



Good Practice Story Title: Corn Maze “Hrvatica” - Find Your Way Back to Heritage

Destination: Zagreb County - Ivanić-Grad

Country: Republic of Croatia

Submitting Organization: Ivanić-Grad Tourist Board

Category:

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

Destination description:

Ivanić-Grad is a town located 35 km east of Zagreb. Out of its 12,000 habitants, 40 % live in rural areas. The town belongs to Posavina and Moslavina microregions in central Croatia. The river Sava is only 12 km away from the centre. Ivanić-Grad lies on the river Lonja, and its 2,500 m long walking promenade connects the city centre to the Naftalan Special Hospital, a unique health resort based on the naftalan mineral oil, famous across Europe. Numerous oil deposits have turned this city into one of the wealthiest parts of Croatia between the 1970s and the 1990s. When it comes to tourism development, Ivanić-Grad has been famous for its pumpkin products for the last 20 years. Since 2004, Ivanić-Grad has been hosting the *International Pumpkin Festival* attracting about 85,000 visitors each year.

Summary of the Good Practice Story:

In the past 20 years, most of the tourist events within the administrative boundaries of Ivanić Grad have been taking place in the city centre, while the surrounding rural area was being neglected. Wishing to create a sustainable tourist attraction in the rural area, the Corn Maze “Hrvatica” (eng. *Croat woman*) was developed in 2022 and 2023 in the village of Dubrovčak Lijevi. The maze is of seasonal character (summer to autumn), based on



agricultural crops and completely environmentally safe. This free attraction, open 24/7 during the season, also offers each visitor a gamified digital experience. It has attracted thousands of individual and group visitors. The shape of the maze was inspired by the local folklore costume embroidery called *Hrvatica*, which means the project presents and promotes local intangible heritage. The project has contributed to a stronger involvement of the local community who regained their sense of heritage while using Corn Maze as platform for the development of other tourism initiatives and projects. This low-cost project, being a significant step toward sustainable development of the rural area of Ivanić-Grad, stimulates further development in rural area.

Issues faced:

Most of Ivanić-Grad's tourism activities and offer are located in the urban area. Even the central agricultural event, *the Pumpkin Festival* does not offer any activities outside the city centre. Although the surrounding rural area (villages of Posavski Bregi and Dubrovčak Lijevi) offers a beautiful landscape and is easily accessible by car and bike, the tourist infrastructure is underdeveloped. Although local farmers have excellent products, their offer is not diverse enough to attract tourists and provide them with a unique experience, such as the tasting of local products. Moreover, the rural area is also facing depopulation, rural decline and the constant threat of population aging. To keep up, rural areas are trying to adapt to major globalization trends, sacrifice their uniqueness, traditions, leading to loss of identity. However, failing to preserve and present their values, they are losing the resources for sustainable tourism development and thus also sustainable development in general.

Solution:

The Corn Maze "Hrvatica" is an innovative and low-cost tourist attraction located in a small village. It derives from local heritage and is completely environmentally safe. Due to its uniqueness and strong media coverage, the new tourist attraction has brought sustainable tourism to the area. Owing to the Corn Maze project, the local community regained the sense of heritage and became proactive, using Corn Maze as platform for the development of other tourism initiatives and projects (summer camp of traditional skills, the pop-up event "Posavina Days" with local product tasting...). The Corn maze is not only a unique tourist attraction worth visiting but it has also become a platform for new sustainable initiatives in the rural area and a driving force of sustainable development of this area whose unique identity and heritage it aims to preserve and promote.





Methods, Steps, and Tools applied:

The project was developed in 2022 and 2023 through four main phases. In the **first phase**, preparatory activities and landscape design of the corn maze were carried out during May and June 2022 and 2023. The local landscape architect designed the corn maze inspired by the local folk costume “Hrvatica”. A local farmer was hired to sow the corn and maintain the field. The corn grain was donated by the corn production company, the Croatian Agricultural Institute. A geodesy expert was also hired to determine the exact geodetic elevations of the corn maze. When the corn grew approximately 50 cm high, it was time to create the paths through the maze. The cost of this phase included the fees for the landscape architect, the services of the geodesy expert, as well as the services of sowing, mulching and creating paths. In the **second phase**, interpretation panels, gamified and educational materials were prepared. This project phase was carried out throughout June 2022 and 2023. During this phase, museum employees and ethnologists were searching for interesting facts from the local history and tradition to implement them in the gamified and educational content for the visitors’ experience. It is important to emphasize that the focus was on the digital presentation of the gamified and educational activities to prevent overproduction of printed and disposable material. We developed around 12 interpretation panels positioned at certain locations within the maze for better visitor orientation. The cost of this phase included the fees for research, development of digital educational materials, graphic services and printing.

