



ADVENTURES IN SMALL TOURISM: STUDIES AND STORIES

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ISBN 978-1-77385-477-9

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Rajzefiber: A Community Hub for Small Tourism in the Small City of Maribor, Slovenia

Katja Beck Kos, Mateja Meh, and Vid Kmetič

After decades of a booming tourism industry with wide impact on territories and economies all over the world, are there smaller-scale, non-intrusive ways of promoting tourism experience?

(Boelen and Sacchetti 2014, 333)

Slovenia, a Hidden Gem

Slovenia, a small European country of 1.2 million inhabitants, is situated between Italy, Austria, Hungary, Croatia, and the Adriatic Sea. Tourism in Slovenia has typically been noted for its winter sport destinations such as Bovec, its political and vibrant cultural capital Ljubljana, Lake Bled and its iconic island, the wild nature of Lake Bohinj, the emerald-coloured Soča River valley, the Postojna karst cave system, and the coastal resort town of Piran.

A mountain hiking route and multistage cycle trail give good reason to visit the country in the run-up to its stint as next year's

European Region for Gastronomy. . . . Beginning on the Italian border, it traces a fiercely beautiful route that incorporates many of the destination's established highlights—including, yes, the lovely Lake Bled—as well as lesser-known parts of the country. No less enticing is the Bike Slovenia Green project, a diverse, 150-mile, multistage cycle route which launched in November. And you won't have to look far for a good meal. Slovenia will spend 2021 as the official European Region for Gastronomy, in recognition of its quality local produce. (*National Geographic Traveller* 2020)

The main touristic attractions in Slovenia are in the central and western parts of the country, which, in such a small place, even before COVID-19, were already experiencing symptoms of over-tourism; dispersing the flow of tourists has therefore become of interest:

Excessive tourism is becoming one of the hottest debates in the modern age of travel. More and more destinations are wondering how to deal with this problem, without magic formulas and uniform solutions that would be suitable for all destinations. In Slovenian tourism, we are tackling this challenge in the long run and with a strategic approach based on sustainability. We are aware that quality is more important than quantity, so our attention is focused on long-term values such as interpersonal relationships and authenticity, and we involve the local community in the processes. (Pak 2019)

Even so, the annual study tours to which the Slovenian Tourism Board invites foreign tour operators via the “Slovenian Incoming Workshop” are still—even as recently as September 2021—highlighting typical sights such as Lake Bled, the Postojna cave system, and Piran, while the eastern part Slovenia receives minimal focus. So, untypical, small-scale tourism places and enterprises must try to help themselves, without support from the Slovenian Tourism Board and with only scarce marketing funds, making it difficult to attract an international audience.

The COVID-19 pandemic may actually have offered an opportunity for small-scale tourism, pushing visitor interest in less-crowded venues and nature destinations even further. And thus tourists, searching for nature, peace,

and quiet, are now discovering eastern Slovenia, including the small city of Maribor, home to 110,000 people. Maribor has been receiving more attention from visitors who are seeking a way out of the crowds, hoping to discover places off the beaten track. Maribor is, however, still in the touristic shade of Ljubljana, the capital city, despite Maribor's numerous positive characteristics (near nature, small but urban, good weather, handy geographical position). It lacks not only recognition from the main Slovene tourist organizations, but also self-confidence. In Maribor, therefore, there has been a tendency to copy tourism products that work in other similar towns, resulting in the proliferation of inauthentic mass-tourism offerings and a lack of support for local experiences. Sustainable tourism processes, and not only for small cities, lie elsewhere: supporting local providers and developing authentic, small-scale content that arises from the local living and historic heritage and culture. And so, Maribor can be a good example for our small tourism in small cities case study. But let us first look into the history of Maribor.

Maribor's Historical Context

After the end of the First World War, new states and state formations began to emerge from the ashes of the former monarchies of Europe. On 29 October 1918, the territories of present-day Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, which previously belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, merged into the State of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs. This confederation of the former southern Austro-Hungarian territories was short-lived, however, lasting only a little over a month. In December 1918, it merged with the Kingdom of Serbia to form the Kingdom of SHS (Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes), and later the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

The Kingdom of Yugoslavia, with a predominantly rural and underdeveloped south, and a much more industrially developed north, represented a bridge between Asia and Europe. This country of differing languages, religions, and customs represented a combination of five hundred years of co-existence between the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg monarchs. The Second World War resulted in chaos among the various peoples, but they were ultimately united under the command of Marshal Tito in a partisan struggle that finally ended in 1945—without substantial Allied aid—with a liberated Yugoslavia.

