



Report on the Study Tour of East Gotland

Mihaly Lados (Hungary), Iza Orłowska (Poland), Magdalena Petersson (Sweden), Barbara Prcnik (Slovenia), Irma Schouten (The Netherlands), Istvan Sido (Romania), Daina Vinklere (Latvia).

1. The character of the area

The east of Gotland has a very attractive coastline, with a sandy beach for swimming and rocky beaches for walking. The Folhammar rocks are an attraction at the coast. Tourists can also follow a cycling path along the coast. At several points, you have a great view over the beaches and the sea.

The region that we visited can be referred to as the cultural part of Gotland. Ljugarn was the first real tourist resort on the island. Restaurants, pensions, youth hostels and hotels are mainly situated in typical Gotland houses, which helps to maintain the cultural heritage and is also an attraction for the tourists. Along the coastline, there are harbours, with traditional shops where smoked fish can be bought. Handicrafts are quite popular in this region : visitors can see and buy the products, and maybe participate in a workshop. There are also four museums in the area.

Because of the variation in accommodation and activities, many different target groups visit this area. Youngsters, families and elderly people are all involved.

The tourism entrepreneurs in this area all know each other, from hearsay or in person. Some of them co-operate : others really enjoy working on their own. Most of them involve the local population in their enterprises, for example the carpenters, handicraftsmen, hairdressers and priest. Co-operation with local farmers is also quite common. Farmers in this region have specialised in specific crops or cattle over the last few years.

The entrepreneurs are trying to extend the tourist season with new tourism products and to activate the local people.

Gotland, except for Visby and 4 kilometres around Visby, is a LEADER+ region. More information about this topic can be found in case study 2.2

2. The case studies

2.1 Ljugarns golf course

In the 1980's, Ragnard Olofsson started playing golf. After a few years, his father and mother also started to play. They found this a great hobby, but there was only one problem - they had to travel 70 kilometres to get to the golf course.

That's how Ragnard's father, Bertil, came up with the plan to make a golf course at home, along with houses and a recreation centre. He tried to get a permit for this, but failed because people are not allowed to build close to the sea.

One year later, the programme 'Kick-off Gotland' started and there was a demand for quality recreation. Some government officials came to visit Bertil, and one of them was really

enthusiastic about his idea. He arranged things so that the Olofsson family got a permit for a golf course with 27 holes, 140 houses and a recreation centre. Bertil wanted to co-operate with an entrepreneur for the recreation-centre and with a group of doctors. The aim was to play golf without having to drive 70 kilometres, and to sell the houses to companies for their staff to stay there.

The golf course enterprise is strongly based on the family : there are no outside employees. Right now, in 2002, only part of the plan has been realised. There is a golf course with 9 holes; and 7 houses have been built, mostly occupied by the family themselves. The reason for this is:

- They got a Statesubsidy of 350,000 SKr, but needed about 7 million SKr. They borrowed the rest of the money. In the early 1990's, there was a recession, and interest-rates went up with 500 %. This was really bad for the loans.
- Due to the recession, the doctors and the recreation entrepreneur drew back.
- The market for the houses also collapsed due to the recession, because big companies were not interested in investing in houses for their staff.

On Gotland, there are 6 golf courses, including this one, which belong to the Swedish Golf association. Two of them with 18 holes are really close to Bertil Olofsson's course, but there is no real competition : they see themselves more as a cluster. Ljugarns Golf course is also a member of the Gotland Tourist Association.

Golf courses have usually been founded by golf clubs. Ljugarns golf course is a family business : however, they are also work with a golf club, which has some 350 members, much less than other golf clubs in Gotland. They want to increase the number of members to 700. The number of daily visitors is about 4,000 in a year. This number is growing, and 2002 was the first profitable year financially.

Local people are enthusiastic about the golf course, because restaurants can stay open, the village is more 'alive', and the tourist season is longer. But they are not willing to invest in the golf course !

The family feels that the future could be dark or bright. On the dark side, in five years it could still be the same, with the family working very hard and struggling to stay 'alive' financially. On the bright side, they could be managing the golf course, but with employees instead of working themselves. They hope to have built up to 120 houses for people to come and live there, which will help to increase the population of Gotland.

If they had to start over again, they probably would not do it. But right now, they don't want to sell it. Probably they would start doing something else in a short while, because they are an active family.

2.2 Leader+

Bertil Olofsson's son, Ragnard, is working for LEADER+. He told us about that.

In Sweden, there are 12 LEADER+ regions. Gotland is one of these regions : the whole island is included, except for Visby and an area of 4 kilometres around it. LEADER+ is based on the grassroots principle of rural development, with a three-way partnership between local people, government and private organisations. In Gotland there is a committee, consisting of 21 people who represent different parties, which decides which projects will receive LEADER+ support. The Local Action Group (LAG) advise the Committee in this decision.

