



**EX**periential **TO**urism for sustainable **R**ural development

**WP2:** Success stories and needs mapping for VET renewal in rural tourism

**A2.1:** EU collection of success stories and analysis of national trends



Co-funded by  
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## EXTOR

# Analysis of the current national status of rural tourism and related VET offers

## Individual Interviews National Report – die Berater

### INTERVIEWS INFORMATION

*Please add the main information about the interviews.*

**COUNTRY OF IMPLEMENTATION:** Austria

**CITY OF IMPLEMENTATION:** Lower Austria, Burgenland, Upper Austria, Salzburg, Tirol

**NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS:** 17

**DATES OF THE INTERVIEWS:** April and May 2024

**VENUES OF THE INTERVIEWS:** Video call/telephone and in-person interviews.

**TOTAL NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS (per interview):** 17

**TARGET GROUP AND STAKEHOLDERS:** Rural entrepreneurs and rural tourism professionals.

### INTERVIEWS DESCRIPTION

*Please provide a detailed description of the interviews.*

- **Number of interview implementers and description of their background:**

The interviews were implemented by two persons from die Berater involved in the project. One of the implementers is the responsible project manager for the EXTOR project on behalf of die Berater. Both implementers have knowledge of the EXTOR project, have experience in the rural tourism sector, in the implementation of ERASMUS+ projects, and similarities in their educational background.

- **Number and description of the participants' background:**

The total number of participants in the interviews is 17. 10 participants are rural tourism professionals and 7 participants are rural entrepreneurs. The rural tourism professionals work in rural tourism in Burgenland and Salzburg in accommodation facilities at the reception or in the restaurant and in wineries as sessional workers. The rural entrepreneurs have their enterprises in Burgenland, Lower Austria, Upper Austria, and Tirol. The sectors covered by the entrepreneurs are accommodation facilities, wineries, agro & farm tourism, and restaurants.

- **Duration of the interviews:**

The duration of the interviews was between 30 and 60 minutes depending on the amount of information the participants wanted to provide.

- **Main structure and agenda of the interviews:**

The main structure and agenda for both the interviews of rural tourism professionals and rural entrepreneurs via video and phone calls as well as in-person interviews was the same. Firstly, the EXTOR project was introduced to the participant including aims and objectives. Secondly, the interview was conducted according to the questionnaire for rural tourism professionals or rural entrepreneurs. Thirdly, the participant was informed about the next steps in the EXTOR project.

- **Description of any group and/or interactive activities:**

There were no group and/or interactive activities.

- **Level of engagement of the participants:**

All participants showed a good or very good level of willingness to answer the questions. Some rural entrepreneurs hesitated to provide information on funding.

- **Any challenges faced during the interviews:**

The main challenge was to find participants willing to participate in the interviews. In the case of rural entrepreneurs it was more difficult to find participants.

- **Main conclusions of the interviews:**

### *Rural Tourism Entrepreneurs*

#### **Q1: When did you start your rural tourism business?**

The period when the respondents started their rural tourism business ranges from the early sixties to the last 15 years.

#### **Q2: What is the size of the business?**

4 respondents have a micro business with up to 9 employees and 3 respondents have small businesses with 10 to 49 employees.

#### **Q3: What is the sector of your business:**

The majority of the respondents see their business in the rural tourism sector (5 respondents) followed by experiential tourism (3 respondents). In addition, respondents indicated sport & adventure tourism (2 respondents), sustainable tourism, and agrotourism & farm tourism (each 1 respondent).

#### **Q4: What is the type of your business?**

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The respondents have the following business types: accommodation facility (3 respondents), restaurant (2 respondents), farm, and winery (each 1 respondent).

**Q5: What sources of funding did you use for starting the business?**

More than half of the respondents did not want to answer this question. Among the other respondents, the majority used personal investment as funding source, 1 respondent indicated national funding, and one of the respondents added Leader Funding (application in progress) and national funding for Agri-PV.

**Q6: Are you aware of European or national funding opportunities?**

More than half of the respondents are not sure about their funding awareness. Two respondents indicated they are aware of European or national funding opportunities and one respondent indicated a lack of awareness about funding opportunities.