Although the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was a one-party system under the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, the state itself did not

follow the path taken by other countries with communist rule. Yugoslavia was never a member of the so-called Eastern Bloc. In the bipolar world divided between NATO on the one hand and the Warsaw Pact on the other, Yugoslavia took a third path and, together with India and Egypt, founded the Non-Aligned Movement. This placed Yugoslavia in an exceptional geo-strategic position, as it represented a kind of buffer zone between the Eastern and Western Blocs. Moreover, the regime, albeit under communist ideology, was far from the hard communism of the Soviet Union and its satellites, as the country always had open borders, and Yugoslav citizens were able to travel virtually unrestricted all over the world. But after Tito's death in 1980, trouble began to bubble beneath the surface of this multinational state. The Yugoslav ideal of brotherhood and the unity of nations and ethnic groups was largely kept alive by the figure of Tito. Only he managed to hold together the state of six nations, five languages, and three religions, a state that had swept all the divisions of the Second World War under the carpet, or even rudely silenced them. Shortly after 1980, various nationalisms began to emerge, culminating in 1991 with the disintegration of the state and bloody wars of succession, especially in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

This walk through the history of the territory of Slovenia until 1991 and the beginning of an independent state is necessary to facilitate an understanding of the extraordinary diversity present in this small part of central Europe. Slovenia's location is almost ideal for tourism, both in terms of natural resources and cultural diversity, which together make the country attractive to visitors. On its territory—only a mere 20,271 square kilometres sandwiched between the Alps, the Adriatic Sea, the Slovak Karst, and the Pannonian Plain—we can find almost everything. In a single day, we can climb almost 3,000 metres into the mountains and swim in the sea the same evening, as well as explore the mysterious underworld of the Karst. In addition to natural resources and fortunately still quite unspoiled landscape, perhaps the even greater wealth of Slovenia is its cultural heritage and diversity of customs, local dialects, and cuisines. And in the northeast of this small country we find the city we want to present to you: Maribor.

Maribor has always been at crossroads or borders of one kind or another. Already during the Roman Empire, roads connecting Celeia (near today's Celje), Flavia Solva (near today's Lipnica), Poetovio (today's Ptuj), and Virunum (on the Gosposvetsko Polje), crossed near the territory where the city was formed much later. The name Marchburch first appears in a deed of

gift dated 20 October 1164. Marchburch was a castle that stood on a hill, which today we call the Piramida. However, below the hill and especially along the Drava River, a city started to form at that time, which was named after the castle: “Marchburch” means “a castle in marka” (a border landscape).

The predominantly rural and artisan city gained real impetus only after 1846, when it was connected to the railway line between Vienna and Trieste. This opened a window to the world in Maribor, and at the same time brought the world to the city. Soon the first industrial plants began to appear, and the industrialization of the city continued after the Second World War, so that Maribor was always considered an industrial city, this description failing only with the collapse of the great industrial giants. The consequences of decline are still partially felt by the city today. It was known by the German name Marbug until the end of the First World War. During the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a small military coup, led by General Maister, resulted in Maribor landing in the newly formed Kingdom of Yugoslavia instead of Austria.

Maribor has always sat along one or another border: the extreme edge of the Alps and the beginning of the great Pannonian Plain; the Slavic and Germanic languages; ancient crossroads leading in all four directions. Maribor has had its share of historical moments as well. Nikola Tesla lived in Maribor for a few months in 1878–79; Marshal Tito was imprisoned here in 1931; Adolf Hitler visited in 1941; Pope John Paul II presided over a beatification in 1999; the Dalai Lama stopped at Maribor twice, in 2010 and 2012. And of course, the “Žametovka” or “Modra Kavčina,” the world’s oldest producing grape vine at over four hundred years old, is an indelible part of our history.

Maribor’s Small Tourism Context

Our historical journey through Maribor has demonstrated the cultural and outdoor tourism opportunities even such a small city can offer.

