

NEWSLETTER

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FROM LOCAL ASSETS TO PEOPLE-POWERED EXPERIENCES

Approaching the halfway point of its three-year journey, People Powered Tourism is moving from shared concepts and local mapping towards real visitor experiences — co-designed with communities, tested in place and refined through transnational learning.

Seventeen months into the project, one idea has become increasingly clear across the Danube Region: sustainable tourism cannot be built for communities without being built with them.

Across 10 countries, 14 project partners, 12 Associated Partners and local stakeholder groups are working together to uncover the cultural, natural and human assets that often remain outside established tourism routes — and to turn them into experiences that create value for both residents and visitors.

This is the *visitor economy* in practice. It looks beyond visitor numbers and traditional destination marketing to the whole environment in which people meet a place: local knowledge, small businesses, cultural memory, natural landscapes, services, relationships and the everyday life of communities. The aim is not simply to attract more people, but to create better experience spaces — places where visitors can connect more deeply while local people retain a strong voice, share in the benefits and shape what tourism becomes.

During the first phase of People Powered Tourism, partners built a common methodological foundation through capacity-building, asset mapping and stakeholder engagement. The current phase is more tangible. Communities are validating what

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has been mapped, prioritising the assets that matter most, co-designing pilot tourism services and testing them with real participants. Early pilots in Hungary, Moldova and Bulgaria are already showing how this approach can connect regenerative tourism, nature conservation, local production, hands-on participation, cultural storytelling and community ownership.

The shift is simple but significant: from asking what visitors can see to asking what a visit can create — for people, place and community.

FROM MAPS TO MEANING

Communities are not simply confirming what exists. They are deciding what matters, what should be shared and how tourism can support the places where they live.

WHEN COMMUNITIES VALIDATE THE LOCAL MAPS

The mapping process has now moved into a second, more decisive stage. Across partner locations, local host communities are reviewing the cultural and natural assets identified during earlier workshops and validating them through the lens of the *visitor economy*. They decide on which assets best express local identity, which can support meaningful visitor participation, and which have the potential to generate social, cultural, environmental or economic value for residents.

In urban areas, discussions focus on transformative experiences that connect visitors with community identity and sustainable practices. In rural areas, partners also examine accessibility, seasonality and the practical challenge of linking dispersed assets into viable offers. The outcome is a locally grounded roadmap for pilot development — shaped through community priorities rather than imposed as a ready-made tourism product.

THE LOCAL CATALOGUE IS A STARTING POINT, NOT THE DESTINATION

Each partner location has created a catalogue of local cultural heritage and natural assets. These working inventories bring fragmented knowledge into a shared evidence base and give local stakeholders a common starting point for discussion. More importantly, the catalogues connect the mapping phase with action: the pilot experiences are selected and assembled from the assets that communities themselves have helped identify and prioritise.



FROM ASSETS TO EXPERIENCES: FIVE EARLY PILOTS IN MOTION

Early pilots are showing what the *visitor economy* looks like when local assets become shared experiences.

The first People Powered Tourism pilots are testing the same principle in very different places: tourism does not always need a new attraction. Sometimes the real opportunity lies in connecting what is already there — landscapes, skills, traditions, local businesses and the people who give them meaning — and turning these into experiences that visitors can actively enter.

KÓSPALLAG, HUNGARY

— *From visiting nature to giving something back*

In Kóspallag, the journey from ecotourism towards *regenerative tourism* begins with the landscape itself. Close-to-nature forestry, regenerative farming, herb collection, silvopastoral practices and basket weaving invite visitors to understand not only what makes the area special, but how local people care for and sustain it. By connecting ecological knowledge with local production and hands-on experience, the pilot explores how tourism can strengthen both environmental responsibility and the rural economy.



CHIȘINĂU OLD ZONE, MOLDOVA

— *The city did not need a new attraction.
It needed new connections.*

Ceramics, traditional food, hidden heritage and local storytelling had long existed in Chișinău's Old Zone — but rarely as part of one visitor journey. The pilot brought these separate pieces together, allowing artisans, cooks, historians and local businesses to become active hosts of the experience. The result points to a *core visitor-economy idea*: when visitors spend more time with local people, they also leave more value within the community.



