

## Tourism in European villages



*The day after the closing conference on Paxos, on the 8th of november, after a year of meetings about the lack of water on the island, the square of Gaios was overflowed by the water of the sea.*

### **“It’s rather hilly here, but we don’t have any mountains!”**

*Danish contribution to 2003 conference*

The above quote illustrates one of the roadblocks to developing tourism in villages. Villagers may suppose that tourists only come to places with grandiose and magnificent castles, rivers, or, indeed, mountains. Moreover, villagers tend to belittle their own surroundings and capabilities, suffering from what the Danes have called a “Jante Law” attitude (don’t pretend to be capable of anything). Being geographically isolated is a bother, a forest is just an infrastructural nightmare and if you do not have any traditional dance you might as well forget about tourism. Tommerup needs mountains to attract tourists, while Kirchheim needs a hot spring.

Many communities nowadays try to focus on local tourism, because their traditional economy is becoming unsustainable. However, how can they attract people? People from close by are difficult to impress with your natural resources. They will only visit when they have friends or family living in the village, or when they can find something regionally special - a toy market, excellent quality fish (or fishing spot), or an idyllic picnic spot. If there is such a resource, traditional or not, they will visit more than once. Popular recreation areas such as beaches, ski sites, rock-climbing spots, forests, lakes and hiking trails also have this effect.

Getting tourists from afar is a whole different matter. Foreign tourists will be impressed by almost any part of Tuscany, Hungary, Germany or Estonia. How do you guide them to your village? Making trips to your village “easy to buy”, as the Aldeburgh contribution puts it, is not easy.

Tourists can go anywhere they want within financial limits, so you need to advertise to bring in strangers. One way to go is to cooperate with large, multinational tour operators. The major drawback of this approach, as Paxos noted, is that you become dependent on the whims of international marketing. You will either have to offer a very exceptional ‘product’, or work very cheaply. The advantage is that you will not suffer the difficulties of professional marketing, something some villages stated not to be good at.

Another way is to follow Palkonya in its establishing a regional Wine Road organization in 1994 which takes care of such things, perhaps even hiring professional advertisers to attract tourists. For Palkonya this seems to be working very well, and in Kirchheim the discovery of a hot thermal spring led to a similar regional touristic cooperation.

If there are any existing major tourist hubs in the area, such as Florence near Pergine, you can try to get in on the action. By simply offering appropriate accommodation in a rustic environment you might be able to hijack a substantial amount of tourists from the city, as Pergine was. Tourists can stay in the village, visit the city during the day, and return at night. This way of course depends on good infrastructure - you need at least a bus connection that takes under an hour and a half to take tourists to the center of the city every day, and to take them back at night.

Most villages like the idea of regional cooperation, or at least see it as necessary to increase the financial base of investment in the infrastructure necessary to tourism industry (especially when the government fails to support it as in Bystre). Cooperation also provides options to the deman-

ding tourist: as Aldeburgh stated, you need a place where tourists can go and demand that their 24 hour stay in the area be packed with interesting things to see and do. As many touristic activities (walking, sunbathing etc.) are weather-dependent (Wijk aan Zee), and as some villages have difficulty keeping the interest of the tourist, it pays to cooperate - you can always send a bored visitor to the neighbours.

Tourism can give the village a good and obvious reason to keep itself clean, restore landmarks for which otherwise the funds would be lacking, in short, making the village a more beautiful place to live. In the words of Bystre: creating "an unmistakable image by the attractive sight of the village and an intact cultural scene" or those of Aldeburgh: "If we provide an environment which is right for visitors - somewhere that is clean, interesting to live in, with friendly people and lively cultural traditions - we probably created exactly the kind of environment in which people are happy to be resident."

Communities change in other positive ways well. By entertaining tourists with what has come to be known as "cultural tourism", communities are forced to explore their own identity. On Paxos, the reliance on tourism has led to the restoration of historical buildings and the publishing of books on local traditions and

history. You can only attract cultural tourists if you are knowledgeable on your own surroundings. Wijk aan Zee even managed to get tourists admiring the beauty of a modern steel factory! While the industry had been seen as a burden by many tourist organizations, the villagers knew all the lights and fires can be very romantic at night.