The formal start of tourism in Maribor can be traced to the establishment of Beautifying Society (Marburger Stadtverschönerungsverein) in 1869. Its main task was to design and lay the big park in the north of the city. Even before, in the times of Habsburg Empire, Maribor and its natural surroundings were the preserve of spas or summer residences for wealthy Austrians. Theatre has existed in Maribor since the late eighteenth century. When the train connection between Trieste and Vienna came through Maribor in the late nineteenth century, the city grew in industrial importance, and also

gained even more in terms of social life: the National House for Culture, a puppet theatre, museums, and art galleries all opened. The members of the new bourgeoisie were keen to attend balls and festivities. Because of the massive industrialization that supplied Hitler's army, Maribor was bombed by the Allies several times during the Second World War.

When Yugoslavia was established, Maribor grew into one of the federation's biggest industrial towns, mainly for the automobile, textile, and rail industries. During the 1970s and '80s, the town engaged in economic diversification, including tourism. And the most important tourism product in Maribor was skiing on Pohorje, easily reached by city bus. Since 1964, Maribor has hosted an International Ski Federation Women's World Cup event, the Golden Fox. The world's oldest producing grape vine and its wine provide another popular tourism attraction, marketed beginning in the 1980s.

Maribor's status as an industrial power collapsed with Yugoslavia's dissolution, and with the absence of former markets, unemployment grew, a problem from which the city has not yet recovered. One therefore wouldn't tend to think of Maribor in terms of cultural tourism. Although its cultural scene has been vibrant throughout the decades, providing recognized Slovene artists, festivals, and works, the existing tour operators in the city were still mostly outgoing. Slovenia's national destination organization didn't include the city in its new promotional actions or products; indeed, it tends to focus only on Ljubljana or on nature and adventure tourism.

Even though it was designated a European Capital of Culture in 2012, and a European Region of Gastronomy in 2021, Maribor has not yet fully taken up the possibilities offered by small, creative tourism enterprises that would address the authenticity sought by visitors who want to immerse themselves in the everyday life and sense of a particular place. This is not to say, however, that improvements in tourism products have not occurred.

Since 2010, we can see a rise in the quantity of cultural industries providing activities of interest for potential tourists. The Maribor Slovene National Theatre, which includes drama, opera, and ballet performances, has established a system of buses bringing tourists from Austria. The museums and galleries are developing high-quality tours for schools and kindergartens, which can easily be adjusted for tourists. The Museum of National Liberation even provides a live role-playing exercise for schoolchildren, with the director of the museum, Dr. Aleksandra Berberih Slana, taking the role of a historical figure, Franziska Scherbaum, who was the wife of Karl Scherbaum, a Maribor

businessman who owned a steam mill and who brought to Maribor its first thirty-six lightbulbs, lit on 4 April 1883, just four years after the Edison's patent—an important part of the industrial history of the town. The Scherbaums lived in the villa that currently houses the Museum of National Liberation.

The new Maribor Puppet Theatre is an important regional institution providing high-quality puppet theatre for children and adults, while also offering great production spaces for artists from all over Slovenia. Maribor has many festivals that are more popular domestically than abroad, but they are also gaining a profile in other countries thanks to such events as the international theatre festival Borštnikovo Srečanje, the summer music and theatre series Festival Lent, and the celebration of classical music that is Festival Maribor. All of them host many international artists, especially Festival Lent, which fills all big hotels with visiting companies in its best years. And those artists are very pleased with the renowned local hosting culture, ensuring return visits. And last but definitely not least: local NGOs are very responsive to trends and are endeavouring to provide content of interest to the urban tourist. While fabulous, these activities do not generally exploit the opportunities of micro-tourism.

A noteworthy NGO in the area of small, creative tourism is the Living Courtyards Initiative, which since 2010 has been working to revive and highlight one of Maribor's unique urban features: the courtyards in the medieval city centre, using them to provide artistic, social, and cultural programs that suit these special intimate spaces, which in many cases have regrettably become parking lots or have simply been abandoned. The programs invite locals and visitors to look behind the facades of the city and to discover its hidden dimensions, providing direct insight into both the current lives of Maribor's people and a perfect illustration of life in centuries past, when the courtyards provided gardens, livestock sheds, public washing spaces and laundries, artisan workshops, gathering places, and facilities for communal child care. This ingenious enterprise led directly to the establishment of our initiative.

Rajzefiber

In this chapter, we would like to share our experience, our aims, and our good (and not so good) practices in order to encourage similar processes in other small cities where the existing touristic ecosystem remains very shallow and unable to connect the dots between creative locals and creative visitors, or where tourism just reproduces, rather than regenerates, a locality's tired assets.

We established Rajzefiber¹ in 2014 in order to develop attractive creative walks in the city, to design unique souvenirs by local creatives, and to build social capital among stakeholders in Maribor.

