

LIMES – Turning on the Light Switch

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1 ABSTRACT

LIMES¹ is an EU project which examines whether new, innovative, mobile services can strengthen the economy in areas outside the big cities. Test areas are rural regions along the Roman Limes in Europe. There are multiple challenges in the project: low infrastructure (regarding technology, mobility, supply, etc.), constrained thinking of the population, low employment, outdated industry, etc.

The rural regions, however, have an enormous unused potential which should be developed. By creating a “bottom-up” cooperation, a “we-feeling” will exceed borders. The pitfalls of low network coverage are avoided by a large open Wi-Fi initiative. Studies have shown that the rigid sector mentality must be eliminated in order to create new, cross-sector approaches which will strengthen the region from within. With all this, innovative mobile services play an enormous role – to lead rural regions into the present and to turn on a common light switch.

2 INTRODUCTION

The challenges citizens and planners face in rural areas are widely known. Demographic change and a declining infrastructure have left their footprints. This not only applies to closing post offices, banks, supermarkets, etc., but it is also a mobility factor. A possible sector, which defies the decline of the regions outside the big city lights, is tourism. But how can it survive when public transportation is decreased and hikers have no place to eat or spend the night? How can rural regions be economically supported under these conditions? This question is the purpose of the European LIMES project. Its goal is the promotion of economic development in the regions along the Roman Limes in Europe by culture tourism and the application of innovative mobile services.

Limes is the name of the ancient Roman frontier that represented the border of the Roman Empire at its greatest extent until the beginning of the 3rd century AD. The influence of the Roman Empire, which was one of the greatest states the world has even seen, survived for over 2000 years. Successive generations have built on that heritage and modified it, thus helping to create our modern world. Parts of the Limes became a UNESCO world heritage site: Hadrian’s Wall, the Antonine Wall and the Germanic Limes were added to the world heritage list (JILEK; KUTTNER; SCHWARCZ, 2011, p. 8ff; ALTHOFF et al.). The potential of the cultural heritage has not been exploited as far as cultural history is concerned.

3 THE OPPORTUNITIES OF CULTURE TOURISM AND MOBILE SERVICES

Tourism has always been an important economic factor for rural areas. According to OECD, culture tourism is that sector of tourism which is predicted to experience a dynamic development in the next years. Culture is an important factor for the attractiveness of most destinations, for international as well as for domestic tourists. More and more people put culture into the focus of their vacation planning. Destinations, cities as well as regions, increasingly use the opportunity to point out cultural offers in order to establish a better market position (ref. OECD 2009).

A big potential for tourism is provided by new, innovative mobile services (ref. European Union, 2012, p: 11ff). They are designed to make travelling easier. With their mobile phones, travelers have all the information they need at all times at all locations world-wide. This is the reason the European Commission created the European Mobile and Mobility Industries Alliance (EMMIA). EMMIA’s goal is to bring together representatives from politics and industry to ensure joint sustainable solution approaches in the development of mobile services (ref. EMMIA, 2013). To test these solution approaches in real life, there are three Large Scale Demonstrators. The three demonstrators develop and test transferrable concepts for the provision of

¹ Stands for Large Scale Innovative and Mobile European Services for Culture Tourism in Rural Areas

mobile services for tourists. This is done in close cooperation with tourism agencies, public administrations and businesses in rural areas with valuable but under-used cultural heritage sites (MAYO 2012, p. 18).

4 THE LIMES TEST REGION IN RHEINLAND-PFALZ

In addition to Austria (Lower Austria) and Bulgaria (the region around the city of Ruse), another test region is the rural region along the Roman Limes in Rheinland-Pfalz (Germany) . A different partner is responsible for each region so that diverse objectives can be realized in the individual region.

The State Project Development Agency (PER) is responsible for the region in Rheinland-Pfalz. Geographically, the Limes region is located in a triangle between Cologne/Bonn, Koblenz and Frankfurt/Main (ref. figure 1).

