Stitches of Patience: Reviving a 600-Year-Old Bay of Kotor Legacy

Kotor, Montenegro

Kancelarija za pripremu i upravljanje projektima koji se finansiraju iz međunarodnih fondova i drugih izvora, Opština Kotor

Local Destinations (including villages, cities, municipalities, islands)

Culture & Heritage

Summary of Good Practice Story

Dobrota lace, a 15th-century needle-lace tradition from Kotor, Montenegro's UNESCO-listed Boka Bay, held official cultural protection but by 2021 only one recognised bearer, Nadežda Nada Radović, could still teach the authentic technique — meaning the living skill risked disappearing even though the object itself was safe. Rather than simplifying the craft for tourists, the municipal museum JU Muzeji Kotor launched a demanding six-month training school built on trust and discipline, later expanded through the "Pacijenca" interpretation programme of demonstrations, exhibitions and a vertical display method that made the intricate handwork legible to visitors. About 60 lace-makers have since completed the training, with three former students now active instructors, meaning transmission no longer depends on one person. The programme won a European Heritage Award/Europa Nostra Award, and its contemporary "Wear Your Heritage" brooch won a Balkan Museum Network prize. The lesson: a living skill cannot be saved by legal protection or promotion alone — it survives only through structured teaching, strict authenticity, and giving visitors a slower, more respectful way to encounter a destination under tourism pressure.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context
Kotor is a small coastal town in Boka Bay, Montenegro, where mountains descend to the sea and stone settlements carry maritime memory. Its UNESCO World Heritage area is admired for the Old Town, church towers, palaces and bay views. Yet Kotor is fragile. Many visitors meet it quickly, through a crowded route, a photograph and a short walk. At that speed, local knowledge becomes invisible.

This story belongs to Dobrota, a historic captain's settlement within Kotor, shaped by maritime families, churches, palaces and Adriatic departures. Among its delicate forms of knowledge is Dobrota lace, a local needle lace named after Dobrota and protected as an intangible cultural good of Montenegro. Its documented history reaches back to the 15th century and lives through collections, local memory and the work of JU Muzeji Kotor, with research into its roots, influences and sister traditions.

Dobrota lace is made with white thread, a needle, patience and exceptional precision. One centimetre of dense lace may take four to six hours. In Boka, this patience is often called pacijenca. It describes the making of the lace, but also of maritime households, women's work and local pride. If the skill disappeared, Kotor would lose more than a craft. It would lose a quiet language of memory.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed
The turning point came when the community understood that legal protection was not enough to keep Dobrota lace alive.

The lace already had protected status. It existed in museum memory, church collections, family stories and public respect. But its living transmission was close to breaking. In 2021, only one officially recognised bearer could transmit the authentic skill: Nadežda Nada Radović. She had learned the technique in 1964 and kept it alive through her hands, memory and discipline.

A protected object can be documented, stored and displayed. A living skill cannot. It survives only when one person is able to teach and another is willing to learn. If the knowledge remained with one bearer, the chain could break quietly. The lace might still be admired, but no longer practised.

The risk was deepened by the craft itself. Dobrota lace is slow, exacting and difficult. It asks for time that modern life rarely gives. It had moved away from everyday use and remained mostly in collections, memories and the hands of very few people. At the same time, Kotor's tourism pressure made fast, visible heritage easier to notice than patient, living knowledge.

What was at stake was memory carried mostly through women's hands: the discipline of making, the connection with maritime households and church gifts, and the pride of knowing

that this skill belonged to the place. Could Dobrota lace return from protected status into living practice before it was too late?

The Vision: What you set out to do
The vision was to bring Dobrota lace back into people's hands.

JU Muzeji Kotor, the municipal museum institution leading this safeguarding work, did not treat the lace only as an object to display. The museum understood that its future depended on transmission: the authentic technique had to be learned again, practised again and taught again.

