

LATVIA

Local development

Location

Valmiera

Programming period

2014 – 2020

Priority

P6 – Social inclusion & local development

Measure

M19 – LEADER/CLLD

Funding (EUR)

Total budget 19 989

EAFRD 12 240

National/Regional 5 760

Private 1 989

Project duration

2019 – 2020

Project promoter

Valmiera municipality

Contact

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Website

<https://visit.koceni.lv/atp%C5%ABta-un-izklaide/akt%C4%ABv%C4%81-atp%C5%ABta-un-sports/slie%C5%BEu-velosip%C4%93di-zil%C4%81kaln%C4%81>

Cultural heritage and leisure activities in Latvia revitalise a small rural community

Summary

The Valmiera municipality in north-western Latvia created a coordinated tourist offer in the Zilaiskalns (Blue Mountain) village based on the area's natural and industrial heritage. The municipality recently established the Local History and Culture Centre which presents the life and history of this small community.

To complement the cultural centre, the municipality developed an innovative service, consisting of a railbike that allows visitors to enjoy a four km long journey along an old narrow-gauge railway which is part of the village's industrial heritage.



© Valmiera municipality

Results

The railbike complements the existing tourist offer in the Zilaiskalns village and attracts new people who are interested in learning about the history of the place in an active way. In the season, from May till October 2021, a total of 2 136 tourists visited Zilaiskalns and more than 1 500 of them used the railbikes.

Lessons & Recommendations

- ❑ Niche visitor attractions provide competitive advantages and help to diversify rural economies.
- ❑ Niche visitor attractions should be incorporated into a larger coordinated tourism plans which can attract attention through a wider array of opportunities for visitors.
- ❑ The design and delivery of customised products (e.g. the railbikes) may cause delays to the implementation of a project.

Context

Zilaiskalns or Blue Mountain, is a small village of 742 inhabitants in the north-western part of Latvia. The village is part of the Valmiera municipality, in the territory of the Vidzeme Rural Partnership Brasla LAG. The Zilaiskalns village was established in the 1950s to provide accommodation for people who worked on the nearby peat bog called Zažēni. The peat was transported through the narrow-gauge railway line Valmiera - Ainaži, which was built at the beginning of the 20th century. The process of extracting peat has now been modernised, so the narrow-gauge railway is no longer in use. It is, however, an important aspect of local industrial heritage and, as such, constitutes a site of cultural and historical significance.

Based on an analysis of the needs of the local population, the municipality began to look for innovative solutions that would attract investment to the territory, make it more attractive to visitors, and improve the quality of life for its inhabitants.

Objective

The aim of this cultural tourism project was to develop new visitor services that would promote the village and the surrounding area in a way that valorises and conserves the existing industrial heritage while exploiting the potential for local development.

Activities

The municipality purchased and installed four bespoke railbikes that were specifically designed and adapted for traveling on the narrow-gauge railway. Each bike carries up to four people and is equipped with an audible alarm and various safety features. Families with children can also enjoy the ride, as there are two child seats on each bike. They are environmentally friendly, and the entire service can be used by up to 16 people at a time.

The railbikes became part of a new tourism product. They enable visitors to enjoy a four km long journey along the narrow-gauge railway, which connects the Zilaiskalns village with the Zažēni peat bog. This activity complements the broader, complex touristic offer of the newly established Zilaiskalns Local History and Culture Centre. Here, visitors are introduced to the history of the

Zilaiskalns village and its connection to the peat extraction industry. They are shown how to use the railbikes and learn how they were built. In the old depot, from where the trips start, visitors can also see the original locomotive which used to run on the same narrow-gauge tracks, thus helping them to imagine the former traffic to and from the peat bog.

The project was implemented by the Valmiera municipality, which established a group of experts to design and oversee the work. The direct beneficiary of the project is the Zilaiskalns Local History and Culture Visitors Centre.

Main results

The railbikes proved to be very popular in the 2021 season (May-October), attracting a total of 1500 visitors, mainly the project's target audience of students, young people, and outdoors/active people.

Main lessons

- Niche visitor attractions provide competitive advantages and help to diversify rural economies.
- Niche visitor attractions should be incorporated into a larger coordinated tourism plan which can attract attention through a wider array of opportunities for visitors. The restored railway track is included within the wider nature tourism network 'Green Roads', which has been set up through a transnational cooperation project between the territories of Vidzeme and Southern Estonia and implemented in 2019-2021.
- Project promoters need to be aware that there might be delays in the design and delivery of customised products like the railbikes. When writing the project proposal, the technical specifications of the railbikes were not yet ready, and this delayed the entire process.

"The result of the project is unique and innovative, railbikes in Latvia are only in Zilaiskalns! We are proud of the fact that an unprecedented tourism offer has been implemented with high quality, creating an attractive environment for revitalisation of rural areas."

Līga Kārklina, LAG Vidzeme Rural Partnership "Brasla"

Additional sources of information

www.valmieraszinas.lv/uzstadot-sliezu-velosipedu-attistis-bijuso-saursliezu-dzelzcela-liniju-zilakalna/

<https://brasla.lv/events/event/200>

www.brasla.lv/blog/post/zalie-velo-celi