



Photo by Colinele Transilvaniei



## COLINELE TRANSILVANIEI

THE CASE STUDY 4/4

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# INTRO

## WENATOUR PROJECT

WeNaTour is an Innovation Alliance project (ERASMUS-EDU-2022-PI-ALL-INNO) funded with support from the European Commission - Erasmus+ program under Grant Agreement No 101111561. The project aims at training new professionals for sustainable tourism and exploring emerging markets while keeping the well-being of local communities and preserving the environment at the core of its strategies, towards a more responsible and sustainable future.

As part of its efforts, WeNaTour highlights four case studies of certified sustainable tourism destinations. These destinations, selected for their commitment to sustainable tourism, include Valsugana Lagorai in Italy, Colinele Transilvaniei in Romania, Siena in Italy, and Nassfeld Lesachtal Weissensee in Austria. Each case study is presented in a factsheet format, offering insights into its approach to sustainable tourism destination management and practices.

The case studies were developed by Etifor with the collaboration of Carinthia University of Applied Sciences - CUAS and the Transylvania University of Brasov - UNITBV.



For more information on WeNaTour, its training opportunities and outputs you can visit [www.wenatour.eu](http://www.wenatour.eu) and follow us on [LinkedIn](#).

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## THE CASE STUDY



Case Study  
Area

### DESTINATION PROFILE

	Colinele Transilvaniei (Transylvanian Highlands)	Name
	Transilvania, Romania	Location
	<a href="http://www.colinele-transilvaniei.ro">www.colinele-transilvaniei.ro</a>	Website
	approx. 100.000 inhabitants	Population
	2.674 km <sup>2</sup>	Extention

### DESCRIPTION

**The second largest protected area in the country: it includes 44 municipalities in rural areas distributed in 3 counties (Sibiu, Mureş and Braşov)**

The destination offers a well-preserved natural and cultural landscape, with hills and valleys accompanied by pastures and meadows, small villages with Saxon houses, fortresses and fortified evangelical churches, some of them part of the UNESCO heritage. It has a network of 500 km of tourist trails for hiking, cycling and horseback riding, connecting the villages through oak wooden pastures and grasslands, that makes the area ideal for rural slow tourism, medieval romantic escapes, and biodiversity exploration. The destination includes 56 small to medium-sized guest houses, mostly family run, and it has the biggest density of eco-certified accommodation units in the country. It attracts approx. 13.000 tourists annually, resulting in 21.000 overstays, with an average stay of 2 nights. Most guesthouses operate seasonally, closing in the winter season.

### MANAGING ORGANISATION AND ITS FOCUS OF OPERATION

**Colinele Transilvaniei Association is responsible for the management and marketing of the certified ecodestination: this Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) acts like a thematic Destination Management Organization (DMO) for ecotourism, in charge of the strategic plan implementation.**

The main responsibilities are the development of slow tourism infrastructure (hiking, biking trails and thematic paths), capacity building for local authorities and Small-to-Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in tourism, nature based product development and the marketing of the destination on the Romanian market as well as on foreign markets. The association is also the main drive for the Ecotourism Network, a platform for collaboration between approx. 100 local operators who work together to increase the attractiveness, but also the quality and the sustainability of the tourist services available in the destination.

# SUSTAINABILITY

## HOW THE DESTINATION ENVISIONS AND PRACTICES SUSTAINABILITY

### SUSTAINABLE TOURISM CERTIFICATIONS AND SPECIAL FEATURES

- ✓ Area designated as an ecotourism destination by the Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship and Tourism.
- ✓ The last authentic medieval landscape in Europe and largest ecotourism destination designated in Romania.

### HOW SUSTAINABILITY IS EMBEDDED IN THE DESTINATION'S VISION AND MISSION

The Colinele Transilvaniei **vision** is for a future where ecotourism helps preserve the delicate natural landscape, the cultural heritage and the traditional way of life, and at the same time allows communities to develop, in a harmonic bond between nature and the people.

The **mission** of the destination is to identify, create and promote unique tourism experiences by fostering cooperation between public and private stakeholders, who are the ones that can ensure higher standards of quality and sustainability.