This work began through the museum programmes "Stara vještina za novo doba and Stara vještina za nove generacije". Their purpose was direct: transfer the skill from the recognised bearer to new learners, build confidence through practice, and prepare a wider circle of people who could carry the knowledge further.

The aim was not to simplify the lace for quick attention. Authenticity had to be protected through discipline, repetition and respect for the original method. The lace had to remain demanding. The difference was that more people would enter that discipline and understand its meaning.

Pacijenca later gave this work a public voice. It helped interpret the lace through demonstrations, exhibitions, films and shared pride. But the heart of the process remained learning. The lace had to move from paper protection into hands, homes, classrooms, museum spaces and public life.

The Journey: How change happened
The journey began in 2021 with a six-month training school led by Nadežda Nada Radović. The first task was not promotion. It was trust. Participants had to trust the slowness of the method, the authority of the bearer and the value of learning something that could not be rushed.

They learned to work with a needle, thread, thimble, scissors and a prepared pattern. They learned that one centimetre of dense lace can take hours. Many discovered that patience was not a decorative idea, but a physical part of the work. A small movement mattered. A correction mattered. Starting again mattered.

This changed the relationship with the lace. It was no longer only something beautiful in a collection or a story told about the past. It became a skill that people tried to understand through their own hands. Each learner entered the discipline of the lace and, in doing so, entered a line of transmission that had almost narrowed to one person.

The school continued in cycles. Around 60 lace-makers have completed it. Participants received certificates after mastering the basic techniques. The process included local residents, children from Kotor primary schools, people from outside Montenegro and participants who came because the skill had begun to speak beyond Dobrota.

Women were central to this return of knowledge. Many entered as learners, but the process gave them more than a new craft. It gave them a role in carrying forward something that had belonged to the memory of their place. At the same time, the programme also opened the lace beyond expected gender and local boundaries. One participant from Zagreb took annual leave to come to Kotor and learn the technique, a small but telling sign that Dobrota lace had begun to reach people outside its original circle without losing its local meaning.

The classroom became a circle of concentration, conversation and confidence. Hands that first hesitated over white thread gradually learned to read the pattern, correct mistakes and continue.

The most important step came when former participants began to teach. Today, three active instructors, Dubravka Ivetić, Indira Čečur and Ljubica Krivokapić, help transmit the skill further. This changed the future of Dobrota lace. It no longer depended on one pair of hands alone. The knowledge had begun to multiply without losing its discipline.

At the same time, JU Muzeji Kotor brought the lace into public view with care. Through Pacijenca, the museum used public demonstrations, school activities, presentations, exhibitions, promotional films and interpretation to show the labour behind the lace. The message was not that the lace was an attractive object. The message was that it was a demanding living skill and that the community had chosen to keep it alive.

The museum also changed the way the lace could be seen. A vertical exhibition method allowed Dobrota lace to be viewed from all sides instead of lying flat. This simple curatorial decision mattered. It helped people see the transparency, density and structure of the work. It made the handwork legible.

Tourism created a new possibility for the craft, but only because the community kept control of meaning and quality. Visitors could meet Kotor through patience, not only through quick consumption. Public demonstrations and interpretation gave them a slower way to understand the destination. Contemporary forms, such as the Wear Your Heritage lace brooch, showed that the skill could gain visibility and new opportunities for visibility and local value without being reduced to a shallow product.

The journey widened further through public events and international contacts. In 2026, the First International Lace Festival in Kotor placed Dobrota lace in dialogue with lace traditions from Italy, Croatia and South Korea. This did not replace the local story. It strengthened it by showing

that Dobrota lace could stand within a wider community of practice while remaining tied to its own place, method and memory.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved
Dobrota lace moved from fragile protection into active transmission.

In 2021, the authentic skill depended on one officially recognised bearer. Today, around 60 lace-makers have completed the school and three active instructors continue to help transmit the technique. The future of the lace no longer rests on one person alone, but on a system of learning, practice and instruction.