A nanotourist agency, Rajzefiber Biro was strategically established in an abandoned shop within the old city of Maribor. The collectively self-renovated project space operates as a multipurpose arena for exchange, performance, education, and production. It provides and produces co-creative memorabilia—ART-FACTS—made by special local artists and craftsman, redefining the typical souvenir. It is a melting pot, a platform that constantly researches and follows the needs of co-creators of touristic/cultural/artistic activities. The agency avoids formality, yet provides and collects an endless all sensual experience of Maribor. (Boelen and Sacchetti 2014, 356)

This is the first description of Rajzefiber, an idea, a term, a concept that was formed in a workshop on nano-tourism in the Design Biennale, Design 50, held in Ljubljana in 2014, and the quotation still aptly describes our mission. It was intended to describe the opposite of mass tourism—so it focuses on providing authentic, small-scale (i.e., nano) tourism experiences in which both visitors and locals participate. And Rajzefiber is a trial of this idea/concept that we hope will promote local heritage in small contexts and support development of new contents/products in the creative tourism space. We started as, and indeed still are, a program of our existing NGO, House! Society for People and Spaces, which has approximately 25 members, residents of Maribor and its surroundings, all with very different backgrounds but all keen to promote local heritage. Every two years, we elect a new executive board. The NGO has been publicly funded and has complementary programs such as Living Courtyards. We benefited from unemployment funding measures for Rajzefiber, which allowed us to hire four employees. Now, our team varies between 2 and 3 permanent employees, plus an additional 10–60 co-workers from outside Rajzefiber during the Festival of Walks. Since we were addressing social issues through sustainable economic and cultural development, we received social enterprise status, which allows us some benefits. Rajzefiber is still receives around 40 per cent of its funded through

different funding programs (for the Festival of Walks, for the PAKT, etc.) and the rest we develop from our sales.

Arising from Maribor's cultural and artistic scene, Rajzefiber faced a challenge, as the established tourism infrastructure was ill-equipped, or perhaps even unwilling, to support our goal to promote local cultural engagement in small contexts. For guidance, we looked to the principles of creative tourism, which values place-based intangible cultural heritage, and individual or small group immersive experiences. In 2020, our walks were described as follows:

Stories can be told, danced, sung and painted. Many walks offer various experiences, such as photographing, painting, printing, singing or dancing. Walkers are encouraged to use other methods of expressing the way they see or feel the city and the whole intangible heritage experience. Media, or the way the stories will be told, are also part of the creative process. This way, participants start to care for the stories and recognise them as their own heritage. They also get a new and different experience of their city. Through the Festival of Walks, lots of new stories find their own media. Moreover, the stories that haven't been written yet find their place in the realm of the intangible heritage of Maribor. (Ratković and Tolić 2020, 39)

Curiosity Leads to Creativity

The team at Rajzefiber is curious about people, untold stories, everyday paths, and hidden spaces. This curiosity has led us to be innovative in approaching subjects and developing formats. We use creative strategies to bring stories alive: we might dress up as historical figures, or we might ask walk participants to cover their eyes and discover the city using their other senses. We try to evoke curiosity and creativity in visitors.

Authenticity Based on Facts

While we are creative in our approaches to intangible cultural assets, we believe that authenticity must also recognize factual data. Our team member Vid Kmetič is responsible for examining the archives, and for finding stories in historical newspapers. All our local experts as well as our walkers are required to verify the information used in their walks.

Collaboration and Co-creation

Rajzefiber would not have achieved the success it has without the strategic and systematic methodology of collaboration and co-creation, which is written into its DNA. We have always worked closely with local and regional stakeholders, small enterprises, artists, shop owners, guesthouses, Airbnbs, with public institutes of art and culture and cultural heritage, and with public institutes of tourism, as well as with governmental bodies, private agencies, and finally with universities and schools. We connect a network of stakeholders in the town with those in the wider region in order to gain more presence in the tourism market, to exchange knowledge, and to advocate for common issues. We invite young people to work with us, and we offer older people a space for their creativity.

Above all, we connect cultural heritage—both tangible and intangible—and creative industries and culture with tourism. We must often persuade creatives that their processes and behind-the-scenes work can be even more interesting for the visitors than their formal performances or products. We must also convince the tourism industry that tourists are definitely open to some hands-on work during their visits. We are all about connection and collaboration in co-creating small tourism experiences.

