





Towards a methodology of good practices for heritage-led rural regeneration: From the main paths to the surrounding areas[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Pilgrimage routes can be traversed by thousands of people, but their impact is felt almost exclusively in the places situated directly along the paths. Thus, multiple rural regions remain passive witnesses to the flows of pilgrims, when in fact they could add content and value to the experiences, especially considering that in these places, slow tourism is still possible. The objective of this research is to explore the challenges and opportunities offered by heritage in urban-rural dynamics in the context of rural regeneration near pilgrimage routes as a tool for promoting sustainable development. Through what strategies can the charm of the cultural heritage of the rural areas near pilgrimage routes be leveraged? To this end, four case studies from Europe traversed by different transnational pilgrimage routes were selected. The study is based on primary sources such as 16 interviews and 384 surveys and secondary sources such as statistics and existing studies to design common foundations. This work additionally allows the identification of good/best practices. The main results highlight bringing together significant cultural experiences with resources found in the rural environment, mobilizing transport, accommodation, and catering in one click, and offering complete packages to pilgrims through tailored promotion methods.

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been growing attention to pilgrimage routes as tools capable of promoting sustainable development, especially in rural areas. The processes of valuing heritage and tourism through these routes are considered a strategic element for regenerating rural populations (Mariotti et al., 2021). However, this study addresses a weak point hidden behind this success description: pilgrimage routes are traversed by thousands of people, but their impact is felt almost exclusively in the places situated directly along the paths and rarely penetrates the surrounding rural areas. Thus, this highly sensitive territory, due to its biodiversity and rural character, faces significant economic and demographic challenges across Europe, becoming passive witnesses to the flows of pilgrims when, in fact, they could add much content and value to the experiences.

Under these premises, pilgrimage routes are additionally an opportunity to enhance the value of “minor regions” away from tourist

centers. Undoubtedly, in these places, it is still possible to practice slow, experiential, and responsible tourism. In this sense, these itineraries can translate into an opportunity for the empowerment of the multiple economies involved, as well as act as a driver of sustainable mobility (Trono & Castronuovo, 2021) and, in turn, help to decongest these tourist centers.

Thus, the research gap that our study seeks to address is the lack of studies on the impact of pilgrimage routes on adjacent rural areas. In this context, the objective of this research is to study the challenges and opportunities offered by heritage in the rural environment close to pilgrimage routes. The opportunity arises from the fact that pilgrimages are usually planned with some flexibility regarding dates, distances traveled, places to rest, etc., to which must be added the fact that pilgrims, unlike other types of cultural and tourist experiences, are more open to improvisation in terms of activities to be carried out (Araújo Vila et al., 2021; Trono & Castronuovo, 2021). Based on this consideration, it is interesting to evaluate and understand through which strategies the

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charm of the cultural heritage of the rural areas near pilgrimage routes can be leveraged.

To this end, four case studies from multiple regions of Europe traversed by different transnational pilgrimage routes were selected within the H2020 project *ruAllure*, each focusing on different aspects of heritage. The cases are: the Way to Santiago de Compostela (Spain and Portugal), the Ways to Rome (France, Switzerland, and Italy), the Ways of Saint Olaf to Trondheim (Norway), and the Marian Way to Csíksomlyó (Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania).

It is significant to note that this proposal does not seek to directly promote or further develop pilgrimage routes and does not address religious heritage. Instead, it seeks a symbiosis with pilgrimage routes so that, on the one hand, the investment being made in these routes additionally leaves a mark on the nearby rural areas, and on the other, pilgrims enjoy enriched experiences thanks to the heritage of the rural environment (which they would not otherwise know).

In short, the study is based on evaluating the challenges and opportunities of the rural environment around pilgrimage routes based on statistics, surveys, interviews, and existing studies to design common foundations. This work additionally allows the identification of good/best practices and, in general, opens the door to the replication of experiences.

2. The rural heritage in the vicinity of European pilgrimage routes: challenges and opportunities

Today, pilgrimages are a religious, cultural, and socio-economic phenomenon of great global impact (Araújo Vila et al., 2021). Undoubtedly, these routes have become a significant economic and political asset for Europe and are widely recognized as relevant tourist attractions that offer considerable opportunities to contribute to local and regional development (Balestrieri & Congiu, 2017; Romanelli et al., 2021).

According to the forecasts of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the sector moves more than 300 million people each year (Álvarez-García et al., 2019; Mariotti et al., 2021). The attractiveness of these pilgrimage routes is related to the quality of the environment and the experience of walking freely and discovering lesser-known areas (Balestrieri & Congiu, 2017). Prominent pilgrimage routes worldwide serve as key examples of the socio-economic and cultural impacts of such pathways. The Camino de Santiago, one of the most renowned routes, attracted over 446,038 registered pilgrims in 2023, representing a significant cultural and economic driver for Spain and Portugal (Pilgrims Office, 2024). Similarly, the Via Francigena, stretching from Canterbury to Rome, has experienced growing popularity, with thousands of pilgrims annually contributing to the revitalization of rural communities along its path (Via Francigena, 2024). Furthermore, the pilgrimage routes to Mecca, such as the Hajj, gather millions of pilgrims each year, with estimates exceeding 1,845,945 in 2023, underscoring its profound cultural and financial importance to the region and the global Islamic community (Saudi General Authority for Statistics, 2023). These routes not only highlight the historical and spiritual significance of pilgrimage but also emphasize their contemporary relevance as catalysts for tourism and sustainable development.

Many pilgrimage sites have been secularized through the phenomenon of tourism (Di Giovine & Picard, 2015), leading modern pilgrimages to incorporate a wide range of travelers with diverse motivations (Di Giovine & Choe, 2019). These secular motivations offer opportunities for the integration of pilgrimage sites into regional development strategies in rural areas (Hilpert, 2018). Tourism is often considered a desirable catalyst for innovations in local sustainable development (Brouder, 2012) as a result of the conservation, intervention, and recovery of heritage and the value it adds to the territory (Mitchell & Shannon, 2018), and at the same time, its role in improving the quality of life of local communities (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004). Thus, in recent decades, tourism has been recognized as a potential means for

socio-economic development and the regeneration of rural areas, particularly those affected by the decline of traditional agricultural activities (García-Delgado et al., 2020; Pourtaheri et al., 2012), and additionally provides supplementary income and employment for local communities (Juárez Sánchez et al., 2017).

Tourism is not only considered an element of economic dynamism for local populations but additionally generates impacts in other dimensions such as socio-cultural, demographic, or environmental, influencing the quality of life of locals (García-Delgado et al., 2020). It is worth noting that these issues arise in a context marked by growing interest in the future of rural areas that have long been subjected to a deep demographic, economic, and cultural crisis (García Docampo, 2003). These spaces try to integrate into these new dynamics through new productive processes, among which the emergence of lucrative activities related to non-productive uses of agricultural land, such as tourism (Andrade Suárez et al., 2010), stands out.

The global context thus pressures for the establishment of new ways to comprehensively exploit the endogenous resources of rural areas (González Fernández, 1999) that attempt to mitigate the effects of their territorial and socio-economic disarticulation, and in the framework of this philosophy, tourism is outlined as an economic activity capable of being part of many development plans. In this way, in recent years, a policy has been carried out to promote tourist activity in rural municipalities endowed with numerous natural and cultural resources but very deteriorated from a demographic and economic point of view. In fact, tourism has become a priority tool in the orthodoxy of rural planning and a lever for economic and social development (Garrod et al., 2006). Rural and peripheral areas, economically and socially depressed, have often considered it an instrument to promote local employment and a path to rural regeneration, diversification, and restructuring of economies (Panyik et al., 2011).

Tourism through these routes is considered a strategic element for regenerating rural populations, provided it is better integrated into multiple local programming instruments to make it a true element of sustainable local development and relaunching of affected territories (Mariotti et al., 2021). In any case, the analysis of these routes from the perspective of tourism development involves describing the general conditions, the development framework, and especially the governance structures (Bausch et al., 2020), as their success will depend on local needs, temporal context, political will, cultural and socio-economic conditions, available resources in the territory, commitment of actors, etc. (García-Delgado et al., 2020).

