

Joint Strategy for Branding and Promotion

Deliverable D1.4.2
within the Interreg SI-HU ICDM project

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1. Executive Summary

This strategic document outlines the "ICDM Community-Based Strategy for Branding and Promotion," developed as Deliverable D1.4.2 within the Interreg SI-HU ICDM project, focuses on the Aura Trail as a flagship product brand within the broader ICDM cycling destination model. It serves as the foundational blueprint for creating a unified and sustainable branding framework for a cross-border cycling destination connecting Slovenia and Hungary.

The strategy is grounded in a participatory approach and draws from co-creation workshops conducted in both countries. It integrates findings from previous initiatives such as Iron Curtain Cycling (ICC), Amazing AoE, Green Exercise, and EuroVelo13, building on their experience to shape a strong and emotionally resonant brand identity.

The key aims of this document are to:

- Establish a coherent destination identity across borders
- Align narrative, visual, and promotional strategies with local stories and symbols
- Provide a roadmap for implementation, capacity-building, and stakeholder coordination
- Support tourism sustainability through place-based, inclusive branding

Aligned with Work Package 3 (WP3) of the ICDM project, this strategy contributes to coordinated destination promotion and communication. It forms the basis for the creation of the visual identity, core messaging, storytelling structures, and engagement tools necessary for long-term brand deployment and cross-border cooperation.

By presenting strategic pillars, core values, audience segmentation, and implementation guidelines, this document serves as a practical and visionary tool for stakeholders committed to building a shared destination brand rooted in authenticity, emotion, and local ownership.

2. How to Read This Strategy

This document is *not* a general strategy for the cross-border destination. It is a **branding strategy for one specific tourism product** – the **Aura Trail** – a newly co-created cycling route that combines physical movement with emotional and spiritual experience.

The Aura Trail was developed within the Interreg SI-HU ICDM project, through a **participatory, community-based process** involving local stakeholders and co-creation workshops in both Slovenia and Hungary.

Although the route traverses a broader tourism area – and even though two other long-distance cycling trails (**Amazon of Europe** and **Iron Curtain Cycling**) pass through the same cross-border region – **this strategy does *not* cover the development or branding of all three trails.**

However, it acknowledges:

- the shared context,
- overlapping geography, and
- **existing audiences** already familiar with these routes.

In this sense, the strategy **complements the existing offer** and contributes new ideas for promotion, storytelling, and cross-border marketing synergy. It enhances the overall appeal of the cycling experience in the region and helps lay the groundwork for future coordination.

2.1 What Do We Mean by “Destination Brand”?

In this strategy, the term *destination brand* refers specifically to the identity and emotional perception of the **Aura Trail** – not to a general or umbrella brand for the entire cross-border region.

Creating a full-scale destination brand – one that would cover wellness, cultural heritage, gastronomy, and active leisure – would require a separate strategy, a dedicated

budget, and formal governance structures. At this stage, these elements are not yet in place.

2.2 How to Use This Strategy

This strategy serves as a practical guide for branding a single, emotionally resonant tourism product – the **Aura Trail** – shaped by community voices, nature, and cross-border collaboration.

It is not meant to replace any existing or future destination management plans, but it can offer inspiration, structure, and transferable ideas for broader use.

Should a cross-border destination brand emerge in the future, the Aura Trail could take its place as one of the flagship experiences – alongside Iron CurtainCycling route¹ and Amazon of Europe². Suggestions for such alignment are offered in Chapter 8.7.

2.3 What This Strategy Covers

To be clear:

- This strategy focuses exclusively on the **Aura Trail** – its identity, emotional value, target audiences, tone of voice, and storytelling logic. The Aura Trail is embedded in the ICDM cycling network, but this document does not provide a branding framework for the entire destination.
- It places the trail within the broader cross-border cycling offer (AoE and ICC), highlighting potential synergies and shared audiences.

