The Awakened Castle: A New Story of Slovenia’s Tallest Castle Tower

Destination Jeruzalem Slovenia, Slovenia
Javni zavod za turizem, kulturo in šport Občine Ormož
Local Destinations (including villages, cities, municipalities, islands)
Culture & Heritage

Summary of Good Practice Story
Ormož Castle, dating to 1278 in Slovenia's Jeruzalem wine region, sat underused — open only a few limited hours a week under museum management, with no year-round attraction to anchor the wider destination. The Municipality of Ormož and its Public Institution for Tourism, Culture and Sports extended opening hours to every day of the year, opened the castle's tower to the public for the first time (Slovenia's tallest, with a restored historic clock ringing again after a decade of silence), added digital interpretation, and commissioned "Doroteja," a 15-minute film made with local cultural associations dramatising a local witch-trial history, alongside a community storytelling evening about the castle's last owner, Countess Irma Wurmbrand. Visitor numbers jumped roughly eight to twelvefold, from about 1,300 annually to over 5,000 in the first five months, supported by 27 newly licensed castle guides and around 80 visiting groups. The lesson: heritage becomes meaningful only when it's made accessible and alive, and a destination succeeds when every local stakeholder — guides, wineries, cultural associations, residents — feels part of the same shared story.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context
Jeruzalem Slovenia is where vineyards meet heritage and traditions come alive. Rooted in wine culture, living traditions, and community, this sustainable rural destination preserves its past while shaping its future. The revival of Ormož Castle stands as a symbol of this transformation.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed
For years, Ormož Castle remained a hidden gem with untapped potential. Although the castle was open to visitors under museum management, access was limited to only a few days per week and for just a few hours each day. Due to staff shortages, exhibitions were sometimes closed entirely. Weekend and holiday visitors—the time when demand was highest—often found the castle doors locked.

At the same time, Ormož lacked year-round attractions that could encourage visitors to stay longer or travel to the destination specifically for culture and heritage. Beyond the natural attractions, such as the Ormož Lagoons and the park, few cycling paths, there were few points of interest available. Existing exhibitions were limited in scope and did not fully engage families, children, or diverse visitor groups.

The community recognized that without change, an important part of local heritage would remain underused, while opportunities for sustainable tourism development would be lost. The challenge was not only to preserve the castle, but to transform it into a vibrant cultural hub—one that would bring life to the town, strengthen local identity, and create new reasons for visitors to discover Ormož throughout the year.

The Vision: What you set out to do
The vision was to transform Ormož Castle from an underused heritage site into a vibrant cultural hub and the gateway to Destination Jeruzalem Slovenia. The Municipality of Ormož and the Public Institution for Tourism, Culture and Sports of Ormož recognized the need to create a compelling reason for visitors to choose Ormož and explore the wider destination.
The castle was seen as the ideal entry point to the region's vineyards, gastronomy, nature, and living heritage. By expanding exhibitions, extending opening hours, and creating experiences for all generations, the community aimed to make the castle accessible year-round and strengthen sustainable tourism.
This transformation built on existing efforts: Ormož Castle has held the Slovenia Green Attraction label for four consecutive years. The goal was clear—to bring heritage to life, strengthen local identity, and position Ormož as the gateway to Jeruzalem Slovenia.

The Journey: How change happened
The transformation began with a shared vision to give Ormož Castle a new role in the life of the town and the wider destination. The Municipality of Ormož and the Public Institution for Tourism, Culture and Sports of Ormož joined forces to create a more open, accessible, and engaging heritage experience.

The first step was to improve access. Opening hours were extended, including weekends and holidays, ensuring that visitors would no longer find closed doors when demand was highest.

New exhibitions, guided tours, events, and experiences for families, children, and groups gradually brought new life to the castle.

A milestone of the revitalization was the opening of the castle tower. For the first time in the history of Ormož Castle, dating back to 1278, visitors can access the tower and climb to its top. Even more symbolically, the historic castle clock began operating again after more than a decade of silence. Today, visitors are rewarded with a breathtaking 360-degree panoramic view over vineyards, rivers, plains, and the landscapes of Jeruzalem Slovenia - all that on the highest Castle tower in Slovenia.

The revival was made possible through a comprehensive castle revitalization project that combined heritage preservation with innovation. Alongside opening the tower and restoring the historic clock, the project introduced digital interpretation throughout the castle, creating engaging experiences for modern visitors. Through local actors, costumes, and stories, the community itself became the storyteller of its own heritage.

A special addition was the creation of Doroteja, a 15-minute film included in the entrance ticket. The film tells the story of Doroteja, a woman accused of witchcraft from Središče ob Dravi, now part of Destination Jeruzalem Slovenia. What makes the experience even more authentic is that local cultural associations took part in the production, bringing the region's history to life through community participation.