However, communities should not only expect a flourishing economy and a renewed cultural identity when they choose the path of tourism. Social organization itself is subject to change when tourism is introduced. In Paxos, for instance, traditionally, social position was determined by the land a person had. When people stopped working the land this mechanism stopped working as well. Conservatives in villages see this as a reason not to like tourism—in this sense it destroys a "way of living" that has persisted perhaps for a thousand years. However, tourism can also lead to conservation. If foreigners visit a community to appreciate the local way of living, they might help traditions to survive in the face of forces of change, even if they do so by turning them into commodities. It was such tourism that made Paxos conserve the old supporting walls used in their olive tree gardens. Another negative effect of tourism is the impact on nature. To protect the environment, most nature parks charge people extra to maintain

the park, and see to it that the visitors are only allowed in certain sections of it. If you make sure you get the tourists to pay for any damage they cause, and don't let many of them visit sensitive areas, damage can be curtailed to reasonable levels. Prohibit cars from entering sensitive sites, but do remember to organize a simple bus system. Enforce fines for littering, wandering off the paths, and smoking wherever necessary. The tourists should not write up the conditions on which they visit the place where you live!

Whatever the way used to attract tourists, villages must prepare themselves for negative effects. Besides those mentioned above, the greatest danger is what Aldeburgh calls 'prettification'. Communities might turn into museums and become so commercialized that no one really wants to live there anymore. Not even tourists actually like this sort of place: a village should be different from a museum, and tourists will only appreciate the village's 'authenticity' when they can observe the local inhabitants. As Paxos observed on one of the 2004 conferences, it is not enough just to preserve the works of your ancestors. Communities must continue to produce culture of their own.

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# Europa Tour

**A Caravan leaves on the 15th of July the Dutch Village Wijk aan Zee for a ninety days during tour. An international group of people with in between twenty five and fifty participants will travel 13 000 kilometres in 25 European countries and visit 50 villages.**

The main purpose is to ask attention for the new Magazine 'The Rake' The Tour will produce themes, concrete issues and a big amount of correspondents in different countries. The copy editors of 'The Rake' will prepare a first edition before July.

People from the country (not only farmers) are complaining for many decennia that they are not heard. There is no attention for things that are done on small scale. 'It gets you nowhere'. From people from the countryside has been expected nothing else than fitting in modern urban society. But since this urban society meets its own problems there is a chance for initiatives born in the countryside. In any case many city dwellers go to the countryside to recover from their fatigues.

With the Europa Tour starts a discovery journey for initiatives and ideas in the countryside. It will be written down in a large book that will be taken along during the Tour.

Under the people from the countryside is a lot of local knowledge of the region, of history and of people. Knowledge that is often ignored by central planning and big scale organizations.

At the start of the Tour on the 15th of July will be given attention to this relevance of local knowledge.

During the discovery journey that can be called also a conference on wheels, the caravan invites the villagers to tell their story, how they look at the world and at their own place.

Next to the book the tangible results of the Tour will be a film and the first internet Magazine for the European countryside 'The Rake'. Four symposia will be held during the Tour. The themes of these symposia: (1) The relevance of local knowledge, (2) village culture, (3) solidarity of the generations and (4) nature. The Tour should illustrate what is alive in the countryside and what it means for the new EU policy towards the Rural areas. At the end the Europa Tour on the 20th of October the Caravan will report to the EU in Brussels.

Soon the Europa Tour will have an own website with actual data. In the moment there is a search for sponsors. One kilometre of the Tour costs € 8.70. It is free for anybody to sponsor a certain distance.

# Exchange elderly people

**In March, April, May and September elderly people from Paxos, Pergine Valdarno and Wijk aan Zee will meet each other. The Arca care- organization from Florence took the initiative and succeeded in finding EU money for the project 'Anchise' that provides in exchanges of elderly people.**

The different participants of the project met each other on the 19/20th of December in Florence. Elderly people of Pergine Valdarno will work on 'elderly people and new technologies'. Elderly people from Paxos will work on physical activities, posture and the usage of medicine and alternative remedies and life styles for a positive aging process.

And elderly people from Wijk aan Zee will work on tradition. They will search for experience, the specific knowledge of elderly people to hand over to younger generations.

In March the first exchange will take place in Pergine Valdarno. The second in April in Wijk aan zee and the third in May on Paxos.

The final conclusion is foreseen again in Italy in September.

While there have always been numerous papers and magazines commenting on the condition of modern society, their scope is usually limited to problems in the urban areas or to nationwide politics. With so few people in one village, who in the public at large would care about their local issues? Such a stance seems reasonable enough, but it has had large consequences for small communities throughout Europe.

With many of them being “uninteresting to report on,” their needs and opinions are seldom heard. And in those rare cases when they are, villagers are often depicted as people who are ‘just complaining’. Small communities have, to put it bluntly, been ignored for quite some time now.