¹ The "Iron Curtain Cycling" route is officially named the **Iron Curtain Trail** (or **EuroVelo 13 (EV13)**). This long-distance route spans over 10,000 kilometers from the Barents Sea in the north to the Black Sea in the south, tracing the former border that divided Eastern and Western Europe during the Cold War. The trail runs through 20 countries, offering a unique blend of history, culture, and nature along the "Green Belt"—a term for the ecological network that emerged in the former fortified border zone.

² The "Amazon of Europe" name is used to describe the 700km-long green belt of the Mura, Drava, and Danube rivers due to its rich biodiversity and extensive floodplain system, which is comparable in ecological significance to the Amazon basin. The name is also used as a destination brand for sustainable tourism, primarily centered around the **Amazon of Europe Bike Trail**. **The Bike Trail:** This is an international long-distance cycling route covering over 1,250 km along the rivers, offering 27 stages for cyclists.

- It does *not* develop or manage the branding of AoE and ICC, as these products have their own narratives, identities, and audience profiles.
- It presents a standalone branding framework, yet remains adaptable for future integration into broader destination branding initiatives, should they emerge.

2.4 Strategy Structure

This document is organised into three main sections:

- 1.Foundation & Story - Context, emotional drivers, community insights, and core brand values.
- 2.Branding System - Name, narrative framework, audience segments, storytelling flow, visual mood, and activation tools.
- 3.Context & Recommendations - Brand architecture, positioning of Aura Trail alongside ICC and AoE, and guidance for future destination-level integration.

We invite you to read this strategy with a clear sense of its purpose: to position the Aura Trail as a unique and emotionally engaging experience, rooted in local stories and community spirit – while laying the groundwork for stronger cross-border branding collaborations in the future.

3. Context and Background

3.1 Regional Overview

The Slovenian–Hungarian border region is characterised by a rich mosaic of cultural traditions, natural beauty, and intangible heritage. Rolling hills, sacred sites, folk narratives, and rural lifestyles contribute to the area’s unique identity. Despite investments in infrastructure and route development, the region continues to suffer from fragmented visibility, inconsistent positioning, and limited resonance with international cycling audiences.

Previous projects such as **Iron Curtain Cycling (ICC)** and **Amazing AoE** have provided critical stepping stones for development. ICC focused on transnational route infrastructure, particularly through the establishment of **EuroVelo13**, while Amazing AoE explored branding approaches in **UNESCO Biosphere areas**. However, these initiatives lacked a consolidated branding narrative that could unify the region and communicate its experiential value across borders.

The absence of a cohesive identity has limited the impact of these efforts. Local attractions, while meaningful and authentic, are often promoted in isolation. The ICDM project aims to address this gap by building a holistic, emotion-driven strategy for branding and promotion.

3.2 Strategic Challenges

Several persistent challenges continue to hinder the region’s branding potential:

- Disconnected marketing and communication efforts between Slovenian and Hungarian stakeholders
- **Underdeveloped recognition of rural attractions**, particularly those located away from established cycling routes
- Lack of a unified visual identity, certification systems, and storytelling frameworks

- **Low levels of digital marketing proficiency** among tourism providers, as highlighted by the ICDM baseline analysis
- **Top-down governance structures** that limit stakeholder engagement and co-creation

These challenges highlight the need for a participatory, grassroots-oriented strategy that is able to activate local narratives and harmonise promotional activities across the territory.

3.3 Project Rationale

The ICDM project introduces a bottom-up branding process rooted in local ownership, emotional storytelling, and symbolic resonance. By focusing on:

- **Inclusivity** (involving marginalised and rural actors).
- **Spirituality** (drawing on the region's emotional and symbolic capital).
- **Narrative immersion** (emphasising stories over slogans).

The strategy positions the cross-border destination not just as a cycling corridor, but as a **transformative, slow-travel experience**.

3.4 Connection to WP3

This strategy is directly aligned with Work Package 3 (WP3) of the ICDM project, which addresses joint promotion, capacity building, and cross-border communication. Key contributions include:

- Defining the narrative and visual elements of the destination brand.
- Providing a **content structure** for future campaign materials, website copy, and visitor communication.
- Aligning **local tourism offerings** with cross-border storytelling principles.

