

Report on Study Tour to Latvia

July 30 – August 6, 2017



Summary

From July 30 to August 6, 2017 ARDI program organized Study Tour to Latvia for 10 project participants – owners of rural SMEs and service providers in tourism sector of Armenian economy.

The Study Tour was hosted by Latvian Rural Forum (<https://www.facebook.com/laukuforums/>) and had special focus on sustainable rural tourism and women empowerment.

Total distance of travelling was 1480 km.

Study tour participants visited Ministries of Agriculture, associations Rural Traveller (Lauku ceļotājs), Latvian Platform for Development cooperation (LAPAS), Latvian Farmers association (LOSP), attended various presentations, had productive discussions with the prominent specialists in the field of mutual interests.

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The group travelled to more than 11 locations in major provinces of Latvia (Līgatne, Rauna, Stameriena, Rugāji, Balvi, Balvu county, Līvāni and Preiļi, Aglona, Daugavpils, Latgale Art and Craft Center) and got acquainted with the rural economy selected businesses in tourism and agricultural production supported by EU funding. The ST participants not only learned from Latvian colleagues, but also actively created networks and partnerships with the hosts and even provide some valuable recommendations from own business experience.

The objective of the study tour to Latvia was knowledge and experience sharing of Latvian rural tourism actors with ARDI financed rural tourism representatives.

Latvian host organization had selected sufficiently targeted showcases to give the right visibility of the projects and destinations. The participants had great opportunity to see new ways of improving the services they provide, ways of promoting their services. Through direct contact with the rural tourism actors in Latvia, who were ready to share their knowledge, our participants witnessed how Latvian colleagues are developing their tourism opportunities based on natural resources and unique cultural elements.

It can be stated that participants valued much the abilities of Latvian rural tourism actors to welcome European integration and economic boost in rural tourism at the same time intending to preserve their local settings and cultural values: traditions and historical features of rural landscape, local rural heritage objects.

Our participants learnt about innovative mechanisms to develop synergies at the community level and through diversification of the services and activities they spread the benefits from tourism sector to other sectors of the local economy. As a result of these synergies they had found effective and profitable ways to service rural tourism sector through engaging local producers to meet the tourism market requirements in terms of quality, quantity and regularity of their produce.

Study Tour Diary

July 30

Study Tour participants from Armenia arrived at 11:55 AM from Kiev (Flight PS9401). Group was welcomed by Zane Purina, project manager, a representative from Latvian Rural forum. The group was accommodated in Konventa Seta hotel in the Riga Old town. The Group was asked to relax with the respect of closely planned further week.

July 31

There were two sessions – morning and afternoon. During morning sessions held in the premises of LRF, Aris Adlers, Board Member of LRF, made a presentation about a host organization's operations. Other

speakers' (Investment and Development Agency of Latvia (LIAA), Tourism Marketing Department - Inguna Zigure, The Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development (VARAM) - Jevgenija Budnicka) presentations contain a comprehensive analysis of the situation in rural economy with focus on sustainable rural tourism in Latvia, paying special attention at all developments and lessons learned during post-soviet years.

During lunch with the hosts and speakers, more discussion and networking took place.

In the afternoon ST group visited Ministry of Agriculture where several presentations were devoted to the CAP (Common Agricultural Policy in EU), to the activities of some Latvian rural associations. The afternoon session was held by the professionals and officials from the Ministry of Agriculture, Latvian Association of Local and Regional Governments (LPS), Latvian Farmers Federation, Latvian Agricultural Cooperatives Association (LLKA), Latvian Farmers association (LOSP). The afternoon session was attended also by the delegation from Moldova, so during break the Armenian group communicated and shared experience with the Moldovan group led by ProCoRe ("Pro Regional Cooperation" NGO, Moldova).

- 1) Jevgenija Butnicka, Deputy Director of Regional Policy Department, Head division of the Regional development planning at the Ministry of Environmental protection and Regional Development of Latvia;
- 2) Inguna Zigure, Marketing Project Manager of Tourism Department at the Investment and Development Agency of Latvia (www.latvia.travel);
- 3) Sniedze Sproge, Advisor, Latvian Association of Local and Regional Governments;
- 4) Liene Radzina, Executive Director, Latvian Agricultural Cooperatives Association (LLKA)
- 5) Guntis Vilnitis, Board member of Latvian Agricultural Organization Cooperation Council (LOSP)

Travel to rural Latvia

In late afternoon the group travelled to Ligatne (71 km from Riga) with one minibus and accommodated in "Rehabilitation center Ligatne" or "Lāču mīga. Mr. Ainārs Šteins, head of local self-governance body, organized an interesting excursion to the local touristic attractions in nature and also inside the Rehabilitation Center Ligatne - The secret soviet bunker/Padomju slepenais bunkurs

The group was introduced to Ligatne story – "Transformation from paper manufacture to tourist attraction place". More information on www.visitligatne.lv.

