



# Culture Tourism - Treasure Hunt in Rural Areas

## Take-off for the German Westerwald region with Social Media

**S**timulating cultural economic power in small cities and rural areas does not necessarily change existing urban strategies applicable to the countryside. This is notably obvious in culture tourism, one of the most interesting fields of cultural economic power. The German Westerwald region, a stunning recreation area of unspoiled nature between two strong economic regions (Rhine-Main-area and the Cologne-Bonn area) has stepped forward to stimulate local and regional economy via culture, tourism and social media.

Since 2009, a cultural touristic network created by local actors from culture, business and local administration acts as a driver for regional development and culture tourism. The overall aim is generating economic benefits for all parties and bringing resources and ideas together. Supported by the regional government of Rhineland-Palatinate, the city of Altenkirchen and Association Culture and Work the network set up an electronic platform called Wunderwald - "Forest

of Wonders": [www.derwunderwald.de](http://www.derwunderwald.de).

The inspiring name speaks volumes because, hidden in the depth of the famous Westerwald, there are many cultural treasures waiting to be uncovered by both visitors and locals.

The network is constantly developing products and services in a cooperative way. This can be, for example, in the form of packages containing accommodation, dinners with fine regional specialities, vouchers for museums and cultural heritage sites, combined with guided tours through the forest, creative courses including shopping vouchers or cinema visits. Experience shows that products and services which are of limited interest in isolation become highly attractive to customers in a temporarily and spatially "condensed" form. In addition, products and services can be provided in rural areas, especially in association with the landscape, enabling a differentiation from the products and services provided by urban cultural tourism – to name but a few examples, art in the landscape or agricultural products and the experience of nature.

Consequently, the network approach translates into product communication. The activities of the network are communicated and evaluated by social media such as Web 2.0. Facebook, Twitter, Blogs and others and they play an important role in the communication processes which are integrated in a highly innovative way in the [www.derwunderwald.de](http://www.derwunderwald.de) – platform.

As in many rural areas, the Westerwald offers an incredible wealth in culture and cultural heritage for visitors as well as for local people. "With the Wunderwald platform we act as treasure seekers discovering the hidden treasures of the whole region", says Heijo Höfer, the mayor of the city of Altenkirchen, who is the initiator of the networking concept. His municipality is supported by the German umbrella organization of small towns and municipalities, the Deutscher Städte- und Gemeindebund, which sees the network and the Web 2.0 based platform as sustainable instruments for developing the economic potential of the region.

Evidently, networks are of vital importance to the cultural economy of municipalities in rural areas. "Cooperation" is a kind of leitmotif for stimulating resources. Here, cooperation builds on in-depth knowledge of regional history and culture and a cordial willingness for sharing the pleasures of country life with other people. The Wunderwald-network serves as an example of a continuous learning system and as a foundation for securing and developing the attractiveness of the living and working environment of small cities.



[info@derwunderwald.de](mailto:info@derwunderwald.de)  
[www.derwunderwald.de](http://www.derwunderwald.de)



[www.vg-altenkirchen.de](http://www.vg-altenkirchen.de)



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