- Serving as the **foundation for visual design briefs**, training toolkits, and promotional campaigns.

By integrating these elements, the strategy will ensure long-term brand consistency, stakeholder empowerment, and visitor engagement.

4. Strategic Foundations

A robust brand strategy is essential for structuring the emotional, narrative, and visual identity of emerging destinations—especially in cross-border regions where fragmented governance and diverse cultural contexts can hinder cohesion. Within the ICDM project, branding serves as a connective tissue between landscapes, communities, and visitors.

4.1 Vision Statement

To become a soulful, accessible, cross-border cycling destination that offers inner journeys through authentic landscapes and stories.

This vision encapsulates the emotional and symbolic depth of the region, anchoring the destination not just in geography, but in **spiritual immersion, narrative discovery, and inclusive accessibility**.

4.2 Mission

The ICDM destination unites communities, places, and travellers through shared values of **peace, slowness, exploration, and cultural depth**. It promotes mindful travel, celebrates micro-experiences, and encourages co-creation between locals and visitors. By doing so, it enhances the resilience of rural areas, supports green mobility, and builds an emotionally resonant identity.

4.3 Core Values

- **Spirituality and Depth:** Honouring silence, ritual, and symbolic landscapes. Sacred spaces, stories, and sensory stillness are central to the experience.
- **Slowness:** Encouraging non-rushed, immersive exploration that allows the destination to be felt, not just seen.
- **Authenticity:** Rooting experiences in real local life—culinary traditions, crafts, languages, and ways of being.

- **Accessibility:** Enabling discovery for all abilities and cycling skill levels, from families to older travellers, from gravel riders to leisure cyclists.
- **Sustainability:** Promoting low-carbon transport, regional dispersal of visitors, and the strengthening of local circular economies.

4.4 Why Branding Matters in Cross-Border Cycling Destinations

Branding in cross-border tourism is not a superficial exercise. It plays a **strategic role** in shaping perception, enabling coordination, and unlocking latent value. Without a unifying narrative, destinations risk being reduced to a collection of isolated sites and experiences.

According to analyses and benchmarks from Epic Road Rides³ and leading cycling development platforms, investing in cycling tourism offers **multiple strategic benefits**:

- **Higher economic return:** Cycling tourists typically spend more than average leisure visitors, especially in rural areas and on multi-day trips.
- **Sustainable growth:** Cycling encourages low-carbon mobility, reduces pressure on congested tourism hotspots, and supports decentralized visitor flows.
- **Off-season and regional impact:** It extends the tourism season and revitalizes peripheral areas by creating year-round appeal.

However, **without branding**, these benefits remain **invisible**. Storytelling, as a branding tool, is not just an accessory to promotion—it is the **emotional core** of destination identity.

Successful cycling brands don't just provide routes—they offer meaning, coherence, and a promise of experience.

³ Epic Road Rides is the travel website for cyclists: <https://epicroadrides.com/>

For ICDM, this means that **small rural stories**, symbolic elements, and emotional tones must be **woven into a larger narrative arc** that positions the destination as soulful, unified, and worth exploring.

5. Participatory Process and Methodology

A cornerstone of the ICDM branding strategy is its community-based foundation. Rather than applying a top-down marketing concept, the destination's identity is co-created with local stakeholders through structured, symbolic, and emotional exploration.

5.1 Methodological Approach

As part of this participatory process, two **co-creation workshops** were conducted:

- **Slovenia:** May 2025, Slovenian stakeholder; Murska Sobota
- **Hungary:** June 2025, Hungarian stakeholders, Dobrovnik/Dobronak

Participants were guided through a structured format known as the “**Co-Creation Circle**”, consisting of six thematic steps:

1. **Sensory Anchors** – What connects us through the senses?
2. **Identity Markers** – Who are we, symbolically and culturally?
3. **Emotional Tone** – What should the visitor feel here?
4. **Local Stories & Symbols** – What narratives and myths define us?
5. **Communication Style** – What voice, language, and imagery suit us?
6. **Creative Breakthrough** – What slogans, names, and metaphors emerge?

