From Preserving Folk Costume to Living Heritage

Saaremaa, Estonia
Visit Saaremaa, Saaremaa Vald
Local Destinations (including villages, cities, municipalities, islands)
People & Community

Summary of Good Practice Story

On Muhu island in Estonia, traditional folk costume — worn by children on their first school day and by families at weddings and festivals — remained genuinely part of everyday life, but the specialised embroidery, knitting and shoemaking skills behind it risked disappearing as experienced makers aged and young people pursued opportunities elsewhere. Rather than only preserving garments in museums, the community invested in teaching people to make their own: a school handicraft club introduces children to embroidery, the Muhu Folk Costume Centre and Muhu Museum support authentic craftsmanship, and the flagship programme "Muhu naine oo kut lill" (2017-2023), run by the Muhu Craft Association, guided about 100 community members through roughly ten sessions each to complete their own folk costume pieces — with a new traditional slippers course in 2026 drawing almost 20 participants despite limited capacity. The community also launched "Wear Muhu – Folk Costume Friday," encouraging traditional or Muhu-inspired dress every week. The lesson: living heritage survives only when people continue to make, wear and pass it on, not merely preserve it as an object — so destinations should invest first in their community's skills and confidence, letting authentic visitor experiences follow naturally.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context
Muhu is a small island in western Estonia, known for its distinctive folk costume, colourful embroidery and strong sense of local identity. Unlike many traditional costumes that are now worn mainly for performances or displayed in museums, Muhu folk costume continues to be part of community life.

Children wear it on their first day of school, families wear it at weddings, church festivals, village celebrations and national holidays, and many people own garments that have been carefully embroidered, repaired and passed down through generations.

This living tradition depends on much more than the garments themselves. Every embroidered apron, knitted stocking and handmade shoe reflects specialised skills that take years to learn. As experienced craftspeople grow older and younger generations have many different opportunities, passing these skills on has become one of the community's most important challenges.

This is why the story could only happen in Muhu. Here, folk costume is not simply cultural heritage to be preserved—it is a tradition that people continue to make, wear and pass on as part of everyday life.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed
For generations, Muhu's traditional folk costume has remained part of everyday community life. Children still wear it on their first day of school, and families continue to dress in it for weddings, church festivals, village celebrations and national holidays.

At first glance, it seemed that the tradition was thriving.

But beneath the surface, an important question emerged:

Who would make these garments for the next generation?

Authentic Muhu folk costume is the result of highly specialised skills that take years to master. Embroidery, knitting, sewing and traditional shoemaking cannot be learned overnight, and much of this knowledge has always been passed directly from experienced craftspeople to younger generations.

As many skilled makers grew older and younger people had more educational and career opportunities beyond the island, the community realised that preserving the garments themselves would not be enough. Without people who could continue making them, a living tradition could gradually become a museum collection.

This realisation changed the way we thought about heritage.

The greatest challenge was no longer how to preserve traditional objects, but how to ensure that the knowledge, skills and pride behind them would continue to live within the community.

That became our starting point.

The Vision: What you set out to do
The question was no longer how to preserve Muhu's folk costume, but how to ensure that the knowledge behind it would continue to be passed from one generation to the next.

The first step did not come from a single organisation or individual. It grew from a shared understanding within the community that safeguarding living heritage meant investing in people as much as preserving objects.

Our vision was to create opportunities for local people to learn traditional skills, make their own authentic folk costume and gain the confidence to pass these skills on to others. By strengthening knowledge within the community, we wanted to ensure that Muhu's traditions would remain part of everyday life rather than becoming something remembered only in museums or on special occasions.

This mattered not only for preserving cultural heritage, but for strengthening community identity, belonging and pride. We believed that a community that continues to value and live its own traditions creates the most meaningful experiences for visitors.

Rather than creating traditions for tourism, we chose to invest in the people who would carry those traditions into the future.

The Journey: How change happened
The transformation did not happen through a single project or organisation. It grew from a shared commitment across the community to keep traditional knowledge alive by passing it from one generation to the next.

Learning begins early. Through a popular handicraft club at the local school, children are introduced to traditional Muhu embroidery, developing both practical skills and an appreciation of the craftsmanship and cultural meaning behind their island's folk costume. At home, many families continue passing on techniques, stories and traditions across generations.

The Muhu Museum preserves collections, documents traditions and shares the stories behind them, while the Muhu Folk Costume Centre supports people making authentic folk costume and helps ensure that traditional techniques continue to be used. Experienced craftspeople play a

vital role as mentors, teaching through workshops, practical guidance and everyday conversations.

One of the most important milestones was Muhu naine oo kut lill ("A Muhu Woman is Like a Flower"), organised by the Muhu Craft Association Oad ja Eed between 2017 and 2023. Each year, around 15 local participants completed an authentic piece of their own folk costume over approximately ten guided learning sessions. Over seven years, the programme enabled around one hundred community members to create garments that became part of their own lives rather than remaining workshop exercises.

