achieve an appropriate form of management. However, it's crucial that the planning and development are accepted and supported by all stakeholders. This is key to a successful narrative and the achievement of goals.

## Recognitions and Additional References

### Recognitions:

River Kolpa destination chosen as EDEN 2010

(<https://www.slovenia.info/en/press-centre/news-of-the-tourism-press-agency/6630-river-kolpa-destinati-on-chosen-as-eden-2010>)

Bela Krajina 2019 Sustainable Destinations TOP 100

(<https://www.radio-odeon.com/novice/bela-krajina-uvrscena-na-seznam-global-top-100-sustainable-destinations/>)

BIG SEE award 2023 ( <https://bigsee.eu/otons-adventure-in-landscape-park-lahinja/>)

### Additional References:

Webpage: <https://www.belakrajina.si/en/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/belakrajina/>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/bela.krajina/>

YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/@bela.krajina/>

Tik Tok: [https://www.tiktok.com/@bela.krajina\\_official](https://www.tiktok.com/@bela.krajina_official)

