Where the desert is inhabited: Esquiña and Illapata prepare rural tourism that takes care of water, the community and local life

Camarones, Chile
Arica Siempre Activa Trade Association
Local Destinations (including villages, cities, municipalities, islands)
Nature & Environment

Summary of Good Practice Story
Esquiña and Illapata, pre-Hispanic-origin villages in Chile's arid Camarones Ravine some 135 km from Arica, faced geographic isolation and incomplete basic infrastructure that limited their readiness for rural tourism, despite strong cultural assets like the San Pedro and San Pablo festivity (led by traditional roles including fabriquero, mayordomo and alférez alongside the Aymara Indigenous community) and the Lamb Festival. Rather than building tourism attractions first, the Municipality of Camarones, residents, Indigenous representatives and public institutions prioritised community infrastructure — improving the village plaza pergola and multicancha sports facility as social gathering spaces, and building household wastewater interconnections (463 metres of piping, 48 inspection chambers and 26 grease-trap chambers) benefiting 35 homes and 140 direct residents — treating sanitation as a foundation for dignity and environmental protection rather than a tourism amenity. The lesson: sustainable rural tourism cannot be separated from the basic conditions of community life — invisible infrastructure like wastewater connections shapes a destination's real sustainability far more than any promotional image, and progress in small rural communities is rarely linear, requiring patience and flexibility rather than treating delays as failure.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context
Located in the Esquiña Valley, in the Camarones Ravine, in the municipality of Camarones, Arica and Parinacota Region, the town of Esquiña is 135 kilometers from the city of Arica and 2,180 meters above sea level. This historic town of pre-Hispanic origin has, in recent years, fostered a process of territorial strengthening based on sustainability, the preservation of its cultural heritage, and the improvement of the quality of life for its inhabitants.

Through collaborative work between the community, the Municipality of Camarones, and various public institutions, Esquiña has developed initiatives that promote sustainable tourism, the conservation of ancestral traditions, the use of renewable energy, and the improvement of community infrastructure, becoming an example of rural development aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The Turning Point: Why change was needed
Like many rural communities in northern Chile, Esquiña faced challenges related to its geographic isolation, limited tourism infrastructure, and the need to generate economic opportunities that would keep the local culture alive and improve the living conditions of its inhabitants.

Preserving its religious, livestock, and heritage traditions also required strengthening the bond between the community and visitors, promoting authentic experiences that highlighted the cultural identity of the region.

The Vision: What you set out to do
The vision was not to turn Esquiña and Illapata into conventional tourism destinations. The aim was more precise: to prepare these rural communities to welcome visitors on their own terms, without weakening the foundations that make local life possible.

The Journey: How change happened
Change in Esquiña and Illapata unfolded gradually, through a sequence of practical decisions rather than a single large tourism project. The process began by recognising that the future of rural tourism in these villages depended on strengthening the everyday systems that support community life.

The first step was to look at the territory from within. Esquiña already had a strong cultural base: its calvaries at the entrance of the village, the celebration of San Pedro and San Pablo, the Lamb Festival, livestock traditions, agricultural practices, and a landscape shaped by the Camarones ravine. These elements gave the community a clear identity, but they also revealed an important responsibility: tourism would need to be organised around what local people already value, not around an external image imposed on the village.

From there, the Municipality of Camarones, local residents, community organisations, Indigenous representatives, and public institutions began to align different actions under a common direction. Some actions were cultural, others were technical, and others were related to basic infrastructure. Together, they started to form a coherent pathway for sustainable rural destination management.

One line of work focused on community infrastructure and public space. In Esquiña, the improvement of the plaza pergola became a visible sign of this process. The pergola is not only a physical structure; it is part of the village's social life. It provides shade, a place to meet, and a setting for local activities. Improving it meant reinforcing the village centre as a space for residents first, and for visitors only as part of a respectful encounter with local life.

Another action was the improvement of the surroundings of the multicancha, a key community facility. In small rural settlements, these spaces are multifunctional. They are used for sport, meetings, celebrations, and social interaction. Strengthening their surroundings helped improve the quality of the built environment and contributed to making Esquiña more liveable, safer, and better prepared to host community-based activities.

In parallel, sanitation became one of the most important and concrete areas of progress. Previous works had advanced public wastewater infrastructure, but households in Esquiña and Illapata still needed proper domestic connections. This became a decisive step. The project to build household interconnections was not presented as a tourism facility, but as a necessary condition for health, environmental management, and responsible destination development. It connected the idea of sustainability with something tangible: homes, families, wastewater, water protection, and dignity.

The process also involved technical adaptation. Public works in remote rural areas are rarely simple. Distances, construction conditions, design adjustments, procurement procedures, and the need to coordinate contractors and municipal teams created delays and required flexibility. In the case of the pergola, for example, technical modifications related to pavements, stonework, architecture, and execution time had to be addressed. Rather than treating this as a failure, the process showed the importance of adapting implementation to the realities of the place.