### WHAT IS SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN PRACTICE

The destination Transylvanian Highlands aims to protect and conserve the natural and cultural beauty of the region, ensuring it remains a special destination for future generations.

They believe this goal can only be achieved through **collaboration** with the local community, visitors, and members of the Ecotourism Network: this is why their main effort is in fostering partnerships between local operators by organising many **networking events**, in order for them to get to know each other, figure out opportunities of integrated offers and share best practices on responsible tourism. In addition, the destination carries out a close collaboration with environmental organizations and local authorities to support projects related to **conservation and restoration** of nature and biodiversity, including the promotion of sustainable agricultural practices and responsible land management. The local community is directly involved in planning and implementing development and conservation initiatives that regard both natural and cultural landmarks. For example, a group of volunteers, supported by the DMO, is restoring part of the “Mocănița” trail, a narrow gauge train between Sibiu and Sighisoara which used to connect the two important towns and that operated until the mid-1960s, an important part of the local culture that is now an alternative experience for tourists. They also commit to **raise awareness** about the impact of tourism activities on the environment and the local community with operators, public authorities and with visitors: they do so through internal and external communication, where this last one is focused on explaining to tourists how they can contribute to the maintenance of the community’s cultural and economic identity by supporting local accommodations, traditional crafts and seasonal food.

## HOW SUSTAINABLE TOURISM CAN CONTRIBUTE TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

### FLAGSHIP INITIATIVES

#### Educational program

The destination is supporting 20 schools in the territory that introduced the optional subject “**Education for the Landscape**” in their curricula, which focuses on understanding what it means to live in a protected landscape, its connection with people who lived there over the years and on reconnecting children with nature that surrounds their towns. The destination is developing a practical manual on nature education and landscape appreciation for teachers and children, as well as providing educational kits to support outdoor activities and to encourage the use of natural areas as outdoor classrooms. This helps students grasp the importance of responsible resource management and sustainability, addressing local issues such as water supply and promoting sustainable living habits.



**Quality Education:** by developing valuable and technical material about local landscape and biodiversity for schools.



**Sustainable Cities and Communities:** by educating and empowering the younger generation to value and protect their local landscapes, promoting sustainable practices, and enhancing community engagement with the natural environment.

#### Sustainability mentorship to SMEs

The DMO is collaborating with 12 small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in a **mentorship program** aimed at enhancing sustainability practices. In partnership with local tourism county associations, the DMO engages in ongoing dialogues about sustainability, educating these businesses on practical ways to integrate sustainable practices into their operations with the final aim of developing individualized roadmaps toward greater sustainability. The goal is to create best practice examples that other SMEs can follow, demonstrating how businesses can successfully transition to more sustainable models. This initiative not only aims to improve the environmental impact of these companies but also to promote a culture of sustainability within the local business community.



**Responsible Consumption and Production:** by providing SMEs with skills and tools for a better use of resources.

#### Slow tourism infrastructure connecting remote areas

The DMO, in collaboration with Mioritics and ADEPT NGOs, has developed a robust visiting infrastructure under the **Colinele initiative**. This project involved marking and creating biking and hiking trails that connect remote villages in the region that were priorly relatively isolated and struggling economically. The establishment of these trails has not only physically connected these communities but also revitalized them by opening new avenues for income. The trails have encouraged collaboration among the villages, leading to a collective effort in promoting tourism and preserving their cultural and natural heritage. By integrating these lesser-known villages into a broader network, the initiative has attracted visitors to areas that previously received little attention, thereby distributing the economic benefits of tourism more evenly across the region. This has transformed the local economy and fostered a sense of community and cooperation among the inhabitants.



**Decent work and Economic Growth:** by introducing a new source of income in struggling and remote economies.



**Sustainable Cities and Communities:** by building a sustainable but solid infrastructure for communication, trade and tourism.