In recent decades, tourism has been recognized as a strategic driving force capable of not only increasing economic growth, employment, and the improvement of cultural values, diversity, and heritage but additionally helping countries transition to more inclusive and resilient economies. According to UNWTO predictions for 2023, among the main trends is the increase in rural tourism and the preference for more conscious travel. Furthermore, travelers will seek the authenticity of places and their traditions, looking for a positive impact on local communities. However, tourists in a difficult economic environment will increasingly adjust their budgets and travel to closer destinations. Pilgrimages are additionally noted as the next travel trend post-COVID. In this sense, slow tourism can be considered a clear bet by rural territories for tourism promotion and territorial revitalization (Azevedo, 2021). The place, the landscape, the history, the tradition, and generally the heritage around the paths, as well as the routes themselves, can constitute the axes that can enhance the development of the territory.

Previous studies and European projects such as RURITAGE, CLIC and Be.CULTOUR have shown that cultural heritage can be a key driver for sustainable rural development. These projects have highlighted how the revitalization of heritage sites not only preserves cultural identity, but also boosts the local economy and fosters social cohesion. In this context, heritage sites act as catalysts for local development, promoting an integrated approach that connects culture, economy and sustainability.

In this line, the experience of pilgrimage routes is not only about

undertaking the journey but additionally about enjoying the experience by complementing it with other resources found along the way, from basic resources like local gastronomy and accommodation to other types of tourism such as visiting nearby highlights (museums, monuments, etc.). Thus, a pilgrimage route becomes a tourist journey whose path is marked by the chosen route but encompasses much more than its indicated path (Araújo Vila et al., 2021).

Therefore, there is a clear need to attract the traveler's interest more towards the journey than the final destination (Trono & Olsen, 2018), and in this sense, slow tourism emphasizes the stages of the journey and the enjoyment of the time spent on it (Trono & Castronuovo, 2021). This approach is particularly significant in rural areas often relegated to a marginal role in planning strategies but often traversed by these itineraries (Balestrieri & Congiu, 2017). This makes pilgrimage very different from other types of cultural and tourist experiences, opening possibilities to increase the number of visitors to lesser-known heritage sites. Therefore, in this context, rurAllure project proposes that well-developed and managed cultural and natural heritage assets could help avoid depopulation and stimulate the economy and local creativity (Makuc, 2015) through the implementation of slow tourism strategies and taking advantage of their strategic location along major pilgrimage routes.

3. Research approach

The rurAllure project research has focused on specific segments of the main European routes (Map 1) to maximize the use of the resources invested in the study and generate positive evidence through local impacts:

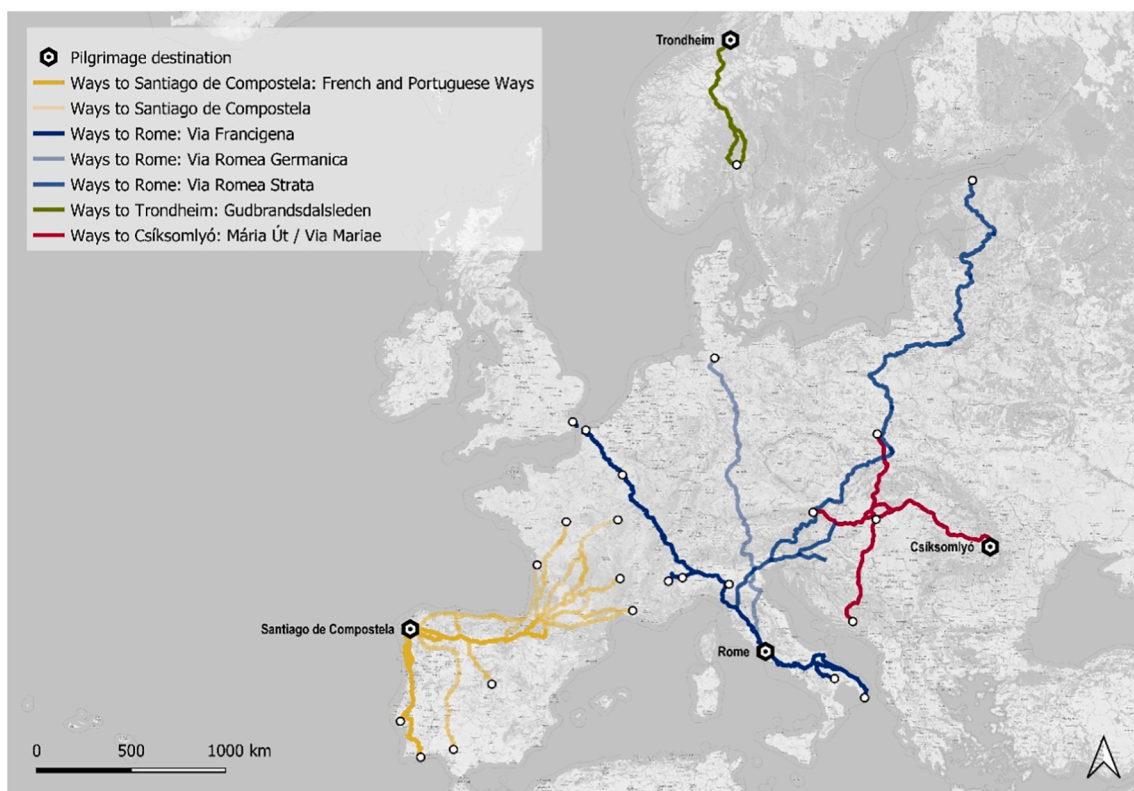
- Pilot 1 - On the ways to Santiago de Compostela: from Pedrafita do Cebreiro to Santiago de Compostela itself; from Las Médulas to

Chantada; from Porto to Vilarinho by Vila do Conde (Literary heritage on the ways to Santiago de Compostela – Spain).

- Pilot 2 - Ways to Rome: selected segments of the three main routes, namely Via Francigena, Romea Germanica, and Romea Strata (Thermal heritage and others on the ways to Rome – Italy).
- Pilot 3 - On the ways to Trondheim: segment along the west bank of Lake Mjøsa and north through Gudbrandsdalen (Ethnographic heritage on the ways to Trondheim – Norway).
- Pilot 4 - On the ways to Csíksomlyó/Mária Út/Via Mariae: from Bodajk to Mogyorósbánya; from Šahy to Trstená on the north-south diagonal of Mária Út; from Mátraverebély to Gyöngyös; from Péliföldszentkereszt to Mátraverebély; from Kőszeg to Bodajk; from Targu Mures to Ghimes Faget (Natural heritage on the ways to Csíksomlyó – Romania).

Most of the locations included in the four project pilots or case studies can be classified as rural territories based on a set of indicators such as low population density, economies primarily based on agricultural activities, lack of resources and financial innovations, peripheral position, lack of high-quality employment opportunities and services, among others. However, these areas are also of high historical and heritage interest, traversing territories with significant natural and environmental resources. Indeed, all the routes considered are rich in heritage assets, including a high density of environmental assets, historical and artistic monuments, and a variety and quality of landscapes. Semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders provided qualitative insights that highlighted the heterogeneity of local realities and enriched the analysis.

The diversity in methods for implementing and evaluating regeneration objectives was identified through interviews and validated in participatory workshops. Each territory exhibited different aspirations and priorities, ranging from job creation to heritage preservation or the strengthening of local identity. These differences underscore the need to



Map 1. Geographical coverage.

(Source: Own elaboration and OpenStreetMap (as background map).)

tailor strategies to the specific characteristics of each area, ensuring that interventions address the socio-economic and cultural particularities of the respective contexts. For this purpose, the following specific objectives have been defined:

1. Analyze the profile of pilgrims and tourists in each of the project pilots.
2. Develop a detailed understanding of the rural territory in the vicinity of each pilgrimage route through a SWOT-CAME analysis to activate tourist projects and draw a new development perspective.
3. Gain a progressive understanding about the barriers and opportunities concerning each pilot and about the exchangeability of the observations and outcomes across different territories.
4. Build a systematic methodological tool that collectively and participatively guides a Manual of Transfer of Good Practices to systematically design, implement, and evaluate the actions carried out within the rurAllure project and to make that knowledge accessible and replicable for future initiatives not only in the selected pilgrimage routes but rather at a pan-European level.

While there is a growing number of studies related to pilgrimage routes in terms of demand, we lack statistics, making the analysis of this field additionally a challenge. In this study, we aim to understand the profiles of pilgrims to develop content for them and organize future specific actions.

