

Conference Report

Tourism – Current and Future Challenges for Urban Development

IFHP Annual International Conference, 24th – 27th May 2009, Mikulov, Czech Republic

The IFHP international Spring Conference held May 24-27, 2009 in Mikulov, in the Czech Republic was the culmination of an IFHP four year Working Party on Tourism and Urban Development. This working party lead by IFHP Bureau Member Jaromir Stejskal explored a range of tourism related development challenges in diverse locations including Porto, Malta, Budapest, Goteborg and San Juan.



The choice of the scenic town of Mikulov for this meeting symbolized several aspects of tourism. It particularly underscored the continued value of small relatively un-noticed places that have retained their everyday charm and simplicity. Attendees were reminded how small places with simple means can provide a beauty and charm that bigger, more popular and known places cannot.

Opening ceremonies were held at Mikulov's historic castle and included welcome speeches from: host Jaromir Stejskal (IFHP Board member), Francesc Ventura (IFHP President), Blazena Krizova (Ministry for Regional Development), Anna Prochazkova (Vice-Governor of the South Moravia Region) and Rostislav Kostial (Mayor of Mikulov). Each speaker emphasized their appreciation for the expertise of the attendees and hoped the collective knowledge of attendees would provide new insights on promoting the economic development of South Moravia and other regions like it. The evening's welcome speeches concluded with a presentation by Tomas Ruzicka (General Manager, TR Consulting). His case study of the Lipno Town and lake area in the Sumava Region of the Czech Republic demonstrated how areas undermined by decades of political distress could be turned around with a combination of a good strategic master plan, fresh thinking political leadership and community support. This was followed by a "meet and greet" reception on the castle terrace overlooking a beautiful South Moravian landscape.

The conference began in earnest the following day with a keynote from Prof. Joseph Reitinger-Laska (University of Vienna, President of ESTAR). Professor Reitinger-Laska spoke of the need to not lose the cultural heritage of places in their adaptation to serve growing tourism.

The afternoon saw two case studies in Austria (Laa an der Thaya) and Sweden (Goteborg). The first described the development challenges of Laa into an attractive health spa and rejuvenation

centre, while the second offered new perspectives and questions on how the public squares in Goteborg could be improved.

That afternoon attendees split up into two groups. The first travelled to Laa an der Thaya to see firsthand the changes brought about by the new spa there. The second group took a comprehensive and scenic bicycle tour along the Dyje River area including the Lednice and Valtice chateaus. The day rounded up with a convivial dinner in the wine cellar of the Hotel Eliska.

The second full day of the conference began with a keynote lecture by Prof. Jan van der Borg (Erasmus University & ECTC University of Venice). He spoke extensively about the challenges of developing tourism during the credit crunch. His unique and highly creative perspective focused on the economic, management and qualitative perspectives of tourism.

Several case studies followed. They included the development and marketing of the Pasholavky Spa and Resort Centre (Radim Gill), cross border development in the Dyje River region (Jakub Smolik), and issues relating to the protection and reinforcement of the historic core of Gdansk. The Gdansk presentation (Anna Kaczorowska-Fudala et al) was structured to encourage shared audience experience on questions of common concern. A lively discussion followed. Issues included how best to integrate and connect the character of historic cores with more contemporary development around them.

The afternoon contained a rather intense concentration of seven paper presentations. The first three papers discussed the trade-offs between economic benefits and sustainability (Antalya, Turkey: Caber and Albayrak), to the restoration of Vilnius' Historic Center (J. Glemza, Lithuania) and an interesting discourse on cultural and artistic tourism (Ines Salpico, Portugal). Ms. Salpico made a persuasive case for culture as a resilient basis for sustained development.

The last four papers in this series addressed the challenges of the Medvenica Nature Park near Zagreb (J. Kranjcevic & S. Saban), the historic 12th century town of Gorohovets, Russia and the Historic Centre Master Plan for Evora, Portugal – a world heritage site (Maria Oliveira).

The intense day concluded with a well deserved garden party at the hotel MBZ.

The final day of the conference began with a keynote from Christoph Pienkoss. He spoke of an innovative effort to create an intra-country trail celebrating brick gothic structures. This was followed by two final case studies. The first dealt with marketing tourism in Mikulov the host city (K. Michnova & A. Holesinka) and a detailed discussion on the practical development realities and desires of Maastricht, The Netherlands (Math Jongen).

Final comments and thanks to all were made by Derek Martin, Secretary General of the IFHP on behalf of the IFHP President Francesc Ventura.

This conference made clear that our current economic crisis is going to continue to present many strategic planning and economic development challenges globally. Many of the projects shown and plans being made continued to pursue the hope of “if we build it, they will come”. This suggests that the competitive advantage of one location over another and the desire to capture shrinking spending power will continue to be an ongoing concern. Further, conceiving and then implementing plans that have a more strategic regional basis for matching public investment in infrastructure with private investment confidence will remain a challenge everywhere.

On the optimistic side, the conference made it clear across scales (from prominent historic centres to small local gems) that great opportunities remain in capitalizing the unique assets of historic and attractive locations. The charming town of Mikulov provided ample evidence of this.

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