Small and Agile

Rajzefiber is one of the four main programs, along with Living Courtyards, Lumina, and the Center for Graphic Arts, in House! Society for People and Spaces. House! has been a social enterprise since 2016. The team is small—currently five people—and we are very connected with others, as we have described. In addition, we have a strong system of volunteer workers who helps us execute our events, such as the Festival of Walks.

Our primary team members come from the fields of cultural management, cultural studies, media communication, visual art pedagogy, and organizational sciences and cover the roles of researcher, programmer, executive producer, public relations person, and administrator. We use any digital tools that enhance our productivity and ease our workload.

Financing

The four prime tenants of House! are financed from different European Union, national, and local funding agencies and gain approximately 15

per cent of their funds from revenue, principally from Rajzefiber activities. Through Rajzefiber's first five years, the municipality provided us with a rent-free space in the city centre; as a result of Maribor's very high unemployment rate, we also received funding from the national employment agency to hire unemployed people as our main personnel.

About Our Walks

Our "walks" are the curated individual experiences that our local guides provide for visitors. We call these guides "walkers." Walkers are people who live in and with the city, and who know its stories; some of them are also professional tour guides or experts in a given field. Walks allow visitors to feel, smell, taste, hear, and touch the cultural heritage in real time and space. The format of these walks comprises community-led content offered by locals, including students, professors, chefs, writers, former factory workers, and artists. Walks are reasonably priced and open to the public, whether visitors or locals.

In Rajzefiber, we avoid the term "guided tour," as we are of the opinion that the walks we offer are a departure from standard "guided" ways of presenting the city to visitors. We believe that in the time of the Internet, when a person can find any information they seek with a few clicks on a mobile device, "classic" guided tours are outdated and stale, offering only the serial reproduction of culture. If we are visiting a place, why would we pay for someone to tell us something that we can find by ourselves by directly consulting our devices?

Rajzefiber walks express the various senses of place in Maribor by exploring the stories written behind the walls of city buildings, on the streets, and in the squares. These stories "creep under the skin" of participants much more deeply than they would if they had simply ingested the dry data typically provided by tourist guides. Of course, accurate data is also vital, but we believe that information can be presented in a different way, often with humour, and sometimes with an ironic self-deprecation. Rajzefiber walks are generally themed, and the topics we tackle are as unique as the different impressions of a city its citizens may have. Although walks can reference rumours or myths, walkers must indicate when these references occur; information offered as facts must be verified through credible sources. We check.

Some walkers take on the task of "role-playing": this is when the walker takes, with the help of a particular wardrobe, a personage from the past and

presents the city through that character's eyes. This can happen, for example, in our series of Cool!Tours, and of course during our popular (In)tolerant walk. In the latter, we learn about Maribor's former brothels through the eyes of a conservative city dweller, a young sex worker, and a madam; in this way visitors get a sense of the various attitude toward brothels in the past, and whether public opinion about prostitution is any different today.

Many visitors prefer not to get to know the city in groups, but rather individually or with their particular travelling companions. We reserve our best stories for them! With the help of some simple instructions, they perform tasks at their own pace: in the Electric Story Hunt they learn about the electrification of the city, and in the Wine Story Hunt about the wine that is closely connected with Maribor. In Crown Hunting, children look for crowns on the facades of buildings and thus, by the way, also learn something new and interesting, while in ParkPlac Hunt, they get to know the city park. Our Hunt series of walks is very popular.

Perhaps our most unusual walk is the Deklajca, in which we direct our attention to the ground and to objects that we don't typically notice at all, but which are present at every step: for example, the covers on sewer shafts, an unspoken but integral part of everyday life, and surprisingly interesting. At Deklajca, visitors also play an active role, as they can imprint their choice of sewer cover on a T-shirt, canvas bag, or any other piece of fabric. In this way, they also take home a piece of the city that they themselves have created.

Rajzefiber walks are a going concern, constantly being made and remade, just as a city is active, writing and living its new stories every day, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

About Souvenirs and Memorabilia

Rajzefiber also offers a range of local products in its space in the city centre; we attempt to move beyond the classic tourist souvenirs that can otherwise be seen in all cities. Through social networks and personal contacts, we are constantly looking for new, young creatives and designers. We help young people to create an idea, develop a product, and place the final product in our sales program. In this way, we contribute to cultural and economic sustainability. For example, since 2018, we have been co-operating with Štajerski Argo, the linguistic project of a young woman from Maribor, which has grown from pure entertainment into one of the city's more recognizable brands, exposing and nurturing the Styrian dialect. In addition to the products of local artists,

Rajzefiber also offers its own production of objects that we design and print at the Center for Graphic Arts, co-located in our space. Both ours and the products of other designers draw inspiration from local stories and the cultural heritage of the city.