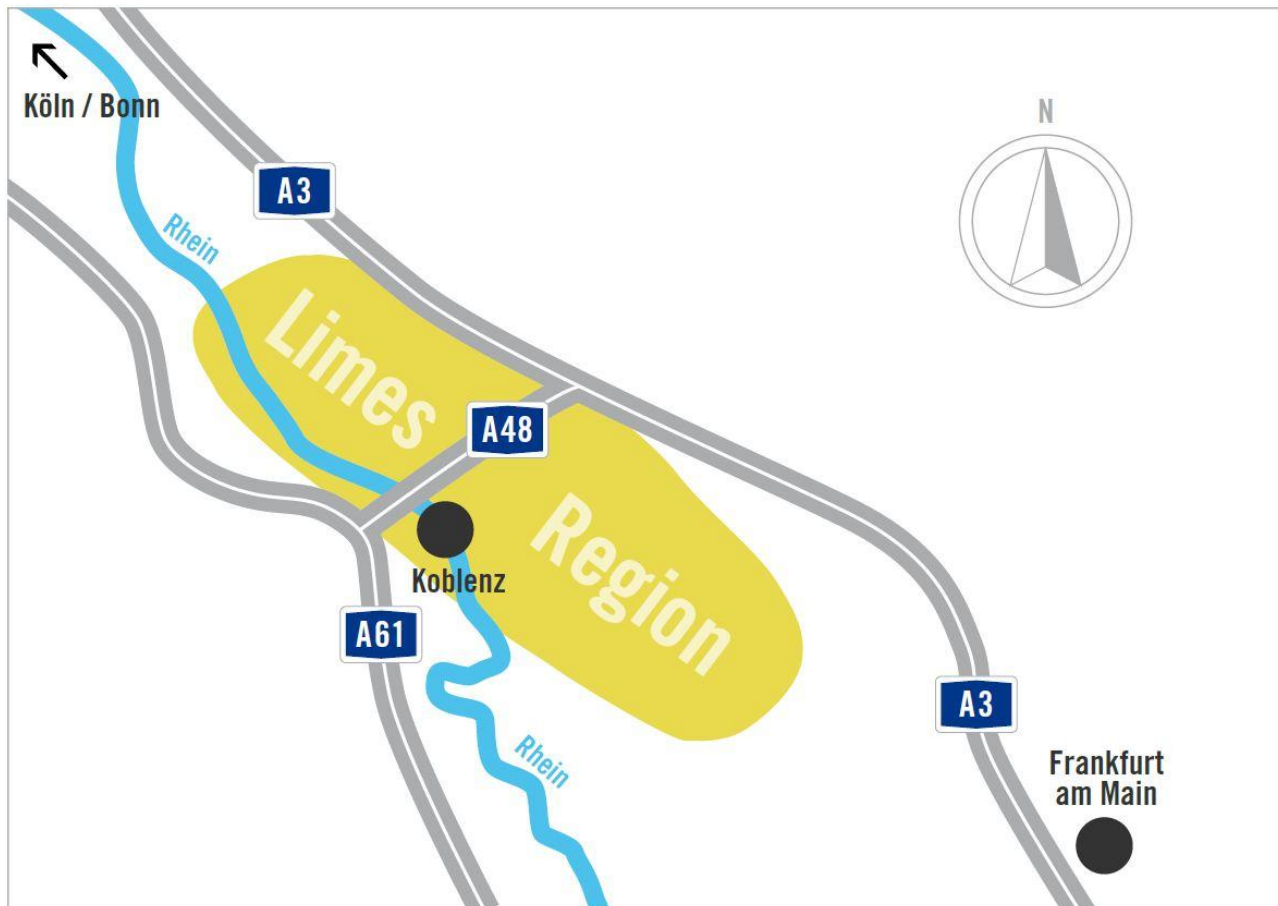


Fig.. 1: The Limes Region in Rheinland-Pfalz is located in a triangle between Cologne/Bonn, Koblenz and Frankfurt/Main.

The area of 750 square kilometers has 250,000 people in 4 counties, 12 associated communities and non-associated cities as well as 42 villages and suburbs (ref. figure 2). During the past years, various visualization and maintenance measures were implemented (SCHAFRANSKI; THOMAS, 2010, p. 158 ff). One of the obstacles for an expansion of the tourist infrastructure is the narrow-focused thinking of many actors in the region. The idea that visitors are not interested in political borders and that they want to experience the region as a whole has not yet been realized. There currently is no central organization which deals with the touristic development of the Limes region as a whole.

