

Best Practice: Primary Forest Tourism

***Inspiration - guidance - checklists - for nature and
wilderness tourism developers and practitioners***



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<https://primaryforests.org>





With this briefing paper, we would like to highlight the value creation opportunities associated with the comprehensive protection of primary and old-growth forests in Romania in conjunction with the promotion of careful and low impact nature tourism - and provide practical assistance for tourism development.

Romania's primary and old growth forests are unique, but little known and rarely visited. At the same time, many primary forest areas are disappearing due to logging for economic reasons and due to a lack of sufficient protection.

We want to support both forest preservation and economic development through “forest wilderness tourism”.

We therefore want to provide practical advice and guidance to interested actors and stakeholders – such as tourism associations, tour guides, NGOs, accommodation providers, photo coaches, etc. – who are involved in this tourism sector, want to develop and implement ideas or further develop their offers.

We hope that this paper can be useful and contribute to positive developments. In concrete terms, we offer compact information on best practices and success criteria, specific checklists for potential stakeholders/ partners and "inspiring" examples from different countries.

And we would like to thank the German Federal Environmental Foundation (DBU) and the Heidehof Foundation for their generous support, without which this project would not have been possible.

1. Introduction: Why and how can wilderness tourism generate economic benefits?

Human needs and the exploitation of natural resources are often in conflict with nature conservation because the extraction of resources (such as natural raw materials) is associated with interference in natural ecosystems. Economic development and the conservation of natural ecosystems are often perceived as opposites. Is there a way to bring these opposites closer together?



The economic 'utilisation' of intact natural landscapes does not always have to be associated with hard interventions in natural ecosystems such as extraction of natural resources.

One example of this is nature-based tourism, which "uses" the natural landscape economically without the need for infrastructure that massively interferes with ecology.

High-quality protected areas - such as national parks, UNESCO biosphere reserves, UNESCO World Heritage sites, non-intervention nature reserves - with tourism development, themed trails or specific offers from tourism providers generate economic benefits without severe impacts on the ecosystems.

Instead of exploiting natural resources and thus interfering with ecosystems, added value is created for the local population with the help of nature-friendly tourism offers - e.g. accommodation, gastronomy and food supply, guided tours, natural products or craft / artisanal natural products. Nature preservation and (limited and channeled) tourism can therefore be mutually beneficial partners.

Modest touristic infrastructure could include: marked trails, information systems at boundary of nature sites, protected area visitor centres with exhibitions, discreet structural facilities to enhance the wilderness/natural landscape experience (footbridges, boardwalks, viewing platforms), guided tours (in wilderness areas), wilderness camps and/or individual touristic packages.

There are numerous good examples (as we will show later) of 'wilderness or wild nature tourism' that does not harm nature in protected areas and at the same time promotes regional economic development.

Decisive factors for „low impact" nature tourism are: Limiting the volume of tourism to a level that is compatible with nature, e.g. by limiting the number of parking spaces or beds in the area, providing visitor information, imposing restrictions on routes and by directing and concentrating tourist flows to selected and less ecologically sensitive parts of the protected area.

If tourism is limited to areas that are already accessible via existing hiking trails and other ecologically valuable and vulnerable areas are kept out of tourism development, and access to primary forest areas is not made too easy for larger number of people eg. by access roads and parking lots nearby, then nature-based tourism and primary forest protection are not insurmountable opposites.

However, without high-quality offers for tourists and advertising and PR measures, the economic potential of nature-oriented primary forest tourism cannot be tapped. What is needed are good, safe trails with quality information, well-trained hiking guides, quality accommodation and food supply in the area and cooperation with (international and national) tour operators and the media.

2. What is „wild nature“ and „wilderness“?

The idea of wilderness and wild nature attracts many people. But what exactly is ‚wilderness‘ about?

Well, there is no single, universally recognised definition of wilderness. But we want to provide a selection of descriptions and definitions to you:



- 'Wilderness' stands for biologically and ecologically largely intact landscapes that are largely free from human disturbance“(Watson ¹)
- Wilderness is also defined as an area that provides 'outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation'(Cole ²)
- Wilderness includes aspects like “naturalness”, “lack of human influence”, “remoteness”, “ruggedness of the topography” (Radford et al.)
- Wilderness protection means: “protecting large, relatively undisturbed natural areas that are free from buildings, roads and other human-made artifacts and ‘where natural forces and processes predominate’” (Kangler ³)
- Wilderness could also be seen in connection with concepts such as “grounding”, deceleration or silence: Wilderness as symbolic representative landscape and individual and social space of possibility (Langenhorst ⁴)
- Unique features of wilderness are: no human intervention - regeneration, efficiency and freedom of nature is possible" (Altmoos ⁵)

The „idea of wilderness" also relates to an intangible and spiritual resource.

Visitors can simply contemplate the idea , take pleasure in the fact that such a timeless and uncontrolled part of earth is still there.

This could probably be summarised as follows:

Wilderness' and “wild nature” are landscapes that are strongly associated with the absence of human influences and the free development of nature.

These areas offer a kind of free space that enables experiences and adventures away from the constraints of everyday life.

Experiencing wild nature is often also associated with relaxation, regeneration, the promotion of mental and physical health and spiritual experiences as well as better being-away, experiencing solitude, simplicity, groundedness or self-awareness.

¹ Watson, J. E. M., Shanahan, D. F., Di Marco, M., Allan, J., Laurance, W. F., Sanderson, E. W., Mackey, B. & Venter, O. (2016). Catastrophic Declines in Wilderness Areas Undermine Global Environment Targets. *Current Biology*, 26, 2929–2934. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2016.08.049>

² Cole, D.N. (2004). Wilderness Experiences: What Should We Be Managing For? *Journal of Wilderness*, 10(3), 25–27.

³ Kangler, G. (2018). Der Diskurs um 'Wildnis': Von mythischen Wäldern, malerischen Orten und dynamischer Natur. Edition Kulturwissenschaft: Bd. 185. Transcript.

⁴ Langenhorst, B. (2016). Wildnisbildung und nachhaltige Entwicklung. Dissertation. Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung: Bd. 8.

⁵ Altmoos, M. (2023). Mehr Wildnis wagen! Naturdynamik erkennen, erleben, fördern. Pala.

3. Why are people interested in 'wild nature' tourism?

The public's longing for unspoiled nature and undestroyed, aesthetically pleasing landscapes is apparently increasing: Nature trips and holidays in pristine landscapes are popular and will probably become even more so in the future.

This provides interesting options both for tourism and for the preservation of wild natural landscapes, including primary and natural forests.

People who engage in wilderness tourism are generally physically fit and independent, they are interested in individual experiences (away from the crowds), are looking for intensive nature experiences, preferably in scenic and wild landscapes and some also seek the thrill of adventure.

A large proportion of nature tourists traveling to distant places to experience wild landscapes are likely able to cope with more difficult and challenging terrain and love the experience of physical exercise in the 'great outdoors'.