The Annual Festival of Walks

To gain more media recognition for local heritage and culture, to promote local heritage and creative tourism among locals and visitors from Slovenia and abroad, to address local issues, to showcase great heritage projects developed by pupils of local schools, and, finally, to provide a community focus for residents, Rajzefiber has since 2018 organized an annual Festival of Walks (FW): at least once annually it presents more than fifty different thematic walks that lead the visitors through untold city stories, those that aren't typically given space in museums, through architectural landscapes or the places that once existed but are not there anymore, and about historical figures that lived in the city. These thematic walks engage all senses and are veritable photographic safaris. The walks are curated every year with the help of a public open call. Anyone can apply to curate and lead a walk, so we get very different views on the same city, assuring a living and lively reflection of Maribor's cultural assets. In 2021, the FW was recognized as a best practice by the European Association for Heritage Interpretation (Koritnik Trepel 2021, 21). All walks during the festival are free. By employing and then subverting the more traditional "festival" tourism structure, the FW brings direct attention to the city's lack of a cultural tourism strategy to highlight intangible heritage. Moreover, it offers space and time to bring together stakeholders to discuss current issues and trends.

Maribor city has numerous untold and unheard stories that remain in the archives, books and people's memories. It is an intangible heritage that can easily vanish with time. The FW presents more than 40 of these stories each year through walks around the city and storytelling. Stories are designed and presented by the local inhabitants that are in love with small or big, every-day or a superhero type of stories of the city. (Ratković and Tolić 2020, 37)

In the time since the first RajzeFiber FW was held in 2018, the event has grown from the initial three-day affair into a ten-day festival with more than sixty different themed walks, as well as evening talks on topics related to tourism, cultural heritage, and culture in general. It is here that we can directly address current issues.

Cities are of course physical entities; they are compact settlements with buildings, streets, and all other necessary infrastructure. And yet, they are defined as much by their inhabitants and the stories they have written over decades and centuries, on the same streets and in the same buildings. Without these stories, cities would be mere clusters of architecture, grey streets, and cold walls, more or less colorful facades, intersections, parks and squares, spaces. Big and very important stories are indeed captured in history books, but cities also comprise small, seemingly insignificant stories: the everyday stories of individuals. These are stories that perhaps only a handful of residents know, but such stories have over time built the city and its identity. And it is these stories that the FW seeks to tell. We are looking at the people in these tales; we are most interested in them, we want as many people as possible to meet them.

The festival occurs at the end of March, which symbolically marks the beginning of spring and the awakening of nature and the city (this is also, frankly, the beginning of the tourist season). For the last two years, we have been forced to postpone the festival to the beginning of autumn due to public health measures related to the pandemic, but we will return to a spring start as soon as conditions allow.

Based on the principle of co-creation, local people tell their stories during daytime walks while evenings are reserved for contemplation and discussions about different topics of heritage and creative tourism. Thus, walkers who are heritage bearers themselves become active heritage interpreters. (Ratković and Tolić 2020, 38)

Preparations for the festival, including the composition of the program, begin about two months before the start date. We start with an open call to local residents: anyone who knows an interesting story related to the city, and who would like to present it as a walk, is invited to contact us. We are open to all

topics, but the walk must be carried out at a sufficient level of quality, and it must not falsify historical facts.

We can proudly say that the response has been exceptional, and that every year we enjoy the entirely pleasant stress of having to find a way to program and place all the registered walks and walkers. It is noteworthy that public institutes and institutions related to tourism, culture, and cultural heritage also apply to offer walks, confirming that our approach to small tourism is gaining traction. Through their participation, the FW can access and share with our participants the knowledge of experts, which is usually reserved for museums, galleries, theatres, and archives.