## WHICH ARE THE MAIN CHALLENGES TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY

The main challenge in the Transylvanian Highlands is the overly **complex and uncoordinated legal and fiscal systems**, which are particularly harsh on small and medium-sized enterprises. The fiscal system discourages entrepreneurship with high costs and burdensome requirements that many family-run businesses can't afford. Overall, this bureaucratic complexity and the lack of coordinated information create further obstacles that hold back economic growth and sustainability efforts in the region.

## WHICH NEEDS AND STRATEGIES TO RESPOND TO THE CHALLENGES

To address the complex legal and fiscal challenges for SMEs, the Colinele Transilvaniei Association is actively involved in consulting groups and constantly collects feedback from the field to deliver to the authorities. While they cannot directly change the laws through lobbying alone, they focus on supporting individuals and businesses by encouraging the formation of **associations and formal collaborations** that can better represent their needs. By advocating for increased representation and collective action, they aim to empower the community to better navigate the regulatory landscape and address bureaucratic obstacles together and more effectively. This approach not only helps individuals voice their concerns but also fosters a more unified and resilient business environment.

## EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY

The DMO supports and collaborates with many local associations and NGOs who are actively involved in educational initiatives for tourism operators, in order to align efforts and maximizing the impact of the initiatives. They collaborate closely with the Sibiu County Tourism Association who engages with educational institutions to develop training programs, with the aim to develop similar initiatives with universities in the Colinele region. With them, they are collaborating in the LOOKUP project, where the DMO is involved in helping SMEs understand the importance of certification and how to effectively communicate their certified status.

## NEW TRENDS FOR THE DESTINATION

*#Digitalisation*  
*#Network*



Photo by transylvanianhighlands

# INNOVATION AND CERTIFICATION

## THE ROLE OF CERTIFICATION IN INNOVATING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DESTINATION MANAGEMENT

### WHY CERTIFICATION

It is a relevant and recognised certification in Romania. Additionally, being part of a broader network of eco-tourism destinations, it supports the destination alignment with established standards in eco-tourism.

### HOW CERTIFICATION IS SUPPORTING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DESTINATION MANAGEMENT: KEY ASPECTS (KA)

#### KA2: Management and funding

**Funds:** the Ministry of Tourism offers a funding program specifically for eco-tourism; however, it is available exclusively to municipalities and not to DMOs.

**Credibility:** the designation has enhanced credibility and fostered trust with municipalities. It distinguished the organisation from other NGOs and strengthened its ability to advocate for sustainable practices, thereby improving engagement and success in municipal interactions.

#### KA3: Stakeholder engagement

**Awareness and trust:** the designation enhanced local authorities' awareness of the importance of surrounding natural resources and cultural heritage, and raised trust for tourism operators. The community is not yet fully aware of the concept of sustainability, but through the communication efforts, local pride has been notably enhanced.

### SUCCESS FACTORS

The success was due to extensive fieldwork lasted 6-7 years, involving many hours of engagement with stakeholders and continuous reminders of the DMO presence to the mayors. Their visible commitment was crucial for the evaluation committee.

### LESSONS LEARNED

Strategic repositioning is needed, along with a larger team to manage the many stakeholders involved. While initial expectations suggested significant progress, it soon became evident that only the preliminary steps had been taken, with a long journey ahead.

### FUTURE COMMITMENTS

More specific actions must be taken, with a strong commitment to collaboration with SMEs and local authorities, while effectively communicating all the efforts to visitors.

## WENATOUR EMERGING MARKETS

THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE DESTINATION ON THE 3 EMERGING MARKETS IN TOURISM THAT ARE THE FOCUS OF THE PROJECT WENATOUR



### Green care

The Transylvanian Highlands' approach to green care tourism focuses on fostering and encouraging local initiatives carried out by specialized NGOs and in supporting experience exchange among local and international tourism operators to inspire new ideas. The destination promotes forest bathing and mindfulness hiking by creating thematic paths and infrastructure, then inviting local tour operators to build experiences around these natural landmarks. The emphasis is on collaboration and inspiring others to create activities that enhance the tourism experience, particularly in villages where accommodations exist but activities are lacking. Additionally, the destination organizes regular meetings with the Ecotourism Network where local operators can interact and understand how to integrate their activities or products.