The Rake feels that voicing the opinions of rural Europeans is very important during this time of European integration and harmonization. We also believe the local issues of a small community can be of interest to a much broader audience. Experiences of one village can be exemplary, providing small communities around Europe with inspiration on how to solve problems. Perhaps not many people are interested in the affairs of one specific village, but small communities are surely interested in each other!

Just like the tool of the same name gathers leaves, The Rake collects experiences and opinions from Europe’s rural areas. In doing so,



The Rake will not only help inhabitants of small communities to formulate and solve some of the problems they have. It will also provide governments – be they regional, national or supranational – with some much-needed feedback from the populace. How do their laws affect the daily lives of citizens? The magazine might show policymakers how widespread external effects truly are. At many times, villagers feel as if politicians do not hear their side of the story; The Rake wants to make sure they do.

We are not interested in creating a national magazine. To do so would just continue the selective reporting we want to end in the first place. Instead, because of our desire to stimulate discussion between policymakers and members of small communities, we want to give all communities from the European Union a voice. By using clear language, the magazine will be readable to everyone from this diverse group. As The Rake will be published primarily on the World Wide Web, it can spread easily among

European society. However, printed editions will also appear, using a decentralized network of publishers.

In the summer of 2005, at the start of the so-called Europa Tour, the first issue of The Rake will be released. This tour, a project of the foundation Cultural Village of Europe, consists of a caravan traveling through the rural areas of

Europe, exploring its small communities. The Rake will report this tour, which also features a series of conference on rural life, intensively. At the same time, the journey is an excellent opportunity for The Rake to promote itself and expand its network of correspondents, translators and publishers.

Right now we face the challenge of creating the proper infrastructure of correspondents, publishers and even translators, given the plethora of different languages spoken in Europe. We need to find writers who understand the European countryside and share our belief in the necessity of voicing its opinions. We need to find enthusiastic people who are able to print and spread local printed editions, or who can translate their native language from and into English. With such assistance, The Rake can become a collection of the various voices of (and about) rural Europe, allowing governments to understand and appreciate it.

## The building of houses.

### Experiment in Wijk aan Zee

Jan de Wildt

In Wijk aan Zee the situation of housing is tight. There are only a few possibilities of enlargement. Many elderly people live in a big house and are searching for more comfort and a house that is adapted to their age. For young people it is difficult to obtain a house. It is quite normal to speak in abstract terms about the housing: housing market, building prognosis and so on. It is possible to describe the need for houses much more concrete: we know the people who are concerned personally. It is possible to build for a concrete market when the known needs of the villagers are the point of departure. The informal contacts in the village make it possible to couple question and demand.

From this idea an experiment in Wijk aan Zee has been started with a small scale housing project of about ten apartments. A building location is available. The demand is the point of departure, not the supply, as usual in the world of project developers. More than 20 people came forward after an article in the village news-

paper. Together with an architect and a Housing Company these applicants will explain their wishes and together they are going to make the building plan.

This experiment is inspired by the Charter of the Villages in which village democracy is one of the important items. Bottom up initiatives get their power because they are supported by the village community itself.

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### CULTURAL VILLAGE of EUROPE

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#### Colophon:

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## Short news

Hans Hartl (Kirchheim) and Bert Kisjes (Wijk aan Zee) visited the EU in Brussels together. They visited the Directorate General of Culture in order to speak about financial support from the EU. There they were informed that the funds of Town Partnerships can be used also for villages. The signed Charter can be used by the partners as the formal partnership contract.

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### Editorial

The year 2005 is becoming crucial for the network of Cultural Villages. The networks starts to show its fruits. We refer to the Magazine ‘The Rake’ and the Europa Tour. In this newsletter more about both. The three Musea of Kreiz Breizh, Porrua and Schachdorf Ströbeck are cooperating. Elderly people from Paxos, Pergine Valdarno and Wijk aan Zee develop activities and in Wijk aan Zee is an experiment in the field of housing. The network is in contact with Swedish rural organisations that want to make an European Rural Parliament. In this newsletter has been written about some of these activities.

