From Coal to Water: Regenerating Šaleška Valley through Cultural Tourism and Immersive Heritage Experiences

Šaleška Valley, Slovenia
Šaleška Valley Tourist Board
Local Destinations (including villages, cities, municipalities, islands)
Culture & Heritage

Summary of Good Practice Story
Šaleška Valley in northern Slovenia was shaped by over 150 years of coal mining that caused entire villages to sink underground, leaving behind the lakes that now define the landscape — but as mining declined, the valley risked forgetting the memories of submerged villages and former miners along with its industrial past. The destination management organisation brought together cultural institutions, diving professionals, local guides, farmers and hospitality providers to create "Beneath the Surface of Šaleška," an experience that honestly interprets the difficult mining history rather than hiding it, using digital tools, 3D visualisation and virtual reality to make the submerged villages visible to visitors who cannot dive, ending with a reflective moment at Vista Park. The experience involved more than 15 local partners, welcomed over 1,000 participants with a perfect 10/10 average satisfaction score, and coincided with the destination reaching 46,768 arrivals and 129,333 overnight stays in 2025 — over 20% growth year on year. The lesson: regeneration isn't just about restoring landscapes physically, but about restoring the connections between people, places and memories — difficult histories, presented honestly and respectfully, become powerful tools for education and community pride rather than something to conceal.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context
Šaleška Valley in northern Slovenia is a destination shaped by coal mining, environmental change and regeneration. For more than 150 years, mining defined the landscape, economy and identity of the valley. Due to land subsidence, entire villages disappeared and the lakes that define the area today were created.

What was once a degraded industrial landscape has gradually been transformed into a green and accessible destination. Today, the lakes, Velenje Beach and Vista Park Velenje are important spaces for recreation, tourism and everyday life.

This story is deeply connected to local people. Former miners, residents, cultural institutions and tourism providers preserve memories of the submerged villages and industrial heritage. “Beneath the Surface of Šaleška” belongs here because it connects this unique landscape with the stories, memories and resilience of the community.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed
For decades, Šaleška Valley was known primarily as a coal mining region. While mining brought economic development, it also transformed the landscape, caused the disappearance of entire villages, and left a strong environmental footprint. As the mining industry began to decline, the valley faced a crucial question: how could it preserve its identity while creating new opportunities for future generations?

The community realised that its greatest challenge was also its greatest opportunity. The lakes created by mining, once seen as a consequence of industrial activity, could become symbols of renewal. At the same time, there was a risk that the stories of submerged villages, former miners and local communities would be forgotten.

This moment sparked a collective effort to transform the valley from a mining region into a sustainable destination. The goal was not to erase the past, but to reconnect people with it, turning memory, heritage and environmental restoration into a source of pride, resilience and future development.

The Vision: What you set out to do
Our vision was to transform the story of Šaleška Valley from one of industrial change into one of regeneration, resilience and opportunity. We wanted to create an experience that would preserve the memory of the submerged villages and mining heritage while helping visitors understand how environmental restoration can create new value for communities.

The initiative was developed by the tourism destination management organisation together with local partners, cultural institutions, tourism providers and community members. The motivation

was clear: as the valley continues its transition beyond coal mining, heritage should not be forgotten but reinterpreted as a resource for education, identity and sustainable development.

The goal was to connect people with the landscape, strengthen local pride, support local businesses and demonstrate how tourism can contribute to the regeneration of former industrial regions. “Beneath the Surface of Šaleška” was created to turn the past into a foundation for a more sustainable future.

The Journey: How change happened

The transformation began by listening to the landscape and to the people who had lived through its changes. The first step was to connect local knowledge, memories of submerged villages, mining heritage and the new life around the lakes into one coherent visitor experience.

The destination management organisation brought together cultural institutions, local guides, diving professionals, hospitality providers, farmers and producers. Each partner added an important layer: historical interpretation, underwater experience, storytelling, local food, mobility and visitor care.

The main challenge was how to present a difficult industrial and environmental past in a respectful but hopeful way. Instead of hiding the scars of mining, we decided to interpret them as part of the valley’s identity. Digital tools, 3D visualisations and virtual reality helped make invisible stories visible again, especially for visitors who cannot dive.

The experience was developed step by step: from storytelling and heritage research, to testing the underwater element, connecting local gastronomy, and designing a reflective ending at Vista Park. Former miners, residents and local institutions contributed memories and knowledge, ensuring that the story remained authentic.