Nature-loving tourists are driven by various motives.

Here is an (incomplete) selection of possible motives:

They probably seek to get „close to nature“, to relax and disconnect, to enjoy the scenery, to enjoy new experiences, to get to know new places, to learn more about the natural environment, to enjoy a solitary experience, to practice some kind of physical or sporting activity, to practice adventure sports, to enhance health or physical condition, to visit a particular trail or area, or spend the day with family or friends and enjoyment.

What does "wilderness" tourism mean in particular?

- Guests and visitors are looking for **intensive experiences** (adventure, in a wider sense) and want to experience 'wilderness' as something extraordinary and special.
- Wilderness tourism should be seen as a **special form of tourism with ecological interests**, especially to visit intact, wild natural landscapes - which are protected properly.
- It is **crucial to avoid negative impacts of tourism on natural landscapes and / or the local population**. This would destroy the basis for wilderness tourism (natural ecosystems, consent of the inhabitants).
- It is also important to enable tourists to experience intact nature and **to avoid disturbances caused by human activities** that are perceived as destructive (such as logging or muddy forest roads).



4. What are wild („primary“ and „old growth“) forests?

Why are these ancient forests so fascinating, eg. in fantasy movies (such as ‘Lord of the Rings’ or ‘Avatar’)? What makes wild forests so attractive? How do we distinguish them from production forests? Most commercial forests are indeed very different from their natural ‘ancestors’, the primary and old growth forests.

Our primary forests sometimes really do look like out of another world: sublime, ancient and sometimes giant trees, irregular and free tree and vegetation growth, sometimes lots of moss and tree sponges, lying and standing dead wood, dim light, intense smells... Places where you can feel the presence of an ancient and enduring network of life and ‘creation’. But how to define „primary and old growth forests“?

This is how the European Commission describes our natural forests (Guidance Paper, 2023):

Primary forest: „Naturally regenerated forest of native tree species, where there are no clearly visible indications of human activities and the ecological processes are not significantly disturbed.“

Old-growth forest: „A forest stand or area consisting of native tree species that have developed, predominantly through natural processes, structures and dynamics normally associated with late-seral developmental phases in primary or undisturbed forests of the same type. Signs of former human activities may be visible, but they are gradually disappearing or too limited to significantly disturb natural processes.“

The following pictures show what a “wild forest” looks like – examples from Romania ...



Native tree species, no clearly visible indications of human activities, ecological processes are not significantly disturbed; dominated by natural structures and dynamics. Frequent features: uneven aged, diverse tree stands incl. old / large trees, lying and standing dead wood. (C) Matthias Schickhofer

5. Why does society want to protect the last primary and old-growth forests in the EU?

Natural forests, in particular „primary and old growth forests“, are not only of exceptional natural beauty, but also ‘do’ a great deal for us humans. They are champions in providing important ecosystem functions - such as: water storage and water purification, flood prevention, air oxygen production, soil protection, protection of humans from avalanches / rockfall / land slides, carbon storage and sequestration, landscape cooling (cloud generation), biodiversity / habitat preservation for many species that have long often disappeared in intensively managed forests.

Forest stands with a centuries-long undisturbed history of their ecosystems (habitats) also provide particularly valuable genetic material: they are optimally adapted to the natural conditions at their locations. It is precisely these extremely well-adapted genetics that are gaining in value in the climate crisis, because intensively managed plantations are collapsing and better-adapted trees are needed to secure forest cover in Europe.

A very large proportion of the production forests in the European Union are areas with an unnatural tree composition, even-aged and monotonous plantations, with only 1-2 tree species and very low resilience (in times of climate heating). More and more of these unnatural forests are now collapsing under the effects of global warming. At the same time, the demand for wood is increasing and logging, e.g. for the combustion of biomass, is on the rise. It is therefore of vital interest of the society to preserve all remains of primary and old growth forests, in order to maintain these extremely precious ecosystems and their essential functions and to support the restoration of our commercial forests.

For this reason, the unanimously adopted ‘EU Green Deal’ (2019) stipulates that all primary and old-growth forests in the EU should be ‘identified, mapped and strictly protected’ by 2030. The ‘EU Nature Restoration Law’ requires the restoration of defined ecosystems, including forests.

But these conservation goals also lead to conflicts: Interest groups oppose these protection programs and speak of "expropriation" (which is not even legally possible).

An important point in the debate is the lack of budgets for compensation payments for (private) forest owners who should no longer exploit and sell wood from their primary / old growth / near natural forests (or only to a limited extent) in the future and give preference to other „uses“ of their forests - such as preserving the ecosystem functions for society. The lost revenue from timber sales will undoubtedly have to be compensated - for example by payments for the provision of forest ecosystem services (water storage and filtering, carbon sequestration, landscape cooling, biodiversity, etc.).

And: nature tourism in protected wild forest areas can also contribute to people's income. This can create a win-win situation...



Ecosystem functions of primary/old growth forests: Water storage/ purification, carbon uptake and sequestration, ground shading and soil stabilisation, flood prevention, oxygen production, local cloud formation and landscape cooling. (C) Matthias Schickhofer

6. Status quo of primary forests and related tourism in Romania

Romania hosts the largest tracks of primary and old-growth forests in the temperate climate zone of the EU. According to different estimates⁶, these areas cover about 500,000 ha.

However, less than 100,000 ha of Romania's primary and old growth forests today are located in strictly protected areas ("National Catalogue of Virgin Forests") or non intervention zones of national parks and UNESCO World Heritage sites - and thus are safe from logging. The tourism value added potential of Romania's primary and old growth forests is theoretically huge, but has not been much discovered so far.

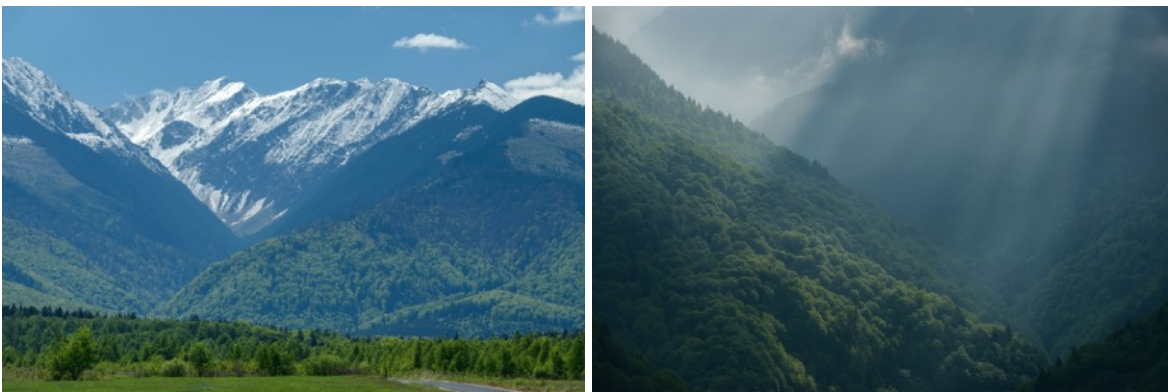
Today (2024), the beauty and the experience of Romania's wild forests are rarely or seldom addressed in tourism. To date, there are no thematic hiking trails that explicitly lead to 'primary forests'. Specialised tourist information or organised tourist offers from tour operators to experience the unique wild forests of Romania are still in their infancy. Most of the websites of Romania's protected areas such as national parks for example are only providing info in Romanian language and the majority does not even mention the existence of „primary forests“.