The approach chosen to profile pilgrims involved the administration of a questionnaire on each of the routes during the second half of 2021. This questionnaire targeted individuals who were already engaged in a pilgrimage journey. It could be completed in both paper and online formats and was available in English, Spanish, Portuguese, and Hungarian, depending on the specific route studied. Partners involved in the pilot projects were instructed to distribute printed forms at selected locations within the segments of interest (e.g., bars, restaurants, inns) and to place signs providing pilgrims with access to the online form via a QR code during the same period. The final sample comprised a total of 384 surveys distributed across three pilgrimage routes: the Camino de Santiago (237 surveys), the Via Mariae (114 surveys), and the Ways to Rome (33 surveys). The Trondheim route was excluded from the analysis due to the low response rate in that location, which could have biased the results. Additionally, limitations related to the COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected data collection on the Ways to Rome, explaining the lower number of surveys conducted.

The questionnaire included questions on pilgrims' motivations, activities along the route, detours taken and their reasons, demographic characteristics (age, gender, education level, nationality), travel preferences, itinerary organization, duration of stay, and the level of flexibility in their planning. For analysis, the collected data were statistically processed to identify common patterns and trends.

Furthermore, a qualitative methodological design was implemented through semi-structured interviews. A common interview script was developed and adapted to collect detailed data on the internal (strengths and weaknesses) and external (opportunities and threats) factors affecting sustainable tourism development in rural areas near pilgrimage routes. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with key experts linked to each of the four pilot routes. The interviewees were selected for their in-depth knowledge of tourism and heritage management in the territories studied, as well as for their role in the promotion and development of the routes.

In total, 16 interviews were conducted, four for each pilot route. Interviewees included local government representatives, tour operators and community development specialists. Their perspectives provided a solid basis for identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats common to the rural areas adjacent to these routes.

For clarity, a detailed table with the roles, countries of origin and relevance of the interviewees is included in the Annex (Table A1). The information obtained from the interviews was triangulated with

secondary data from national and European databases, ensuring a balanced representation of local realities. The responses from interviewees were categorized and analyzed to construct the SWOT-CAME analysis and they also provided data to develop a Manual of Transfer of Good Practices.

In addition, we also developed a common strategy to collect relevant data from each action implemented during the rurAllure project. This strategy led us to progressively gain understanding about the implementation and evaluation of actions for the promotion of cultural heritage in different rural areas in the vicinity of European pilgrimage routes. The findings of the process of harmonized cataloguing of actions was thought as a needed basis to foster an exchangeability of the observations and outcomes across different territories involved in the project at present, but also in its future growing towards rural areas in the vicinity of other pilgrimage ways.

Both the SWOT-CAME analysis and the Manual contribute to addressing the challenges and opportunities in rural areas close to pilgrimage routes. On the one hand, the SWOT-CAME analysis provides a strategic vision by identifying the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that affect the development of sustainable tourism in these regions. This tool makes it possible to understand the global context and generate an analytical framework to guide strategic decisions. On the other hand, the Manual of Good Practices translates these strategies into concrete and actionable recommendations, based on real and replicable examples, which can be implemented by local actors, road managers and rural communities.

The integration of the two tools not only facilitates an in-depth analysis of local dynamics, but also ensures that the results of the study can be translated into practical actions that promote economic regeneration, heritage enhancement and the strengthening of local communities. By addressing the issues from a strategic and operational approach, the study aims to provide a comprehensive resource for researchers, policy makers and rural tourism managers.

The responses from interviewees were categorized and analyzed to construct the SWOT analysis. The 16 interviewees were primarily selected from the following groups: local government representatives, local tour operators and entrepreneurs, and representatives of local community organizations. These interviews provided diverse perspectives on the studied topic and contributed to the development of an action plan tailored to the resulting situation.

4. Results analysis

4.1. Profile of pilgrims and tourists

This section presents the approach chosen to profile pilgrims in the pilot routes by identifying their main characteristics, which is needed to design relevant and impactful actions. The information shown below comes from the data obtained from the "Questionnaire for Pilgrims on Route". The profile of the pilgrim (Table 1), even within the same route, can be extremely heterogeneous; however, based on certain characteristics, it is possible to define subgroups with homogeneous profiles that help design future development and promotion strategies identified based on specific characteristics, such as the motivation for the trip and the duration of the trip. In addition, there are other predominant characteristics that are analyzed in detail below.

Pilgrims surveyed were mostly aged between 25 and 64 years for the Camino de Santiago (78.9 %) and between 35 and 74 years for the Via Mariae (79.9 %) and Ways to Rome (81.8 %). When analyzing the data by gender, men (62 %) predominated over women (35.9 %) on the Spanish route. This trend did not occur on the other routes, where women outnumbered men. Regarding the level of education, most pilgrims on all routes had higher education, followed by those who had completed secondary education. Regarding nationality, there were differences between all routes, but a constant variable was proximity, as people on the routes were mostly locals.

Table 1
Sociodemographic variables.

Variables	Camino de Santiago		Mária Út/Via Mariae		Ways to Rome	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Gender						
Male	147	62 %	50	43.9 %	14	42.4 %
Female	85	35.9 %	58	50.9 %	19	57.6 %
Age range						
Youth (18–34)	74	31.2 %	16	14 %	5	15.2 %
Adults (35–64)	137	57.8 %	68	59.7 %	15	45.4 %
Elders (Over 64)	26	10.9 %	26	22.8 %	13	39.4 %
Blank space			4	3.5 %		
Level of studies						
No studies	1	0.4 %			5	15.2 %
Primary	3	1.3 %	1	0.8 %	2	6.1 %
Secondary	56	23.6 %	23	20.2 %	8	24.2 %
University	117	74.7 %	86	75.4 %	18	54.5 %
Blank space			4	3.5 %		
Nationality						
Spanish	137	57.8 %				
Hungarian			52	45.6 %		
German	17	7.2 %			13	39.4 %
Belgian			35	30.7 %		
Italian					9	27.3 %
USA	22	9.3 %				
British					3	9.1 %

*Please note that blank spaces represent data not reported by respondents. (Source: Own elaboration.)

Regarding the degree of repetition (Table 2), it should be noted that few people were traveling the route for the first time on the Via Mariae (18.4 %) and Ways to Rome (6.1 %). On the Camino de Santiago, first-timers were more representative (58.2 %). In terms of travel organization, 85.6 % of pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago did the itinerary on their own. Lower but relevant proportions were observed on the Via Mariae (44.7 %) and Ways to Rome (48.5 %). Most of the surveyed pilgrims had booked their accommodation independently for the Camino de Santiago (79.4 %) and the Ways to Rome (81.8 %). On the Via Mariae, the percentage of people who had booked accommodation

Table 2
Pilgrim/tourist behavior.

Variables	Camino de Santiago		Mária Út/Via Mariae		Ways to Rome	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
First time on pilgrimage						
	138	58.2 %	21	18.4 %	20	61 %
Self-planned travel						
Itinerary	203	85.6 %	51	44.7 %	16	48.5 %
Hospitality	188	79.4 %	55	48.2 %	27	81.8 %
Planned days and flexibility						
Preferred planned days	101	(6/7 days) 42.6 %	54	(3 days or less) 47.7 %	22	(10 or more days) 66.7 %
Opened schedule	96	40.5 %	28	24.6 %	15	45.5 %
Closed schedule	139	58.7 %	78	68.4 %	15	45.5 %
Accompanying						
Alone	93	39.2 %	14	12.3 %	11	33.3 %
With friends	70	29.5 %	34	29.8 %	9	27.3 %
With partner	30	12.7 %	24	21 %	9	27.3 %

(Source: Own elaboration.)

independently was significantly lower (44.7 %).

For all three routes, pilgrims preferred relaxed and informal spaces such as hostels or pilgrimage accommodations. Regarding the type of transport used to travel the route, most respondents traveled on foot, maintaining traditional pilgrimage styles. In terms of travel duration and flexibility, the route where pilgrims spent the most time was the Ways to Rome, as two-thirds traveled it for 10 or more days, followed by the Camino de Santiago, where nearly half of the travelers spent between 6 and 7 days. On the Via Mariae, almost half of the pilgrims stayed for 3 or fewer days. Therefore, in terms of days spent, Ways to Rome could be considered a long route, the Camino de Santiago a medium route, and Via Mariae a short route.

