



"The Delta is still in a process of creating a tourism that is not easy at all"

Maria José Vergés, director of Riu a l'Ebre, talks about sustainability and tourism development in the nature reserve with the most important aquatic habitat in Catalonia.

Riu a l'Ebre is a tourism initiative that brings people closer to discovering and connecting with one of the most important natural areas in Catalonia and Spain. The Ebro Natural Park is a unique space with a great variety of landscapes and environments, but the most remarkable one is the aquatic ecosystem in the river, beaches and lagoons.

With her proposal, Maria José Vergés claims the Ebro Delta as a space full of beauty and possibilities, where nature offers fascinating experiences for all audiences.

HOW WAS RIU A L'EBRE BORN?

As a project, we were born ten years ago, at a time of crisis. I had previously owned a travel agency and an active tourism agency and felt the need to create something more open, which would allow people to do more authentic activities. I thought that, in a way, the Delta allows you to have a very large space where you can do a lot of activities.

My partner was unemployed due to the economic crisis and it was very difficult to find a job. In my case, I had the experience of working in a travel agency and a tourist center. So together we created Riu a l'Ebre.

We run activities all year round. In winter we offer guided bike and car tours, from spring we offer self-guided combined bike and kayak tours and in summer and autumn we offer guided kayak tours. We also have a permanent bike hire service for both normal and electric bikes. We are a consolidated eco-tourism company in the Ebro Delta. For this reason, we are members of the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism.

We do activities that we love, in a fantastic environment: a natural park. I have nothing but good things to say about what we do and what we offer.

YOU PAY A LOT OF ATTENTION TO SUSTAINABILITY. DO YOU THINK IT MAKES YOU DIFFERENT FROM OTHER COMPANIES?

Fortunately, there are a lot of companies in the region that are very aware of sustainability. Today I believe that either we do things sustainable, or we will have a very short journey.

Two years ago, we won an award for recycling. That's because we use a lot of bicycles and they get a lot of punctures. One day we wondered what we could do to take advantage of that. So we made the BagBike, a bag that you can carry on a bicycle made with punctured wheels.

Sustainability is a priority. Although it is true that there is a lot of greenwashing and little real action. In our case, we do a lot of combined routes because it allows customers to get there by bike without having to use the van. People really appreciate it: there is a big difference between arriving by bike and arriving by van.

DO YOU THINK CUSTOMERS APPRECIATE SUSTAINABILITY?

There are different types of customers. We have the type of customer who is very conscious and comes at the end of the activity with a bag full of rubbish that he/she has collected from the river. That is very positive.

IF YOU WERE STARTING THE PROJECT TODAY, WHAT WOULD YOU DO DIFFERENTLY? WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

That's a tough question. We wouldn't do anything differently. What I've learnt is that things don't happen overnight - everything has a process and that process is slow.

At the moment we are very mature and everyone knows us, but it has been hard. The Delta is still in a process of creating a tourism that is not easy at all. Nor we want to mirror other places such as, for example, Salou. We must find a balance between what we want and what we do not want to survive.

We have grown bit by bit, consolidating several routes. We also use less paper and send Google Maps to everyone so they can follow the route on their phones. We are very aware that we need to use recyclable products, collect rubbish and create networks with other companies to consolidate tourism.

HOW HAS THE RESTART MED! INITIATIVE AFFECTED YOU?

It is very interesting to receive grants with the aim of making relevant publicity. Last year, we turned ten years old and we made a commemorative video with our own soundtrack, composed by the group "Pepet i Marieta". The song was the reward for participating in a Verkami, a crowdfunding platform. Doing this kind of action is difficult because you often have to choose between renewing the bikes or advertising. Advertising usually comes last. You must find a balance, but it's not easy.





"The best decision we made ten years ago was to address the issue of digital barriers"

Ramón Martín, CEO of Gymkana Digital Turística, defends the new digital tools to promote tourism

Gymkana Digital Tourism is an initiative that explores a concept of tourism linked to sustainability, decentralisation, seasonality, gamification and the digital world. Through the different activities it proposes, visitors can approach the great diversity of territories and stories of Catalonia and Spain.

Technology and digitalisation have played a fundamental role in the development of the project. Thanks to digital resources, the company offers tourist gymkhanas at any time of the year. Among other things, Ramón Martín stresses the importance of using technology to tell stories in a simple way so that all audiences can enjoy them.

WHAT WAS THE MAIN REASON FOR CREATING THIS PROJECT?

