Title of the Story: Go with the flow. The Green Soča Valley

Destination Name: Soča Valley

Country: Slovenia

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Nomination Category: (Please check the boxes that indicate the focus of your story)

- Localizing the destination supply chain
- Decarbonizing the destination supply chain
- Culture & Communities
- Environment & Climate
- Nature & Ecotourism
- Tourism Reset & Recovery

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Issues faced

Soča river is one of the most beautiful alpine rivers of the world and Soča Valley is among 5 top destinations in Slovenia, the green heart of Europe. The years before 2020 have brought record numbers of outdoor explorers and active holidaymakers to the valley, famous for its emerald river beauty and evergreen energy. Soča Valley is the Slovenian destination with the best-developed outdoor tourism and mountain holiday offers, which are among the most important products of Slovenian tourism and Alpine Slovenia macro region. Until 2020 Soča Valley showed one of the highest growths of visitors in Slovenia. In 2018 Soča Valley had 302,343 tourists and 813,924 overnight or 5.4% in Slovenia and 21% in the Julian Alps. Tourist arrivals have grown for 2.5-times in the last ten years. Mountain municipalities attracted the biggest part of guests in 2018, altogether 29% of all tourists in Slovenia. This shows great attraction of the Alps, part of which is also Soča Valley, compared to the other Slovenian tourist destinations. Tourism is also one of the most important generators of economic growth in Soča Valley. Directly connected to the tourism sphere is over 800 accommodation providers, more than 100 restaurants and 40 sports agencies, and indirectly another 300 subjects in commerce, traffic, cultural-recreational and other spheres.

2020 stopped the world and tourism. The tourism standstill brought an enormous economic damage for Soča Valley, so it was necessary to act quickly. At Soča Valley Tourist Board, together with Nea Culpa Tourism Communications Agency, we have decided to form the concept of integrated communications before the season according to the general atmosphere and state of spirit across Europe, from the lockdown period to the easing of safety measures. We positioned the river of Soča as the hero of the integrated campaign with two parts – the first one, entitled BACK TO THE SPRING, at the time of lockdown and the second at the time of easing of measures, entitled GO WITH THE FLOW. In autumn, in normal circumstances there would have been three traditional green-oriented events (two events promoting local food and the Hiking Festival), which would have attracted a great number of local and foreign visitors. Due to restrictions the events could not have been organized as usual, so we have connected them all in one single event SOČA VALLEY FROM RIVER TO SKY. We have intertwined the hiking trails with the local culinary offer. A common programme was prepared, consisting of guided hiking and cycling tours, complemented by the culinary offer of the main local specialties. This way, every visitor could find something for himself, and the experience was more intimated or individualized. This year we continue the story and upgrade it. First a new video was launched, entitled GO WITH THE FLOW. THE GREEN SOČA VALLEY, inviting the visitors to an individual experience in the valley. Soon, a new brochure and a video will be published, promoting out destination card Julian Alps: Soča Valley. By buying the card, visitors acquire free entrance to all natural and cultural attractions in the valley and can use public transfers.
Methods, steps and tools applied

In April, at the time when we started, majority of destination campaigns was focused on stay home – stay safe message. We opted for a different one, with the focus on travelling within ourselves, just like the Soča river with all its faces, from white-water rapids and cascades to emerald pools and slow-paced flow, is the reflection of human emotions and states of mind. Therefore, the river can have the power to take us on a soul travel, a meditation. The first part of the campaign was focused on multimedia video storytelling, e-mail marketing and public relations, with specific art direction - camera shooting of the river in its reverse flow, literally back to the spring. We shot during the time of total lockdown, with no people in the script and scenario, with nature – having a rest from all the human seekers of its pleasures – being the only actor in the film. The music underpins the tone and message of the video as a reflection of the inner state. Campaign at the social media (FB, Instagram, YouTube) targeted nature lovers, outdoor explorers (B2C) as well as Soča Valley partners in tourism (B2B) in Slovenia (narrative in Slovenian) and abroad (narrative in English).

The second part of the campaign was prepared for the moment of easing of safety measures. In May-June, Slovenia reopened travel and hospitality sector (restaurants, accommodation, Tas, TOs) and opened borders. We knew that is the time to GO WITH THE FLOW, positioning the river once again as the hero of the campaign, this time accompanied with a human, going with the flow of the Soča river, far from everybody, far from the crowds. We chose the kayak paddler as the central co-star of the river, meeting other adventurers on the go. The content creation was based once again on the video storytelling, with the message of the river, which can carry you on, helping you move forward with its endless energy, even if the whole world stops. The music and tone are different as well – a positive song of all the people, in love with the river. Campaign targeted the same markets, groups and personas as the first one, with an invitation to Soča Valley for Slovenians and international markets. Apart from the social media advertising of the video, other formats of social media ads (carousels, newsfeed posts, Instagram stories), print ads, outdoor media (bus in the capital of Slovenia) and e-mail marketing were added.

