
CROCUS PROJECT | Horizon Europe Research Initiative

New European Research Reveals Untapped Potential of Cross-Border Cultural and Creative Tourism in Rural and Remote Communities

CROCUS Horizon Europe Project Publishes Landmark Synthesis Report Covering Eight Cross-Border Living Lab Areas Across 14 European Countries

Brussels / Veszprém, 25 May 2026 -The CROCUS project -a Horizon Europe research initiative focused on Cross-border Cultural and Creative Tourism (CCT) in Rural and Remote Areas -has released its comprehensive Synthesis Report (Deliverable D4.3), drawing on field research conducted across eight cross-border Living Lab areas spanning fourteen European countries. The report, involving more than 2,100 residents, tourism businesses, and visitors, establishes a robust knowledge base for the development of sustainable cultural and creative tourism models in some of Europe's most distinctive yet underserved rural territories.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

Operating within the Work Package 4 (WP4) framework of the CROCUS project, the research pursued three interconnected objectives: first, establishing cross-border Living Lab core development teams composed of academic researchers and key CCT stakeholders; second, conducting in-depth analyses of the socio-economic, cultural, environmental, and institutional contexts of each Living Lab area; and third, capturing the lived experiences and priorities of residents, tourism entrepreneurs, and visitors with respect to cultural and creative tourism. The overarching aim is to apply design thinking principles -specifically the “empathising” and “defining” phases -to co-create sustainable CCT business models tailored to each cross-border territory.

GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE: EIGHT LIVING LAB AREAS ACROSS EUROPE

The research spans eight cross-border Living Lab areas, each representing a unique combination of cultural heritage, natural landscape, and socio-economic conditions characteristic of rural and remote European regions:

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- Sønderjylland (Denmark) – Schleswig-Holstein (Germany)
 - Matulji (Croatia) – Ilirska Bistrica (Slovenia)
 - Mulgimaa (Estonia) – Valmiera Region (Latvia)
 - Sondrio (Italy) – Graubünden (Switzerland)
 - Goriška (Slovenia) – Gorizia (Italy)
 - Torne Valley: Ylitornio (Finland) – Övertorneå (Sweden)

- Zala (Hungary) – Pomurska (Slovenia)
- Dobrudzha/Dobrodgea: Silistra & Dobrich (Bulgaria) – Constanța (Romania)

While many of these territories are predominantly rural or semi-rural in character and face shared demographic challenges -including aging populations and declining density -they are unified by a wealth of tangible and intangible cultural heritage that forms the cornerstone of their CCT potential.

KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

The synthesis report draws on data from 2,138 valid responses -exceeding the original target by 8.6% -collected through online surveys with local residents, tourism businesses, and visitors, as well as semi-structured qualitative interviews with key stakeholders. The following findings emerge consistently across Living Lab areas:

- **Cultural Heritage as a Core Asset.** Both tangible heritage (historical sites, museums, architecture) and intangible heritage (local customs, traditions, languages, foodways, crafts, and storytelling) are identified as the primary competitive advantage for CCT across all eight areas. Gastronomy and food culture emerge as particularly central CCT themes, with strong potential for year-round tourism development.
- **Strong Community Support for Tourism.** Residents, businesses, and visitors alike express widespread support for tourism development and promotion. Communities demonstrate deep place attachment and view tourism as a complementary, rather than competing, driver of local economic vitality.
- **Tourism as an Economic Driver.** Tourism is widely recognised across all Living Labs as a significant generator of employment, business opportunity, and improved living standards. However, concerns about rising cost of living and carrying capacity are also noted, particularly in areas with higher visitor volumes or advanced tourism maturity.
- **Cross-Border Collaboration Gap.** While informal cross-border activity is common, the creation and marketing of joint cross-border tourism products remains scarce. This fragmentation is identified as a key obstacle to realising the full tourism potential of these territories.
- **Infrastructure and Seasonality Challenges.** Infrastructure deficits -including poor transport accessibility and limited public services in remote areas -and pronounced tourism seasonality are shared challenges that point to the need for coordinated, long-term destination management strategies.

“The CROCUS Living Labs are demonstrating that rural and remote cross-border areas hold extraordinary, largely untapped potential for sustainable cultural and creative tourism. By listening carefully to residents, businesses, and visitors, we are building the evidence base needed to co-create tourism models that are both economically viable and rooted in the authentic identity of each community.”

-Prof. Ágnes Raffay-Danyi, WP4 Lead, University of Pannonia (Hungary)

RESEARCH CONSORTIUM PARTNERS

The Crocus Living Lab Synthesis Report is the result of a collaborative effort by a pan-European consortium of universities, research institutes, and innovation partners: University of Bergamo (Italy), Aalborg University (Denmark), University of Oulu (Finland), Tallinn University (Estonia), University of Maribor (Slovenia), University of Pannonia (Hungary), Zangador Research Institute (Bulgaria), Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management -University of Rijeka (Croatia), (Croatia) -Atlas Association for Tourism and Leisure Education (Nederland).

ABOUT CROCUS

CROCUS (Cross-border Cultural and Creative Tourism in Rural and Remote Areas) is a Horizon Europe research project bringing together universities, research institutes, and industry partners from across Europe. The project applies design thinking and Living Lab methodologies to co-develop innovative, sustainable cultural and creative tourism business models tailored to the specific needs and assets of eight cross-border rural territories. By engaging residents, local businesses, and visitors as active participants in the research and design process, CROCUS aims to unlock the economic, cultural, and social value of Europe's rural heritage while fostering cross-border cooperation and inclusive tourism growth. The project contributes directly to the European Union's objectives for sustainable tourism, rural development, and cultural heritage preservation.

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