The project was born almost four years ago with the need to attract people to small, unknown and well-known populations. Their culture is hidden in the walls, in the details and in the stories behind each house.

We thought about combining tourism with culture and creating this product: Gymkhana Digital Turística. The gymkhana is the excuse to come to the village. It's like school for our children: "we play to learn". Therefore, if the aim is to promote this area, we have to get to know the people through play. Playing is a better way to discover or rediscover.

AND HOW DOES THE VISITOR GET TO KNOW YOUR PRODUCT?

Our client is the public administration, which is always present. We carry out actions for private companies, but it is the municipalities that hire a gymkhana and have it implemented. From that moment on, it is the town council that has to be responsible for attracting visitors. Once they have created a tourist product, they must promote it.

We also understand the needs of small communities. There is a lack of capacity in terms of social networks, so we help them to promote the gymkhanas that exist in these destinations.

To know that there is a gymkhana, the users go to our website and see a map, or they discover it on social networks. We have created a Telegram group where we announce the news. The council also puts a banner on the website, posts on Instagram, mentions the partners or announces it on the radio.

We want to make it as easy as possible for people to play. The gymkhana works as a web link or a QR code placed at the tourist office. You go there, go to an office in Caldes d'Estrac, scan the QR and the title of the gymkhana you want to play appears. For example, 'In search of the enchanted waters', which tells a very nice story that makes you want to walk around the town.

HOW DO YOU THINK COMMUNITIES AND TOURISTS APPRECIATE THIS? DO YOU THINK IT IS A BOOMING ACTIVITY?

We have two types of visitors: users and clients. Of the latter, most are enthusiastic about the product because they see people coming: families with their mobiles looking around, who end up consuming in the town's establishments while telling some anecdote about the gymkhana. Then there are the users who leave reviews, and the general opinion is: "I loved meeting people in a different way" or "my children had a great time playing and learning".

DO THESE ACTIVITIES HELP TO REDUCE THE SEASONALITY OF TOURISM?

Absolutely. I always use the example of the goose game. The mobile would be the dice and the board would be the town. You don't have to pay a ticket, you don't have to enter an enclosed space, and so it is part of the urban furniture and heritage of the village.

This means that you can do a gymkhana on a Tuesday at eleven in the morning or on a Saturday at five in the afternoon. We do it on a seasonal basis, and if we promote the Osona area and the gymkhanas we have at Easter, we'll get more people there. But we are talking about autonomous tourism: if you give me a schedule, you are already conditioning me. Let me go when I feel like it. This is what the seasonality of gymkhanas allows us to do. We talk about decentralisation because through gymkhanas we can also move the public from one place to another.

WHAT VALUE DOES SUSTAINABILITY AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY BRING TO YOUR PRODUCT?

We end up communicating all these values through storytelling and the magic of words that capture the user. Depending on how you say it, you end up reaching people's hearts. We have a very nice gymkhana on Rambla Catalunya number 1 in Barcelona where you walk through all the emblematic shops in the area. The final message is to appreciate all this.

There are gymkhanas that promote women's empowerment and others that talk about sustainability and the responsible use of natural resources. Each gymkhana has its own story to tell about the town or village.

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED FROM ALL THIS EXPERIENCE?

My partner Marc Guillén and I have many years of experience in digital transformation, and we have given ourselves so many chances that this time we wanted to correct all the mistakes we made in the past. The best decision we made ten years ago was to address the issue of digital barriers. We used to create mobile apps to do a lot of things and thought "we need to make things easier for people" and it was the best decision.

HOW HAS THE RESTART MED! PROJECT HELPED YOU?

RESTART MED! has helped us to promote the territory. As we said, the gymkhana is the excuse to promote the territory. Through this support, we want to bring the audience to the villages and give more value to our territory.





"People now want to get out of the city and go to places that are not overcrowded"

Jaume Graus, director of La Manreana, highlights the value of rural environments

La Manreana proposes the creation of a link with the rural environment and farm life. Through the various activities it offers, it promotes the dissemination of the world of agriculture to schools and families from more urban centres. Anyone who visits this classic Masia of Les Garrigues will get to know the everyday aspects of farming and livestock breeding.

Jaume Graus proposes a combination of leisure and learning through La Manreana, a company that has adapted to the new trends of the digital age and has managed to bring the authenticity of rural life to all audiences.

HOW WAS LA MANREANA BORN?

