

# Want to avoid Europe's tourist hordes? Try getting off the beaten track

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Monastery of Santo Estevo de Ribas de Sil, which is often overlooked by pilgrims on a nearby route. Credit: [JanCeuleers](#)/Wikimedia Commons, [CC BY-SA](#)

European tourism is getting a makeover to strengthen remote communities with the help of EU-funded researchers.

The monastery of San Estevo de Ribas de Sil in northwestern Spain is located within 20 kilometers of the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage route, but for Martín López Nores the two places felt worlds apart. And that gave him an idea.

In 2019 López Nores, a professor in the Department of Telematics Engineering of the University of Vigo in Spain, attended an event at the 800-year-old monastery with researchers and local representatives. The participants discussed how best to revitalize rural economies.

## **Slow down**

While the Camino de Santiago has long been a popular pilgrim route to the holy site where St James the Apostle is believed to be buried, the monastery—deemed one of the most spectacular heritage spots in the Galicia region of Spain—was often overlooked by tourists.

"We were meeting in a jewel of a location—a remarkable place that goes unnoticed by thousands of pilgrims walking nearby," said López Nores. "We realized we needed to make it more visible, to draw people to it, to encourage people on the pilgrim route to get to know the area they are passing through, not just focus on getting to the next point in their guide."

He led a project that received EU funding to help spearhead a new form of tourism across Europe—a kind that moves away from the hordes of international visitors who fill countless European cities and towns for most of the year.

In doing so, López Nores took to heart a sentiment expressed by one of the 20th century's greatest wanderers, the late British writer and Philhellene Patrick Leigh Fermor. In 1966, Leigh Fermor commented on the emergence in Greece of mass tourism by writing that it "destroys

the object of its love."

López Nores championed a different approach called "slow tourism," which encourages visitors to take time to immerse themselves in their surroundings.

"Mass tourism consumes places, whereas cultural tourism is about creating meaningful connections with people and places," he said. "It's a non-destructive way of tourism that gives benefits to everyone and somehow makes your mind a little bit richer, more interesting."

## **Spread the wealth**

The many people who travel the Camino de Santiago spend considerable amounts of money—more than €300 million in 2019. But with few tourists straying from the path itself, the economic benefits are relatively narrow.

The phenomenon occurs across culturally rich Europe and inspired a group of Spanish and Portuguese researchers—including López Nores—to join forces in an effort to spread the benefits of pilgrimages. Called [rurALLURE](#), their project ran for three years until the end of 2023.

The team's goal was to enhance the appeal of "cultural tourism" in countries ranging from Spain to Norway and ensure that tourism revenue goes beyond the main trails.

For the Camino de Santiago, the researchers created a web portal and an [app](#) to highlight cultural points of interest close to the route. These include museums, places of natural beauty and bars and restaurants with local foods and drinks such as Ribeira wines. A total of 7 362 such sites were mapped in this way by the project.

Also available are written and audio guide material, local voices and histories, as well as thematically grouped information on, for example, nature spots and regional traditions.

Other pilgrimages covered by rurALLURE included routes to Italy's capital Rome, paths known as the Saint Olav Ways leading to Trondheim in Norway and the Way of Mary, which traverses central Europe to Csíksomlyó in Romania.

## **New mindset**

The researchers went beyond technology in a bid to foster a change in the mindset of businesses, cultural institutions and other organizations linked to the various routes.

A sense of competition, which at one time in some places in Europe even led to road signs to rival tourist spots being destroyed, has been replaced with a spirit of collaboration, according to López Nores.

A [network](#) of more than 100 members around Europe now coordinates efforts, believing they can attract visitors by working together and in turn raising the popularity of pilgrim routes as a whole. Best practices—plus insights into what hasn't worked so well—are freely available.

For instance, the northern Portuguese town of Vila do Conde, long accustomed to being shunned by tourists who flew to nearby Porto to make their way north to Santiago de Compostella—the culmination of the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage route—has reaped the benefits, according to López Nores.

The rurALLURE portal and app now feature the town—complete with multi-media content—in a guide to the literary heritage of the Camino

de Santiago. As a result, the area has flourished as a destination for pilgrims and literature lovers alike.

"This cooperation strengthens our cultural community and promotes the exchange of knowledge and resources, benefitting everyone," said Ivone Teixeira, coordinator of the Vila do Conde Museum.

Although the impact of the rurALLURE app is difficult to measure in terms of overall tourist numbers, it is clearly making a difference for specific sites.

The [Otero Pedrayo Foundation](#) in the Galician village of Amoeiro, for instance, has seen a remarkable increase in visitor numbers as a result of featuring in rurALLURE's sites around the Silver Way—the longest but least traveled of the Caminos de Santiago.

Drop-in visitors to the house of this major personality of Galician culture have increased from just a few to nearly 200 per year.

## **Peripheral appeals**

Peripheral communities in Europe were at the heart of another EU-funded tourism project called [INCULTUM](#). An acronym for innovative cultural tourism, the project wrapped up in April 2024 after three years.

The researchers chose 10 pilot sites in nine countries ranging from Ireland to Slovakia. The sites are in remote areas that don't feature in traditional tourist guides.

"We wanted to highlight the values and potential of cultural heritage that has been denied or hidden," said José María Martín Civantos, professor in the Department of Medieval History at the University of Granada in Spain and the project coordinator. "We are using tourism as a tool, not



an objective."

In Ireland, the pilot featured a grassroots heritage initiative in which local groups carry out field surveys of historic graveyards and record oral histories.

The initiative, called [Historic Graves](#), expanded under INCULTUM to include the deaths that resulted from the Great Famine of 1845–1852, when around 1 million people died.

At this time, more than 1 million people also emigrated from Ireland. Many of their descendants in the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand are tracing their ancestry through Historic Graves, with some traveling to Ireland as part of the process.

In Slovakia, INCULTUM included an abandoned mining district in the central area of Banska Bystrica. The site is a source of industrial heritage as local schools and other groups work together to recover community memories.

In the works is an interactive digital map featuring "mining treasures" that tourists will be able to visit.

As it happens, this area also features in the rurALLURE digital maps because it lies on the Slovak section of the Way of Mary.

## **Better balance**

Both projects offer a roadmap for Europe as it seeks to spread the economic benefits and ease the environmental costs of tourism.

For Martín Civantos, Europe must seek to revive rural areas in a way that is true to their past while reimagining their future. He said such an

approach serves both tourists and local communities over the long run.

"It means you are visiting a place, but you're not having a negative impact on the environment or community," said Martín Civantos. "In fact, you are helping the community to maintain its values and heritage and giving something positive back."

**More information:**

- [rurALLURE](#)
- [INCULTUM](#)
- [EU research on culture and creativity](#)
- [The EU rural vision](#)

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