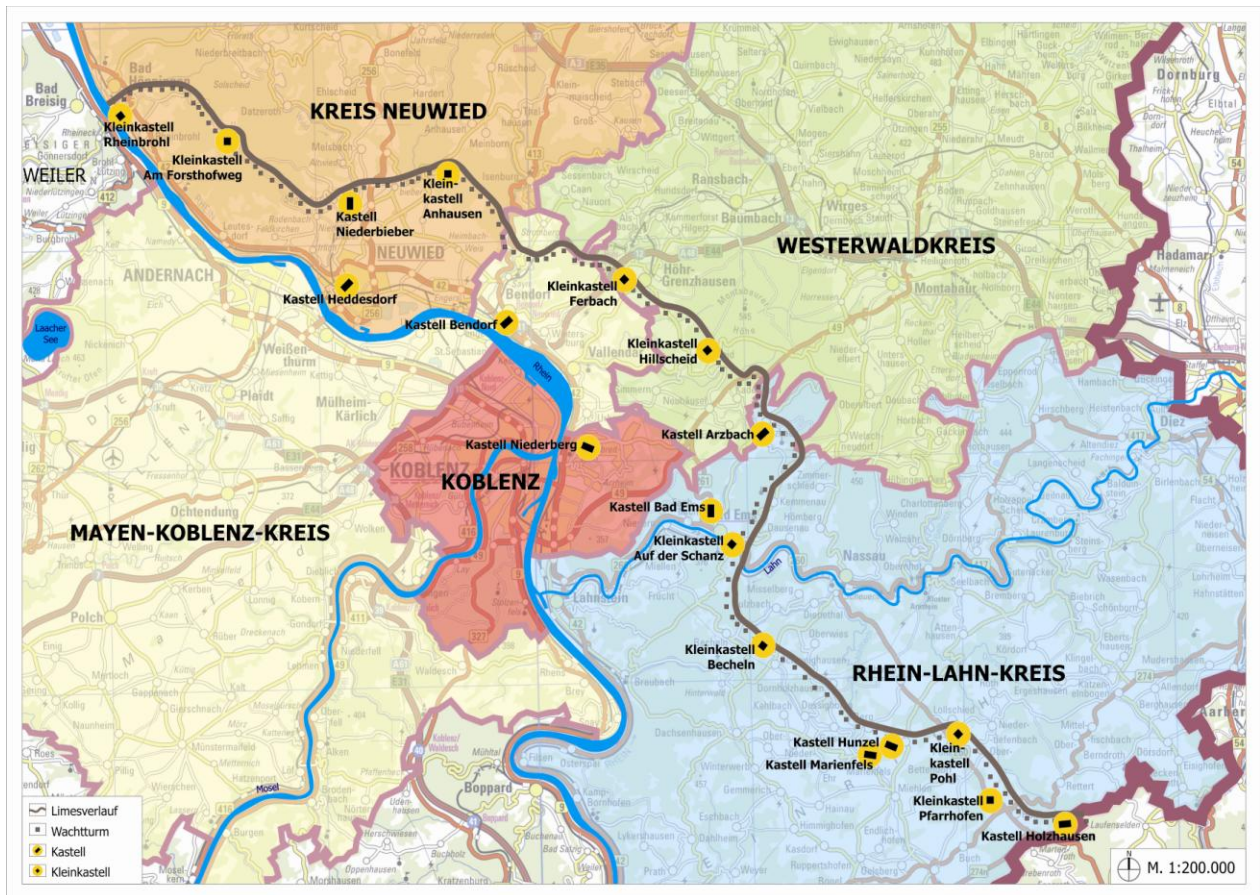


Fig. 2: The Limes passes through rural areas and has a few spots which are interesting for tourists.

5 THREE INITIATIVES TO INITIATE INNOVATIVE SERVICES

The pronounced narrow-focused thinking is only one challenge faced by project LIMES in accomplishing its goal to promote culture tourism in Rheinland-Pfalz.