**Q7: Have you faced any challenges since you started your business? If so, what kind?**

The majority of respondents indicated lack of necessary human resources (6 respondents) as a challenge, followed by financial challenges / lack of financial support (4 respondents). One respondent indicated lack of essential skills/education and another low demand as a challenge. Other challenges mentioned by the respondents included bureaucracy regarding organic agriculture and insurance and logistics and accessibility of the location in the beginning.

**Q8: Is your business sustainable? If so, how do you ensure sustainability?**

The majority of respondents indicated they ensure sustainability of their business through ensuring tourist satisfaction (7 respondents) followed by involving the community (6 respondents) and preservation of culture (4 respondents). Two respondents indicated environmental sustainability and another two encourage responsible tourism.

**Q9: Have you ever participated in a VET program related to rural tourism or received any personal or professional development training? If yes, please specify.**

All respondents participated in a VET program related to rural tourism or received any personal or professional development training. The respondents listed the following programs: University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Winery School, business and gastronomy trainings, specialized courses and participation in conferences.

**Q10: Have you ever provided personal or professional training to your employees? If yes, please specify.**

The majority of respondents with 6 persons provided personal or professional training to their employees, and only one respondent claimed to have never provided training to employees.

**Q11: Are you aware of the VET programs or other professional training offered in your country related to rural tourism?**

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The majority of respondents with 6 persons are aware of VET programs or other professional training offered in Austria related to rural tourism and only one respondent is not aware of those programs.

**Q12: Do you think it would be useful to receive professional development training? If yes, in which of the following topics/areas?**

The respondents indicated that it would be useful to receive professional development training in the following topics/areas: sustainable tourism (6 respondents), regenerative tourism, ecotourism practices, digital marketing & E-commerce (5 respondents each), experiential tourism, basic skills development on video making (4 respondents each), EU Funding & norms for SMEs' opening and/or development (3 respondents), and rural tourism (1 respondent).

**Q13: In your opinion, are there any gaps regarding the rural tourism sector in your country? If so, which of the following?**

The respondents indicated that there are the following gaps regarding the rural tourism sector in Austria: depopulation (6 respondents), lack of infrastructure, lack of training programs/education (4 respondents each), and insufficiency of support for green transition (2 respondents). One respondent indicated lack of financial support, another insufficiency of support for digital transition, and one respondent added low demand for tourism in not popular destinations.

**14: Do you have any recommendations for improving the rural tourism sector in your country?**

For improving the rural tourism sector in Austria, respondents indicated that future entrepreneurs should step away from traditions and give it a modern touch. They should dare to make things differently. In addition, rural tourism in the own region should be made more attractive.

**Q15: Is there any other kind of support that you would like to receive as a rural tourism entrepreneur?**

The respondents indicated that they would like to receive support by less bureaucracy for human resources.

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*Rural Tourism Professionals*

**Q1: In what sector do you work?**

9 out of 10 respondents indicated they work in the rural tourism sector. In addition, 6 respondents indicated they work in sport & adventure tourism.

**Q2: In what specific type of business do you work?**

6 out of 10 respondents indicated they work in an accommodation facility, 5 indicated also sports and nature-related activities, and 4 work in a winery.

**Q3: What is your profession?**

The respondents indicated the following professions: seasonal worker (4 respondents), waiter and receptionist (2 respondents), receptionist, waiter, chef, and administration (1 respondent each).

**Q4: How long have you been working in rural tourism?**

5 out of 10 respondents have 10 years of experience working in rural tourism, followed by 2 respondents with 7 years, 2 respondents with 3 years, and 1 respondent with 1 year of experience.

**Q5: In your role as a rural tourism professional, what challenges do you face?**

5 out of 10 respondents indicated lack of infrastructure as a challenge, 2 respondents added a lack of support for digital transition. In addition, the respondents indicated the following other challenges: support and challenges in customer service and customer contact and requests, lack of respect to tourism workers, and language barriers. One respondent indicated there are no challenges.