# European rural alliance

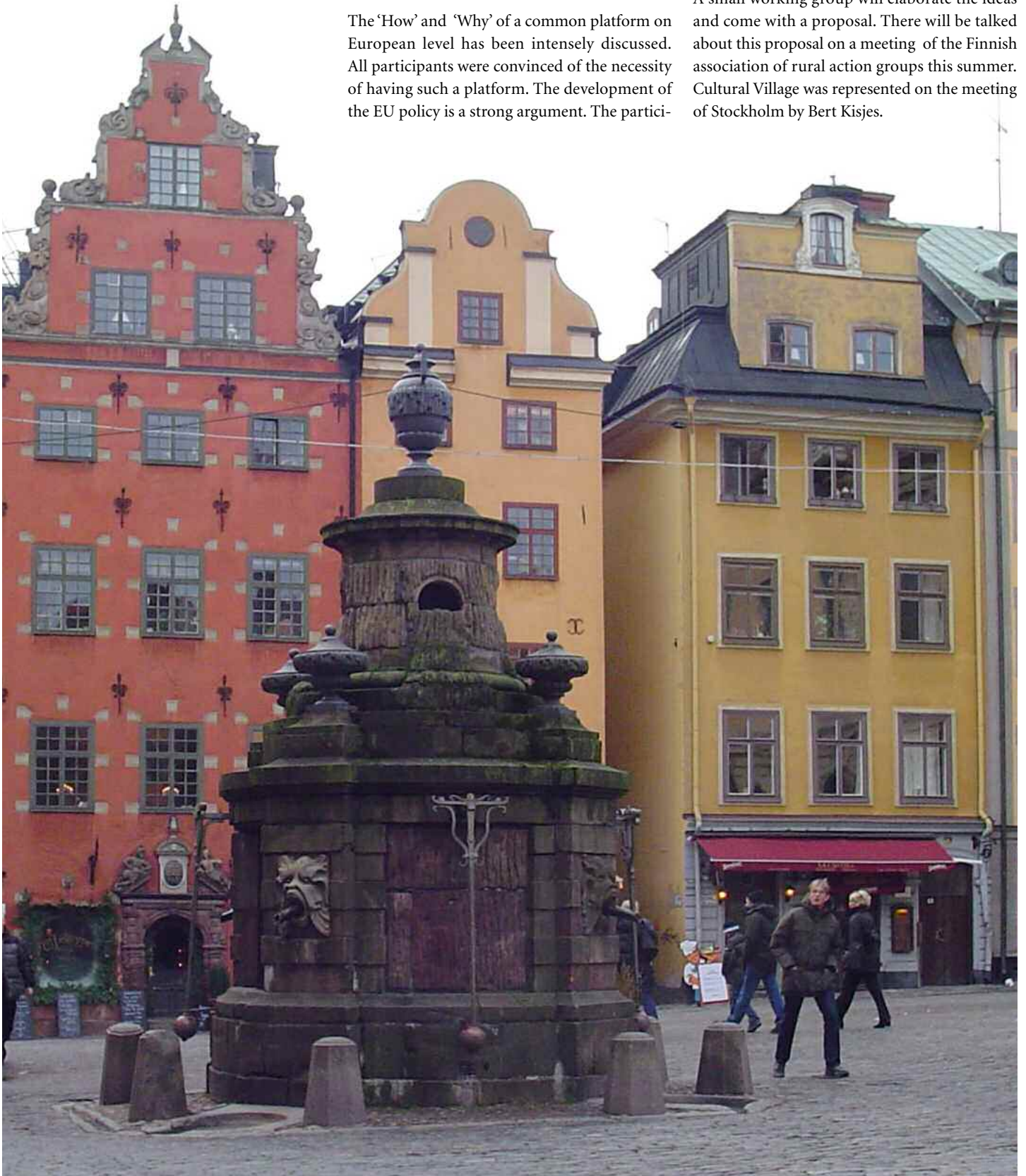
On the 17th of January in the heart of Stockholm a meeting has been held with the intention to found an European Rural Parliament. The initiative has been taken by the Swedish organization 'All Sweden shall live' on her conference in Ystad. All Sweden shall Live represents 4000 Local Action Groups throughout Sweden.

During the meeting became clear that the representatives of Sweden, Scotland, Wales, England, Finland and the Baltic states (especially Estonia) know each other for a longer time. The contacts with some other countries were new (the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Slovenia and Slovakia).

The 'How' and 'Why' of a common platform on European level has been intensely discussed. All participants were convinced of the necessity of having such a platform. The development of the EU policy is a strong argument. The partici-

pants agreed that it is the highest time for such an initiative and that the name of the initiative should not be 'Rural Parliament'. This new platform should be supported by national associations of small rural communities in the different countries.

A small working group will elaborate the ideas and come with a proposal. There will be talked about this proposal on a meeting of the Finnish association of rural action groups this summer. Cultural Village was represented on the meeting of Stockholm by Bert Kisjes.



*Stockholm is situated on fourteen islands. On the smallest island Gamla Stan came into being a village Stockholm around a spring. On the photo the spring on the square Sortorget where the organization 'All Sweden shall live' has its office and where the meeting happened.*