As a first step of the project, the situation was analyzed with a view toward tourism and technology. This resulted in two interesting facts: Firstly, there are relatively few touristic offers in the region. In order to market the region successfully, however, a minimum of tourism-related infrastructure is recommended. Secondly, it was found that the 3G network coverage in Bulgaria and Austria is very good, but in the German test region it was very limited and spotty. If mobile services are to function, all visitors must have internet access – at least at certain locations.

Developing potentials in rural areas requires an intensive exchange with stakeholders from the region. Solution proposals must be developed together with the stakeholders, otherwise they cannot be realized practically later (ref. HOEFER, 2010, p. 328). Promotion attempts often fail because, after the on-site promotion is terminated, no-one from a local level stands behind the project. In order to achieve a “bottom up” cooperation, several on-site workshops and events with various subjects were organized. Actors from the local political scene, tourism, business as well as volunteers from the region were invited. The feedback from these events was used to develop various concepts to make the region along the Limes attractive for tourists.

5.1 Creative Tourism Limes as a Cross-Sector Approach

One approach which created new tourism services in the region is Creative Tourism Limes. This initiative came about in cooperation with Creativ Tourism Austria. It is supported by regional economic developing agencies, community associations, local tourism organizations and the Koblenz Chamber of Industry and Commerce. It is, therefore, a good example for trans-community and international cooperation.

Creative Tourism Limes promotes the idea that creative courses (like distilling one’s own single-malt whisky or a professional painting course) are offered as a package combined with a culinary experience program and overnight stays in a hotel (ref. figure 3). Tourists are offered an experience which is perfectly attuned, and tourist specialists profit from the synergy effect.



Fig. 3: Creative Tourism Limes – Something for Everyone

More than 70 enterprises or private persons are involved in Creative Tourism Limes; with almost 30 offers and more than 70 events in the year 2013 they generate an additional economic value of at least 50.000 Euro. The investment costs are relatively low, with approximately 20.000 Euro for personnel, costs for a joint home page, a marketing cooperation with the Big Brother Creative Tourism Austria, plus print and design costs for flyers and PDF brochures. With the marketing cooperation program, Creative Tourism Limes was introduced to the general public at the International Tourism Fair in Berlin.

As a cross-sector approach, the creative economy together with tourism specialists put the program on the joint home page www.kreativreisen-limes.de and on Facebook www.facebook.com/kreativreiseamlimes. The partners are challenged to actively participate in the promotion and communication via Facebook. This will strengthen their understanding of mobile services and the opportunities of this potential which was, up to know, unused.

So far, results demonstrate that a big budget or sponsoring opportunities are not always needed in every case for the stimulation of the economy in rural regions. It requires courage, time and a view beyond state borders. It's worth talking to neighbors, to learn from others and to become active one's self.

In the 2013 season, Creative Tourism Limes will be tested under real-life conditions to investigate how tourism in the rural regions can be better developed. Whether the Limes regional concept works and what the future will bring will be determined at a joint meeting in October. One thing is sure right now: other Limes countries like The Netherlands have great interest in expanding the concept to their Limes regions.

5.2 E-Bike Tours along the Limes

Another approach which created new program for tourists in the region was the E-Bike Initiative along the Limes. E-bikes have become very trendy in the past few years. Supported by environmentally-friendly electric motors, e-bikes can be used to master steep hills and long distances. Joint bicycling tours no longer depend on how old or physically fit people are; e-bikes provide active recreation even for "silver agers". In view of the demographic change e-bikes will stay trendy even in the future.

The newly created e-bike tours take people to the special sites along the Roman Limes, the Roemerwelt museum, or the authentically reconstructed Limes castle in Pohl as well as to other unique cultural and scenic sites of the region. Examples are the castles and fortresses in the Middle Rhine Valley, a UNESCO cultural heritage site. Four providers have joined forces and are offering 12 interesting tours, most of which are guided.