Conservationists complain that parts of the Romanian forestry industry reject greater protection of the “primary forests” and the development of increased nature tourism in these wild forest areas, as this could make logging and timber harvesting more difficult.

Sometimes the forest roads leading to the primary/old-growth areas are often blocked by barriers, so that access is only possible via unattractive walks on (muddy) forest paths with traces of logging (machines, felled trees, oil stains, etc.). This could deter hikers in these areas and hamper the potential for tourism.

Some protected areas (including national parks) have only relatively small, strictly protected core zones and allow more or less intensive logging in the buffer zones, as conservationists regret. Whether and how the forest protection zones will be extended is the subject of intense debates.

We very much hope that it will be possible to preserve as many primary and old growth forests as possible - and to consider them as a basis for “alternative” uses such as nature tourism.



The Fagaras Mountains are one of the last strongholds of large, contiguous primary forests in the temperate climate zone of Europe. Unfortunately, only a part of these forests is strictly protected. Scientists and environmentalists hope that it will be possible to create a larger protected area. This could also bring in additional income - eg. through hiking, wildlife watching and photography tourism. (C) Matthias Schickhofer

⁶ Schickhofer M. & Schwarz U. (2019): Inventory of Potential Primary and Old-Growth Forest Areas in Romania (PRIMOFARO). Identifying the largest intact forests in the temperate zone of the European Union. https://www.saveparadiseforests.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/PRIMOFARO_24092019_layouted.pdf

7. Protected wild nature as a tourist attraction

The German „Naturwald Akademie“ published the paper “Tourismus-Magnet Naturwald” (2019)⁷, which gives some insights in the nature tourism status quo in Germany.

The paper elaborates, that wild forests and tourist infrastructure for visitors are mainly found in protected areas. Therefore, data on visits to national parks were used for the research.

According to the paper, tourists in German national park regions generate a gross turnover of about 2.8 billion € per year. Around 14 % of this comes from forest national park regions. Tourism generates „almost 11,000 additional jobs in the forest national park regions, which are often structurally weak areas“. Tourists spend „an average of 5.7 nights / stay in regions with larger protected forests“.

It also highlights that visitors to national parks, whether day or overnight visitors, spend „more money per day than other comparison groups in nature tourism“.

Tourism and recreation „earn about 4 times more per hectare in the forest than timber extraction and logging“. This positive trend can be expected to continue as nature tourism is „still considered a growth market“. This means that large natural forest areas are „national or regional, landscape-defining identification objects and therefore increase the image value of a region“. 2/3 of Germans like nature better „the more pristine and wild it is“.

Tourists vacationing in Germany value „sunshine, a healthy climate and beautiful nature more highly than varied evening entertainment, good shopping opportunities or cultural offerings“....

In marketing, tourism regions that establish a „direct link to national parks or biosphere reserves are often more successful“. Original nature thus becomes a „unique selling point“ in marketing.



Excursion to old growth forest stands in German Hainich national park (upper images), hiking in wild forests in Croatia (with students HFR; bottom). (C) Matthias Schickhofer

⁷ Naturwaldakademie: “Tourismus-Magnet Naturwald”, 2019 (original file not available online any more), <https://naturwald-akademie.org>

8. Success factors in wilderness tourism ⁸

This chapter aims to provide you with an overview of important factors that ensure that visitors/guests have a lifelong visitor experience.

If you manage to consider these factors in your tourist activities, then visitors are likely to have an intense and positive experience.



Key factors for a positive experience of wild nature

Factor 1: The nature experience is unique and adventurous

The experience of nature is adventurous, it allows a new and very intense, rare and unique experience with nature. It is something special, because only few people get such an opportunity. This quality of experience occurs when you are exploring a path or an area that is new to you.

Factor 2: “Escape” from everyday live...

When people go out into nature, they are often seeking relaxation, a change from the routine, a sense of well-being. They often want to spend time with friends. Many people also want to experience ‘wilderness’ as part of their lifestyle.

Factor 3: Personal challenge and aesthetic experience

Experiencing wild nature means for people often: to challenge themselves and / or to have a spiritual experience. Beauty of landscapes and scenery is a crucial aspect as well. Observing wildlife (birds) could also be an important aspect for nature tourists.

Factor 4: Education and photography

Many people simply want to learn and gain more knowledge about wild nature (wild forests), biology and ecology. A passion for nature and / or wildlife photography is another important motive for wilderness trips.

Key factors for a memorable organised / guided tour

When people move slowly, mindfully and with open senses in nature, this supports more intensive experiences of wild nature (see also the concept of “forest bathing”). Therefore, a combination of hiking and staying in special places of interest / beauty (e.g. to obtain information about the natural / ecological context or to perceive nature intensely with all the senses) is a good way to enable people to have unforgettable experiences.



Factor 1: Knowledgeable and friendly staff

⁸ M. Saayman, A. Viljoen / Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism, 2016

Behavior and personality of the guide/s are of crucial importance.

Guides should ...:

- have good communication skills
- interact with the clients efficiently and with confidence
- behave professional and friendly
- have sufficient knowledge of the environment (ecology / biology / history and about the very location)
- have outstanding ability to interpret topics and to be a good story teller
- create a relaxing and save atmosphere
- be good instructors on hiking techniques
- be able to act as mediator in case of conflicts

Factor 2: Availability of food and refreshments, clean accommodation

The food at the accommodation and in the outdoors is sufficient and good.

There is plenty of drinking water and refreshments. There is hot water at the accommodation. The menu took into account different dietary requirements (accommodation). The facilities and accommodation are clean, safe and comfortable. Authentic, healthy, local food is served that has been grown and produced in the region. There are opportunities to get to know local people and gain an insight into their everyday lives.

Factor 3: Good value for money

Total cost was reasonable, in general, trails are value for money.

Factor 4: Locality of accommodation (base camp)

The accommodation property is located near attractive nature resources, preferably in a wild/ rustic area. Visual resources such as mountain / river views are in abundance.

