

**LAUKU CEĻOTĀJS**

Press release

**European Rural tourism goes for quality**

Rural tourism offers authentic experiences, which is something foreign visitors are looking for in every country. At the same time, services, accommodation types, food and many other things in rural tourism are so much different between countries that visitors do not know what to expect and often choose hotel services instead. Rural tourism could have better prospects in international markets if the offer was more understandable and clearer to guests.

Benchmarking of rural tourism product concept and quality of services has long been discussed in Eurogites, the European Federation of Rural Tourism, uniting 35 professional rural tourism organisations in 28 countries. In 2005, International Quality Assessment standards were accepted by Eurogites members. This is a minimum level of comfort guests would find in rural accommodation properties which are members of Eurogites organisations. Discussions and surveys of rural tourism organisations reveal similar quality issues to be addressed in all countries: misleading information/incorrect presentation of the product, poor technical condition of the facilities (worn-out furniture, bathroom equipment, etc.), inadequate room and bed sizes.

To show the different interpretations of rural tourism quality standards in European countries and to help rural tourism organisations train their members to Eurogites quality standards, the project "Transfer of Quality Assurance Tools for European Rural Tourism Sector" was initiated. By the end of 2010 Eurogites and rural tourism organisations from Spain, Greece, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Latvia have developed QUALITOOL - a web based training tool to the Eurogites quality standards. It is accessible from <http://serv.celotajs.lv/eurogites/home> and offers: 1. Quality self-check for rural tourism accommodation properties, 2. Inspection manual with explanations of quality standards, 3. Virtual training. The QUALITOOL presents examples in photos illustrating positive and negative examples of compliance with Eurogites quality standards. With just 5 countries represented, the QUALITOOL shows very explicitly the differences in rural tourism accommodation style, rural environment and services.

To make sure that the Eurogites quality standards provide what the market is looking for, a customer survey was put online and attracted ca 3500 respondents. The results show facts that are useful for rural tourism providers, for example, the most important factors when choosing accommodation are: attractive nature or surrounding landscape, complete and reliable information before booking and price level. Customers regard the offer as good value for money if there is attractive surroundings and location, high standard of rooms and facilities, easy booking and security guarantees.

The International Workshop "Changing concepts for Quality?" was held on 9-June-2010 in Riga gathering ca 200 participants from 24 countries of Europe. It was organised by the Latvian country tourism association in cooperation with EuroGites and with support from the EC Leonardo da Vinci program. Unanimously considered by participants as the best and most effective event of this kind in the last years, this workshop provided a wide scope of contributions. They can best be summarized as a new understanding of quality, creating competitiveness based on close connection to the expectations of the visitor, providing quality through cooperation, high level of professionalism, and innovative approaches.

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