The programme offered much more than technical skills. Participants learned the stories behind the patterns, supported one another through the slow process of making and gained the confidence to continue creating traditional clothing themselves. Every completed garment immediately became part of everyday community life, worn at school celebrations, weddings, church festivals, village events and national holidays.

The success of the programme demonstrated that traditional skills were not disappearing because people had lost interest. They needed opportunities to learn in a supportive community.

That became clear again earlier this year when a new Muhu pätt (traditional slippers) course attracted almost 20 local women, while additional applicants could not be accommodated. The strong response confirmed that community demand for learning traditional craftsmanship remains high.

The community has also launched Wear Muhu – Folk Costume Friday (Rahvarõiva Reede), encouraging people to wear traditional folk costume or contemporary clothing inspired by Muhu embroidery every Friday throughout the year. It is a simple initiative with an important message: heritage stays alive when it is worn, shared and lived.

Looking back, no single activity explains the success of Muhu's approach. Its strength lies in the connections between schools, families, craftspeople, community organisations and cultural institutions. Together, they have created a continuous pathway through which traditional knowledge is learned, practised, shared and carried forward to the next generation.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved
Today, Muhu is stronger than before in its ability to pass traditional craftsmanship from one generation to the next.

Between 2017 and 2023, around one hundred local people completed authentic pieces of their own folk costume through the Muhu naine oo kut lill programme. The continued demand for

learning was confirmed when a new traditional pätt (slippers) course attracted almost 20 participants, while additional applicants could not be accommodated.

More people now have opportunities to learn traditional skills, create authentic garments and pass their knowledge on to others. Children encounter Muhu embroidery through a local handicraft club, families continue sharing skills at home, experienced craftspeople mentor new learners, and community programmes support lifelong learning.

Traditional folk costume has always been part of life in Muhu. What has changed is the community's capacity to keep the knowledge behind it alive.

Visitors experience this as living heritage rather than traditions maintained for tourism. By investing first in people, Muhu has strengthened both its cultural resilience and the authenticity of the experiences it offers.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn

One of our biggest surprises was discovering that interest in traditional craftsmanship had never disappeared. What people needed was not convincing—it was opportunities to learn, practise and gain confidence.

We also learned that safeguarding living heritage cannot depend on a single project or organisation. It requires long-term cooperation between families, schools, craftspeople, cultural institutions and community organisations. Each plays a different role, but together they create a continuous pathway for passing knowledge to the next generation.

If we were starting again, we would invest in community learning even earlier and create more opportunities for people of all ages to learn together. The strong demand for new courses has shown us that there is still much more potential to unlock.

Our advice to other destinations is simple: do not begin with tourism. Begin with your community. When local people value, practise and pass on their own traditions, authentic visitor experiences will follow naturally.

Living heritage is not sustained by preserving objects alone. It survives because people continue to make it, use it and share it with others.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact

The impact of this work continues to grow beyond the original learning programme.

Community demand for traditional craft learning remains strong, inspiring new initiatives such as the recent Muhu pätt course and encouraging local organisations to continue developing

opportunities for future learners. At the same time, Wear Muhu – Folk Costume Friday has created a simple but meaningful way for people to bring traditional clothing and Muhu-inspired designs into everyday life.

Perhaps the most important change is a renewed confidence that Muhu's living heritage has a future. Traditional craftsmanship is no longer seen only as something to preserve, but as something people actively choose to learn, practise and share.

It strengthens community identity, builds connections between generations and creates authentic experiences that visitors value because they are part of real community life.

We hope our story encourages other destinations to look beyond preserving traditions and instead create opportunities for people to live them. When communities invest in their own knowledge, skills and identity, heritage continues to grow—and tourism becomes a natural partner in that journey rather than its purpose.

Awards or Certifications

Web Articles
Folk Costume Friday https://maaleht.delfi.ee/artikkel/120568311/mandrimehed-pange-tahele-muhus-vilgub-reedeti-miinikollast?fbclid=IwY2xjawSrZNFleHRuA2FlbQIxMABicmlkETBiQWl6Mm9rVmk5a1RiRFRqc3J0YwZhcHBfaWQQMjIyMDM5MTc4ODIwMDg5MgABHrSkEsP-Q5Sqt6D8RvNph8HmgDFhhO-ZUZcKbJYK6UbRxQXd6CMyYPv-cXmk_aem_uf9F4rrrmmodk2syXO7fEQ

Other Relevant Links
Muhu naine oo kut lill https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYakZ__MFlo
Muhu naine oo kut lill 2022 https://www.oadeed.ee/virtuaalnaitus-vatitegu/
Muhu naine oo kut lill 2020 https://www.oadeed.ee/virtuaalnaitus-patitegu/
Muhu Muuseum https://www.muhumuuseum.ee/en/muuseumist/
Rahvarõiva Reede https://muhu.ee/rahvaroiva-reede/

Quotes or Testimonials
"Every traditional pattern carries the work of generations before us. By using them in new creations, we honour the past while giving it a future." – Triinu Traumann, craftswoman and designer