### Company welfare

When it comes to company welfare tourism, Colinele Transilvaniei focuses on supporting local operators in organizing team-building and other services. The destination's role is to foster collaboration and to redirect international requests towards local operators, but occasionally they also create some concept experiences to be then developed and implemented by the network members. Additionally, some accommodations and operators in the area accept tourism vouchers provided by the Romanian government, although this is seen more as a governmental initiative rather than a significant innovation in the region.



### Accessibility

The Transylvanian Highlands currently face significant challenges in developing accessible tourism due to infrastructure limitations, particularly in rural areas where roads are often narrow and unpaved, making them unsuitable for people with reduced mobility. As an eco-tourism destination, the emphasis on minimal landscape intervention makes it challenging to make hiking and cycling routes in the hills fully accessible. Efforts are currently at an early stage, focusing on sensory thematic paths. Although these paths are not specifically designed for individuals with impairments, they aim to educate local communities about the value of natural spaces and the role of tourism. This educational initiative is the first step in fostering a better understanding and appreciation of natural areas.

Despite some progress in regions like Sibiu with basic accessibility features, Romania as a whole faces significant obstacles. Accessibility remains a major issue in the destination, exacerbated by its central location and limited transport connections. Establishing a benchmark in this area will require substantial private investment. While expanding and developing the destination is a long-term goal, immediate priorities should address more pressing issues, particularly improving public transportation.

*"The certification has enhanced credibility and fostered trust with municipalities. It distinguished the organisation from other NGOs and strengthened its ability to advocate for sustainable practices, thereby improving engagement and success in municipal interactions."*




*Cristina Ana Iliescu, Destination Manager*



# WENATOUR EMERGING MARKETS

THE POINT OF VIEW OF AN OPERATOR ON THE 3 EMERGING MARKETS IN TOURISM THAT ARE THE FOCUS OF THE PROJECT WENATOUR

## OPERATOR PROFILE

	Alma-Via Guesthouse	Name
	Alma Vii, Transylvania, Romania	Location
	<a href="http://alma-via.ro">alma-via.ro</a>	Website

Alma-Via Guesthouse is a traditional, saxon-style farmhouse that has been restored and converted into a guesthouse and restaurant. It offers 6 different guest rooms and their Restaurant Barn can accommodate up to 60 guests. In 2023, the guesthouse obtained the Eco-Romania Certificate for good practices in sustainable tourism.

The Alma-Via Guesthouse was born from a deep appreciation for Romania by Marion and Mike. When they decided to leave their corporate jobs, they started searching for the perfect location to start their project: they finally settle in Alma Vii, a quiet transylvanian village with a fortified church and friendly locals, where they established the guesthouse they had always envisioned.



### Ecological renovation of the Guesthouse

The construction and restoration of the Alma-Via Guesthouse took three years, during which the focus was on creating a healthy and eco-friendly environment. Natural materials were prioritized, with straw and clay used for wall insulation to promote humidity exchange and a good room climate. Industrial construction foam was avoided, with hemp and clay used for heat insulation around windows and doors. Sound insulation was achieved using recycled newspaper cellulose. The restoration also prioritized authenticity by using traditional Transylvanian Saxon roof tiles. Thousands of tiles were replaced, with only about half of the old ones being reusable. The reusable tiles were placed facing the fortified church to maintain the classic village view. The guesthouse features comfortable rooms, a multipurpose restaurant barn, and a garden with amenities like a natural swimming pond, continually being improved.