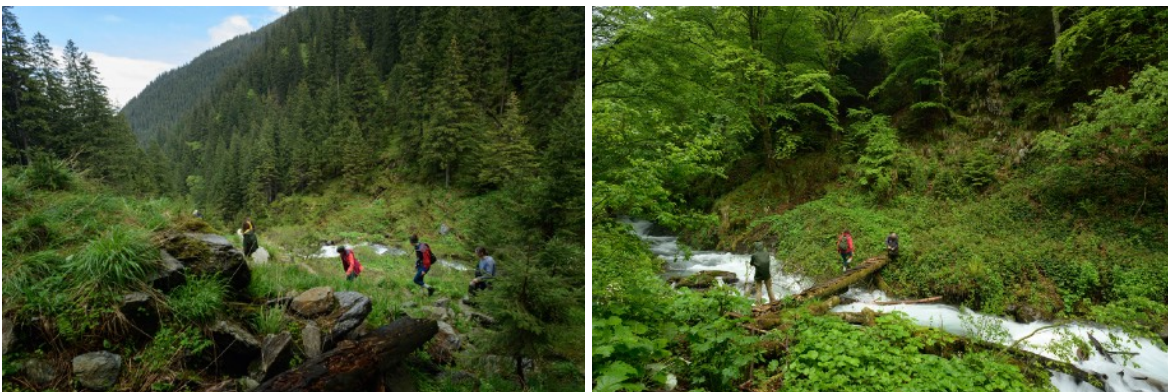
Factor 5: The trail / hiking experience - these aspects are most important for a positive experience of wild nature:

The distance covered and pace of the walk is comfortable for everyone and provides sufficient time to enjoy nature. It is truly an exciting and quality wilderness experience. At the same time it is an educational experience that enhances the participants knowledge of nature and ecology. Safety is important!

The trail hike satisfies curiosity, is interesting and varied. The duration of the walk allows time to relax.

The hike on the wilderness trail is well-planned and the itinerary for the duration of the hike is clear to participants.

The hike should follow a clear structure: distancing from every-day life (introduction phase), relaxation phase (peak experiences), reflexion on experiences et the end ...



Hiking in wild forests in Romania's Fagaras Mountains. (c) Matthias Schickhofer

9. Checklist: Quality criteria for hiking trails

Trails are the main foundation for wilderness tourism, which is first and foremost hiking tourism. Here we provide you with an exemplary checklist (Premium trails in Germany) of how a good, safe and adventurous hiking trail could be designed: The format and quality of the hiking trails used/provided is of crucial importance. Therefore, we give you an overview here of the aspects you could / should pay attention to:

Deutscher Wanderverband ⁹ and Deutsches Wanderinstitut ¹⁰ developed quality criteria for premium hiking trails. Here you can read our summary (reformulated / supplemented):

Trails:

- **Close to nature trail surface:** prefer earth, grass; *avoid gravel, asphalt or muddy forest roads*
- **Limited width of trail:** prefer single track paths; *wide, straight trails or forest roads are less attractive*
- **Edges and surroundings of the path:** the greener; the better; avoid fences or walls
- **Trail usage:** give priority to footpaths, *avoid shared use with cars or bicycles.*
- **Road contact:** *avoid walking alongside roads*
- **Traffic safety:** *avoid passages on roads, in particular with heavy traffic*
- **Furnishing** of the trail is good - especially with some benches and resting places at special, attractive points of interest - if possible in connection with the availability of water (springs or streams) and beautiful scenery.



Nature and Landscapes:

- **Attractive natural landscapes:** Look for natural / old growth forests, meadows (with trees), heaths, rocky landscapes, unobstructed free-flowing rivers ...
- **Forestscapes:** Prefer picturesque places, lush natural biotopes, monumental/old trees; avoid crossing monotonous plantations and destroyed (logged) forest landscapes. Larger sections with dense young forests (afforestations) are also not attractive for hiking. Avoid as much as possible using (unshaded) forest roads with damage from forestry on the edges.
- **Outstanding natural attractions:** e.g. natural monuments / monumental trees, view points / mountain peaks, gorges, cliffs, caves, waterfalls,
- **Variety of landscapes:** changing landscape formations on a large scale
- **Open views are attractive:** Meadows, views of open valleys, small groves in open landscapes are perceived as beautiful; areas of intensive agriculture with crop cultivation on large fields and little shade are less attractive.

⁹ <https://www.wanderbares-deutschland.de/service/b2b/qualitaetswege>

¹⁰ <https://www.wanderinstitut.de/deutsches-wandersiegel/kriterien/en/>

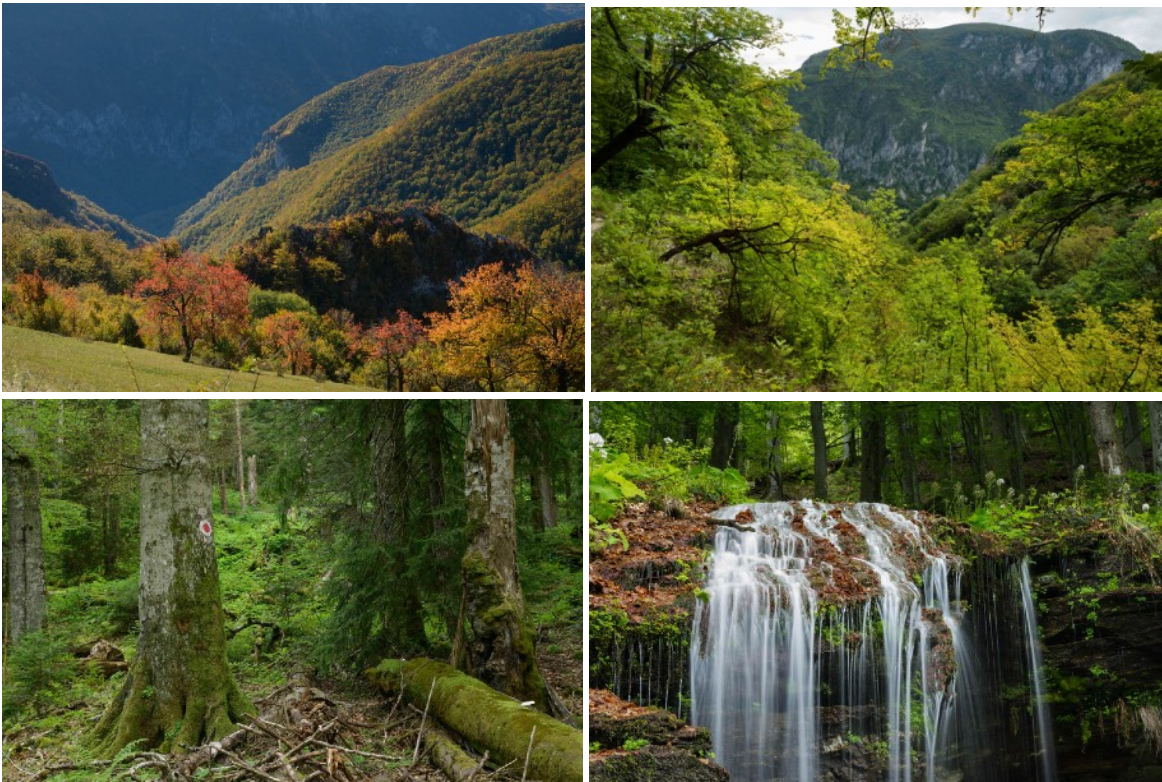
- **Viewpoints:** People like panoramic views from openings, rocks or summits; the expanse of the view is an attraction.
- **Nearby scenery:** Hollow ways and ravines / gorges support positive experiences.
- **Edges:** People love to gaze over edges – like at the forest margin or on shores/beaches.
- **Water bodies:** Pristine, picturesque streams, rivers and lakes are widely seen as attractive; we do not like to be at modified, canalised or polluted waters.
- **Idyll:** Many people prefer idyllic places that fulfil romantic, picturesque, traditional and peaceful notions and where we feel safe.
- **Silence:** no machine and traffic-related noises

Hiking guidance system:

- **Signposts** should contain clear, simple, seamless, error-free and unambiguous information (including distances). Avoid confusing or incorrect signposts.
- **Markings** must be very visual and reassuring; they must not cause confusion or be wrong.