Workshops were facilitated by destination branding experts **Polona Flis** and **Martin Narandža**, with participants working in small groups and capturing insights on pre-designed A3 templates. The process concluded with **Mentimeter voting** to identify preferred slogans, names, and emotional tones.

5.2 Key Themes – Slovenia

The Slovenian session revealed a landscape rich in **sensory, spiritual, and symbolic layers**:

- **Sensory landscape:** bird song, church bells, tractor sounds, wind, clappers, silence
- **Cultural-symbolic themes:** multiculturalism, Kurent mythology, culinary richness, Parzival legend
- **Emotional tone:** peacefulness, slow rhythm, rebirth, “feels like home”
- **Narratives:** hidden layers, local legends, superstition, tales of fear and wonder
- **Communication:** soft storytelling, poetic metaphors, natural rhythm

Top-rated slogans included:

- “We radiate aura” (28%)
- “Over the Mura, over the Drava, into the heart of nature” (22%)
- “Breathe with the trail” (22%)

Suggested names included:

- “Natural Orchestra” (7 votes)
- “Go with the Flow” (6 votes)

Tone-of-voice expressed a duality between **tranquillity and boldness**, rooted in authenticity.

5.3 Key Themes – Hungary

The Hungarian session, held in the local language, strongly mirrored Slovenian insights:

- **Dominant themes:** inner journey, soulfulness, spiritual freedom
- **Symbolism:** rivers, nature, invisible beauty, rebirth
- **Tone:** peacefulness, wonder, quiet transformation, awe

Top-voted slogans:

- “Határtalan tekerés önmagadhoz” (“Boundless cycling to yourself”) – 38%
- “Csodáld meg a láthatót, fedezd fel a láthatatlant” (“Admire the visible, discover the invisible”) – 25%

Preferred names:

- “Lélekvarázs” (Soul Enchantment) - 5 votes
- “Határtalanság” (Boundlessness) - 5 votes

The tone focused on peaceful immersion and quiet emotional intensity – reflecting a **deep inner alignment with nature** and personal transformation.

5.4 Summary and Recommendations

The participatory process confirmed a shared cross-border emotional identity based on:

- Slow rhythm and silence
- Natural immersion and inner harmony
- Spiritual undercurrents and symbolic depth

These elements will serve as the foundation for the visual identity, naming, core messages, and experience design of the destination brand. Ongoing involvement of local stakeholders is recommended during the visual and promotional phases to ensure authenticity and long-term ownership.

Detailed results from stakeholder workshops and Mentimeter votes are archived in annexes and internal project documentation.

Recommendation: Maintain the participatory approach throughout the design and promotional phases by including local stakeholders in content creation, feedback loops, and visual testing. This ensures authenticity and long-term community ownership.

6. Destination Identity: From Stories to Structure

In the context of this strategic document, it is important to distinguish between two interconnected yet distinct concepts:

- (1) the ICDM cycling destination, and**
- (2) the Aura Trail as a branded tourism product.**

1. The ICDM Destination

The ICDM destination refers to a **cross-border cycling network** co-developed through the Interreg SI-HU ICDM project. It encompasses a broader geographical and administrative area, namely:

- on the **Hungarian side**: the counties of **Zala** and **Vas**,
- on the **Slovenian side**: the statistical regions of **Podravje** and **Pomurje**.

This area forms a functional cycling region that integrates natural, cultural, and spiritual heritage assets across borders. The ICDM destination serves as the **spatial and developmental framework** for building sustainable cycling infrastructure, experiences, and governance mechanisms.

2. The Aura Trail Brand

The **Aura Trail** is a **flagship branded cycling product** that was conceptualised and co-created within the ICDM project as a unifying storytelling route across the cross-border destination. While situated within the ICDM area, the Aura Trail:

- represents one specific route and product identity,
- is anchored in **emotional branding**, symbolic narratives, and spiritual experiences,
- and is designed to serve as a **lighthouse brand** — a first mover that paves the way for future thematic trails and branded offers in the ICDM region.