Ragnard is a member of the LAG. When people have an idea for a project, they can come to him. He will advise them and help them with their project proposal. He and his colleagues also organise information evenings to tell the local people about the possibilities of LEADER+. They don't push people in any way to think of projects, they only encourage and stimulate them. They believe that the initiative for projects should come from the local people themselves.

LEADER+ will pay between 40 and 60% of the costs of a project : the rest of the money must come from co-financing, for example the capital or working hours of the person who initiates the project. Examples of LEADER+ projects are local call centres, farm shops and producing champagne from rhubarb.

2.3 Lövängen guesthouse

Frei is a professional chef, now aged 55. Thirty years ago, in 1971, he started the Strandcafé at the beach. A couple of years later, he bought the restaurant "Bruna dörren". Both this enterprises are now rented out to other entrepreneurs.

About five years ago, Frei and his family bought Lövängens guesthouse, which now has about 30 guest rooms. It offers bed & breakfast (at between 200 and 450 Skr per person per day), cottages and apartments. Guests enjoy their breakfast in a cosy garden. Full board is also offered at high season, at between 5000 and 9000 Skr per week. Two persons are employed.

The tourist season only lasts for 6 weeks. About 70% of the customers to the guesthouse come from Stockholm. Later in August, there are also visitors from Norway and Germany. About 10 to 15% of the guests return every year.

Frei's view is that "the company is very much me as a person". The total cost for marketing is 80,000 SKr per year. He uses two main brochures for the advertisement. The homepage of the guesthouse, www.ljugaren.com, is a very practical way to inform customers, who wish a look at the standards of the rooms.

Frei says that it is not very profitable simply to serve food : it is important to have guests staying overnight. Parties for about 30-40 persons for weddings and family reunions are a good way to earn money. He is searching for a "partner" who can offer all sorts of activity to his customers. His vision for the next five years is to improve the standard of the rooms, and to build another 10 cottages and a swimming pool.

2.4 Katthamra Gård

Katthamra Gård is a youth hostel in Katthammarsvik, based in the outbuildings of an old mansion owned by the Gustavson family. Mr. and Mrs. Gustavson had, for many years, a great desire to buy what they regard as the only genuine manor on Gotland. They succeeded at the fourth auction, and started the business in summer 1999.

The manor with its surroundings was in very bad condition when they bought it. The previous owner had been using the buildings as a youth hostel, but there was much work to be done on them, including repair of the roof and alteration of the windows. The Gustavsons have given their heart to the restoration, with professional help from a lawyer and a financial adviser. Mr Gustavson was brought up on a farm on the northern part of Gotland, which contributed to his motivation for this project. He wanted to make a significant contribution to the development of rural tourism on the island.

Developing a tourist product for different target groups has taken a lot of money and much hard thought. Today, Katthamra Gård consists of

- The Manor, used as a private house
- The youth hostel, with 75 beds
- Three other houses which can be let to visitors (one with 4 beds, one with 6 beds, and the other with 2 beds,

11 people are employed in the enterprise.

The main offer to visitors is overnight accommodation, with breakfast in the garden in front of the manor. There is a café, offering soft drinks, simple lunches, smoked salmon etc. Guests can also rent a bicycle, and can take part in tours inside the manor and different cultural events on the estate. One of the buildings has been converted for use as a concert hall, with a stage and seats for 150 people. The Gustavsons try to keep tradition alive by organising concerts of chamber music and light jazz. They are eager to support local development by co-operation with local people, and by telling their visitors about other attractions nearby, including many specialised farms.

Their youth hostel a member of the Swedish Association of Youth Hostels (SVIF), together with 5 other hostels in Gotland. They are also members of the Gotland Tourist Association. They take part in a project started by the local museum, called 'Cultural way of living on Gotland': this is a significant source of ideas and help for their restoration project. In all these ways, they are drawing Katthamra Gård to the attention of tourists both in Sweden and abroad, for example in the Baltic countries to which transport is improving. They hope to achieve extension of the present 6-week long season in the youth hostel, for example by organising a Christmas fair in the yard of the manor.

2.5 Gotland Animal Park

Gotland Animal Park is a zoo. It was founded in 1993 by a farmer who wanted to start a new enterprise because cattle breeding had become unprofitable in his small farm. After his death, it was taken over by the present owners, Hasala Ltd, a non-profit health-care organisation whose main activity is to help youngsters to move away from taking drugs. Many of the staff are young people, aged from 14 to 18 and living in Klintehamn rehabilitation centre. Their involvement in the zoo caused some trouble in the local community at first. Hasala Ltd organised an information evening for the local people, to tell them about the concept and the youngsters. Now they are accepted by local people and are quite involved in community life.