General conditions:

- **Scenery should be extensive** / spacious and unspoiled; not stripped and densely populated.
- **Variety counts:** Changes to the landscape formations are positive – e.g. a varied mix of insights into ecosystems (such as wild forests/bogs/ravines/water bodies) and expansive views from view points or more open sections of landscape.
- **Prevent a lack of maintenance** of boards/signs and landscapes; to avoid poor route orientation, test hikes and route checks can be carried out and feedback can be obtained from hikers.



Variety of views and landscape types counts. (C) Matthias Schickhofer

9. Checklist: Needs of (international) travel operators

In this chapter, we describe the needs of international tour operators and how Romanian partners can contribute to a high quality of tourism products.

In general, nature and photo travel programmes offered by international operators include a mixture of day hikes in wild nature areas from a permanent accommodation in the valley (outside the wilderness) and cultural visits at the beginning and/or end of the tour.

In our workshops and research, we learned that the following aspects are important:



Logistics, accommodation, food supply:

- **Reliable and trustworthy local logistics and guidance partners** in the destination area with English and / or German speaking skills.
- **Good accessibility of the area from abroad:** road / rail / bus / air transportation.
- **Shuttle services from airport / train station to accommodation** near to hiking trails in wild forest areas. This could be: rented minibus (with driver), taxi ...
- **High quality accommodation downhill - in valley / outside hiking area:** Clean rooms / bathrooms / dining area, friendly and motivated owners / staff (if possible English / German speaking), breakfast + dinner served, option for ordering lunch packages, outside seating area (garden) with campfire / barbecue site would be a good add on ...
- **High quality food in the accommodation:** Fresh food, local authentic food, clean facilities / dishes, vegetarian / vegan options for all meals.
- Downhill accommodation should **not be far away from the hiking area** - if possible not more than one hour drive maximum.
- **Food for lunch packages:** Fresh, healthy supplies, light weight, vegetarian / vegan options.
- **Attractive scenery at accommodation** (downhill): Nice views, if possible scenic view (mountain, river, plains / hills etc); avoid view from accommodation to ugly buildings, factory areas, dusty roads, waste etc

Wild nature trails:

- **Access to hiking trails:** Avoid long access marches on (dirty, muddy) forest trails to the trailhead. If there is a barrier eg. at the entry of the valley, it could be opened for the tour minibus / cars (if there is consent with owner) to ease access to the trailhead.
- **Hiking trails - checklist:**
 - *Diversity of scenery*, frequent changes in the landscape along the way, new perspectives after only a short distance, no monotonous walks through static landscapes; mix of insights (eg. into wild deep forests) and lookouts (panoramic views);
 - *Use small forest paths* if possible and avoid forest roads;
 - *Avoid difficulties* like climbing passages or wild river crossings (without bridge);
 - It would be good to have *drinking water options* along the trail;
 - The path should *not lead for too long and without shade* through terrain exposed to hot sun, especially when walking uphill in the morning / around noon;
- **Avoid trails / forest roads with visible signs of logging and damage to natural forests** such as clear cuts, old downed trees along the trail, tracks of logging tractors, oil residuals on the

road etc. This is likely to be perceived by tourists as very negative and environmental devastation and could severely deteriorate or even destroy any positive wild forest experience. If signs or sights of logging / clear cuts are unavoidable, they should be actively addressed - and become part of the narrative.

Guides, guiding and storytelling:

- **Local wilderness/nature guides should speak at least good English (if possible: German) and should be well-informed, experienced storytellers.**

They should be **competent to recognize the natural beauties / ecological features**, to draw attention to them and to explain them in interesting "stories". Guides should also be knowledgeable about the history of the area and their historical use by humans, as well as natural history.



- And they should be **able to tell the 'story' of the special natural values**, the fascination of wild nature, the scenic beauties and peculiarities of the 'points of interest' / magical places, the social context and the socio-economic history, etc. in a convincing, entertaining, interesting and interactive way.

Guides should also have a **good knowledge of the very protected area** (conservation objectives and prohibitions), ecological highlights and the ecology of wild forests / primary forests. They should have knowledge about key species of wild forests - such as natural trees, rare plants, birds or mammals etc.

- **Risk reduction and safety: Romanian forests are inhabited by bears and wolves.** Guides should know how visitors should behave to minimize risks. They should be able to create a feeling of security (and positive interest) among trip participants and dispel fears and avoid panic. These animals are an integral part of the Romanian "wilderness" and that should translate into a positive experience.

Special needs for adventurous „wilderness tours“

(Input: „Experience Wilderness“ Agency, Austria)

These special tours offer a mix of wilderness experiences - eg. hikes in wild terrain around the trails (if nature conservation regulations permit this) - overnight stay in tents in the wilderness, „softer“ nature walks (eg. on day 1 for acclimatisation / adaptation) and potentially also sightseeing in a town (eg. on the last day).

The focus is on the intensive **experience of a real wilderness stay of several days in a pristine natural landscape.**

The hike from the road drop off to the location of a base camp in the wilderness should not be too exhausting: 2-3 hours on foot or 1/2 day maximum. The access route should follow a path and not just wild, difficult terrain ...

The „base camp“ (tenting) in the wilderness needs a level ground, not too stony or too wet. There should be a drinking and washing water source nearby. It should not be too exposed to the elements (storms), but could be an open/semi-open area with some scenic landscape views would be beneficial. The availability of dry wood for a campfire would be helpful.

The surroundings of the base camp should allow 2-3 days to visit different wild places (day hikes) and to enjoy varying nature and landscape experiences (such as: primary forest with veteran trees, wild streams / waterfalls, canyons, mountain and valley views, alpine meadows, peaks, etc.). The consent of the land owner of the property for the base camp must be guaranteed.

For orientation of Romanian partners: A typical itinerary of a “wilderness tour” ...