3. Relationship Between the Two

While the **ICDM destination** provides the geographic and infrastructural backbone, the **Aura Trail** offers a **narrative and emotional entry point** into the region. It

brings the destination to life through story-driven content, symbolic design, and curated experiences — and acts as a **testing ground for future product branding** across the ICDM territory.

Therefore, this strategy does **not aim to brand the entire ICDM destination**, but to establish a comprehensive identity system for the **Aura Trail** as its first branded emotional product. Future strategic steps may expand this framework to additional trails, thematic experiences, or overarching destination narratives.

6.A Destination Branding: Definitions, Purpose and Strategic Role

In destination marketing/branding is not about logos or visual identity alone. It is a 360-degree strategic approach to developing, nurturing, and communicating a destination's unique identity, values, and emotional appeal. A destination brand serves as the foundation for all promotional activities and must be rooted in authentic narratives that reflect the place's heritage, values, and long-term vision.

6.A.1 Definitions and Conceptual Foundations

Destination branding is the discipline of shaping a region's image through the alignment of identity (what the destination is), reputation (what people say about it), and perception (what people feel about it). It is not a one-time marketing tactic, but an ongoing strategic process. According to the European Travel Commission (ETC), a successful destination brand must reflect authenticity, build emotional connection, and differentiate itself from competitors through meaningful storytelling.

"Branding is the process of purposefully shaping perceptions." — Marty Neumeier, The Brand Gap

Unlike traditional product branding, destination branding must account for the complexity of place: multiple stakeholders, diverse experiences, and the subjectivity of visitor perceptions. It requires alignment across public, private, and civil society actors to create a consistent and emotionally compelling narrative.

6.A.2 Three Pillars of Destination Brands

1. **Reputation:** A destination's reputation is built over time and is informed by visitor experiences, media portrayal, stakeholder behaviour, and word of mouth. A damaged reputation can take years to repair; a strong one becomes the most valuable asset a place can own.
2. **Identity:** Identity includes a destination's geography, heritage, culture, landscape, rituals, and values. A strong destination identity is authentic, layered, and emotionally resonant. It emerges from within the place and must be owned by its people.
3. **Perception:** Perception is how the destination is interpreted by the outside world. It includes visual, emotional, and sensory dimensions. While branding strategies can guide perception, they must acknowledge its subjectivity and ensure coherence across all touchpoints.

6.A.3 Strategic Role of Branding

Branding serves several key strategic functions:

- **Differentiation:** In a saturated tourism market, unique brand narratives allow destinations to stand out.
- **Consistency:** A brand provides a common framework for storytelling across platforms and actors.
- **Resilience:** Strong brands adapt better to crises, as they have emotional equity and recognition.
- **Sustainability:** Destination brands can guide responsible development by anchoring identity in local culture and nature.

"It is all about the brand story and creating one that really resonates with your core audience."

In a hyperconnected and fast-changing travel environment, branding is not a luxury—it is a survival tool. As tourism preferences shift towards meaning, transformation, and authenticity, destinations that fail to articulate their brand risk fading into invisibility.

6.A.4 Destination Branding as an Economic Driver

According to ResearchFDI and ThinkDigital.travel, destination branding also plays a direct role in economic development. A compelling brand:

- Attracts not just tourists, but talent, investors, and partnerships
- Boosts perceived value of experiences and products
- Builds local pride and strengthens community cohesion

The transformation of South Tyrol (Italy) into a premium, bilingual alpine destination is a well-documented example. Through integrated branding, they aligned agricultural products, hotel standards, regional identity, and visual language under a unified storytelling framework. Similarly, the South Baltic cycling initiatives used branding to turn functional routes into emotional journeys.

6.A.5 Implications for ICDM

For the ICDM region, destination branding is not merely a promotional layer but the strategic glue that binds diverse experiences, micro-destinations, and cross-border collaboration. It allows small stories—about rivers, silence, or spiritual depth—to form part of a larger, memorable identity.