The change is also visible in people. Women who came to learn became carriers of knowledge. Some became instructors. Children encountered the lace as something they could touch, watch and learn, not only as a finished object from the past. Local residents began to recognise Dobrota lace again as part of Kotor's living identity.

The museum changed as well. It became a place where heritage knowledge is practised, taught, corrected, interpreted and shared. Public demonstrations, exhibitions and the vertical display method helped visitors and residents see the lace as work, not only as beauty.

The destination also gained a more responsible way to speak about itself. Under strong visitor pressure, Dobrota lace offers a slower, higher-value cultural encounter. It invites people to spend time with process, skill and local meaning instead of seeing Kotor only as a short photo stop. Demonstrations, festivals and the Wear Your Heritage brooch connect visitors with authentic local work and offer an alternative to generic souvenirs.

Wider recognition confirmed the value of this model. Pacijenca received the European Heritage Award/Europa Nostra Award, while the Wear Your Heritage lace brooch received first prize from the Balkan Museum Network. These awards matter because impact was seen beyond Kotor. But the heart of the story is that Dobrota lace is practised again, taught again and visible again.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn
The main lesson is that a living skill can’t be saved by declaring it important. It survives when knowledge is passed on, when new people accept the discipline of learning, and when institutions create the conditions for learning to continue.

Authenticity also requires strictness. Dobrota lace couldn’t be protected by making it easier, faster or more decorative. The technique, materials, rhythm and standards had to remain clear. JU Muzeji Kotor treated research, context and interpretation as part of safeguarding, so the lace could be taught with evidence and respect for its authentic method. Education became preservation.

The process also showed that a living skill cannot be saved through one-time action. It required time, materials, instructors, repeated training cycles, certificates, institutional support and community trust. Not everyone learns at the same speed, which is why instructor development became essential.

Tourism can help a fragile skill survive, but only when the community keeps control of meaning, quality and context. Public demonstrations, exhibitions, festivals and museum souvenirs created pride and economic possibility because they followed training and transmission.

For other destinations, the advice is practical: start with the people who hold the knowledge. Understand why the skill is at risk. Build trust before promotion. Create structured learning. Protect authenticity. Train future instructors. Then tell the story publicly, with evidence and care.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact
The ripple effect of Dobrota lace reaches beyond one craft.

For Kotor, it has changed the way living heritage is understood in a destination under pressure. Identity does not live only in monuments, churches and views. It also lives in quiet practices that require attention, discipline and time.

For participants, the process created pride and belonging. Women became carriers of knowledge again. Former learners became instructors. Children saw that heritage is something learned by hand. Local residents saw Dobrota lace as a living part of Dobrota and Kotor.
For visitors, the story opens a more respectful way to meet the destination. It asks them to notice work, patience and transmission. In a place where many visits are short, Dobrota lace creates a pause.

The model may also help other places. JU Muzeji Kotor is considering a future approach to UNESCO to protect and share the safeguarding model: identify the knowledge holder, create structured training, build new instructors, involve children and residents, protect authenticity and connect visibility with community pride.

Dobrota lace survived because people learned it, practised it, taught it and saw it again as part of Kotor's living identity. Its future is still made slowly, one patient centimetre at a time.

Awards or Certifications
European Heritage Award / Europa Nostra Award, European Commission & Europa Nostra, 2026, Category: Education, Training and Skills; Project: "Pacijenca" – Safeguarding the Dobrota Lace Tradition, https://www.europeanheritageawards.eu/winners/safeguarding-the-dobrota-lace-tradition-pacijenca-project/

First Prize, Museum Souvenir Award, Balkan Museum Network, 2025, “Wear Your Heritage” lace brooch; recognised as best museum souvenir among 18 entries from Balkan museum institutions, https://www.bmuseums.net/celebrating-the-creativity-of-museum-souvenirs/

Protected Intangible Cultural Good of Montenegro, Ministry of Culture of Montenegro, 2013, “Vještina izrade dobrotske čipke” (Skill of making Dobrota lace); national-level intangible cultural asset, https://www.gov.me/clanak/nematerijalna-kulturna-dobara-crne-gore