Day 0: arrival (night train; minibus) - welcome, intro, accommodation in pension downhill

Day 1: not too long hike (2-3 hrs) to base camp in the wild landscape; set up camp with camp fire

Day 2-4: day hikes from base camp, wilderness experiences, forest mediation, etc.

Day 5: walk back downhill; spend night in pension

Day Z: maybe sightseeing in a nearby town ... and / or travel back...

In total: 4 nights / 5 days in wilderness...

Special requirements for photo hikes in wild forests

(Input: ARR Reisen travel agency ¹¹, experiences with photo walks organized by „Fotoschule Gesäuse“ in wild forests of Gesäuse national park / Austria ¹² and input during a test hike in Romania with members of the Austrian Nature Photographers' Association VTNÖ in August 2024 ¹³)



Basically, similar requirements apply to photo tours as to "nature tours", with the important difference that the distances from the starting point of the hike to the (first) photo locations should be as short as possible (not longer than 1-2 hours) and not too difficult to walk.

Experience shows that sometimes the photographing guests are also often not very "fit" for difficult or longer hikes. Therefore, the hike should not require climbing, as participants are likely to carry a lot of photography equipment (expensive cameras, tripod, photo backpack) and should not involve (longer) hikes in rough or steep terrain.

Photo enthusiasts are usually primarily interested in spending enough time in magical natural places with lots of different photo opportunities: scenic views, wild and "creative" sceneries (old / monumental, trees, dead wood, waterfalls, streams, bizarre rock formations, mountain views), interesting vegetation details for macro shots (flowers, fern, moss) or movies for abstract photographs (structures, natural sculptures).

Therefore, the tour program should be designed in a way that most of the time is spent photographing - and not hiking ...



Test hike in Romania's Fagaras Mountains with members of the Austrian Nature Photographers' Association VTNÖ in August 2024. (c) Matthias Schickhofer

¹¹ <https://arr.at/>

¹² https://nationalpark-gesaeuse.at/nationalpark-erleben/nationalpark_fotoschule/

¹³ <https://www.vtnoe.at/>

10. Wild forest tourism - inspirational examples

In several European countries, "wild forests" in connection with protected wild natural landscapes are also branded and successfully marketed as places of longing and touristic promises.

These protected areas also contribute to local/regional economic development.

These examples show: Nature conservation and economic welfare do not have to be opposites. In national parks, biosphere reserves, UNESCO World Heritage areas or IUCN Wilderness Areas, "primary forests" (or "wild forests", "primeval forests of tomorrow") are part of the protected area narratives and part of the tourist marketing story telling.

Here are some snapshots with inspirational examples from different European countries:

Hainich national park / UNESCO World Heritage site / Germany



The Hainich National Park, a former military training area in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), is a particularly outstanding example of positive economic development in harmony with nature conservation.

The national park is located in Thüringen, Germany, close to (once) closed border of the former "iron curtain". With a surface area of 160 km², it is the largest coherent deciduous woodland in Germany.

Due to its history as a military training area, the area was hardly used for a long time. The partially very natural forest landscape now offers good conditions to allow the development of the "primeval forests of tomorrow" ("Urwald von morgen").

Hainich national park has also been inscribed as a property (component part) of the transnational, serial UNESCO World Heritage Site „Ancient and Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and Other Regions of Europe“.

But the national park is not only about nature conservation. The National Park Act declares: "The national park aims to improve the living and working conditions of people living in the area, as well as the local economy and tourism."

Targeted measures to promote nature tourism have brought economic success: There have been five million visitors in the 20 years of its existence (2005 to 2017). 2.5 million people have been visiting the „Treetop Trail“ at the Thiemsburg complex, which is the central point of contact (and point of interest) for visitors. ¹⁴

Information offers and infrastructure for tourists ensure attractiveness:

- **Five information centers** at entry points to the national park - open every day!
- **A tree „Canopy Walk“** winds along a length of 530 m from the lower crown section up to the tops of the primeval woodland canopies. Visitors can explore the Canopy Walk on their own or with a guided tour by a ranger or voluntary national park guide.
- Special **exhibitions about the UNESCO World Heritage Site** on European beech forests

¹⁴ Manfred Großmann: Bedeutung des Nationalparks Hainich für die touristische Entwicklung der Weiterbergregion Wartburg Hainich. Mühlhauser Beiträge, Bd 42, 2019

- Plenty of **attractive walking / hiking trails**: Twenty signposted walking paths with a total length of more than 120km ... The hiking trails are equipped with information boards and a branded guidance system (signs).
- **Guided tours** with park rangers
- **Cycling trails**
- **Primary Forest-Life-Camp**: The "Urwald-Life-Camp" is located near Lauterbach in the west of the national park. Children and young people can learn, play and stay in tree houses made of wood in this adventure youth hostel with a twist. Environmental education, experiencing nature and team spirit are in the focus of the stay.
- **Wildcat Village Hütscheroda**: The Wildcat Village is right at the edge of the UNESCO World Heritage site Hainich National Park Hainich. Visitors can get to know the shy animals in the Wildcat ...
- **Website**, offering of a World Heritage App

The national park has become an important factor for regional economic development ¹⁵:

The income equivalent or employment equivalent of the national park is about 266 persons who, in purely arithmetical terms, earn their livelihood from the visitor demand in the Hainich National Park. This represents an increase of 60 job equivalents since 2008.

Also due to the increase in the regional average primary income per capita (from €12,132 in 2008 to €19,423 in 2017).

As a result of the increased touristic demand, a wide range of accommodation has been created in the vicinity of the national park, from the youth hostel "Urwald-Life-Camp" to a campsite and sophisticated vacation homes to a hotel for more discerning guests.

The income effects to € 5,158,000 (2018). This a significant increase of 106% compared to 2007/08.

More information: <https://www.nationalpark-hainich.de/en/national-park/hainich-national-park.html>



Guided tour into wild forests in Germany's Hainich national park. (C) Matthias Schickhofer

¹⁵ Manfred Großmann: Bedeutung des Nationalparks Hainich für die touristische Entwicklung der Welterberegion Wartburg Hainich. Mühlhauser Beiträge, Bd 42, 2019

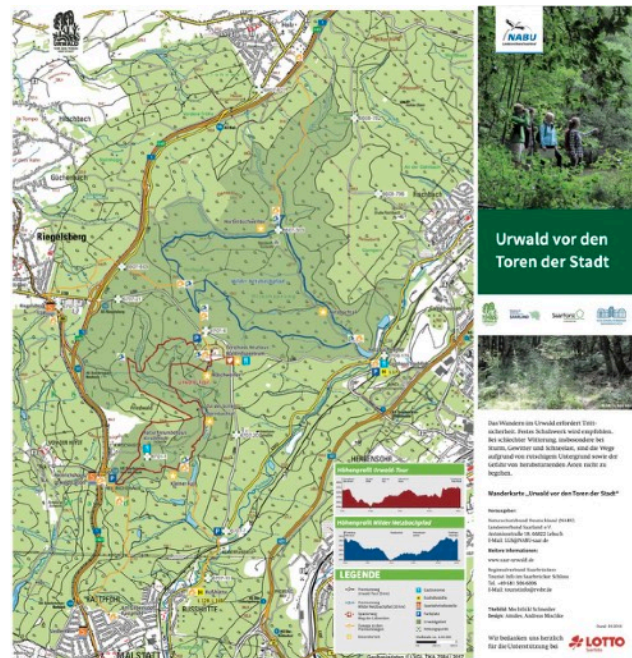
Saarbrücken / Germany: „Urwald vor den Toren der Stadt“ („Primary forest at the gates of the city“)

Next to the German city of Saarbrücken there is a "primary forest" - or at least a forest that is allowed to become forest wilderness again. Saarbrücken is the capital of German state Saarland, more than 180.000 people live here.