Unfortunately we were not able to meet the owners, so we got some information from Annette, whose responsibility is to take care of the animals and who has been working in the zoo for one and a half years : she is proud to be a real Gotlander.

The zoo occupies about 10 hectares of land, and contains about 40 different species of animals and birds, most of them of species not native to Gotland. The zoo is open to the public only in summer, but most of the animals have to be cared for there throughout the year. Visitors can use a snack and souvenir shop, and a fine café in country style. This hall can be used also for conferences.

The main customers are families; older people; and groups of school children. They are mainly from Sweden. The zoo serves as an added attraction for "beach tourists" on Gotland

The zoo co-operates well with other local entrepreneurs and farmers. Most of the food for the animals is bought from local farmers. Handicrafts made by local artists are sold in the shop : the café serves lunches prepared in the village. The zoo provides 2.5 jobs for local people and activity for many of the youngsters : several other people are involved in repairs and other work.

The enterprise receives some money from the state for rehabilitation of youngsters. Unfortunately we could not get any statistics about customers or finance, nor about their marketing activities or their visions for the enterprise in the future. However, the zoo has some reserve area for further development. One possibility for the future could be to develop activities for children such as pony or camel riding, playgrounds etc.

2.6 Villa Alskog

Villa Alskog Hotel and Pension is near Ljugarn, about 8 kilometres from the beach. It consists of two buildings which previously belonged to the local church. The present owner, Mikael Ahnell, bought the buildings five years ago, and opened them as tourist accommodation in 2001. He is originally from Gotland : the family left to Stockholm in his childhood, and he came back to the island five years ago.

Villa Alskog offers a variety of high quality services to customers. It is open all the year round. In addition to accommodation and full board, the services includes distinct local cuisine, classical music and artistic activities, such as nature photography, painting and dancing. The emphasis is on 'nutrition, art and well-being'. There are special weekend events, such as weddings, 'Romantic week-ends', and family celebrations; and also facilities for weekday conferences, for example from Monday to Thursday.

The marketing of Villa Alskog is done mainly by Internet. It has a half-page advertisement in the biggest Gotland tourist guide. Mr Ahnell did a special feature on a morning programme on national radio, for fourteen weeks. Tourist packages are offered in three languages - Swedish, English and German. Villa Alskog is a member of the Gotland Tourist Association.

What kinds of tourists come to Villa Alskog? They are mainly rich people, coming to the weekend events, which they treat as a short holiday at reasonable prices. They include many Germans, responding to the Villa's advertising in their own language.

What impact and synergy effects could be observed? As a family business, the Villa does not need formal partnership or co-operation with other entrepreneurs. However, it is a member of an informal network with fourteen local entrepreneurs. It uses local employees on a casual basis. Local people can take part in training sessions and other activities organised at the Villa outside the tourist season. Local food and other goods are bought and used in the hotel and restaurant. Local handicrafts, such as ceramics from Ethelem and glass from Roma, are displayed in the hotel.

Looking to the future, Villa Alskog has a project funded by LEADER+ to expand the cultural programme to include more folk- and artistic events. Mtr Ahnell's longer-term ambition is to set up a similar hotel with services in a warm country, in order to assure a longer 'full season'.

3. The group's reflections on the tour

Rural tourism. The main topic of our stay on Gotland has been rural tourism. We saw a variety of entrepreneurs during our trip, from a former farmer/carpenter to an international marketing hotshot. Some of them want to work together with other entrepreneurs : others really want to work alone.

It is difficult to find anyone who fits into the picture of an "ideal rural tourist entrepreneur" or "typical rural tourism product". None of the people we saw are included in the brochure of Bed and Breakfast in Sweden, although 17 farms from Gotland are included. In our opinion, the main tourist attraction in this region is the beach : all the other activities may be seen as added attractions.

Financial goals. In the conversations we had with the entrepreneurs, nobody really talked about making a lot of profit. The zoo can be kept out of this discussion, because it is owned by a non-profit health-care organisation, subsidised by the government.

- The golf course is struggling to make money, indeed until now it has been running at a loss.
- Frei at Lövängen guesthouse has plans for more investment, but he does not want to increase his prices to earn this investment back faster.
- The Gustavson family at Katthamra Gård have another job in Stockholm. They want to improve their house, to keep its atmosphere and to contribute to local development.
- Mikael Ahnell at Villa Alskog has a flourishing enterprise, after only a year in the business. He is focused on making it profitable, and has plans for expansion.