ICOM Recognition, International Council of Museums, 2025, “Pacijenca” project included among 130 exceptional projects from 60 countries worldwide, https://icom.museum/en/icom-award-for-sustainable-development-practice-in-museums-longlist-of-eligible-projects/

“21 November” Local Award, Municipality of Kotor, 2022, awarded to Museums of Kotor for cultural heritage contributions, https://www.kotor.me/files/documents/1668908009-ODLUKA%20O%20DODJELI.pdf

Web Articles

All winners: European Heritage Awards celebrate conservation and reconversion projects, Euronews Culture, April 21, 2026, Pacijenca project revived nearly extinct Dobrota lace tradition, https://www.euronews.com/culture/2026/04/21/all-winners-european-heritage-awards-celebration-conservation-and-reconversion-projects

European Commission & Europa Nostra announce 2026 winners press release, Europa Nostra Official, April 20, 2026, Dobrota Lace included among award winners, https://www.europanostra.org/european-commission-and-europa-nostra-announce-the-winners-of-europe-top-heritage-awards-2026/

Paths and Centuries of Dobrota Lace, European Heritage Days, February 28, 2025, feature story documenting Dobrota lace history and sustainability efforts, https://www.europeanheritagedays.com/Story/Paths-and-Centuries-of-Dobrota-Lace

European Heritage Awards Ceremony 2026, Europa Nostra, May 28, 2026, official ceremony booklet listing Dobrota Lace Tradition – Pacijenca Project as winner, https://www.europanostra.org/events/european-heritage-awards-ceremony-2026/

Other Relevant Links

Video Pacijenca https://youtu.be/Zp96FZ4YSU8?si=r24zodsyT1BQH0ji

First International Lace Festival in Kotor, Museums of Kotor, 27–29 March 2026, https://muzejikotor.me/i-medjunarodni-festival-cipke-u-kotoru/

First International Lace Festival in Kotor opened by the President of the Municipality of Kotor, Municipality of Kotor, 27 March 2026, https://www.kotor.me/opstinakotor/vijesti/predsjednik-joki%C4%87-proglasio-prvi-me%C4%90unarodni-festival-%C4%8Cipke-u-kotoru-otvorenim/

Quotes or Testimonials

For more than 50 years, Nada Radović kept the knowledge of Dobrota lace alive. In 2021, she was the only officially recognised bearer able to transmit the authentic skill. She spoke about the lace with deep emotion: “Dobrota lace can be spoken about for days and still never be fully told. Everything we received, from designs to patterns of Dobrota lace, was taken from here, from this beautiful place of ours. Windows and their frames, doors, staircases, the look of palaces. Everything that served as ornament could become inspiration. Garden flowers, wildflowers. The moon, the sun, the stars, a ship. Everything can become a pattern.

One centimeter of dense embroidery takes four to six hours. I was alone for many years, for more than 50 years. One could say, a lifetime. Then they invited me to the Gallery of Solidarity. You can imagine how I felt. I waited 58 years.

I learned it, and I must pass it on, so others know that this treasure lives in the Bay of Kotor. The woman who made the lace was rich in emotion. And that richness of feeling was expressed in every single stitch. So when a loved one returned, they would find a piece through which she, in silence, had been with them.

She created something original, the lace of Dobrota.

If you make one piece, you’re done. You’ll be captured by the lace. I am 88 years old, and I still work. I gladly pass on all I know.

Around sixty women have passed through the lace school of the MPI Museums of Kotor. The lace goes on. The lace lives.”

The Jury of the European Heritage Awards / Europa Nostra Awards stated: “The “Pacijenca” project transformed a domestic craft into a shared cultural event that strengthens community life while supporting the economic empowerment of women. Through lace-making, it promotes patience as a social and cultural value, safeguards a fragile element of intangible heritage, and connects a small local tradition with wider audiences.”