My colleagues and I have always been interested in leisure. In 2006 we had the opportunity, right here in the town where we are, to have a space that was already functioning as a leisure space, but to adapt it to what we wanted and what we could contribute. Since then, we have been adapting to the new times and the new needs generated by tourism and leisure. The Garrigues is a historical area that is very little exploited in this sense.

With the facilities we had, in addition to being a summer camp, we looked at what else we could offer. We wanted to do something different for family tourism and it seems that we have finally found the formula.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE LA MANREANA?

La Manreana is an educational space that wants to be familiar and wants to bring the public closer to rural life through leisure.

WHAT DO YOU THINK CHILDREN SEE? LEARNING, FUN, FAMILY TIME...

We try to make it a combination of all these things. Perhaps when we do the family part, there is more leisure and fun than in the educational part that schools get. We added some activities during the weekends which, apart from teaching the fact that cows are milked twice a day, are also fun: the pony trails, the pedal circuit... In addition, we no longer run workshops, but organise dramatised activities where we play the role of a farmer who shows the animals. On the other hand, when schools come, there is a monitor with a curriculum prepared for each school. For families, we try to make them have fun and learn from it.

WHAT ARE THE MOST POPULAR ACTIVITIES?

Animals always succeed, especially farm animals. The trend is that animals must be in their habitat. The cow as an animal is spectacular: it is large, they have spots and we can milk them. It is an activity that works because it is rustic.

We also use pedal tractors, like in the old days. These activities work quite well. We even have an escape room that works with QR. It is the combination of the two: the animal part and the recreational part.

WHAT VALUE DO YOU THINK SUSTAINABILITY AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY BRINGS TO YOUR PRODUCT?

We have work with farm animals. Each animal has its own characteristics and we know all their needs. We also want to highlight the work of the farmers, which is not always appreciated. La Manreana has a greenhouse where we

make calçots and visitors can see how they grow and how they should be worn. Because from the moment we plant them, it takes four or five months to get them ready. This is not a factory that makes two million a day: calçots take their time. It is important to know the work behind the product you see in the supermarket.

The same goes for the taste of the products. The trend is for everything to have the same shape and taste. When you go shopping, everything is in boxes or plastic: it is nice, but it has no taste. When the kids taste cow's milk for the first time, they are surprised because they are not used to it. It also happens with tomatoes. This is the authenticity of things, made little by little, in a non-intensive way.

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY IS THE GREATEST DIFFICULTY IN INTEGRATING AGRICULTURE AS A TOURIST EXPERIENCE?

I will take the example of Barcelona. If we have to go there, we go. But when it is the other way round and the people of Barcelona must come here, it seems much further away. It is difficult for them.

Today, the experience has to be spectacular: it has to be a big roller coaster, it has to be a big monument, it has to be everything. Here in La Manreana we look for the small things. And we love that people take away an experience that is close, without big crowds. I think we have reached a point where we have managed to have a pretty nice

product. I've noticed this a lot since the pandemic: people now want to get out of the city and go to places that are not overcrowded.

HOW HAS THE RESTART MED! PROJECT HELP YOU?

The project support small companies like ours. RESTART MED! has helped us to take the final step and create our website. It's been a great help because we waste too much time on the phone. Thanks to the website, people look at it for five minutes and the information is clear, which speeds up the whole process. With that in mind, we hope that everything will be consistent and linked to social networks such as Instagram, which works very well for us. We've also been working with Google Reviews to implement a system where people can comment and leave their opinions.





“The cultural proposals we are developing are sprouting in a spectacular way”

The Casa Bigodé Shelter is committed to art and culture in a traditionally agricultural and livestock territory

The Casa Bigodé Shelter, run by Maria Clara Grimalt and Marta Villagrasa, aims to provide a space for cultural concerns and activities to flourish. The Shelter, which is the headquarters of the Envall Cooperativa, has become a stimulating environment for the inhabitants of Pallars Jussà who want to develop their cultural projects or simply enjoy art and culture.

The cultural agenda never stops and the space has become a pioneering meeting point in the area. Maria Clara Grimalt reflects on the positive reception the project has received from the local population and the potential she sees for the future.

WHAT WAS THE MAIN REASON FOR CREATING THE SHELTER?

The Shelter is the headquarters of the Envall Cooperative, which was created to rehabilitate the town after being abandoned for thirty years. The first phase of this project was to restore one of the houses and turn it into a shelter with 24 beds and three floors: one for the bedrooms, another for the dining room and kitchen, and the last one for the classroom and workshop.

