
Press information, May 12th, 2009

Cultural heritage meets natural heritage in Latvia

Today, young people can hardly imagine why only two decades ago, there were special designated beach areas along the Baltic Sea free to be visited. In Latvia, it was allowed exclusively during daytime and the beach was literally combed every day and why gigantic spot lights lit the beaches at night. Large watch towers are witnesses of that time of intense border patrolling which are still visible today. Back then, a special permit was necessary to pass the checkpoints on the way to relatives living on the coast. Sometimes, the military would refuse to accept the permit at all. Residents of the village on Cape Kolka, dividing the Baltic sea from the Bay of Riga, were not allowed to swim in the Baltic - in case they would decide to cross over to Gotland, some 150 km away. The outer borders of the USSR were strategical objects, and any sort of attention was unwanted. It is obvious that only little development took place in these regions and that nature was comparatively free to reign here. At the same time, dozens of military objects are left from that time, offering a unique chance for modern touristical development following the rules of sustainability in ecological, economical and social terms.

On May 11, 2009, the first out of several local stakeholder seminars under the name of "Military heritage based tourism" took place at the "Laumas" Nature Park in Latvia. 35 participants from tourism businesses, local representatives, specialists from ministries and other stakeholders took part in seminar. They are working on a concept for a new way of experiencing the sites shaped by former military use: sustainable tourism based on military heritage. "Military heritage is almost forgotten in our country," says Asnate Ziemele, head of the Latvian Country Tourism association who is leading the Latvian initiative. "People, who can tell the real stories from their very own memory are old already. Therefore, this is the last chance for us to write down their stories, experiences, thoughts and feelings during those times. These memories are precious to the younger generation. For them, we combine the memories with outdoor activities along the former Iron Curtain such as hiking or biking."

Cultural heritage meets natural heritage in this pilot project in Latvia. This pilot is one out of several pilots carried out within an EU funded project coordinated by the Coastal geography branch of Kiel University. The Baltic Green Belt project demonstrates good practice in sustainable tourism, ecological agriculture, coastal and marine conservation, integrated regional planning and public participation by carrying out different activities in each of the countries along the southern and eastern Baltic Sea. And this project is not alone. The Baltic Green Belt closes the last geographical gap within an international initiative named European Green Belt. The overall vision is to create the backbone of an ecological network, running from the Barents to the Black Sea that is a global symbol for transboundary cooperation in nature conservation and sustainable development.

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Further information über Urlaub in Baltikum: <http://www.celotajs.lv/index.do>
über das Projekt Baltic Green Belt: www.balticgreenbelt.net

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Foto 1: This exhibition of military heritage belongs to Mr. Agris Rozenblums, the owner of a small farm "Mandari" in Kurzeme, Latvia. He discovered the helmets when he was digging a rather large pound. Project staff from the Latvian Country Tourism Association Lauku celotajs are currently searching for such places trying to convince people to tell their stories (copyright: Lauku celotajs 2009).



Foto 2: Powerful spotlights were installed in the buildings like this on the shore of the Baltic sea, along the border of the USSR. During the night, the spotlights screened the shoreline and sea waters. Located near Melnsils (copyright: Lauku celotajs 2008)

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Foto 3: The North Forts of Liepāja Military Port. In 1894 – 1908 a large fortification system was built on the shore of the Baltic Sea to the North from Liepāja, in the territory of the present Karaosta (the Military Port). It was destroyed before the WW I. The remains have been washed away by the sea waters. Today it is possible to visit this military area which was formerly closed to visitors. They say that the fortifications have been joined by catacombs, which still have not been found. Attractive excursions and reality shows are organised today in the North Forts of teh Karaosta (the Military Port).

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