As with Creative Tourism Limes, investment is comparatively low. A flyer was printed for 2.750 Euro; it provides information on tours, services, dates and booking methods. The service is also advertised on the Creative Tourism Limes homepage, thus creating a synergy effect between Creative Tourism and e-bike

tours. The partners who arrange e-bike tours along the Limes are challenged to actively participate in the marketing and communication via Facebook and their own home page. The end of the 2013 vacation season will show whether this program was successful.

5.3 Network Coverage via Free Wi-Fi

The “Free Wi-Fi and Loading Facilities for Visitors and Customers” program was created to face the challenges of low network coverage in the Rheinland-Pfalz Limes region. With the support of the Koblenz Chamber of Industry and Commerce, all businesses in the region were asked to make their Wi-Fi and electrical outlets available for customers and visitors to the region. This means that visitors can use mobile services despite the limited network coverage and international visitors avoid the high data roaming charges. As smart phone batteries are usually charged only for a limited time, offering visitors the opportunity to charge their smartphones in a restaurant, makes good sense. In this way, hikers can use mobile services like hiking apps without having to worry about discharged batteries.

So far, more than 100 regional businesses are participating and are covering the gaps in network coverage (ref. figure 4). Visitors may recognize the participating businesses by a sticker which was distributed to these enterprises (ref. figure 5).

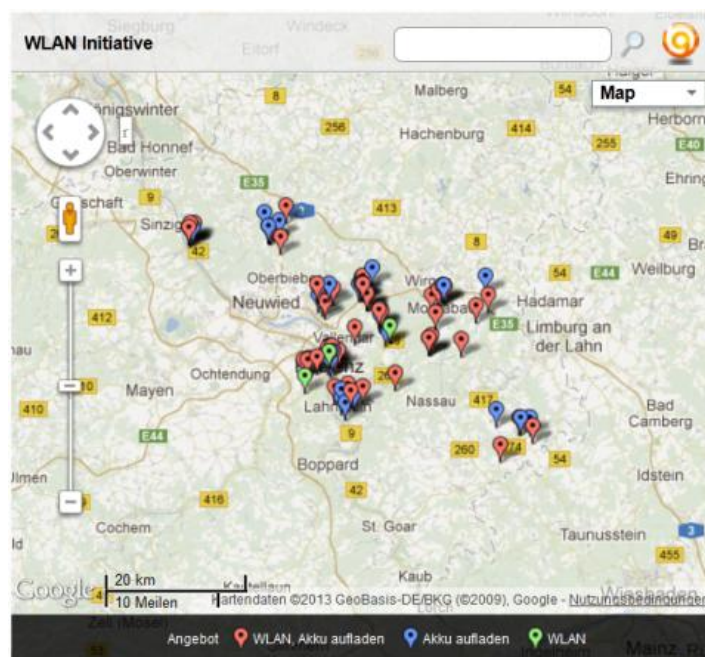


Fig. 4: The Wi-Fi program closes Network Coverage Gaps



Fig. 5: Stickers of the Wi-Fi Initiative that Fills Gaps in Network Coverage

6 CONCLUSION

As demonstrated by our results, the rural area has multiple economic potentials. The biggest challenge, however, is to acknowledge and utilize them. To do this, new paths must often be explored, as demonstrated

by the Creative Tourism Limes example. The creative economy is a significant economic factor in Germany and, by combining it with existing sectors or industries, can be used to promote the areas (ref. HERING, 2010, p. 31 ff). The Wi-Fi initiative along the Limes demonstrates how a regional disadvantage can be turned into a business advantage. Visitors, who charge their smartphones or tablets or surf on the internet, will automatically stay longer in a business and consume more of its products.

It is obvious that a low financial budget can also be regarded as an opportunity, i.e. to use one's own dedication and the assistance of unconventional ideas to achieve one's economic goals. A very important factor is to make use of the synergy effects. Goals can be achieved by acting in concert and to promote each other. It is easier to inspire visitors for other program in the region if these visitors were satisfied by their initial visit to the Limes. And thus one profits from the other.

The negative trend in the development of rural areas can only be combatted by a joint, borderless presence of the region. To put it graphically: only if we stick together can we explore new paths and turn on the lights in the rural area.

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