For some years now, I have been working on making care spaces more dynamic through art. When I arrived at Casa Bigodé, I saw that it had a lot of potential on a cultural and artistic level. That is why I set up my ceramics workshop there, and I also wanted to create a space with a diverse cultural programme. Because in Pallars, as in many rural areas, art and culture are not as accessible as in Barcelona, where you can find a museum on every corner.

HOW HAS THIS INITIATIVE BEEN RECEIVED?

We are very happy because it has been very well received. Especially from artists in the area who need to sell a space to hold an exhibition, a workshop or to work in a prepared and quiet space. In that sense we are very happy because it is a good tool for transformation.

WHAT IS THE VALUE OF SUSTAINABILITY AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN YOUR PROJECT?

The Shelter is a construction based on passive house projects. It is supported by solar panels and built of wood and stone. In the past, the houses here were made of stone and the same structure has been maintained, but we also wanted to improve it with the help of new technologies, such as renewable energy and biomass. We have been working on a system of natural insulation through wood, which ensures that the heat generated does not escape.

We are working to make all the houses in the village sustainable. Every proposal is critical and transformative. We want to make people think and feel that we are trying to change, to find an alternative.

DO YOU THINK THE PEOPLE IN THE VILLAGE APPRECIATE IT?

Yes, they do. We feel that there is a lot of gratitude from the people who live in the area. At the moment there is more cultural activity, and that is nice because you can see that it was not just our need, but the need of the environment in general.

We feel that we are focusing on an audience that wants a change. It is also important to us that the project is linked to the region by trying to satisfy different needs: we believe that valuing the jobs that have traditionally been done in this area is part of the claim to a united and resilient countryside.

HOW DO YOU SEE SUSTAINABILITY AND THIS KIND OF ACTIVITY IN A TERRITORY LIKE PALLARS?

I think that, like all mountain areas, it is an area of survival and resilience. It is normal that in the past there was not so much space for art and culture. In any case, there was sporadic space for festivals or livestock fairs. The arrival of people who want to live here, people who have seen an opportunity to create a life project that is different from what the cities offer, means that proposals like this have a wider audience. It is also a great opportunity for the people who already live here.

It is a change we want to make gradually and with the utmost respect for the land and its traditions. We are aware that we are not saying anything new: here the culture has always been valued, the orchards have always been cultivated and that the heat of the fire has always been used. We want to observe, honour and, if possible, improve it.

When you start looking, you find people who are creating very powerful projects up here and who just needed the space, the place or the audience to develop them. I see Pallars as a very fertile land that needs to be cultivated with diverse and innovative proposals. The cultural proposals we are developing are sprouting in a spectacular way.

WHAT ARE THE MOST POPULAR ACTIVITIES?

Our way of working so far has been to ask: who needs a space to offer their art/project/cultural proposal? And from there, offer it. This idea has manifested itself through musical or artistic vermouths, creative proposals such as dance or creative reflection groups. We also organise quarterly exhibitions that have allowed many artists from the area to exhibit their work.

In addition, Argilosa is the pottery project that offers monthly ceramics workshops. It is a space that triumphs

because it has several elements. The first one is creativity: it involves your hands and makes you aware of your own creative abilities. The second is that it is a space where we meet and form a tribe.

The last novelty is that we will offer our first artistic residency, where an artist can come to the Shelter for three weeks to develop their work. Both Marta and I want to create a space of warmth, of tribe, of refuge. In Pallars, distances are very long and if there are no places to meet, you stay at home alone and do not interact with anyone for a long time.

WHAT IS YOUR PRIORITY MARKET? DO YOU WANT TO LEAVE CATALONIA?

Our aim is to create a cultural offer for and by the people of the territory. We want to be closely linked to this place that has welcomed us so generously. We want to reach all audiences that want to meet in a cooperative, sustainable and cultural space.

This year, our priority is to expand in order to continue building a network of projects that share our goals. We also want to establish more links with the town council of our valley, so that together we can create a stronger cultural offer.





"The tourists that want more and start the transition towards sustainability will call us"

Antonio Martín, director of Turismo Vivencial, highlights the uniqueness and the storytelling as pillars of this type of travel

The tours offered by Turismo Vivencial aim to be unforgettable. In other words, travelling through authentic experiences of the territory, knowing and enjoying the culture of the place.