GOIAN GORGE, MOLDOVA

— *Turning everyday rural knowledge into something
visitors can find, experience and book*

In the villages around Goian Gorge, the starting point was a simple question: what do local people do every day that a visitor would never normally experience? Glass art, traditional cooking, hiking, farm-to-table food and caring for horses became a route built around participation rather than observation. Because the experience was shaped by local families themselves, tourism becomes a way to make rural knowledge visible, support small businesses and create a reason for visitors to build a relationship with the place rather than simply pass through it.





BISTRETS, BULGARIA

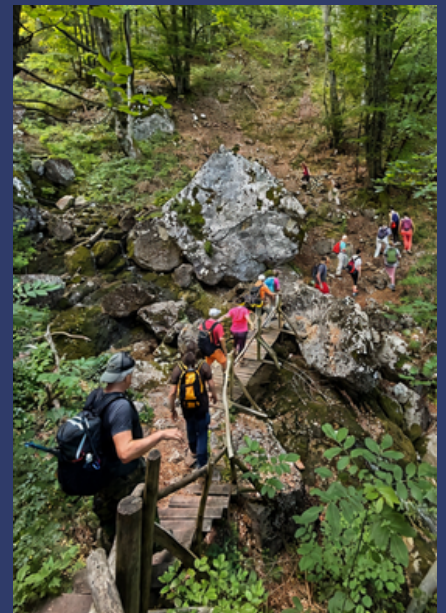
— *A neighbourhood told by the people who know it best*

Bistrets turns living memory into a visitor experience. Older local women, community organisations, volunteers and residents bring together monastery heritage, food traditions, songs and stories that conventional sightseeing could easily miss. In the *Garden of the World*, visitors plant a flower before they leave — a small gesture that captures the pilot's wider *visitor-economy philosophy*: an experience can create value in both directions. Visitors take stories home; the community keeps something they helped create.

ZGORIGRAD, BULGARIA

— *When the landscape becomes the beginning,
not the whole story*

The *Borov Kamak eco-trail* already brings people to Zgorigrad. The pilot asks what might persuade them to stay. By connecting the mountain experience with local food, community knowledge, biodiversity stories and the *Garden of the World*, the *Hidden Valley Journey* transforms a stop on the way to a waterfall into an encounter with the village behind it. Nature attracts the visitor; people, participation and local knowledge create the lasting value — and give the community a stronger place within the tourism economy.



TESTED TOGETHER. STRENGTHENED TOGETHER.

Pilot implementation is not the end of the process. It is the point where feedback, peer learning and long-term viability become part of the design.

PEER REVIEW AS A DESIGN TOOL

People Powered Tourism has built peer review directly into pilot implementation. Each project partner takes part in at least two peer-review visits — one linked to a twin-city relationship and another based on thematic connections. Visiting partners do not observe from the sidelines: they experience the routes and activities alongside local participants, then provide structured feedback on what works, what could be improved and which elements may be transferable to other places.



This creates a practical transnational learning cycle. Local communities bring lived knowledge; visitors test the experience; partner organisations add an external professional perspective. The result is not a fixed pilot, but an offer that can be adjusted after each round of learning.

A pilot becomes more valuable when it can be tested locally, improved collectively and translated into another community's own context.

DESIGNED TO OUTLAST THE PROJECT

Long-term sustainability is being considered while the pilots are still being refined. Several partners are already involving tourism organisations, professional guides and travel agencies so that the tested experiences can move beyond project-supported events and become part of regular tourism offers. In Chişinău, work is under way to integrate the urban and rural routes into official tourism platforms; in Vratsa, the pilot models are being developed with the possibility of travel-agency inclusion and paid roles for local contributors.

This market connection matters because the project's goal is not to create temporary attractions. It is to strengthen local visitor economies: to turn community knowledge, hospitality, cultural heritage and natural assets into experiences that can generate lasting value while preserving local ownership. If a route remains bookable, trusted and rooted in the people who created it, the benefits can continue long after the project itself has ended.

What's next....

Pilot implementation continues across the remaining partner locations until November 2026.

Partners will refine their urban and rural offers using feedback from local stakeholders, visitors and peer-review teams.

In March 2027, the partnership will meet on site in Chişinău, Moldova, to jointly review pilot results, compare lessons and identify what can be transferred across the Danube Region.

The combined evidence will feed into the project's next phase, helping translate local experience into shared methods, roadmaps and tools for a more sustainable, community-powered visitor economy.



<https://interreg-danube.eu/projects/people-powered-tourism>

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