The brand must:

- Be rooted in emotional and symbolic elements (e.g., rivers, rituals, spiritual silence)
- Allow for narrative diversity but visual and tonal coherence
- Serve as the basis for product development, visual identity, stakeholder engagement, and long-term positioning

This strategy is not about aesthetics. It is about meaning. And meaning is what travelers remember.

6.B Emotional Landscape and Brand Structure

6.B.1 Common Themes and Emotional Anchors

The co-creation workshops surfaced a deeply resonant emotional landscape shared across borders. Participants described the region as a space for spiritual recalibration—immersive, poetic, and slow.

Key themes include:

- Spirituality and Mystery: Multi-faith heritage, mystical symbols (Kurent, dragons, Parzival), and hidden cultural layers
- Nature and Elements: Light, rivers, wind, birdsong, vineyard rhythms
- Silence and Slowness: Regenerative pace, expanded space and time

These themes will anchor the emotional core of the brand narrative.

6.B.2 Emotional Tone and Narrative Logic

The brand balances:

- Tranquillity: Peace, spaciousness, grounding
- Boldness: Raw authenticity, unapologetic cultural character

Suggested narrative arc: “A journey where the body pedals and the soul listens. Across rivers and myths, into the quiet echo of your own rhythm.”

6.B.3 Symbolic Anchors and Cultural Touchpoints

- Rivers as thresholds (Mura, Drava)
- Soundscape: birds, bells, silence

- Legends and icons: Kurent, Parzival, Attila’s Tomb, Jewish presence
- Celestial metaphors: stars, wind, light traces

6.B.4 Suggested Naming and Slogans

Slogans:

- “We radiate aura”
- “Breathe with the trail”
- “Boundless cycling to yourself”
- “Admire the visible, discover the invisible”

Names:

- “Natural Orchestra”
- “Go with the Flow”
- “Lélekvarázs” (Soul Enchantment)
- “Határtalanság” (Boundlessness)

6.B.5 Visual Direction

Visual identity should reflect:

- **Textures:** mist, wind traces, foliage
- **Colors:** earth tones, twilight blues, soft gold
- **Typography:** organic, poetic, hand-crafted feel
- **Imagery:** solitary cyclists, foggy landscapes, celestial skies

The brand should feel like an invitation to a living story—immersive, emotional, and deeply rooted in place.

While the ICDM project envisions a broader cross-border cycling destination, this destination identity framework focuses specifically on the Aura Trail as its flagship

emotional product. The Aura Trail brand acts as a strategic compass for all downstream activities – from visual design and naming to product development, storytelling, and promotion.

6.B.6 Storytelling as a Strategic Tool for Emotional Engagement and Product Anchoring

Storytelling is the mirror of the brand strategy. It is the tool that transforms a passive observer into an emotionally engaged visitor – and in the best case, into a loyal guest who returns again and again. More than just content creation, storytelling enables us to communicate meaning, emotion, and value in ways that factual information alone never could.

By weaving authentic narratives around the Aura Trail, we invite the audience to connect with the trail on a personal level – through symbols, local voices, sensory experiences, and place-based mythologies. Stories give the route soul. They create memory. And they allow each guest to find their own meaning within the journey.

From Visitor to Guest – And Back Again

When done right, storytelling becomes a marketing tool that serves multiple roles:

- **Pre-trip inspiration:** Emotional storytelling creates a sense of anticipation and personal relevance.
- **On-site experience:** Clear narrative structure along the route deepens immersion and adds interpretive value.
- **Post-visit connection:** Meaningful stories create strong memories and encourage word-of-mouth promotion and return visits.

Therefore, stories are not only a communication tactic – they are a core part of the product. They are infrastructure, just like a map or a signpost.

A Call to Action for Local Stakeholders

We invite all project partners and local tourism providers to contribute to a story inventory in their area. This includes not only tangible heritage (such as churches, monuments, and historic buildings), but also intangible cultural assets – legends, myths, religious traditions, local beliefs, symbolic places, oral histories, and everyday narratives shared by local residents.