Co-operation with other entrepreneurs. The entrepreneurs whom we visited varied in their thoughts about co-operation with other entrepreneurs.

- The golf course has difficulties in finding people to co-operate with, mostly because they need investment rather than co-operation.
- Mr Gustavson at Katthamra Gård organises cultural events, such as concerts and exhibitions, for tourists and local people. When he's renovating his buildings, he uses local workmen. He also rented an old warehouse where 42 local handicraftsmen sold their products during the last tourist season : in the past 2 years, the volume of products sold has doubled.
- Local farmers produce most of the food for the animals in the Gotland Animal Park. In the café, they sell food made in a local restaurant. When the new concept started, working with former drug addicted youngsters, the village was sceptical : now, the youngsters are accepted by local people.
- Mikael Ahnell at Villa Alskog involves the local community in different ways in his plans. He organises courses for the local people and is stimulating them to keep the village traditions alive. In this, he co-operates with 14 other entrepreneurs. He also uses local activities to entertain his guests (e.g. workshops) and local services in the hotel (e.g. hairdresser, massage).
- Frei at Lövängen guesthouse is quite sceptical about co-operation with others : he just wants to do things on his own and in his own way.

Extending the season. During our introduction on Gotland from Mats Jansson, we heard that the tourist season on Gotland is very short, only 4 to 6 weeks. Most of the entrepreneurs we visited told us the same thing. Only one of them, Villa Alskog, is open the whole year : the owner makes an effort to encourage people to come to the island in other seasons, for different kinds of activity which do not depend on the summer weather.

Gotland's identity. The entrepreneurs are all proud to live on the island of Gotland, even those who are not originally from the island. They see its opportunities and threats, and they want to make the very best of it. They want to make things better, not just profit!

The future. All the entrepreneurs see a future for their enterprises : none of them talked about selling or quitting. They have a goal and plans for the future in many different directions. There may be difficulties for every one of them, but they are very driven to 'make things happen'. Four of them knew about LEADER+, some of them are already involved in these projects and others may find opportunities to do so.

4. Reflections on the process of the study tour

Formal part. When we knew where we were going to, we decided to divide our tasks. We made one person responsible for the report of each visit: the other group members had the responsibility to listen very carefully and ask questions. After the writing of the report, each group member read the report and could add something or suggest changes.

After each visit, we talked about the things we had heard and seen. We discussed the definition of rural tourism, and the different ways that the entrepreneurs fit into that definition.

The first evening we already had some ideas about the final presentation. The last evening was really in the spirit of the report and the presentation. Sunday morning we divided our tasks even more to work as efficiently as possible. Everyone chose what he/she wanted to do and all our personal skills were used for the best!

The atmosphere in the group was really motivating and stimulating. The decisions we had to make were democratic: everyone could have a say in it. Everyone wanted to see and to learn as much as possible of this area, so the decision-making process wasn't that difficult. All of us had an equal part in the group work. It was a good group to work with. Different people with different nationalities were working together in a great way, to learn more about rural tourism.

Fun part! Of course, we also had some fun. We wanted to stimulate the local economy, and we did so in each step of our journey. We went to the local supermarket to buy local food and to meet local people. The evening was spent in the company of local people, drinking locally produced beer, talking about local activities. Synse-harbour, another local place, provided us with locally smoked fish.

We would really, really like to thank Thomas* for suggesting all these different, extra visits and tours to us. This, what we refer to as 'adventure tour', was really quite exciting. We saw the seaside, the beautiful coastline with the Folhammar rocks. We just kept on driving to Synse, where we ate some different kind of fishes. We decided to take the tourist route, which Thomas had recommended. It was great, a bit bumpy maybe, but really great. After a while we really got in a Camel-trophy mood, and forgot for a moment that we were driving a Volkswagen-van. We were in a jeep, having a real adventure!! We came to this really rocky part of the road, but we could make it, Thomas said it was a great route so it must also be safe ... but it wasn't! After a few metres, we started sliding down and towards the water ... we decided to jump out. There we were, stranded at a deserted rocky beach, with our Volkswagen-jeep that was stuck ... After some pushing and trying, Magdalena became the hero of the day, by stepping into the car, looking really brave and driving it away from this road of horror.

So, to thank Thomas for all his good advice, we would like to recommend him a 'love-weekend' at Villa Alskog, a new rural tourism product. He can enjoy the love-champagne, love-poems, love-candles, love-lollipops, love-dinner, love-nights, love-baths until he really hates to think about it.

* Thomas Norrby, organiser of the Euracademy Summer School

euractoureastgotlandam