Antonio Martín explains how the concept of experiential tourism has been gaining ground in recent years and how its organisation adds value to activities in order to offer different and unforgettable experiences.

HOW WAS TURISMO VIVENCIAL BORN?

We started the company eleven years ago with the philosophy of selling different experiences. An unforgettable memory of the experience we have when we travel. Nowadays it's easy, but before it was harder to explain.

Before the pandemic, we won a project called MedGames in Vilanova i la Geltrú through a tourist gamification job. When we won RESTART MED! we thought it would be the continuation of that project. The motivation to bet on this route was to have the resources to develop this pilot test. We wanted to target older people because they are the ones who can do the activity at any time of the year. We launched it very recently.

WHAT VALUE DOES SUSTAINABILITY AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY BRING TO YOUR PRODUCTS?

We are very committed to sustainability. We have two certifications. One is the Biosphere seal and the other is the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism. These are parameters that we feel are very important given this experience. In addition, we will soon be sending out

a document on our concept of the sustainable traveler together with all the requests or responses we send to our customers. It is a letter of intent that the sustainable traveler can use when visiting a destination.

DO YOU THINK YOUR CUSTOMER VALUES SUSTAINABILITY?

Despite being tourism, from my point of view, the tourism sector has two profiles: the traveller and the tourist. The tourist, in my opinion, is that person who makes many trips in a very short time and does not take sustainability into account. But those tourists who have been left wanting more and start the transition towards sustainability end up calling us. In this transition to travellers, they value more going to a destination, getting involved and interacting with local people.

DO YOU THINK YOUR SERVICES AND PRODUCTS HELP TO REDUCE THE SEASONALITY OF TOURISM AND DIVERSIFY THE OPTIONS WITHIN EACH AREA?

We operate with four clear segments: Spain, Scandinavia, Latin America and the USA. They are four completely different segments and each of them has its seasonality. The European-Scandinavian travels in every window of the year because he/she has a direct flight. The Spaniard has a harder time because we all have someone who can tell us where to go, there is no need for a travel agent. And the Latin American traveler values sustainability, but also security: they are more reassured when they have a travel agent behind them. The American is another different profile, as he/she is looking for more premium, luxury products.

THE TYPE OF SERVICE YOU OFFER IS BOOMING?

We have a catalogue of activities that we propose as unique. I am talking about transhumance in the Pyrenees, or a livestock farm in Salamanca; being on a Menorcan fishing boat; or holding an event in the plenary hall of a town hall. These activities do not generally exist. For small groups, for example, we now have an important event with 35 managers from a multinational company. This type of activity fits this client profile.

With an incentive of 250 people, there is no capacity for transformation, but these small management groups have already visited 25 wineries, been to the five Michelin restaurants and stayed in five-star hotels. They want something different.

What can we offer them? Well, we spoke to a winery we work with and the suggestion was to open a bottle of cava and have dinner in the winery's armoury. It is about having an event in a winery, but with the word "disgorging" we are getting attention, and the same thing happens with the family's armoury. We are unique in our storytelling, that is our differentiation. We have a narrative and a story that we communicate to our customers. That's what they buy from us.

IF YOU HAD TO GIVE ADVICE TO COMPANIES THAT ARE ALSO DEVELOPING THESE KINDS OF EXPERIENCES, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

I'd tell them three things. The first is the concept of the host. We always talk about hosts, never guides. The person who is involved in receiving is a host. That is how you have to identify yourself. That storytelling is very powerful and is what people want to buy.

You also have to be unique and have unique propositions. If it is generic, everybody else has it. Travel agencies or event companies have to look for uniqueness. Finally, I would talk about the recommendation to the client. You are the professional, so when you get a proposal, you have to give your recommendation.

WOULD YOU DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT IF YOU STARTED THE PROJECT TODAY?

I would do a lot of different things. When we hit the market, no one knew what experiential tourism was. It's not something we invented. I come from a consulting background and, on the verge of entering the world of tourism, I did my own market research on the trends of travelers: where they go and what they want.

Peru, in the Cusco region, is the birthplace of experiential or community tourism. They call experiential tourism what we call rural tourism. It was difficult to start with this philosophy. We would have done a lot of things earlier if we had had the perspective we have now. Now I see myself as a professional in the sector.

At the moment, in a way we are setting trends. I visit websites and read things about travel memories, about travelling and not forgetting. We are all on the same page. The pandemic was a distinguishing factor that gave it a boost, but we are already thinking about the next league.

