



Good Practice Story Title: Small village`s dream lights up the country

Destination: Järvamaa, Väätsa

Country: Estonia

Submitting Organization: Central Estonia

Category:

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

Destination description:

In Järvamaa county, in the middle of Estonia, there is a small village surrounded by fields and forests. The village is called Väätsa, which stands out for its quiet rhythm of life, nature, and an active community of people. In the Soviet era, some of the most successful and well-known collective farms were here, which even Mikhail Gorbatsov, the leader of the Soviet Union at the time, paid a visit to personally. Out of the 30,000 inhabitants of the whole of Järvamaa county, 700 people live here. The Väätsa bog hiking trail is the most popular in the area. Today, Väätsa is known for being enterprising and think-out-of-the-box people. They organise a variety of well known events in the area: an apartment building festival, a parade of snowmen, and Christmas window displays. Here is the place for artists and other creative personas to bring their ideas to life, together.

Summary of Good Practice Story:

How the dream of light and assembly of a small community inspires and illuminates a whole of Estonia is admirable. Väätsa is known for enterprising and box-out-thinking people. A festival of apartment buildings, a parade of snowmen and Christmas windows - these are just some of the ideas implemented by the people of the area. In the first year, 20 windows were decorated. There was a chance to be the initiator of something and make your thoughts come true, people were thrilled. Over the years, the window community has expanded across the county. By today, the number of decorating windows has doubled and the number of visitors has already risen to 15,000. Väätsa has become an attractive residence for young families, where the community and the joy of assembly are appreciated, where the unity and strength of the community create an admirable example of how small places are able to change the big picture.

Issues faced:

Väätsa, like many other small places, faces various challenges- Large buildings built during the Soviet era can no longer find use on such a large scale: the number of inhabitants has decreased, the buildings have a lot of surplus space and the financial possibilities of the municipality are limited. In today's anxious world, community support and cooperation are vital. The State and local government authorities may not be able to reach everyone quickly in a possible crisis- such as a forest fire, snowstorm, or an electric blackout[ML1]. People's lives depend on how well the community knows and supports each other and what skills they have as a group. Now that people have been organizing the Väätsa Christmas window display project for years, there has been raised a new concern: it feels like everything has already been done and the skills used so far are already exhausted. How does one find new ideas and exciting solutions and how should you involve new members of the community to participate?

Solution:

During the repair work of the community center, two electrical systems were created, thinking about the project of windows - now there is so much capacity that lights can be added to all windows, and at the same time the capability also remains for the engines to be put into operation. A large number of cups were collected worthy of the green destination, which people used to drink glögg and tea and later put them back at the collection point. The decoration of the windows also provides an opportunity to develop adult learning - the viewing windows presuppose knowledge of electricity, rules of physics and materials to make Santa's bike or snowflakes move. In order to cover these costs, the project was written to the Hooandja

(<https://www.hooandja.ee/en/projekt/muinasjutulised-jouluvaateaknad-vaatsal-2023> and support was received from 162 donators which was worth 2206 € in total. The items used for window decorations continue their usual life after Christmas - museum exhibits return to their shelves, the football team's mascot waits for spring and new competitions, and the items borrowed from the household return to the kitchen cupboards, and so on. There have

also been cases where a visitor liked a particular window design so much that they made an offer to the artist to purchase the work. The Snowman made of plastic cups during the first year of the window display still lives on today in the local kindergarten and there are many such examples.

Methods, Steps, and Tools applied:

The former cultural center is standing in the middle of the village with lights out and empty, making the local people feel their home village is forgotten and dark. Lauri Läänemets, the former mayor of Väätsa municipality and the current interior minister of Estonia had an idea when standing in front of the dark community center: Would it be possible to turn the community center of a small village into the same shining Christmas lights display as can be seen in the big cities? Would people come to admire them? Would it be possible here, in a small village in the middle of Estonia? " It's one of the biggest tourist magnets in the area here," he commented to the local newspaper as the windows opened last Christmas. Work on Christmas-themed windows starts already in early summer, and it is publicly announced in autumn to give people time to start with the preparations. People discuss the designs in store queues and on the walking trays, at meetings, and at various regional events. The windows open around the first Advent with the Christmas market. The time before this is tense - more than 100 people coming together at the culture center on November weekends, crafting, building, and putting together their own fairytales. On one hand, the gingerbread, humming Christmas songs, and the tangerine scent move along the house - the sense of assembly and belonging is why people want to get involved in the project. Of course, there will also be failures and problems, but together the solution to unexpected problems will be found. The windows are open until the beginning of January, and it is accessible to visitors around the clock, but people come to admire them rather late at night when you get the best view of the stories created for the windows. The great game of light on Väätsa also gave courage and will to the local man Raid Saar, whose long-term dream was to recreate the light sign of Väätsa shining on the roof of the store that remained in memory during his childhood. He looked for different ways to restore it with modern possibilities. To make the home village even brighter and more prominent he thought, built, drew, called, and wrote to various entrepreneurs for help, and thanks to them and the support of his family, it also came to fruition. Now Väätsa sign shines on the roof of the community centre and shows the way here. Another landmark in the middle of Estonia. The great interest of the public and the growing community gave rise to the construction of a Christmas market at the community center.

Achievements and Results:

Today, the dream of one small community has become the dream of a whole county – the entire Järvamaa is adoring the windows. Together, both kindergarten and school children, elderly societies, museums, citizen associations, health workers, and families build. Putting the windows in motion, extra lights, the cost of building, and everything else need extra money from the organizers. In order to cover these costs, the project was written to the Trustee and support was received from 162 donators which was worth 2206 € in total. In the first year, 13 windows were decorated and community members were invited to campaign. In 2023, 46 windows had been decorated. More than 100 people made the windows in total, but it is impossible to add up the number of people who participated in the preparations. About 15,000 people visited the windows in 2023, making it one of the largest tourist attractions in the region. This whole venture enlivened the tourism of Järvamaa. The village of 700 inhabitants fills up with thousands of tourists for a month in winter. Every year over thousands of people visit the viewing windows all over Estonia and also come to see from abroad. Väätsa has become an attractive residence for young families, where the community and the joy of assembly are appreciated. Väätsa is the Christmas capital of Central Estonia.

Lessons Learned and Advice:

We are accustomed to seeing Christmas markets in big cities, with entire streets adorned with lights and decorations, this is often costly and requires professional assistance. However, a small Estonian village demonstrated that such festive charm is achievable even in a small community using local resources. The community is strong when acting together. It makes the community safer and creates a sense of unity and shared values. In today's anxious world, people's lives depend on how much the community knows and supports each other. Everyone is working towards a common goal - to turn the community center into one big fairy tale for a month. Christmas windows open as a major media event. The creators of the Christmas windows say that participation gives them a sense of team, an opportunity to create something special and to feel part of something bigger. Every year there is something new to learn when decorating windows. Empowering people to be part of a greater wonder, the community grows strong and educates itself. The team has learned to share responsibilities equally, so that the more active members are not overburdened and everyone who wants to feels like an equal member of the team. The most important thing is to identify people's strengths, encourage and guide them. Every project needs a leader who sees the big picture, knows how to involve and encourage people – then a miracle can happen.

Recognitions and Additional References

Delfi/Maaleht:

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Järvamaa Action Awards 2023 Reputation Influencer of the Year. <https://shorturl.at/0R9Tw>

Photo 1

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/visitjarva/53416678388/in/album-72177720305127826/>

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