### Green care

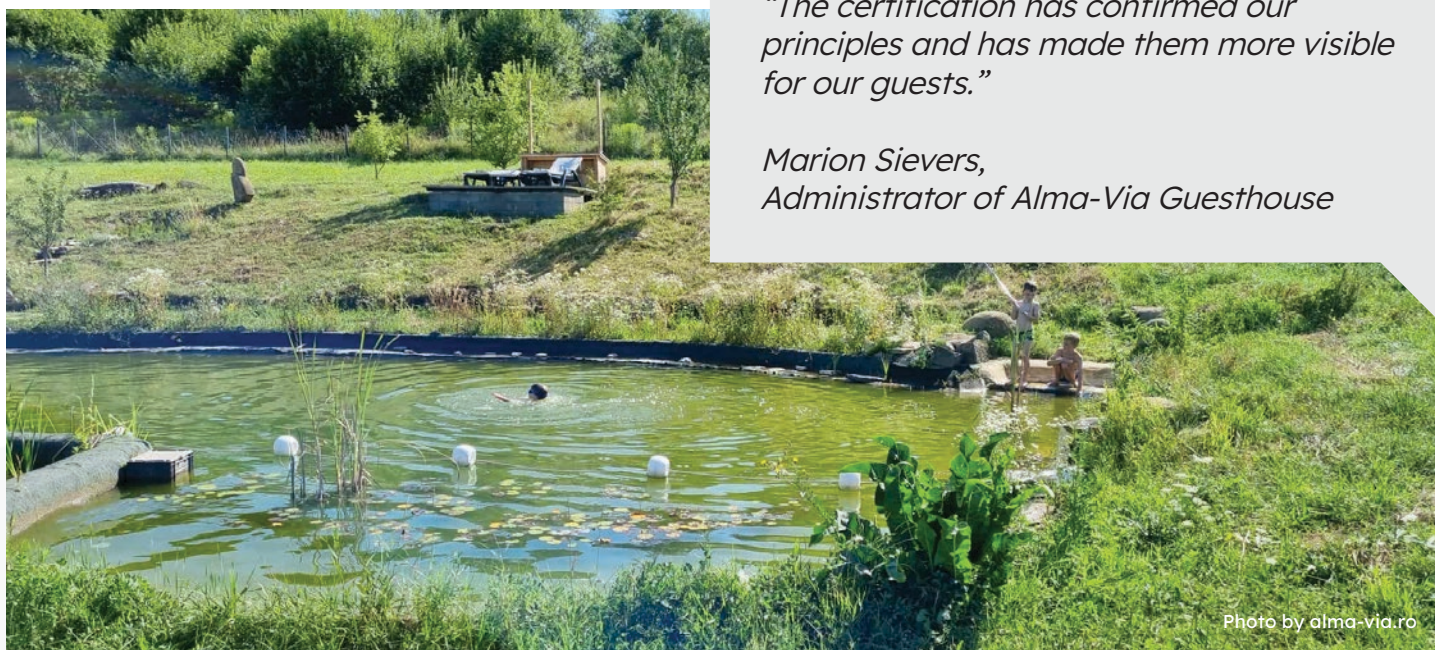
Alma-Via Guesthouse actively promotes activities for their guests to get hands-on contact with local nature, trying to integrate natural and community-focused practices in tourism experiences.

The guesthouse provides guided walks through the surrounding meadows and forests, where visitors can explore local flora, collect herbs and wildflowers, and learn about their healing properties and their traditional uses.

Additionally, guests can enjoy a natural swimming pond built in the garden, which uses only natural cleaning processes without chemicals, where they can swim among fish, frogs, insects, and water plants, enhancing their connection with nature. The swimming pond showcases a sustainable approach to guest amenities.

In the next 5 to 10 years, Alma-Via Guesthouse aims to enhance guests' connection with nature by developing new experiences, such as bird and wild animals watching tours and hiking through the forest. However, these activities will need the development of proper infrastructure to be carried out, such as marking of trails and establishing a bear watching hide.

In addition, they face significant challenges due to the potential deforestation around Alma Vii, which has already been an issue over the years, and that could lead to the disappearance of natural attractions like hiking trails and wildlife, as is already happening. The expansion of agricultural fields further threatens local meadows and wild plants. To address these challenges, they believe that tourism needs to be prioritized in Romanian politics, as it is currently undervalued compared to forestry and agriculture, with little support from local governments for tourism and natural conservation.



*"The certification has confirmed our principles and has made them more visible for our guests."*

*Marion Sievers,  
Administrator of Alma-Via Guesthouse*

Photo by alma-via.ro