There is additionally a clear trend among pilgrims to show greater flexibility, that is, they have been specifically asked about the possibility of deviating from the route in their itineraries when traveling longer routes. Via Mariae exhibits the lowest level of flexibility (24.6 %), while the Camino de Santiago shows a medium level of flexibility (40.5 %), and the Ways to Rome, being the longest route, display the highest tendency towards flexibility (45.5 %).

In the case of deviating from the route, it is very significant to know the reasons for doing so. Thus, the most valued reason was related to the cultural interest of the surroundings of the route. Another well-valued reason was related to the natural environment of the rural areas of the route. It is additionally worth noting that some people might feel motivated to deviate if offered a package that included activities and transportation. The least popular motivation for deviating was related to participating in unexpected activities.

Regarding motivations (Table 3), it is noteworthy that on all three routes, “enjoying the landscape and having direct contact with nature” was highly valued, and “having a different personal/spiritual/psychological experience” was also quite significant. On the Camino de Santiago route, another prominent motivation was “resting/relaxing/disconnecting from routine,” highlighting the more touristic profile of

Table 3
Pilgrim/tourist interests and motivations.

Variables	Camino de Santiago		Mária Út/Via Mariae		Ways to Rome	
	Value	Value	Value	Value	Value	Value
Reasons for route deviation (1 TO 5)						
Explore rural surroundings	4	3.5			2.5	
Interested on rural cultural heritage	4	4.1			3.8	
Interested on rural natural heritage	2.9	3.7			3.9	
Motivations to make this trip (1 to 5)						
Landscape and nature	4.2	4.3			4.4	
Personal/spiritual/psychological experience	4	4.6			3.8	
Disconnecting from routine	3.7	3.4			3.6	
Religious	2.4	4.5			3	
Cultural heritage	3.5	3.7			3.8	
Variable	Camino de Santiago		Mária Út/Via Mariae		Ways to Rome	
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Activities planned (%)						
Experience landscape and nature	152	64 %	55	48.5 %	25	75.8 %
Visit religious sites	123	52 %	95	83.8 %	23	69.7 %
Religious services and related events	104	44 %	75	66.2 %	11	33.3 %
Visit cultural places	95	40 %	43	38.2 %	17	51.5 %

(Source: Own elaboration.)

this route. In contrast, on the Via Mariae route, religious motivations were the most prominent. For the Ways to Rome route, “learning about the cultural heritage of the places along the route” was another significant motivation.

Regarding the activities undertaken or planned by the pilgrims, “visiting religious sites” was common across all three routes. On the Camino de Santiago and the Ways to Rome routes, “experiencing the diversity of the landscape, flora, and fauna” was very significant, reflecting a touristic attitude. Conversely, for the pilgrims on the Via Mariae, religious services and related events were crucial activities.

As a summary, on the Camino de Santiago key motivations include enjoying nature, personal/spiritual experiences and relaxing from routine, with activities focused on visiting religious sites and experiencing the diverse landscape; on the *Mária Út* Way the motivations are mainly religious, with activities focused on religious services and events; finally, on the Ways to Rome, motivations include learning about cultural heritage and enjoying the natural landscape, with activities focused on visiting religious sites and experiencing local flora and fauna.

The descriptive data collected in this study allows for a better understanding of the characteristics and behaviors of pilgrims. These data not only enable the identification of common patterns but also reveal important nuances that inform the development of sustainable tourism strategies tailored to the specificities of each route. Thus, these strategies, being based on empirical data, have the potential to be more effective and sustainable in the long term, contributing to the regeneration and development of rural areas along pilgrimage routes.

- Pilgrim profile and its relationship with sustainable tourism: The analysis of the sociodemographic profile of pilgrims shows a heterogeneity that suggests the need to design tourism promotion strategies that are inclusive and personalized. However, homogeneous groups can also be created based on factors such as the preference of many pilgrims for longer routes and their greater flexibility in itineraries, indicating a significant potential for promoting ‘slow tourism.’
- Deviations from the main route as opportunities for rural development: This behavior offers a unique opportunity for rural areas to attract these visitors through improved signage, the creation of well-promoted alternative routes, and the provision of comprehensive tourist packages that include transportation and accommodation. Business models related to slow tourism can emerge around the valorization of cultural and natural heritage, the creation of alternative routes, the offering of local products, and the implementation of personalized services for pilgrims, such as themed accommodation and cultural activities.
- Impact on the development of sustainable tourism strategies: The data suggest that the implementation of ‘slow tourism’ strategies to leverage the flexibility of pilgrims can foster more balanced and distributed tourism, helping to mitigate the effects of seasonality and generate additional income for local communities, thereby creating a positive cycle of rural regeneration.
- Enhancement of the pilgrim experience: The customization of the tourist offer based on descriptive data can significantly enhance the pilgrim’s experience.

4.2. SWOT-CAME analysis to activate tourist projects and draw a new development perspective

The decision to conduct a common SWOT-CAME analysis for the four pilgrimage routes—the Way of St. James, the Roads to Rome, the Via Mariae and the Saint Olaf Way—is based on the shared characteristics of these routes and the common opportunities they present for sustainable rural development. All four routes pass through rural territories characterized by similar challenges such as low population density, ageing populations, limited tourism infrastructure and economies largely dependent on primary activities. These similarities allow us to identify

generalizable strengths and opportunities for these areas, as well as weaknesses and threats that are common to the peripheral territories.

In addition, the routes share a focus on the enhancement of cultural and natural heritage as the main driver for attracting visitors and fostering sustainable development. Tangible heritage (monuments, landscapes) and intangible heritage (traditions, gastronomy) represent a strategic resource that all the routes seek to integrate into their tourism promotion strategies. Moreover, all routes are aligned with the concept of slow tourism, where travelers prioritize authentic experiences and direct contact with nature and local communities. This provides a common basis for identifying strategies to encourage longer stays, detours to nearby areas and diversification of the tourism offer in rural areas.

Although the routes vary in terms of length, traveler composition and flexibility, they share challenges such as the need to improve infrastructure, diversify the tourism offer and promote tourism outside the most popular spots. They also present common opportunities, such as the growing demand for sustainable tourism and the interest in authentic cultural experiences. In this sense, joint analysis allows for the identification of strategies and good practices that can be adapted and replicated in different contexts, maximizing their impact. For example, lessons learned on the management of local resources, the integration of community stakeholders and the promotion of alternative itineraries are relevant to all routes, regardless of their specificities.

For the SWOT-CAME analysis, a common template was provided as an interview, which was completed by each of the project pilot leaders and a selection of the pilot team for each case study (see Annex, Table A2), extracting common strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the rural areas situated near the pilgrimage routes. The results obtained from the perceptions of the interviewees were triangulated with data from secondary sources (national and European databases).

Based on the obtained results (Table 4), it is highlighted, among other aspects, the need for international efforts to actively promote the regions through which the pilgrimage routes pass, showcasing better examples and practices from other rural areas. It is additionally significant to raise awareness among stakeholders about the importance of slow and sustainable tourism for the development of communities along the route. Under these considerations, it is additionally urgent to address the need for good governance and the establishment of cooperation networks for the routes. Each strategy has been linked to the political and socio-economic realities of the rural areas studied. For example, the reorientation strategy R1 focuses on increasing collaboration between stakeholders, while the defensive strategy D1 highlights the need for sustainable tourism planning to preserve resources and attract a more heritage-conscious consumer. These strategies are applicable and relevant, promoting tourism development that is sustainable and respectful of the local environment.

The SWOT-CAME analysis does not seek to homogenize the particularities of each route, but rather to identify common patterns and highlight how these routes can benefit from each other by sharing successful strategies and practices. This is done while respecting contextual differences, but focusing on those areas where the routes converge in terms of challenges and potentials.

4.3. Methodology for manual of transfer of good practices

The methodology for the elaboration of the Manual of Transfer of Good Practices was developed using a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques in order to ensure that the proposed recommendations were based on solid data and a comprehensive analysis of the routes studied. The elaboration of the Manual was one of the two main results of the coordination strategy implemented within the *ruAllure* project to progressively gain an understanding about the barriers and opportunities concerning each pilot and about the exchangeability of the observations and outcomes across different territories. This coordination strategy included the following steps:

Table 4
SWOT-CAME analysis results.