August 1

On that day the group travelled from Ligatne to Rauna (44 km) to visit the "Small and Tenacious" entrepreneurs, namely:

- 1) Ltd. "Latnature" tasting with a story (vegetable chips factory, fruit-vegetable crackers)
Mrs. Zane
- 2) Ltd. "Latvian garlic" - story and various degustations (garlic tea, garlic bread, garlic candies, garlic soup and other)
- 3) Ltd. "Cheese factory" story (cheese and pasta)

Local host was Mrs. Dace Melgalve, representative of Centre of Regional Rural Partnership (www.partneriba.lv).

From Rauna the group travelled to Stameriena (110 km) to meet representatives of the Local Action Group "Sateka" on the bank of the lake with a view of St. Stameriena. The group visited St. Stameriena Aleksandra Nevskā Orthodox Church and Stameriena castle which considered main touristic attractions in the area.

From Stameriena the group travelled to Rugaji (50 km) to have dinner on the bank of the lake in rural tourist accommodation place "Dwarfs". ST participants gave a small concert with guitar and singing Armenian and international songs.

Some of group members also visited Holiday house "Mazezerini" close to "Dwarfs".

August 2

Early morning the group had a meeting with Rugaji municipality council representatives. Ms. Marite Ornina, director of project and other representatives of local municipality, made a short presentation about the business development situation in Northernlatgale, in Rugaji, Balvi, Vilaka and Baltinava counties.



Afterwards the group travelled to Balvi to visit the fruit and berry processing company - the farm "Dalderi". Farm produces large cranberries, blueberries, etc. The group was invited to collect berries growing on peat bogs (swampland). Strengthened by rainy weather, this was invaluable experiential learning on farming practices on swamplands.

Second visit during the day was to the one of most modern Latvian farms "Kotiņi". "Kotini" is a recipient of farm subsidies in Latvia. Since 2002 "Kotini" has received **€44,179** in payments from the European Union.

In the afternoon the ST group visited a touristic attraction in Tilza - Retro motorcycle club "Rust in the wind". The group was introduced to all activities offered by the host – almost 2 hours of entertainment - puzzle challenges with opportunity to win a trip with retro motorcycles. More information on <http://www.livani.lv/page/224>

August 3

In the morning the host representative of LAG, Mrs. Valija Vaivode, accompanied the group to the Latgale Art and Craft Center (LMAC). The Center is an oasis for those people who wish to explore the crafts of Latgale history and its evolution to the present day, where the unique view, an iridescent Līvāni glass, enjoy art treasures and gain positive energy in harmony in an orderly environment.

- The old manor barn exposition "Latgale Artisans in the 19th - 20th century."
- Livani Glass Museum
- Exhibitions for artists and craftsmen in the exhibition hall
- Leased conference room
- Creative ceramics, glass melting and glass blowing workshops
- Longest belt in Latvia
- Water Gallery of the 16th Century Vaulted cellar

Second visit on that day was to the Latgale thematic village "Future oak village '(oak planting, story of the Latgale thematic villages). The association leader Ms. Zane Praņevsku with the locals made unforgettable presentation – animation, that was concluded by planting an oak to commemorate the visit of Armenian delegation to the area.



Visiting edible snails farm "Osu Maja" (story, tasting).

Visiting local farm "Juris" (homemade cheese production, tasting).

Guided tour through the Aglona Basilica complex.

Dinner with hosts in Bread Museum, the group were exposed to the special show on the importance of bread and national values related to the cultivation of the rye and wheat in the area.

The group travelled from Aglona region to Daugavpils (50 km) and stayed overnight in the Hotel Latgale

August 4

Visiting local action group of Daugavpils and Ilūkste - the first LAG in Latvia. The group travelled to Kaldabruna (45 minutes). Kaldabruna is a small community in the middle of nowhere – it is a small community with active social entrepreneurship, the Meadow Museum, strong local NGO, Art Plenair (open air exhibition-competition of the constructions made from hay and wood).

Host - Ms. Agnese Kalnina, project specialist at the NGO "Watermarks" at the Kaldabrunja School in Rubene's pagasts of Jekabpils novads (www.udenszimes.lv).

The dinner was served by local community inside the reconstructed school building.

Afterwards the group travelled to Riga, approximately 180 km (3 hours).

August 5

Short trip to Yurmala, the location for mass tourism in Latvia and festivals, being famous since Soviet Union times.