**Q6: Have you ever participated in a VET program related to your profession or received any personal or professional development training? If yes, please specify.**

6 out of 10 respondents indicated they have participated in a VET program related to their profession or received any personal or professional development training. The respondents listed the following programs: professional development training in the workplace, vocational school for tourism, tourism management education, sommelier, culinary, hygiene, safety, and butcher training.

**Q7: Do you think it would be useful to receive professional development training? If yes, in which of the following topics/areas?**

All respondents think it would be useful to receive professional development training. All respondents indicated digital marketing & E-commerce as a topic for the training. 4 out of 10 respondents indicated sustainable tourism and ecotourism practices as additional topics, 3 respondents added sport & adventure tourism, and 1 respondent indicated rural tourism. In addition, the respondents indicated the following topics: training for receptionists related to daily tasks of this job and language courses in German and English.

**Q8: In your opinion, are there any gaps regarding the rural tourism sector in your country? If so, which of the following?**

6 out of 10 respondents indicated that there are gaps regarding the rural tourism sector in Austria due to lack of training programs/education. One respondent indicated lack of financial support, another one insufficiency of support for digital transition, and one respondent sees no gaps. In addition, respondents indicated the following other gaps: more marketing towards underrepresented countries (i.e. Eastern Europe, Middle East, Asia), lack of possibilities for promotions in the career, lack of workforce, and low



salaries. For small companies the competition with big enterprises is difficult. Finally, it is also hard to become a part of the community as a rural tourism professional.

**Q9: Do you have any recommendations for improving the sector in your country?**

The participants indicated that the salaries in the tourism sector are low, thus staff is undereducated and not enough qualified. There is also a need for higher salaries. Tourism staff also indicated a need for more leisure time activities. There should be more marketing, also digital marketing to promote the regions. The offer of restaurants and the level of service and equipment in hotels should be improved. Finally, small businesses should be supported, and prices in gastronomy and services should have a maximum limit.

**Q10: Is there any other kind of support that you would like to receive as a rural tourism professional?**

The respondents indicated that they need more language courses, trainings on marketing and knowledge of the own region (i.e. walk arounds), and development in the own profession. Supervision, psychological counselling and burn out prevention are also needed. There is also a need for integration in the community. Benefits in the form of i.e. ski passes or swimming pool passes would be appreciated. Finally, the local governments or EU institutions should provide financial support.

## CONCLUSIONS

This report provides an in-depth analysis of the current state, challenges, and opportunities within the rural tourism sector in Austria, based on interviews with 17 rural tourism professionals and entrepreneurs.

The interviews reveal that many entrepreneurs in the rural tourism sector began their businesses within the last 15 years, with a notable portion leveraging personal investment for funding. The enterprises are predominantly micro businesses, involving up to nine employees, and span various sectors including accommodation facilities, wineries, agro & farm tourism, and restaurants. The majority of these businesses focus on rural tourism and experiential tourism, with a smaller segment engaged in sport & adventure tourism, sustainable tourism, and agrotourism.

Key challenges identified by the entrepreneurs include a lack of human resources, financial support, and essential skills. Infrastructure and logistical issues, as well as bureaucratic hurdles, also pose significant barriers. Despite these challenges, many entrepreneurs emphasize sustainability by ensuring tourist satisfaction, involving the community, and preserving local culture. However, awareness and utilization of European or national funding opportunities remain low, and there is a clear need for more targeted professional development training in areas such as sustainable tourism, digital marketing, and EU funding opportunities.

Similarly, rural tourism professionals face challenges including inadequate infrastructure, insufficient support for digital transition, and customer service difficulties. The professionals, who primarily work in accommodation facilities and wineries, have varied experience levels, with many having over a decade of experience in the sector. Training and professional development are highly valued, with a strong interest in topics such as digital marketing, sustainable tourism, and language skills.

The report highlights several gaps in the rural tourism sector in Austria, including depopulation, lack of infrastructure and training programs, and insufficient support for green and digital transitions. To address these gaps, the respondents recommend modernizing rural tourism, enhancing regional attractiveness, and reducing bureaucratic hurdles. There is also a call for more structured support, such as language

courses, marketing training, and psychological support, to better integrate tourism professionals into the community and improve their job satisfaction.