W WEAKNESSES	R REORIENTATION STRATEGIES
<p>W1. Unfavorable population growth rate in country areas Demographics data are not conducive to development: ageing, low population density and increasing depopulation.</p> <p>W2. Inadequate transportation infrastructure. Insufficient connectivity between rural regions and pilgrimage routes limits accessibility for visitors and pilgrims.</p> <p>W3. Poor signposting and lack of maintenance: Many local paths are poorly marked, making navigation difficult and reducing the attractiveness of the routes.</p> <p>W4. Insufficient tourist demand: Short stays, low overnight occupancy rates, and seasonal fluctuations prevent the development of sustainable tourism models.</p> <p>W5. Lack of structured and diversified tourist offerings: Limited options for accommodations, dining, and complementary leisure activities fail to meet visitor expectations.</p> <p>W6. Deficiencies in tourism management and promotion: Issues such as inadequate language skills, weak marketing, and limited digital outreach hinder destination competitiveness.</p> <p>W7. Limited local awareness and valuation of heritage: Low community involvement and self-esteem towards preserving and promoting local heritage impede progress.</p>	<p>R1. Strengthening local stakeholder involvement: Foster awareness and collaboration to enhance the route’s appeal and functionality.</p> <p>R2. Digitalizing travel planning: Create digital solutions for transportation, accommodations, and services to simplify pilgrim logistics.</p> <p>R3. Improving signposting and route information: Enhance signage and provide comprehensive information at key locations to guide and engage pilgrims.</p> <p>R4. Promoting rural cultural experiences: Develop immersive narratives and cultural activities, accessible through digital platforms.</p> <p>R5. Offering curated packages: Create tailored promotional packages for pilgrims, bundling accommodations, experiences, and services.</p> <p>R6. Leveraging technology for tourism training: Use online platforms to train local stakeholders in hospitality and destination management.</p>
T THREATS	D DEFENSIVE STRATEGIES
<p>T1. Absence of integrated tourism planning: Fragmented strategies limit the potential for coherent development along the routes.</p> <p>T2. Improved public-private coordination. There is a lack of networking among people involved.</p> <p>T3. Resistance to itinerary changes by pilgrims: Many visitors prefer sticking to traditional routes, limiting exploration of nearby attractions.</p> <p>T4. Over-concentration of tourism on main routes: Adjacent rural areas are often overlooked, leading to missed opportunities for regional development.</p> <p>T5. Poor information flow among rural stakeholders: Gaps in communication and coordination hinder collaborative efforts and resource sharing.</p>	<p>D1. Sustainable resource management: Implement tourism planning that respects ecological and cultural limits, targeting eco-conscious visitors.</p> <p>D2. Building strategic alliances: Partner with neighboring destinations, businesses, and academic institutions to boost innovation and shared initiatives.</p> <p>D3. Enhancing regional reputation: Promote themes like hospitality and multiculturalism to strengthen the destination’s identity.</p> <p>D4. Collaborating with cultural institutions: Engage museums and heritage collections as active contributors to tourism content.</p>
S STRENGTHS	S SURVIVAL STRATEGIES
<p>S1. Rich cultural and natural heritage: Pilgrimage routes pass through areas with significant historical landmarks, natural beauty, and cultural assets.</p> <p>S2. Institutional support: Active involvement from public administrations facilitates preservation and promotion efforts.</p> <p>S3. Community and organizational engagement: Associations and local sectors actively support the promotion of these itineraries.</p> <p>S4. Complementary resources: Attractions like gastronomy and crafts enable the creation of year-round tourism offers.</p> <p>S5. Positive perception of pilgrimage routes: Values like hospitality and multiculturalism resonate with visitors and enhance the routes’ appeal.</p> <p>S6. Proximity to other attractions: Nearby tourist destinations can complement the main pilgrimage experience.</p>	<p>SU1. Community co-creation: Work with locals to recover and promote regional stories, traditions, and memories.</p> <p>SU2. Governance and route networking: Establish effective management structures and foster collaboration across routes.</p> <p>SU3. Enhancing communication and best practices: Share successful initiatives and improve outreach efforts to raise awareness.</p> <p>SU4. Developing new tourist products: Design experiences that attract visitors from adjacent destinations and diversify offerings.</p>
O OPPORTUNITIES	O OFFENSIVE STRATEGIES
<p>O1. Increasing demand for pilgrimage tourism: Rising interest in spiritual and cultural travel boosts visitor numbers.</p> <p>O2. Synergies with other sectors: Integrating tourism with agriculture, crafts, and other industries creates diversified economic benefits.</p> <p>O3. Appeal of authenticity and naturalness: Rural areas offer unique assets like high-quality landscapes, slow living, and cultural richness.</p> <p>O4. Growing interest in slow tourism: Visitors are increasingly drawn to less crowded, sustainable travel experiences.</p> <p>O5. Advancing tourism technology: Innovations in digital platforms enhance destination marketing and visitor experiences.</p> <p>O6. Opportunities for cross-sectoral projects: Collaboration among public and private entities fosters innovative initiatives.</p> <p>O7. Heightened focus on sustainability: The association of pilgrimage with environmental and social values attracts eco-conscious travelers.</p> <p>O8. Potential for educational tourism: School tourism can be leveraged to foster awareness of cultural and natural heritage.</p>	<p>OF1. Strengthening social cohesion: Involve local communities and associations in tourism initiatives.</p> <p>OF2. Expanding synergies: Build on existing partnerships and connect with international initiatives.</p> <p>OF3. Highlighting local resources: Identify key points of interest (POIs) to drive sustainable economic and cultural development.</p> <p>OF4. Positioning as a “slow territory”: Promote the region as a destination with diverse and peaceful tourism experiences.</p> <p>OF5. Creating alternative itineraries: Design and market detours to attract diverse visitor segments.</p> <p>OF6. Educating stakeholders on sustainability: Raise awareness about the importance of responsible tourism for community development.</p> <p>OF7. Implementing inclusive programming: Use digital tools to ensure accessibility and universal design in tourism offerings.</p>

(Source: Own elaboration.)

1. First year: the four pilots were given space for autonomy and creativity, so each pilot could brainstorm about possible actions considering local perspectives only. As a result, a total of 73 newly-created actions for pilgrims were implemented and 121 previously-existing activities were continued, repeated or enhanced with the support of the rurAllure project.
2. Second year: the four pilots went on developing actions aimed at promoting multiple facets of cultural heritage, but now their observations and results were collected periodically with a common structure to be able to read the findings. A total of 110 actions were collected and from each of them we gathered common data (see Annex, Table A3), that allowed us to come to some first relevant conclusions and recommendations for the next step.
3. Third year: the results of the actions implemented by the four pilots and the comprehensive analysis of the collected data led to the elaboration of the Manual for the transfer of good tourism practices and a white book of recommendations.

In this study, we are only going to focus on the Manual that, in summary, identifies, documents, and shares a set of good practices in order to give access to lessons learnt resulting from the rurAllure pilots experimentation and experience all along the project development. Indeed, it is designed to provide an overview and identify key issues for those interested in promoting museums and rural heritage near European pilgrimage routes. In brief, the design of the Manual aims to:

- Compile information from selected experiences.
- Includes a system of indicators that allows other institutions to evaluate their own situation.
- Facilitate the implementation of successful initiatives along the pilgrimage routes involved in the case studies and in other parts of Europe.

According to the definition of the European Rural Development Network, a Good Practice is “a management and implementation strategy, programme, project, procedure or practice that meets the following characteristics: it has been tested and validated, implemented with positive results, is successful and innovative, can be developed and adapted to other contexts, is transferable and contributes to improving performance.” (EU CAP Network, 2024).

To select good practices, the European Rural Development Network also highlights that “other aspects are additionally taken into account, such as the improvement of the quality of life, the sustainable management of resources or the active participation of the agents involved.” (EU CAP Network, 2024).

Starting from the previous definition, in the rurAllure project we established a total of six criteria to determine what a Good Practice is: 1. Relevance; 2. Efficiency; 3. Innovation; 4. Impact; 5. Replicability; and 6. Recognition. These criteria have been set based on a review of bibliography related to how to select a Good Practice and what are the dimensions to be evaluated (Gradaille Pernas & Caballo Villar, 2016; International Observatory on Participatory Democracy, 2012), but in accordance with the specific context of the rurAllure project. Next we provide a proper description of each criterion in order to be clear about what is being evaluated for each of them as well as a set of parameters to determine how to weight each criterion with a scale of high-medium-low in Table 5:

1. **Relevance:** evaluates to what extent the practice is focused on promoting rural cultural heritage located near pilgrimage routes and whether it contributes to solving a problem or continuous improvement of a detected need, conservation and use of value, mitigating a threat, or exploring the opportunities offered by a heritage resource.
2. **Efficiency:** evaluates if the practice seeks excellence or quality in promoting cultural heritage in the rural context of European pilgrimage routes, proposing and implementing activities that are

Table 5
List of criterion to select a good practice and parameters to weight each of them.