The ST group participated in the wrap –up meeting with representatives of LRF - Zane Purina, Aris Adlers and Valdis Kudins. The facilitator conducted a front poll asking the following three questions:

1. What during ST you like most?
2. What you were not impressed with?
3. What suggestions/recommendations you may have?



The ST participants were also asked to fill in the evaluation questionnaires (sample is attached). The results of rapid evaluation from wrap-up meeting and the filled questionnaires are as follows:

1. All respondents ranked the Study Tour as Excellent;
2. Among the things named as most impressive during ST were the following:
 - a. We like Latvia: people and nature.
 - b. I like the multifaceted approach in organizing this ST and exposure to a variety of rural enterprises in tourism and agribusiness.
 - c. I appreciate having this opportunity to learn more about the agricultural production and tourism directly on the farms.
 - d. Positive attitudes of entrepreneurial towards their work (regardless of difficulty), satisfaction with their possession and overcoming their difficulties with humor and positive attitude.
 - e. I made parallels between challenges faced by Latvian and Armenian farmers and assessed possibilities for cooperation.
 - f. I like that local authorities were engaged in organization of this ST and hosting us on sites
 - g. We were able to see and learn a lot during a very short time.
 - h. Most of all I'm impressed with the close collaboration approach between various actors in rural area, which is the key to success in the agribusiness sector.
 - i. The positive result of successful social entrepreneurship was the best example of community development and empowerment that can be replicated in more communities.
 - j. Warm hospitality and willingness to share their stories and activities in all places we visit.
 - k. I was particularly impressed with the positive attitude of Latvian people, with their hope and belief in own capabilities. These are people who can create everything from almost nothing!
 - l. The Future oak village was awesome! This is real Latvian spirit!!!

- m. The Glass museum also was very interesting and the story behind it. The glass making demonstration class was very interesting.
 - n. The Rust in the Wind – just captured me, and it was a good learning for me, on how the correct approach in the business could make interested and engaged even people who at the beginning were not interested at all! 😊
3. Among the things named as needed improvement during ST were the following:
- a. Study tour could involve more variety of projects supported by EU.
 - b. In some cases there should be up to two localities to visit to spend more time on each, to get more information and better understand things.
 - c. Some official data provided by local municipalities were not complete and clear answers were not given to us.
 - d. We would like to learn more about specific methods of production in some cases.
 - e. The conditions in which Latvian and Armenian farmers operate are very different
 - f. It was not clearly demonstrated how local municipalities support local producers.
 - g. Interpretation service did not meet expectations in some cases.
 - h. We didn't like hygiene conditions in some places, which was rather unexpected, since the place was run by high professionals.
 - i. I would like to meet more B&B owners.
 - j. Some of the B&Bs we visited were not so cozy and clean as we were thinking they should be.
4. What have you learned in this Study Tour that you will use in your own work/business?
- a. I have learned from experts how agricultural production can be harmonized with rural tourism and realized the strategic importance of cooperation. The most remarkable and innovative experience for me was vegetable chips production and it is worth to start production like that in Armenia. Besides, there were also interesting design ideas like billboards, information wall, etc. that would be applicable in our manufactory.
 - b. I became interested in the different production and processing systems. On the one hand innovative technologies were used and on the other hand simple solutions were developed and used by Latvian farmers, and these were helpful examples for me to adopt in my business. Also, we have been exploring new options for developing our business in Armenia and making B2B contacts.
 - c. It was very instructive that all Latvian partners demonstrated business approach and were trying to get an extra income out of almost everything available around.
 - d. I gained some ideas of organizing traditional and non-traditional crops cultivation, production and processing and after this study tour I have got more creative ideas that will make my business unique and more interesting.
 - e. New ideas were popping in my head during the whole ST, I saw new approaches that can be applied in my business too.
 - f. I like interactive methods of hosting tourists, will definitely use in my work.
 - g. What I learned is that just telling about traditions and national crafts and values are not enough for attracting tourists – you should get them engaged in the process itself. So, I made a decision to organize an Armenian traditions and crafts corner in my B&B, so that the guests can get engaged and learned how to prepare carpets, etc.
 - h. I learned again and again that it is important HOW you present/introduce your business, not WHAT you present 😊.
5. Anything else you would like to add?
- a. The feedback for this study tour is clearly positive. It was useful experience for complex and comprehensive economic development of rural areas. Cooperation of organic agriculture and agricultural production, as well as examples of rural tourism - demonstration farms, traditional crafts management, etc. are strong guides to secure EU financial contribution in rural development in Latvia.

- b. Thanks to the organizers for possibility to have such kind of beneficial tour. Thanks to the group members for positive environment. Thanks for chance to improve and develop our entrepreneurial skills. We enjoyed our visit to selected places of Latvia and overall, it was valuable experience accumulated in each place of visit;
- c. I would recommend that the more coordinated approach will make it possible to increase production volumes (crop cultivation, livestock, production, processing) and use the full potential available in Latvia nowadays.

The ST group members also discussed further steps and proposed further possible collaboration with the Latvian partners from CSO and business communities, national and LSG government. In the evening the group members explored old town Riga www.liveriga.com/lv/.

August 6

Leaving to the airport early morning at 4 AM, departure to Yerevan at 7 AM.