The large forest reserve (1.011 ha) was introduced already in 1997 to become the „largest wilderness area in an urbanised landscape in Germany“.

Today, on over 1,000 hectares right in the middle of the Saar Coal Forest and in the centre of the most densely populated part of the Saarland, nature can develop as it would ‘naturally’ without human intervention. To ensure the sustainability of the project, the project area was designated as a nature reserve and Natura 2000 site and declared a strictly protected „natural forest cell“.

The reserve allows free forest (wilderness) development and brings „wilderness“ closer to people. Several hiking trails enable people to experience the ‘primary forest’ and the development of the wilderness on their own. There are also guided tours and a rich nature education programme.



What makes the project unique and significant?

The project description on the website states ¹⁶:

„One, perhaps the most important task of the project will therefore be to lift the wilderness out of its ecological and nature conservation dimension and, through the interlinking of a wide variety of new activities and innovative communication patterns, to turn the primeval forest at the gates of the city into a cultural event of social relevance. To this end, it is essential to combine the ecological, economic, cultural and social functions of the project.

Wilderness becomes not only the object, but the other place and the other method of interdisciplinary communication. The location of the project in the urban landscape offers synergetic possibilities that go far beyond the sum of the individual functions.

People are seen as part of nature and are actively involved in the development of the area. The project pursues the ambitious goal of bringing people closer to nature and wilderness (again) and promoting intergenerational thinking. The easiest way to achieve this is for people to participate in the development and ‘leave their mark’. Involving the population is intended to improve identification with the primeval forest on the outskirts of the city and the entire region - as a necessary condition for the willingness to get actively involved.“

More information: <https://saar-urwald.de>
(Images on this page: Screenshots saar-urwald.de)



¹⁶ <https://saar-urwald.de/das-urwald-projekt/das-projekt/ziele-des-projektes>

UNESCO World Natural Heritage: „Ancient beech forests of Germany“



Five of the oldest beech forests in Germany have been inscribed as part of the transnational serial UNESCO World Heritage Site „Ancient and Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and Other Regions of Europe“: (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1133/>).

Together, the sites protect the largest and least disturbed forests dominated by the beech tree in Europe. It encompasses 93 component parts in 18 European countries.

The five component parts in Germany - Grumsin, Hainich, Jasmund, Kellerwald, Serrahn - are all accessible via marked hiking trails and equipped with information systems for visitors. The UNESCO status means: outstanding universal value, highest level of protection by humanity. This opens up opportunities for clear unique selling points in tourism marketing.

The old beech forests, which are protected by UNESCO, are therefore all a central part of tourism promotion and visitor provision in connection with the surrounding large protected areas (national park or biosphere reserve) and represent important regional tourism attractions.

Detailed information:

<https://www.weltnaturerbe-buchenwaelder.de/welterbe-buchenwaelder/deutschland>

Hiking trail „Urwaldsteig“ („Primary Forest Trail“) in Kellerwald - Edersee National Park



The 66-kilometer-long „Urwaldsteig“ („primary forest trail“) around Edersee is a popular multi-day hike in northern Hessen (county) in Germany.

The trail leads around Lake Edersee and allows hikers to experience near-natural hillside forests - with remnants of primary oak and mixed beech forest - and the development of the ‘forest wilderness of tomorrow’ in the Kellerwald - Edersee National Park. The forests of the park are partly integrated into the UNESCO World Natural Heritage Site for the protection of „Ancient and Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and Other Regions of Europe“.

Narrow paths lead over numerous hills and into the UNESCO World Heritage beech forests. In these primary forest-like relics, hikers can expect to see majestic old trees and gnarled, sometimes bizarrely grown beeches and oaks on the steep slopes.

More info: <https://nationalpark-kellerwald-edersee.de/presse/urwaldsteig-edersee-fuer-deutschlands-schoenster-wanderweg-2024-nominiert>

Kalkalpen national park and UNESCO World Natural Heritage / Austria

The Kalkalpen national park is also described as the „largest forest wilderness of Austria“.

The objectives of the national park in relation to tourism are:

- Inspire people for wilderness
- Motivate people for a sustainable way of life

Its oldest forests have been inscribed as part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site to protect the „Primeval Beech Forests of Europe“¹⁷.

In order to bring the forest wilderness, which is part of the "USP" of the protected area, closer to people, a "wilderness rail" was created.

The "Wilderness Trail Buchensteig" is a hiking trail through some old beech forests, easily accessible from a forest road at the Northern edge of the national park. It is equipped with some info boards.

Furthermore, there are several information points and visitor centers with educational infos and exhibitions at the edges of the park. The national park also has several hiking trails (including some themed trails), some of which lead into old growth forests.

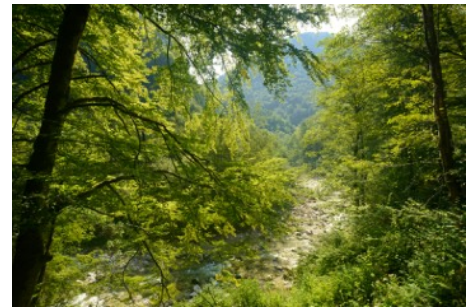
The park also aims to encourage visitors to "feel wilderness" on guided treks into the wild forest and mountain landscape. There are also special guided trekking tours in the UNESCO World Heritage-protected beech forests.

The national park also offers multi-day hikes crossing the whole national park - a journey into the „hidden woods“: (<https://www.kalkalpen.at/wildnisspueren>).

The local tourist office promotes customised tourist offers - such as „On the way to the forest wilderness“ (<https://www.urlaubsregion-pyhrn-priel.at/naturraum-pyhrn-priel/oesterreich-veranstaltung/detail/430200185/am-weg-zur-waldwildnis-nationalpark-kalkalpen-ranger-touren.html>)

A "wilderness camp" (old forester's lodge) invites people to stay overnight in the nature zone of the park and offers wilderness education courses, workshops, youth camps and „raising awareness“ events (sensing wilderness, „forest bathing“, tasting wild nature / cooking). Innovative family camps and „father and son“ days are also offered.