	Parameters	Weighting of the criteria (high option)*
Relevance criterion	Heritage focus	It is focused on heritage assets that are not placed directly on a pilgrimage ways and have not been promoted before in relation with them
	Territory focus	It is focused on ignored rural territories that are not traversed by a pilgrimage route or those with a low impact from nearby pilgrimage routes
	Swot focus	It is focused on two or more strengths, weaknesses, opportunities or threats of a specific rural territory identified in a DAFO analysis
Efficiency criterion	Objectives	It achieves pre-established goals, and this involves positive changes in the context on which the action was focused.
	Use of resources	It is highly efficient in the relationship between the resources used in the action and the goals achieved with them, that is, the action is capable of achieving an objective adequately to the available means (economic, material and human).
	Came analysis	The strategy applied is in correlation with the SWOT analysis, in such a way that is able to face different elements that have been previously found: to correct a weakness (reorientation strategy) and to adapt to/adjust to the threats (survival strategy); to maintain the strengths (defensive strategy) and to explore the opportunities (offensive strategy), ...
Innovation criterion	Heritage assets	It incorporates new assets for the promotion of rural heritage that have not been addressed before in relation with nearby pilgrimage ways.
	Target audience	It is designed for a diverse audience with a special care for population sectors that are generally less taken into account in the context of the promotion of rural museums and cultural heritage sites in the vicinity of pilgrimage routes.
	Promotional mechanisms and tools	It introduces new and creative mechanisms or tools for the promotion of rural heritage and museums placed in the vicinity of European pilgrimage ways at different levels (methodological, functional, relational, ...)
Impact criterion	Positive results	It produces substantive and positive results, that are materialized or clearly visible in regards to its objectives, target audiences, heritage focus, ...
	Improvement in promotion	It produces changes and clear improvements in the promotion of museums or heritage sites in the rural areas placed in the vicinity of pilgrimages routes and these can be clearly documented.
	Sustainability	It is able to maintain its positive results in the short, medium and long terms, or it has the potential for its continuity after the end of the period foreseen for its implementation, with long-term positive effects.
Replicability criterion	Grounding	It is the continuation of a pre-existing practice with no adaptations.
	Strategy	It proposes a strategy that presents many possibilities for its replicability in a different context to which it was initially implemented.
	Diagnosis	Clear guidelines and recommendations are documented to make possible the replication of the practice, along with a diagnosis of its results.

(continued on next page)

Table 5 (continued)

	Parameters	Weighting of the criteria (high option)*
Recognition criterion	Public events	It has been presented at congresses or meetings of specialists.
	Publications	It has been published in specialized journals, blogs, research reports, or conference proceedings.
	Distinctions	It has received awards or distinctions from third parties.

*It was developed a High – Medium – Low Likert scale to measure each parameter and we provided participants with a description of each level of the scale. Here we only show the description corresponding to the High Option. (Source: Own elaboration.)

- effective concerning pre-established objectives and target audiences, efficient in terms of the use of heritage resources, and effective in relation to the solution of needs or how they adjust to threats.
- Innovation:** the evaluates if the practice incorporates new assets for promoting rural heritage or enhances existing ones in the context it is developed to increase the promotional capacity of rural museums and cultural heritage sites not located in areas crossed by a pilgrimage route. It examines if the practice introduces creative ways of doing things that break with traditional or already explored habits in those same contexts in relation to target audiences and promotional mechanisms.
 - Impact:** examines to what extent the practice has sufficient evidence on achieving pre-established objectives, results achieved, and involvement of different agents in the action. Therefore, this criterion focuses on analyzing if the practice has a positive impact in the context in which it has been developed and if it is additionally sustainable in its capacity to maintain the sought objectives over time, that is, if the changes and improvements achieved provide stability to promoting rural cultural heritage near European pilgrimage routes from a local, regional, or global scale consideration.
 - Replicability:** evaluates what extent the practice is transferable or applicable to a different context from which it was designed and thus obtain similar results. In other words, if it can be implemented in other rural contexts near European pilgrimage routes for promoting cultural heritage, even if it has to be adapted to new contexts but following the guidelines set by the original action. This ability to be transferable to other similar realities makes the practice a more realistic solution than other strategies designed for unique, singular, and therefore non-replicable contexts.
 - Recognition:** examines the plurality of agents that evaluate a practice as a way to guarantee its objectivity. It will focus on analyzing if there are indicators of the evaluation and recognition of the action by the expert community in the field in which it has been developed, for example, because it has received a distinction or award, has been presented at public events (congresses, forums...), or has been the subject of studies or publications by actors who know or are interested in the subject. This guarantees its quality and the plurality of agents that express the value of the initiative, ensuring a certain degree of objectivity in the evaluation.

4.3.1. Evaluation system definition for selecting good practices

Once the definition of Good Practice and the criteria for selecting them was established, the next step was to propose an evaluation system divided into two parts: self-assessment and peer evaluation. In this way, it is intended to ensure, to some extent, a critical review from the perspective of the creators of the actions, but additionally from external peers with sufficient experience in the field, that is, the other project pilots.

First Step of the Evaluation Strategy: Self-Assessment

For the self-assessment, each of the four project pilots was asked to evaluate their own actions. Each pilot was asked to choose a minimum of

one practice (TOP 1) and a maximum of three practices (TOP 3) as good practices from among all those they have developed: Actions with pilgrims and tourists (Action type 1); Actions with stakeholders and policymakers (Action type 2); Featured trips creation (Action type 3); Narratives creation (Action type 4). For this selection, interviewees were asked to complete a table for each selected good practice and answer a common set of six questions (Table 6). Each question asks the cases to reflect on each of the six established criteria to gather information from which to draw relevant conclusions for the Manual of transfer of good practices.

Second step of the evaluation strategy: Peer-to-peer evaluation

For peer-to-peer evaluation, each project pilot was asked to evaluate the actions of two other pilots to ensure a certain degree of objectivity in the selection of good practices. Each pilot team was again asked to select a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 3 different actions from among all those they have developed: Actions with pilgrims and tourists (Action type 1); Actions with stakeholders and policymakers (Action type 2); Featured trips creation (Action type 3); and Narratives creation (Action type 4).

This peer-to-peer evaluation was also guided by a set of questions we provided pilots based on the previous criteria in which we also tried to gather information from their side in relation to the reasons that justify their choice.

Table 6
Proposed table for self-evaluation of pilots actions.

TOP 1 (INDICATE IF IT IS THE TOP 1, TOP 2 OR TOP 3 in your selection)	
NAME OF THE ACTION	Indicate the name of the action you choose for evaluation as a good/best practice.
Question 1. [Relevance]	To what extent has the action contributed to solving a problem, need or challenge?
Answer to question 1	<i>Evaluate critically how the action has contributed to correcting a weakness, adapting to a threat, maintaining a strength or exploring an opportunity. You can think of one or various of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and/or threats you have identified in your SWOT analysis and briefly explain the value of the action in that sense. Please, review the criterion 1 to guide you in the evaluation process.</i>
QUESTION 2. [Efficiency]	Is it convenient to modify / improve any specific element of the design of the action analyzed to ensure the effectiveness and efficiency of its generalization?
Answer to question 2	<i>Evaluate critically the singularities of the action that may cause difficulties in their replication, as well as the aspects you will change/improve if you have to run the action again, based on your experience. Please, review the criterion 2 description to guide you in the process.</i>
Question 3. [INNOVATION]	To what extent does the action entail an innovation and/or improvement of those previously carried out?
Answer to question 3	<i>Examine the innovative aspects of the action as compared to the type of practices usually carried out in similar contexts. Please, review the third criterion description and parameters to guide you in the evaluation.</i>
QUESTION 4. [IMPACT]	Is there evidence of the achievement of objectives and positive results, and of the involvement of different stakeholders for the sustainability of the action?
Answer to question 4	<i>Submit indicators and arguments that demonstrate the correct achievement of objectives and positive results, as well as the broad participation of stakeholders involved. Please, review the criterion 4 to guide you in the process.</i>
Question 5. [Replicability]	Is it foreseeable that the generalization of the action in the same terms provided in the study, contributes to solving the problem, need or challenge in a similar context?
Answer to question 5	<i>Reflect about the potentialities that the chosen action has to be transferred to similar contexts. Please, review the criterion 5 description and parameters to guide you in the evaluation process.</i>
Question 6. [Recognition]	Is there objective evaluation and recognition by experts?
Answer to question 6	<i>Explain to what extent has the action been recognized and positively evaluated by internal/ external agents of the expert community. Please, review the criterion 6 description and parameters to guide you in the evaluation process.</i>

(Source: Own elaboration.)