Community participation gave meaning to these investments. The preservation of the San Pedro and San Pablo festivity, with the participation of the fabriquero, mayordomo, alférez, the neighbourhood council, and the Aymara Indigenous community, shows that Esquiña's heritage is not passive. It is organised, practiced, and transmitted. Local traditions are maintained by people who assume roles, prepare ceremonies, receive others, and keep memory alive through collective action.

The Lamb Festival added another layer to the journey. It connected livestock activity, local food, cultural expression, and tourism potential. It allowed the community to present rural production not as a spectacle, but as part of it

The Breakthrough: What you achieved
The main breakthrough in Esquiña and Illapata was not a sudden increase in visitor numbers. It was something more important for a fragile rural destination: the communities began to move from tourism potential to territorial readiness.

For years, Esquiña and Illapata were recognised for their landscapes, traditions, and rural identity, but the conditions needed to support responsible tourism were still incomplete. The change came when infrastructure, public space, environmental management, and community life began to be addressed as part of the same development pathway.
One of the most concrete achievements was the progress made in sanitation for Esquiña and Illapata. The household interconnection project was designed to benefit 35 homes, reaching 140 direct beneficiaries and 172 indirect beneficiaries. Its technical solution includes 463 metres of piping, 48 inspection chambers, and 26 grease-trap chambers. For the local population, these figures represent more than infrastructure: they mean safer living conditions, better wastewater management, and a stronger basis for protecting water resources in an arid territory.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn
One of the most important lessons from Esquiña and Illapata is that sustainable tourism in rural destinations cannot be separated from the basic conditions of community life. A village may have landscapes, traditions, stories, and cultural value, but if sanitation, public spaces, access, and local capacity are not strengthened, tourism can become another pressure rather than an opportunity.

What surprised us was how much of the tourism discussion depended on infrastructure that is often invisible to visitors. Wastewater connections, inspection chambers, grease traps, pavements, shade structures, lighting, and access improvements may not appear in promotional images, but they shape the real sustainability of a destination. They determine whether tourism can grow without compromising public health, environmental quality, or local dignity.

Another lesson was that progress in small rural communities is rarely linear. Technical adjustments, administrative procedures, distance, construction conditions, and design corrections are part of the process. The extension of deadlines and the need to adapt works in Esquiña showed that rural destination management requires patience, flexibility, and close coordination between municipal teams, contractors, institutions, and residents. In these contexts, adaptation is not a weakness; it is part of doing things responsibly.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact
The impact of this initiative is beginning to extend beyond the individual works carried out in Esquiña and Illapata. Its wider value lies in the way it has changed the local understanding of what sustainable rural tourism requires.

Instead of treating tourism as a separate sector, the process has shown that destination management must be connected to sanitation, public space, local culture, renewable energy, road access, community facilities, and rural livelihoods. This integrated perspective is now helping Camarones think about tourism as part of territorial development, rather than only as promotion or visitor attraction.

For Esquiña and Illapata, this has created a stronger foundation for future initiatives. Improved sanitation connections, better public spaces, accommodation support, renewable energy use, and the strengthening of local traditions are not isolated achievements. Together, they create the conditions for new community-based experiences, heritage routes, rural festivals, local food initiatives, and visitor education around water, culture, and life in the desert.

The process has also generated a sense of local pride. In small rural villages, public investment can have a strong symbolic effect.

Awards or Certifications
GD TOP100 2022 & 2025, GD ACP 2025 Bronze Award

Web Articles
https://www.biobiochile.cl/noticias/2014/08/29/esquina-primer-poblado-del-norte-grande-en-abastecerse-completamente-con-energia-solar.shtml

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https://www.soychile.cl/Arica/Sociedad/2013/08/08/192040/Ya-esta-funcionando-el-museo-patrimonial-de-Esquina.aspx

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Other Relevant Links
https://www.pueblosoriginarios.gob.cl/multimedia/san-pedro-y-san-pablo-en-el-pueblo-de-esquina

https://www.facebook.com/municamarones.cl/videos/turismo-gran-noticia-para-esqui%C3%B1acon-mucha-alegr%C3%ADa-celebramos-junto-a-la-comunid/337104165586015 98/

Quotes or Testimonials

“Camarones is a territory where development must respect the way people have lived with the desert, the valleys, and water for generations. In Esquiña and Illapata, we are not only preparing places for visitors; we are strengthening the conditions that allow our communities to live better, protect their identity, and share their heritage with dignity. Sustainable tourism begins when local life is placed at the centre of every decision.”

Cristian Zavala Soto

Mayor of Camarones