



BEST PRACTICE: AHR VALLEY, GERMANY



Key Challenge

Resilience building and crisis management.

Type of Solution

Adoption of a tourism strategy and monitoring framework; Stakeholder participation and management; Promotional campaigns; Investments in infrastructure and product development.

Case Classification

Type of Destination | Rural

Territorial Level | < NUTS 3

Size of the Tourist Area | around 500 km (measured by the area of the municipalities along the Ahr).

Population | ~75,000 in 2023

Type of Tourism | Rural; Cultural; Gastronomy; Health and wellness.

Tourism Organisation | Local Destination Management Organisation (DMO) is a Public-private partnership.

Main Stakeholders Affected | Local authorities/government; Local residents; Tourists; ALL Tourism service providers; Local farmers and producers; Local businesses; Transport companies.

Additional Challenges Covered | Appropriate local tourism strategies and policies to accelerate the transition to sustainable and resilient tourism; Lack of awareness of sustainability and resilience among tourism stakeholders.

Context & Background

The Ahr Valley stretches along the Ahr river and is characterised by wine growing and thermal baths. In 2021, a flood inundated almost 200 hectares of land in the valley, causing 135 deaths and damaging about 9,000 buildings, more than 100 bridges, 150 roads and the entire railway network. Before the flood, tourism was growing steadily (20 percent of GDP and 30 percent of employment in 2019). But most of the more than 450 accommodation facilities were damaged by the event, and the number of overnight stays dropped from 1.4 million (2019) to 624,000 in 2023.

Key Challenge

The destruction has brought about the need for a complete restart of the entire tourism system in the Ahr Valley, with reconstruction, new business ideas and a repositioning of the region. The investments were associated with great financial risks and tourism needed to get back on track quickly.



Implementation of Solutions: In order to rebuild the destroyed tourism system, initial reconstruction measures were initiated on the basis of a newly developed sustainable tourism concept and efforts were made to bring tourists back to the destination.

SOLUTIONS

- The extensive destruction of the infrastructure was a disaster, but also an opportunity at the same time: it made a completely new direction in tourism possible. The DMO Ahrtal Tourismus set the course for sustainable and innovative tourism in the Ahr Valley and, together with regional stakeholders, developed the *"Sustainable Tourism Concept Ahrtal 2025"*, which is based on the State's tourism strategy.
- At the same time, information brochures were created for tourism companies that supported the implementation of the sustainability strategy and provided an overview of *funding programmes*, a *self-check for sustainability management* and *measures for operational sustainability management*. The reconstruction of the tourism infrastructure is a lengthy process. Three years after the disaster, the first feasibility studies are now being carried out.
- More than 100 tourism companies have begun to redefine, restructure and reposition their tourism offerings. The reorientation is also driving a generational change in the companies.
- Due to lack of financial resources, but also to adapt to the new sustainability concept, long-distance markets are no longer being targeted and attempts are being made to exploit the potential of nearby cities. This has a positive effect on mobility, as it is easier for local tourists to travel by public transport – the local railway is being reconstructed, electrified and digitalised to meet modern mobility requirements.
- The *"We ahr open"* marketing campaign conveys the message that the region is ready to welcome visitors again, but also stands for 'openness' to new ideas and challenges. The campaign was launched in October 2022 and includes several measures, among which the DMO website, banners on construction sites in cities and motorways across Germany, advertisements placed throughout Germany (digital screens) in recreation and sports venues and shopping centres, a social media campaign and Spotify spots (October 2022-Jan 2023), and the involvement of regional businesses through the provision of campaign signs, banners, posters and stickers.
- Ahr Valley received advisory support under the *EU project 'Crisis Management and Governance in Tourism'* and developed action plans to improve its resilience.

Replicability potential: High in case of a catastrophe (requires leadership, stakeholder cooperation and financial resources)

Cost & funding source: 200,000 euros for the development of the sustainable tourism concept "Ahrtal 2025", funded by the Rhineland-Palatinate region; Around 250,000 euros for the "We ahr open" campaign, financed by the State of Rhineland-Pfalz and by sponsorships; Advisory support under the EU project 'Crisis Management and Governance in Tourism' was funded by the EU Single Market Programme.



Success Factors & Barriers

Success factors: The solidarity of the residents and people through the disaster; the positive change in motivation (after initial despair, the motivation to create something new developed).

Barriers: Shock phase and disorientation among residents after the flood however did not last very long as the first discussions on the tourism strategy already began at the end of 2021, and at the beginning of 2022 the first plans for tourist activities on site were made.

Results and Impacts

- Tourism played a key role in crisis management and, even after devastating floods, gave hope and confidence that the future of the destination could be successful.
- The “We ahr open” campaign showed locals and guests that the valley was seriously intending to rebuild tourism.
- The restart created many jobs in the construction industry, crafts, tourism, the service sector, etc.
- The number of overnight stays rose from around 434,000 in 2022 to 624,000 in 2023.

Recommendations by the Destinations

- The DMO and the tourism sector are taking a leading role in rebuilding the destination.
- Since the beginning of the reconstruction, tourist acceptance was promoted, as tourism development must take place in harmony with the local people.
- Through the “We ahr open” campaign, local residents and guests have realised that the entire valley is seriously committed to its future, and this has created a generalised sense of confidence.

Useful Links

[We ahr open](#) | [Sustainable Tourism Concept Ahrtal 2025](#)

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