4.3.2. Top 10 rurAllure good practices

At the end of the evaluation process, a total of 9 practices were selected in the Self-evaluation, and a total of 14 practices were selected in the peer-to-peer review process. On the basis of this result, we applied a second evaluation round towards the TOP 10 rurAllure practices taking into account those practices that have been chosen by more than one pilot in the previous phases (Table 7).

After the study carried out, detailed information was compiled on 10 good practices implemented in the field of European pilgrimage routes. For each practice we collected information regarding the following aspects: Name of the Good Practice, Practice Description (Location, Brief Summary); Practice Implementation (Activities carried out, Collaborations: actors, partners and stakeholders, Resource implications);

Table 7

List and brief description of Top 10 rurAllure good practices.

	Name of the good practice	Brief description
Good Practice 1	Pedra, "Festival de Saberes", The Festival of Rural Wisdoms	This festival celebrates and preserves traditional knowledge and rural culture, promoting community participation and the valorization of intangible heritage.
Good Practice 2	I Love Francigena Thermal	An initiative that combines hiking along the Via Francigena with the experience of thermal baths, emphasizing the importance of thermal heritage along the route and offering pilgrims a rejuvenating experience.
Good Practice 3	Passive, Digital Ethnography ("Netnography")	A research method that analyzes user behavior and interactions in digital environments, providing valuable insights into the perceptions and experiences of pilgrims.
Good Practice 4	Family Day on the Way of Mary in Transylvania	An event designed to engage families in activities along the Way of Mary, fostering intergenerational participation and promoting family-friendly tourism in the region.
Good Practice 5	Accessibility workshop in Bagno Vignoni	A session dedicated to improving accessibility at heritage sites, ensuring that people of diverse abilities can fully enjoy the facilities and experiences offered.
Good Practice 6	A series of three stakeholder content workshops in Maithaugen (Lillehammer), Mjøsuseet (Kapp), and NTNU (Gjøvik)	Meetings that bring together various stakeholders to develop strategies and content enhancing ethnographic heritage along pilgrimage routes in Norway.
Good Practice 7	Recommended plans for industrial historical sites along the path	Development of itineraries that highlight industrial heritage sites, integrating them into pilgrimage routes to enrich pilgrims' cultural experiences.
Good Practice 8	Systematic approach to producing and testing featured trips with accompanying narratives along the Ways of Mary / Mária Út	Creation and evaluation of thematic itineraries incorporating specific narratives, offering pilgrims a deeper understanding of the natural and cultural heritage of the region.
Good Practice 9	Narratives on the Silver Way and nearby variants	Development of stories and narratives that enhance pilgrims' experiences on the Silver Way, highlighting the historical, cultural, and natural aspects of the route.
Good Practice 10	Co-creation of narratives with students of the 1st level Master in Tourism Enhancement and Cultural Heritage Management from University of Bologna	Collaboration with students to develop narratives that promote cultural heritage, integrating fresh and academic perspectives into tourism promotion.

(Source: Own elaboration.)

Representation Results (Outputs/Outcomes); Lessons learnt and recommendations (Potential for replication, To keep in mind, Do's/Don'ts); About (Contact details); and Further Reading.

A detailed analysis of the good practices selected indicates that the majority share the common objective of promoting less known heritage, with the aim of moving the public and pilgrims from the best-known areas traversed by the pilgrimage routes to nearby rural heritage with important values. Furthermore, the participation of multiple, mainly local, stakeholders is constantly highlighted in the collected data per each good practice. The potential of workshops and networks with stakeholders has been also repeatedly highlighted as they help to better understand local tourist strategies and identify common goals. In the same sense, some evaluations point out the importance of carrying out activities focused on knowing the motivations, desires and needs of the target audiences, pilgrims and tourists in each region. In the process of analyzing the information collected, it is also observed that it is necessary to design actions for diverse audiences, with special attention to sectors of the population that are generally less taken into account in the context of the promotion of rural museums and cultural heritage sites in the vicinity of pilgrimage routes such as people with disabilities. Last but not least, gathering feedback from participants to allow future improvements has been pointed out but most of the actions implemented.

In particular, the Good Practices reflect trends detected in the analysis such as pilgrims' interest in authentic experiences related to cultural and natural heritage, as well as their increasing flexibility to deviate from the main routes when offered attractive alternatives. Furthermore, they align with the strategic objectives derived from the SWOT analysis such as the promotion of sustainable tourism, the valorization of local heritage and the strengthening of rural communities.

These practices were also designed to be replicable in different contexts, facilitating their adaptation to other pilgrimage routes or rural areas with similar challenges and opportunities. In this way, the Good Practice Manual not only becomes a tool for implementing specific solutions, but also a strategic resource for promoting rural regeneration through tourism and heritage conservation.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, this article aims to provide results that help in the definition of strategies to diversify the economy of rural areas and combat their depopulation through the conservation, dissemination and enhancement of heritage at risk (including trades, customs, architecture, art, music, etc.). As highlighted, the many pilgrimage routes criss-crossing Europe have untapped potential to offer slow travel experiences that can boost rural development. This approach can provide opportunities and solutions to the economic and social deterioration in these regions and serve as an alternative development strategy, in contrast to recent cases of overtourism (Moscarelli et al., 2020).

The results of the surveys have allowed us to know the heterogeneous profile of the pilgrim and allow us to warn the potential of offering diverse experiences during the pilgrimage routes. Furthermore, there is a clear tendency among pilgrims to show greater flexibility in their itineraries when they travel longer routes, so promoting long trips is also a way to promote slow tourism and get them to know more about the territories through which they travel. Although it is true that cultural interest is one of the main motivations, natural heritage can also generate great interest, but it is necessary to study and promote it. Of course, it is necessary to offer a complementary offer that simplifies the pilgrim's work when organizing their stays and detours.

Additionally, the results of the interviews have allowed us to discover how to connect points of cultural and historical interest near routes and locate them on the map. The opportunity is reinforced by the objective of establishing a foundation for rural communities to develop relevant and cohesive tourism products. It is evident that these itineraries and paths represent effective forms of collaboration between local actors and stakeholders to carry out multiple shared tourism and

territorial promotion strategies (Corinto & Nicosia, 2015; Mariotti et al., 2021). In fact, inter-municipal collaboration is a fundamental factor to undertake a strategic approach that strengthens the rural territories of these routes. Ultimately, it is necessary to define holistic and integrated strategies for territorial development through the cooperation of all involved stakeholders (Balestrieri & Congiu, 2017). This study can thus serve as a starting point for the coordination and implementation of common strategies that lead, for example, to the establishment of a network of institutions to work on promoting cultural spaces and heritage sites in rural environments near pilgrimage routes. The purpose of this network would be to foster coordination among stakeholders and unlock the potential of pilgrimage as a catalyst for regional development, thereby building a unified pilgrimage path among the different religious traditions of Central Europe and creating a network between these places.

An initial analysis of the context of the four case studies also highlights the heterogeneous strengths and weaknesses of local realities that influence the potential of these routes to activate tourism projects and draw a new development perspective. While all areas considered in the study clearly express the aspiration to activate regeneration by taking advantage of pilgrimage routes, the methods to implement and evaluate this objective must necessarily be diverse. Therefore, the good practices identified include the promotion of slow tourism, the integration of local cultural activities and the creation of cooperation networks between municipalities. These practices can be replicated on other pilgrimage routes, adapting them, of course, to local specificities.