The transformation was not only about restoring buildings—it was about bringing heritage back to life. Local guides, cultural workers, tourism professionals, associations, and residents all contributed their knowledge and stories, connecting the castle with local traditions and the identity of the destination.

Challenges such as limited staffing, coordination between institutions, and the creation of new visitor experiences required creativity and collaboration. Yet small moments confirmed that the effort was worthwhile: families returning on weekends, children from schools discovering history through stories, and locals expressing pride that their castle was alive again.

Through partnership, community involvement, and sustainable destination management, Ormož Castle has become more than a monument—it has become a living gateway to Destination Jeruzalem Slovenia.

The transformation was not only about restoring buildings—it was about bringing memories back to life. For the first time in the castle's history, the Public Institution for Tourism, Culture and Sports of Ormož commemorated the 140th anniversary of the birth of Countess Irma Wurmbrand, the last owner of Ormož Castle. Many older residents still remember her, as she lived in Ormož until 1970 and remains an important part of local collective memory.

One of the most moving moments was a community storytelling evening, where more than ten local residents shared personal memories, stories, and family recollections of Countess Irma. What began as a heritage event became a bridge between generations—transforming history from written records into living memory. These moments revealed that the revival of Ormož Castle is not only about preserving walls and collections, but also about safeguarding the stories, emotions, and identities that make this place truly unique.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved

Ormož Castle has always been at the heart of the town's identity. The town developed around the castle, which remains a living symbol of Ormož and its community. Today, it houses the Public Institution for Tourism, Culture and Sports of Ormož, the Tourist Information Centre, a wine shop, the local radio station, the Public Fund for Cultural Activities, and the Youth Centre—ensuring that the castle remains vibrant and part of everyday life.

The results of revitalization have been remarkable. Before reopening, the castle received approximately 1,300 visitors annually. In just five months, it welcomed more than 5,000 visitors—an increase of eight to twelve times. Now open every day of the year, including Sundays and public holidays, the castle has become an accessible and lively heritage site.

Community involvement has grown significantly. St. Martin's Day celebrations brought residents back to the castle, while 27 licensed castle guides now interpret its stories. Since reopening, around 80 groups—including local schools and visitors from across Slovenia—have explored the castle and discovered the heritage of Ormož and Destination Jeruzalem Slovenia.

The impact extends far beyond the castle walls. As a key point of interest and gateway to Destination Jeruzalem Slovenia, the castle encourages visitors to explore the region's vineyards, gastronomy, nature, and culture. Most importantly, it has restored local pride and shown that heritage conservation and sustainability can create lasting value for communities and future generations.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn

One of our greatest lessons was that heritage alone is not enough—heritage must be accessible, alive, and meaningful to people. We were surprised by how quickly the community embraced the renewed castle. Older residents returned with memories, children discovered local history for the first time, and visitors began to see Ormož as a gateway to Destination Jeruzalem Slovenia.

The journey was not without challenges. Limited staffing, the need for new visitor experiences, and balancing preservation with modern interpretation required constant adaptation and

collaboration. We learned that successful heritage revitalization depends not only on infrastructure, but also on people, partnerships, and shared stories.

Another important lesson was that a destination succeeds only when all stakeholders feel they are part of the same story. The castle may serve as an inviting entry point, but the true experience of Jeruzalem Slovenia is created by wineries, farms, accommodation providers, cultural associations, nature sites, and local communities. Together, they form one destination and one shared identity.

If we could start again, we would involve the community even earlier in co-creating content and experiences. Events such as the storytelling evening about Countess Irma Wurmbrand showed us that local memories are as valuable as museum collections.

Our advice to others is simple: open heritage to people and involve the entire destination. Let local communities become storytellers of

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact
Jeruzalem Slovenia is an increasingly attractive and sustainable rural destination, welcoming visitors from around the world. Yet one challenge remained: Ormož lacked a strong attraction that would encourage visitors to come, stay longer, and explore the wider destination. Today, Ormož Castle fulfills this role. Its revitalization transformed an underused heritage site into a vibrant cultural hub and gateway to Destination Jeruzalem Slovenia. The project inspired new partnerships among tourism providers, cultural associations, schools, local guides, and residents, proving that heritage can unite a community around a shared vision.

Today, tourism providers share one common story, with Ormož Castle as its gateway. The sound of the clock and the sight of visitors atop Slovenia's tallest castle tower are daily reminders that the castle lives again.

The castle now serves as a key point of interest, encouraging visitors to discover the region's vineyards, wine cellars, nature, and cultural experiences. The story of Ormož Castle is still unfolding. Through ongoing restoration, community involvement, and sustainable tourism, the castle continues to shape a future where heritage is not

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https://www.jeruzalem-slovenija.si/muzeji-in-cerkve/grad-ormoz

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a symbol of history
and culture in the
heart of Ormož
From its walls, a beautiful view
unfolds from the
highest castle tower in Slovenia.