The **third phase** of the project took place in late July and early August 2022 and 2023 and included an intense promotional campaign carried out through social media, the internet as well as local, regional and national media platforms (TV, radio and online news sites). The maze was officially opened for the public on 20 August 2022 and at a similar time in 2023. In September and October, on-request tour guidance through the maze was organized for kindergarten and school groups. We welcomed several groups of retired people and team building events. Visitors were encouraged to ride the river ferry, participate in workshops and download WhatsApp and Viber stickers inspired by local symbols and dialect. The pop-up event "Posavina Days", located next to the corn maze, was organized in August offering additional cultural content such as dances of the local folklore society, presentation of old country games and carriage rides with the indigenous horse breed “Croatian Posavac”. Just as the local community was encouraged to present their cultural values, so were the local farmers stimulated to present their products and offer tasting sessions. This event attracted around 500 visitors from Zagreb and the surrounding area. Many visitors of the 2023 Pumpkin Festival also visited the corn maze and shared their



experience on social media. The cost of this phase included the fees for conducting workshops, the media campaign, and tour guide costs. The **final phase** included the official closing and agricultural works on the maze. When the corn was ready for harvesting, signalisation, interpretation panels and decoration were removed and stored for the following year. Once again, a local farmer was hired to harvest and store the corn. In the end, all that was left was an empty field, ready for reuse. The total costs of this project per year are estimated at € 9 000. After the completion of the corn maze, a wide range of activities started (summer camp of traditional skills for 2024, development of new travel itineraries and the program for the Posavina Days pop-up event in 2024, the old school building in Dubrovčak Lijevo has undergone reconstruction and renovation in the period 2022-2024.).

Achievements and Results:

- The Corn Maze “Hrvatica” has brought sustainable tourism to small rural area.
- The Corn Maze is a well-visited tourist attraction. According to the data for 2022, the corn maze was visited by 1000 visitors, while in 2023, there were around 5000 visitors.
- Visitor stays in the rural area have improved in quality and extended in duration (August to early November).
- The corn maze was a stepping stone for interconnecting tourism products and changing the tourism perspective of the local community. The corn maze was coupled with the Sava river ferry ride in the village of Dubrovčak Lijevo, resulting in increased visiting times and enhanced visitor experience.
- Local farmers recognized their interest in taking part in the tourist offer. In September 2023, they attended the training module titled “Interpretive Hosting” organized by Interpret Europe and Ivanić-Grad Tourist Board in order to enhance their visitor experience and offer product tasting and sales throughout the year.
- The community became active and regained its sense of heritage as the fundamental resource of this destination. Thanks to the project’s promotional activities which contributed to better visibility of local heritage, the local folklore group “KUD Posavec” was invited to participate at several cultural events across Croatia to promote their folk costume. These activities additionally stimulate social engagement of the local community and the preservation/promotion of its cultural heritage.
- The corn maze is a successful example of a project that successfully promotes sustainable tourism, creates connections with the local community, provides innovative and unique visitor experiences and encourages further





development of tourism in the rural area. It has become the driving force of a wide range of cultural activities for tourists and the local community (summer camps, pop-up events and similar). The newly renovated building of the old school will soon be a place where the local community and tourists can come for education purposes, holding lectures and workshops.

- The corn maze has had a strong influence on the revitalisation of the rural area which can make the area more attractive for younger people and alleviate population ageing.

Lessons Learned and Advice:

The most important challenges in the implementation of this project were related to climate change and weather conditions. Since the attraction is located near the banks of the river Sava, it was under constant threat of flooding. In August 2023, Sava broke the record of its highest water level ever measured at the local metering station. In addition, heavy rains also affected the corn sowing process due to flooding, because of which corn had to be sown twice. The wet year and the proximity of the river resulted in a significant increase in mosquito numbers in the area, affecting visitor experience. As a solution, visitors were advised to visit the maze during daylight.

The project is applicable to many rural corn-growing destinations across the world. Its main advantages are low cost, low environment impact, multifunctionality and educative character for various visitor groups, high return on local community engagement and its contribution to sustainable development.

Recognitions and Additional References

2022 – Youtube – the corn maze “Hrvatica” in Posavina (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IAqUISvleoQ>)

2023 - the “Ruža Turističke zajednice Zagrebačke županije” award in the sustainable tourism category
<https://www.jutarnji.hr/like-putovanja/aktualno/najboljima-u-turistickoj-ponudi-dodjeljene-prve-ruze-zagrebacke-zupaniji-15311368>

2024 – the project was presented at the 6th International Rural Tourism Congress.

<https://kongres.klubselo.hr/congress-program/more/255/presentation-of-papers-and-presentations-in-sections-11.04>

2024 – the project was presented at the 17th Crisis Management Days / <https://dku.hr/o-konferenciji/program>

Project portfolio:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1I3Z7-4vVagYn6nVzkYdpeoGwca1ox2I5/view?usp=sharing>

Project on Tourist Board webpage:

<https://www.tzig.hr/doziviljaji-sezonske-atrakcije/posavski-kukuruzni-labirint>