The FW is intended for both visitors and residents. We are particularly interested in the latter; when locals know their city well, all its hidden corners and stories, written over the centuries, a collaborative sense of place is developed, and sustainable cultural capital is created. The communal sense of place is perhaps easier to achieve and share with others in a small destination; we dare to claim that the FW contributes—from the bottom up—to this process. We highlight and encourage our community's engagement by awarding three FW prizes annually:

- Rajzefirbčni Špancirštok, or Rajzefiber Walking Stick: awarded to the visitor who takes part in the most festival walks.
- Rajzefirbčni Šuh, or Rajzefiber Shoe: awarded to the walker who is most appreciated by walk participants.
- Rajzefirbčni Šniranc, or Rajzefiber Shoelace: awarded to the part of the city that receives the most criticism from walk participants, in the hopes that the award will call attention to locations that require improvement in Maribor.

Generally, the festival days end with evening talks on topics related to tourism, especially cultural and creative tourism, and culture in general. We like to tackle innovative topics like creative tourism by small enterprises, or industrial heritage tourism, and potentially uncomfortable local topics such as the denigration of the Piramida. In many cases, a joint conversation with experts in a given topic is enough to identify and address problems, or at least to start solving them. Such community collaboration is a hallmark of the FW, and indeed of Rajzefiber itself.

The festival is gaining profile and has been well-received not only in locally, but also more widely.

- FW is a part of the European Cultural Heritage Days program, a joint initiative by many European countries under the auspices of the Council of Europe and the European Commission, run in Slovenia by the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Heritage.
- FW is recognized by *Interpret Europe* as an example of good practice in the western Balkans and thus, together with twenty-two other good practices, was included in the publication *Fostering Communities through Heritage Interpretation* in 2020.

PAKT for Developing the Community in the Region and Beyond

To enhance the development of regional creative touristic products, Rajzefiber established Potujočo Akademijo Kreativnega Turizma (Travel Academy of Creative Tourism), or PAKT, which is steadily growing to be the first regional, bottom-up educational platform for small tourist providers who live and work in the rural outskirts. PAKT offers training through shared experience and peer learning, as well as discussions of theories and trends in small tourism.

PAKT is a subprogram of Rajzefiber/House! in co-operation with Center for Creativity, and so is a member of the partner network Center for Creativity Platform. The Center for Creativity project is co-financed by the European Union from the European Regional Development Fund (from 2017 to 2022) and the Republic of Slovenia. PAKT currently has more than ten regional partners from Murska Sobota, Ptuj, Novo Mesto, Lovrenc na Pohorju, Trbovlje, and elsewhere, as well as from public institutes and local societies. Together, they co-create the PAKT program in order to address the needs of the stakeholders in their own communities.

The educational content is devised and offered by Dr. Dejan Križaj, of the Faculty of Tourism Studies at the University of Primorska, along with his team of assistants and postgraduates, as well as Ana Osredkar, an expert on service design, and others. PAKT uses formats that enhance creativity, allow peer-to-peer learning and collaboration, and boost confidence for providers:

- Laboratory: a half-day lecture plus workshop in which the participants work on their own and/or common products.
- Clinic: a half-day workshop that focus on a specific tourism case that exemplifies best practices.
- Incubator: an individual coaching program, generally several months long, that supports providers in enhancing their products.

Discussion: The Three Main Challenges of Smallness

Being small and agile, we were able to quickly overcome the everyday challenges of our work, such as programming and execution of events. However, we have faced some recurring challenges.

Like other small tourism enterprises, the biggest challenge we have faced is the wider marketing and sales profile. Our products are high-quality, authentic, innovative, and in demand from local and regional guests, but we do not have established channels to address foreign markets. Our team members are all producers at heart; we are so busy creating and producing our tourism products, that we do not have the time to invest in marketing. And to be honest, we do not possess the expertise to effectively market our products, nor do we have the money to pay for people with that expertise.

Moreover, our destination management organization (DMO) and the national tourist organization, which are mainly responsible for promotion abroad, do not see how to fit our innovative products into their more conservative campaigns. It is revealing that Maribor's tourist information centre has not yet agreed to sell any of our souvenir products. However, since 2021, there has been a positive development: the local DMO has decided to include our popular Story Hunts in their sales program. Also, we are sensing more demand from tour agencies. However, creatives do not feel encouraged to participate in creative tourism. As one told us,

The main challenges that prevent me from engaging even more intensively in creative tourism are: no funds for promotion; no common platform for promoting such products; lack of insights into the needs and interests of urban cultural tourists visiting Maribor; ignorance of promotional and sales channels and their specifics; lack of time and finances for product development

and upgrades; disconnection of tourism from existing local creatives; and the lack of related tourist-products. (Tanja Cvitko, art worker in Maribor, interview with authors, 24 April 2021)

Additionally, we still are not coping with the vast amount of digital channels of sale and promotion.