In autumn we organized weeks for hikers and foodies. In four weeks, visitors could try out no less than 40 hiking and gourmet treats. Every visitor could plan their own tailor-made break with guided tours in smaller groups or individual trips. To compensate for the energy loss, the local providers offered special autumn menus and homemade specialties – everything from kobariški štruklji (sweet dumplings with walnuts and raisins), Tolmin frika (potato and cheese omelette), to buški kraf (Bovec pockets with pears), čompe an skuta (potato and cottage cheese) and to Kanal chestnuts. A video SOČA VALLEY FROM RIVER TO SKY was prepared, inviting guests to these events. The same markets were targeted like in the previous campaigns. Apart from promoting the video on social media, additional social media ads were prepared (newsfeed, Instagram stories), printed ads, metro lights, radio ads and advertising by post.

This year the story was upgraded further with two campaigns. The first was creating the video, which continued the GO WITH THE FLOW story, and it was named GO WITH THE FLOW. THE GREEN SOČA VALLEY. The visitors are invited in Soča Valley on an adventure but also to find peace and connect with the nature. Individual activities are still in the centre. The second campaign is the promotion of the destination card Julian Alps: Soča Valley and informing the guests about the benefits of the card. The benefits include visit to the natural and cultural attractions and public transfers in the Soča Valley. We are preparing a brochure, promoting the purchasing of the card, and including also green tips for
visitors in the valley, in order to diminish their impact on the nature. Shortly, a new video will be published, promoting the main attractions and sustainable mobility.

With call-to-action visuals we have connected the on-line and off-line advertising: digital (Facebook, Google), radio, TV, bus, metro lights, printed ads, brochures and posters.

Key success factors
The nature in Soča Valley is still very intact. In the valley, we have never had mass tourism and this is something we want to keep in the future as well. With the pandemic we have become even more aware of the meaning of our nature and promote non-mass tourism more actively. We strive to preserve the nature despite the growth of number of visitors. We realize that post-pandemic tourist travels will be even more individualized and personalized. Future visitors will look for remote places with experiences that are at the same time green and stress-free and reflect the authenticity of the destination through culture, food and sports. Destinations and accommodations that will take care of sustainable use of natural sources will be more and more respected. We believe Soča Valley is the ideal destination for the developing future tourist. Geographic diversity, Soča river and with its side valleys, Triglav National Park, long-distance hiking and cycling trails, First World War heritage, festivals, local culture and traditional dishes allow a development of traditional products into new experience, suitable for the future tourist.

Lessons learned
There were a number of challenges, because the pandemic has brought a lot of restrictions and distrust of people. This is why we wanted to calm them and stay in contact with people. During the complete lockdown we addressed them with the message to stay at home. Later we invited them to our pristine nature, where everyone can find a place for themselves and where sports activities (organized and individual) as well as intimate experiences (finding peace, meditation, contact with nature) are possible. We also carried out a cycle of education courses for tourist providers, teaching them how to make their business more sustainable and how to ensure safe holidays for their guests. The destination received the Green & Safe certificate for responsible, safe and sustainable tourism management. We also encouraged the tourist providers to acquired the certificate.
Results, achievements and recognitions

Tourism in Soča Valley depends on the foreign market in 85 %, which is why the initial predictions were very bad (60–80 % decrease). With our quick and efficient actions the predictions luckily did not prove to be true. At the end of the summer 2020 (summer being the high season in Soča Valley) the decrease was only 28 % (compared to the national level 40 % decrease). This means we took a step back to the 2017 and 2018 realization. The Slovenian Government has introduced tourism vouchers in June 2020, with the purpose of diminishing the damage of pandemic in tourism sector. The vouchers were given to all Slovenian citizens and could be used for overnight or overnight with breakfast at Slovenian accommodation providers. Apart from the Slovenian coast, the majority of the vouchers were used in Soča Valley.

Videos recorded nearly 1.000.000 of views in only a few weeks, while the emotional power and the effect of storytelling were immense.

Additional references

Soča Valley - Back to the spring: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GiBjKNo_6EM&t=3s
Go with the flow: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IAJFvN0Vpd4&t=21s
Soča Valley - From River to the Sky: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yb2fiFsh1SM&t=1s
Go with the Flow. The Green Soča Valley – 25 s: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ogO861jQpHE
Go with the Flow. The Green Soča Valley – 12 s: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8JBh1hXJYXg

Go With the Flow campaign (bus, Instagram example, radio): Kampanja Grem s tokom
From River to Sky campaign (poster, radio, menus for restaurants, metro light, PR article): Kampanja Od reke do neba, Jestiva, Frika, pohodništvo
Go with the Flow. The Green Soča Valley campaign: Kampanja Go with the flow. The Green Soča Valley