What surprised us most was how strongly people connected with the emotional side of the experience. For many, the lakes are not only places for recreation, but landscapes of memory. Through collaboration and adaptation, “Beneath the Surface of Šaleška” became more than a tourism product: it became a shared story of regeneration.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved

The greatest achievement of “Beneath the Surface of Šaleška” is that it transformed a story of loss into a story of renewal. What was once remembered as an environmental and social consequence of mining is now recognised as a source of identity, learning and opportunity.

The experience has strengthened cooperation between cultural institutions, tourism providers, local producers and the wider community, involving more than 15 local partners. It has

welcomed more than 1,000 participants and achieved an average visitor satisfaction score of 10/10.

The wider destination has also recorded strong growth, reaching 46,768 arrivals and 129,333 overnight stays in 2025, representing more than 20% growth compared to the previous year. Visitor spending has increased through local gastronomy, experiences and longer stays.

Beyond the numbers, the most significant change is emotional. Residents increasingly see the lakes not only as a result of industrial transformation, but as symbols of resilience and a positive future. Visitors leave with a deeper understanding of the valley's history, while local people feel pride in sharing their stories and heritage.

Today, Šaleška Valley is recognised as a model of regeneration, where tourism contributes to preserving memory, supporting local livelihoods and creating new value from a transformed landscape.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn

One of our biggest lessons was that regeneration is not only about restoring landscapes but also about restoring connections between people, places and memories. We initially focused on heritage interpretation and visitor experiences, but soon realised that the strongest impact came from involving local people and giving space to their stories.

What surprised us most was the emotional response of both visitors and residents. Many participants connected deeply with the stories of submerged villages and environmental transformation, while local residents appreciated seeing their heritage presented as a source of pride and inspiration.

A key challenge was balancing authentic storytelling with a positive vision for the future. We learned that difficult histories should not be hidden. When presented honestly and respectfully, they can become powerful tools for education, understanding and community engagement.

Our advice to other destinations is to build partnerships early and involve the community from the beginning. Regeneration is most successful when local people become co creators rather than observers. Start with the stories that make your place unique, embrace both challenges and successes, and focus on creating long term value for residents as well as visitors.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact

The impact of "Beneath the Surface of Šaleška" goes beyond one tourism experience. It has strengthened cooperation between tourism providers, cultural institutions, local producers and the community.

The project helped the valley see its mining heritage, restored landscape and local stories as valuable assets for tourism, education and community pride. It also encouraged new connections with gastronomy, cycling, cultural experiences and sustainable use of the lake area.

Most importantly, it created a stronger sense of pride. Residents see that their history matters, while visitors better understand the valley's transformation.

As Šaleška continues its transition beyond coal mining, this story shows that former industrial regions can become places of resilience, inspiration and hope.

Awards or Certifications

Awards and recognitions:
• Entente Florale Europe 2024 – Gold Award, with special recognition for:
o quality of life
o achievements in tourism and leisure
• Additional recognitions:
o The Golden City Gate Awards
o Slovenia Unique Experiences (3 certified experiences)
o Hidden Gems of Slovenia
o "Moja dežela – lepa in gostoljubna"

Sustainability and regeneration outcomes:
• Achievement of the Slovenia Green Platinum label
• Implementation of sustainable mobility, local supply chains, and zero-waste practices
• Transformation of degraded mining areas into:
o lakes used for recreation and tourism
o renovated Velenje Beach (approx. 140,000 visitors annually)
o Vista Park as a multifunctional cultural space

Contribution of the experience:
The experience "Beneath the Surface" contributes to:
• higher visitor value and spending
• longer stays through modular and multi-day offers
• stronger integration of local stakeholders
• increased awareness of heritage and environmental transformation
• positioning Šaleška as a model destination of regeneration through tourism

Since its launch, the experience has involved more than 15 local providers, welcomed more than 1.000 participants last year and achieved an average visitor satisfaction score of 10/10.

Web Articles
https://www.virtualni-katalog.si/ZTSD_Velenje/Destinacijski-katalog-Velenje-EN/4/
https://www.traveldiariesapp.com/nl/travel-inspiration/slovenie/reisgids-sloveense-saleska-vallei
https://vecer.com/celjsko/zakaj-velenjska-plaza-pritegne-koprcana-ljubljancana-in-mariborcana-10414105

Other Relevant Links
https://www.visitsaleska.si/en/products/beneath-the-surface-of-saleska-weekend-experience/

Quotes or Testimonials
“Beneath the Surface of Šaleška shows that our past is not something to leave behind. By sharing our stories, we can better understand who we are and create new opportunities for future generations.”