More information: www.kalkalpen.at



¹⁷ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1133/>

„Primary Forest Rothwald“ and Wilderness Area / UNESCO World Natural Heritage / Austria Dürrenstein - Lassingtal



Guided tours lead into the strict forest reserve in the IUCN Wilderness area „Dürrenstein - Lassingtal“. However, the strict forest reserve „Rothwald“ may only be entered as part of a guided tour, but these are usually fully booked for several years.

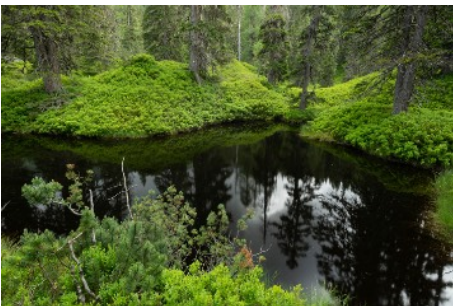
The wilderness area is the largest strict nature reserve in Austria (7000 ha) and protects the famous „Rothwald“, the largest primary forest in the Alps. Access is only allowed on marked hiking trails (there are only a few) and by guided tours offered by the protected area administration.

In order to satisfy the huge interest in the "primary forest" in a nature-friendly way, there are themed experience excursions to other parts of the wilderness area that are less sensitive from a nature conservation point of view.

Rather recently the „Haus der Wildnis“ („House of the Wilderness“) was opened - a visitor center in the small town of Lunz, close to the reserve. The modern and interactive exhibition makes the complex relationships in nature and its uniqueness accessible to everybody - also using augmented reality.

Info: <https://www.wildnisgebiet.at>

„Rauris primary forest trail“ in Hohe Tauern National Park:



A small forest reserve on the edge of the "Hohe Tauern" national park in Salzburg is called the "Rauriser Urwald" (Rauris Primary Forest).

A circular hiking trail leads through the old growth mountain spruce forest with its veteran trees and dark bog lakes. The forest is not a "primeval forest" in the scientific sense (historic grazing and selective tree extractions), but it does allow nature lovers to experience a paradisiacal alpine landscape with „primary forest-like“ impressions.

The "Rauriser Urwald" is a key tourist attraction in the Rauris Valley, in the Salzburg part of the national park.

More information: <https://www.nationalpark.at/en/nationalpark/nationalpark-discover/nationalpark-theme-trails/pois/SBG/fe0ea055-7942-488b-a194-84ab99129c2c/rauris-primeval-forest---themed-national-park-trail>

“Bialowieza primary forest“ / Poland

The legendary "Bialowieza Primary Forest" is famous and a strong magnet for an international tourist audience of nature lovers.

This "largest lowland primary forest in Europe" is the central part of a national park that lies directly on the border with Belarus.

The national park, the bison enclosure (breeding station) and the national park center on the site of the former Tsar's castle are very popular with tourists.



The village of Bialowieza therefore has numerous hotels and guest houses. The strictly protected core zone with the valuable primary forest, however, can only be visited with a ranger/guide.

Infos about access to the strict reserve: https://bpn.com.pl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1598&Itemid=289 and authorized guides: https://bpn.com.pl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=644&Itemid=288&lang=en

Primary forest hiking trails in Sweden

Hiking in wild landscapes is extremely popular in Sweden and a very important part of tourism.

Sweden has created many long-distance hiking trails (such as the famous ‘Kungsleden’) and has established several ‘primary forest trails’ aka ‘Urskogsleden’, for example in Tyresta national park near Stockholm.



‘Urskog’ (primary forest) is a central part of the narrative of many protected areas - such as national parks, nature reserves or wilderness areas.

Designated ‘primeval forest trails’ enable an even more intensive experience of these special forests in the protected areas.

Tourism seems to be proud of the forest wilderness and explicitly praises it.

Examples for „primary forest trails“:

Thematic trail „**Urskogsstigen**“ in **Tyresta National Park** (Stockholm):

<https://www.sverigesnationalparker.se/en/choose-park---list/tyresta-national-park/visitor-information/entrances--trails/> and: <https://www.naturkartan.se/de/stockholms-lan/urkogsstigen>

The „**Urskogsleden**“ in **Vändåtbergets nature reserve** (norther Sweden, west of Umea): <https://www.hogakusten.com/sv/urkogsleden>

„**Urskogsleden**“ in northern Swedens **Marsfjället** area:

<https://www.lansstyrelsen.se/vasterbotten/besoksmal/friluftsliv-och-allemansratt/urkogsleden.html>

Experience **primary forest in Björnlandets National Park**: <https://www.sverigesnationalparker.se/en/choose-park---list/bjornlandet-national-park/experience/experience-the-serenity-and-mystery-of-the-virgin-forest/>

„**Virgin forest loop**“ in **Hamra National Park**: <https://www.sverigesnationalparker.se/en/choose-park---list/hamra-national-park/experience/hiking/>

„Iseltrail“ hiking route in Austria

The hiking trail in Eastern Tyrol (Osttirol region, Austria, 75 km, 5 days) follows the only undammed glacial river in the Alps - the Isel - from its mouth in the district capital of Lienz to its source in the wilderness of the Hohe Tauern National Park.

The trail leads along the mostly very wild river (with many waterfalls), to hidden waterfalls in side valleys, through gorge forests and into the high alpine wilderness (in the national park)



The wild river Isel and surrounding natural landscapes are protected by the EU's Natura 2000 system. Plans to build hydro dams were abandoned after the protected area was established. Therefore, the local stakeholders looked for economic alternatives instead of electricity generation.

The trail is intended to boost hiking tourism, especially in the valley area, since in the past tourism was mainly concentrated in the high alpine regions (mountain hiking/climbing) and the national park (large and famous Umbal waterfalls).

The hiking trail was realized in cooperation between the regional tourism board (Tourismusverband Osttirol), the provincial government, mayors, hotel owners, nature conservationists, an external tourism developer (strategy, scouting, communication) and a planning office (plans for constructions).

The Iseltrail uses almost exclusively existing marked hiking trails, which have been connected, marked and signposted. The trail has a distinctive logo and a claim („follow your river“) and equipped with information signs, resting areas and drinking water fountains .

Only a few sections were newly constructed - such as climbing facilities on steep banks, bridges and some viewing platforms

Information boards (mainly at entry points and rest areas) provide compact and simple information about the route, scenic highlights and ecological features.

The trail was opened in the „COVID year" 2020 and "saved" the tourism season economically. Osttirol Tourism and hotel owners report a significant increase in hiking tourism and bookings since the opening.

In 2021, the Iseltrail was awarded "innovative product of the year" by the Austrian tourism board and promoted internationally.

In 2023 the Iseltrail received the "Tyrol Tourism Award". The trail is considered a lighthouse project for sustainable nature tourism in Austria.

Info: www.iseltrail.at



Iseltrail in East Tyrol in Austria: 5-days hike along an undammed glacier river on a marked trail with branding, rest areas, viewing platforms and a nature information system. (C) Matthias Schickhofer