In recent years (especially during the pandemic), technology and digitalization has advanced at an unimaginable pace that is hard to keep up with. People (especially the young) are getting more and more used to it and it accompanies them at every turn (shopping, booking, searching, sharing, networking, etc.). Surely, its presence will only increase in the future. On the other hand, online absence, the improper use of the internet and the lack of online promotion on the supply side lead to invisibility, unattractiveness, loss of opportunities and revenue streams (Cai et al. 2019; Nugroho et al. 2017). According to our findings (we have conducted more than 20 workshops with local stakeholders all across Slovenia in the last year) this is especially true for smaller local providers mostly working in crafts sector and other creative industries (artisans, associations, clubs, etc.), as they lack financial resources, ICT skills/knowledge, time and support but still want to become part of the tourism market, get in touch with tourists, become bookable and generate additional income from their unique activities. Such actors are often overlooked, even though they contribute greatly to the preservation of local (past and present) traditions, cultures and environments, both in rural and urban areas. Normally, DMOs should take care of them, but they too often lack the resources, staff and time to take care all in the best possible way. (Rogelja et al. 2021)

The next biggest challenge for us is that we are working across two fields: culture and tourism. In Slovenia, there are separate legislative requirements in each area. For instance, while often producers of cultural artifacts, our walkers must also provide a local or national tour guide licence, or we must provide (and pay for) a silent guide to accompany them during their walks. The system and content of national tour guide licences is a bit out of date and does not incorporate newer approaches such as live role-playing, and

it is focused, yet again, on central Slovenia, where you must also go to take your practical exam. In order to provide interesting walks, though, we search for walkers who mostly come from other fields, such as, for example, cultural workers, historians, artists, cooks, ethnologists, or writers, who hold expertise on the theme they want to discuss. And to accord with the formal requirements of tourism legislation, we must then provide a national licensed tour guide, which eventually makes our tours more expensive.

Finally, the last main challenge for us is the fluctuation of co-workers and walkers. Maribor experiences huge waves of employment and unemployment; these transitions affect our walkers, as many are not otherwise employed, so we sometimes lose them when they do find regular employment, or when they move to another place for work. Our core team has also fluctuated since 2014, resulting in the loss of experience, personal knowledge, and contacts. Since 2018, however, the core team has more or less stabilized, and already we can see positive developments in sales and profile.

Summary and Ways Forward

Maribor is the second-largest city in Slovenia, with a very diverse cultural history, a well-preserved medieval city centre, a vibrant creative scene, a storied industrial heritage, great wines, wonderful gastronomy, a gorgeous river, the largest ski resort in the country, and a veritable jungle of the forests and meadows, all reachable by foot from the city centre. It is a fabulous small destination.

Rajzefiber and its stories can help develop green, creative, innovative, sustainable, low-key tourism products that attract individuals and small groups. Working together with the new initiative Tourism from Zero,² a virtual organization dedicated to healing tourism from the devastating dual wounds of the pandemic and over-tourism, and its community (Ideas from Zero),³ we see vast possibilities and potential in those local stories, which we believe could bring Maribor back from the pandemic, serving the curious and demanding tourist who prefers to interact with the local culture, who wants to learn new things, and who is therefore prepared to pay for the experience, helping to sustain the economic, ecological, social, and cultural aspects of our city. According to Dr. Dejan Križaj in his role with the Alliance for Innovators and Researchers in Tourism and Hospitality,

Modern tourists are looking for authentic experiences in the environments they visit, interested in authentic local heritage and locals. They are often closer to local events that reflect the pulse of the place than artificially developed and environmentally friendly experiences that primarily follow only business logic and imitation of global short-term trends. (interview with authors, 29 July 2021)

If we strategically support small tourism providers by encouraging locally executed, tailor-made educational programs, clearly defining roles of stakeholders, coaching and mentoring tourism providers, and offering strategic marketing assistance with creative and cultural heritage content in small towns and rural regions, we at Rajzefiber believe we can achieve a wonderful diversity of regionally/locally authentic content, and put our small towns offering small tourism experiences on the tourism map.

NOTES

- 1 *Rajzefiber* is an expression in the local German dialect, meaning “travel fever.”
- 2 <https://www.tourismfromzero.org/en/insights>.
- 3 <https://www.tourismfromzero.org/en/about/>.

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