The compilation and analysis of the experiences of the four case studies has revealed that work needs to be done so that some pilgrims decide to take a break or detour and spend time in a nearby town. The objective is to achieve a significant social, cultural and economic impact in a broader territory. Certainly, it should be noted that the Camino de Santiago is a consolidated concept, product, brand and infrastructure, which is why it has been taken as a reference and turns out to be a catalyst for all the case studies.

In summary, the good practices presented open possibilities of increasing the number of visitors to lesser-known heritage sites through strategies aimed at: bringing meaningful cultural experiences closer to rural resources, mobilizing transportation, accommodation and restaurants in one click, and offering packages complete for pilgrims through personalized promotional methods. However, the study's findings are subject to certain limitations. The qualitative nature of the research restricts the generalizability of the results, as the analysis prioritizes depth over statistical breadth. Additionally, the applicability of the conclusions is influenced by the unique contextual characteristics of the study areas, which may not be fully representative of other rural or cultural settings. Furthermore, data collection was constrained by

challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic, which limited participant access and fieldwork opportunities.

Ultimately, the data collected through surveys and interviews highlight the flexibility of pilgrims and their willingness to deviate from the main routes, which corroborates previous studies (Araújo Vila et al., 2021; Trono & Castronuovo, 2021). Theoretically, these findings challenge the traditional view of pilgrimage tourism as a linear and predictable experience, instead proposing a more dynamic and flexible model. In practice, our results suggest that rural development planners should consider implementing 'slow tourism' strategies that leverage the tendency of pilgrims. This could include the creation of personalized tourist packages that integrate cultural and natural heritage, offer transportation and accommodation options in these areas, and promote the urban-rural dynamic.

It would be recommended that future research focus on evaluating the longitudinal impact of the proposed strategies, as well as exploring the application of these practices in other cultural contexts.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

María Andrade Suárez: Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Estefanía López Salas:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Iria Caamaño Franco:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Antonio Álvarez Sousa:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Validation.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: Maria Andrade-Suarez reports financial support was provided by Horizon 2020. She has been the IP of WP2 of the Rurallure project in which Estefanía López-Salas and Iria Caamaño Franco have also participated. The other authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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Annex A. Annex

Table A1

List of semi-structured interviews conducted in May 2023.

Project pilot	Interviewee position	Country	Relevance for the study
1. Ways to Santiago de Compostela	Representative of a local tourist agency	Spain	Specialist in sustainable tourism and development of cultural routes.
	Owner of a hostel	Spain	Key operator in the attention to pilgrims and development of local services.
	Researcher in cultural tourism	Spain	Analyst of the cultural and economic impact of pilgrimage routes.
	Member of a pilgrims' association	Spain	Promoter of the preservation and improvement of pilgrimage experiences.
2. Ways to Rome	Expert in cultural heritage management	Italy	Responsible for heritage enhancement projects in rural areas.
	Restaurant owner	Italy	Key player in the integration of local gastronomy into the pilgrim experience.
	Municipal representative	Italy	In charge of infrastructure planning and promotion of the route.
	Experienced pilgrim	Italy	Direct source of information on the motivations and needs of walkers.

(continued on next page)

Table A1 (continued)

Project pilot	Interviewee position	Country	Relevance for the study
3. Ways to Trondheim	St. Olaf's Paths Government representative in rural development	Norway	Coordinator of economic regeneration programmes in rural communities.
	Local tour operator	Norway	Specialist in designing experiences for walkers in Nordic landscapes.
	Member of a local religious community	Norway	Keeper of the spiritual traditions associated with the St. Olaf Ways.
	Destination marketing expert	Norway	Responsible for promotion strategies and visibility of the route at international level.
4. Ways to Csíksomlyó	Member of a local tourism association	Hungary	Promoter of rural tourism strategies and integration of religious routes.
	Owner of a rural house	Hungary	Active in the creation of sustainable accommodation for pilgrims.
	Representative of an environmental NGO	Hungary	Focused on the protection of the natural environment along the routes.
	Religious heritage researcher	Hungary	Expert in the valorization and preservation of religious heritage linked to the route.

Table A2

List of participants in the SWOT-CAME analysis for each pilot project.

Project pilot	Interviewee position and relevance for the study	Country
1. Ways to Santiago de Compostela	Municipal representative with expertise in cultural and heritage itineraries, local development and social change.	Portugal
	Municipal representative with expertise in cultural immaterial heritage, preventive conservation of museums and collections.	Portugal
	Developer of socio-educational action projects with children and youth at risk.	Portugal
	Member of a research center on tangible and intangible heritage and municipal representative of the Tourism, Culture and Communication Division.	Portugal
	Leading scholar in the study of sociology of tourism, culture and heritage.	Spain
	Research fellow on tourism as an agent socio-economic development, heritage and tourism intermediation.	Spain
	Member of a national association on cultural heritage and president of a writer's foundation.	Spain
	Municipal representative with expertise in local tourism policies and strategies.	Spain
	Head of a Center for Advanced Studies in Tourism	Italy
	Research fellow and PhD Candidate in tourism. Sustainability monitoring, rural development and transnational cultural routes.	Italy
2. Ways to Rome	Academic specialist in thermalism in the Roman Empire and the exploitation of natural resources and archaeological heritage.	Spain
	Academic specialist in creating and performing accessible outreach activities based on Universal Design and chair of a NGO association.	Spain
	Director of a European Association of a pilgrimage route.	Italy
	Member of a European Association of a pilgrimage route.	Italy
	Member of a European Association of a pilgrimage route.	Italy
	Coordinator of a European Association of a pilgrimage route.	Italy
	Specialist in policy innovation, project development and fundraising activities.	Italy
	Academic specialist in graphic design, information design and wayfinding systems.	Norway
	Academic specialist in developing interactive applications to improve people's life.	Norway
	Person working with a NGO.	Norway
3. Ways to Trondheim	Member of a national pilgrimage center	Norway
	Member of a local museum.	Norway
	Member of a local museum.	Norway
	Member of a governmental agency.	Hungary
4. Ways to Csíksomlyó	Cultural heritage specialist.	Hungary
	Historian of religion specialized in the formation of saints cult and pilgrimage sites.	Hungary
	Representative of a local religious community	Hungary
	Coordinator of a local public benefit association of a pilgrimage route	Slovakia
	Academic specialist on the application of psychological knowledge to the marketing and media practice.	Slovakia
	Academic specialist on creating promotional tools and campaigns focused on socially-oriented and non-commercial topics.	Slovakia

Table A3

Instructions for data gathering on rurAllure pilots actions.

Column A:	Action name
	Write the name of the action.
Column B:	Action Group
	Choose one of the two options that are displayed when you click on a cell of this columns: Previously-Existing integrated or Newly-created.
Column C:	Action Short Description (up to 250 words)

(continued on next page)

Table A3 (continued)

Column C:	Action Short Description (up to 250 words)
	Provide a short description of the action that do not exceed the limit of 250 words. Have in mind, that many information about the action would be displayed in the following columns.
Column D:	Pilgrimage Route
	When you click on a cell of this column a list of the four rurAllure pilgrimages routes will be displayed. Select the one where the action you are going to document was developed.
Column E:	Pilgrimage Segment
	When you click on a cell of this column a list of pilgrimage segments of the four rurAllure pilgrimages routes will be displayed. These segments are coherent with the ones each pilot included in the Territorial Coverage of March review. If the action is end-to-end, select the last option "Does not apply". If the action was developed in more than one pilgrimage segment, but not in the whole route, select the last blank space and directly write in the cell the pilgrimage segments names.
Column F:	Location/s
	Indicate the location/s where the action was developed in the form Place/s (Country). If the action does not applied to a specific location/s but to a whole route segment, you can leave this cell blank or indicate the location/s where some relevant activities within the action took place.
Column G:	Population density
	Indicate the population size of the previous location/s in inhabitants per square kilometer. In the case of several locations, just indicate an average value.
Column H:	Distance from the official route
	Indicate the location/s distance from the official pilgrimage route in kms. In the case of several locations, just indicate an average value.
Column I:	Facilitated transport
	Select from the list if the action facilitates or does not facilitate transport from the official route to the action location. Depending on the type of action, this information may not apply. In such a case, select the last option "Does not apply".
Column J:	Geographical Scope
	Select a geographical scope from the list.

(continued on next page)

Table A3 (continued)

Column K:	Action Management
Column K:	Action Management
	Indicate who coordinated and supervised the action.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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