Importantly, the results of the co-creation workshops held in Slovenia and Hungary – including the rich input gathered from participants – should serve as a foundational story pool. These workshops already revealed a wide range of symbolic references and emotional associations, which can now be developed into place-based narratives to enrich the Aura Trail experience.

It is not our task to decide which stories are “good enough.” The guest will decide. The more diverse and rich the offer, the more flexible and customisable the trail experience becomes.

Smart Storytelling Infrastructure

To activate this approach, a **technological solution** is needed – one that integrates storytelling into the trail experience in a seamless, user-friendly way. This includes:

- Interactive digital map of the Aura Trail
- Story Points marked with GPS coordinates
- Info on distance, elevation, and surface type
- Tags for filtering: spiritual/legendary/natural/historical
- Option for guests to create a personalised spiritual trail itinerary

In this way, the Aura Trail is not a one-size-fits-all route. It becomes a storytelling canvas – where each guest chooses what to see, what to feel, and what to remember.

7. Target Groups and Personas

Understanding the diverse motivations, habits, and emotional needs of potential visitors is essential for designing a brand that resonates across markets and borders. In the ICDM project, audience-centric branding is not just a marketing necessity—it is a strategic compass for all downstream decisions, from route design to digital communication. This chapter defines the core market segments, explores emerging niche audiences, introduces representative personas, and outlines a framework for integrating these insights into brand and product development.

7.1 Core Market Segments

The ICDM cycling destination addresses a range of audience profiles that can be broadly grouped into two categories: core cycling tourists and complementary niche segments. Each of these groups brings a distinct set of expectations and potentials for engagement.

7.1.1 Cycling Tourists (Domestic and International)

- **Adventure-Oriented Cyclists** These are performance-driven individuals (often male-dominated) who seek challenge, endurance, and multi-day gravel or road rides. They use planning tools such as Komoot or Strava and value route quality, elevation data, and scenic rewards. Adventure cyclists look for emotional connection through physical exertion.
- **Leisure Cyclists** Often traveling as couples, families, or solo explorers, these guests prefer low-effort, e-bike-friendly loops with scenic value and meaningful stops. They seek local cuisine, cultural detours, and nature immersion. Their routes tend to be under 30 km and include curated slow experiences.
- **Social and Group Cyclists** This segment includes cycling clubs, friend groups, or senior communities. They emphasize shared experience and logistical ease. They value thematic events, wine & wheel combinations, and routes with social rest stops.

7.1.2. Niche Segments

- **Spiritual Travelers** This audience seeks more than activity—they seek meaning. They are drawn to sacred sites, rituals, silence, and emotional restoration. For them, cycling is a practice of mindfulness and movement-based meditation. They look for routes that connect nature, heritage, and introspection.
- **Wellness Cyclists** A growing segment, often including women 30–60, interested in health, balance, and self-care. They prefer soft landscapes, gentle rides, spa combinations, and holistic content. This segment overlaps with slow tourism and spiritual seekers.
- **Cultural Pilgrims** These travelers are attracted to narratives—be it Parzival, Jewish heritage, or mythological layers. They appreciate interpretive signage, storytelling routes, and guided discovery. They are culture-first tourists who use cycling as a medium of exploration.
- **Accessible Tourism Users Cyclists** with mobility considerations, or those preferring highly curated, low-barrier experiences. This includes older travelers, differently abled guests, or families with children. They need safe surfaces, clear wayfinding, and reassurance in infrastructure.

7.2 Motivations and Values

A multi-motivational framework enables better alignment between brand promise and on-the-ground product design. The table below synthesizes key motivations:

Motivation	Segment	ICDM Experience Example
Inner peace	Spiritual, Wellness	Silent forest route, ritual rest stop, meditative loop
Cultural immersion	Cultural Pilgrims	Parzival trail, wine story, Jewish route
Physical challenge	Adventure Cyclists	Borderless gravel tour, elevation routes
Connection & belonging	Social, Leisure Cyclists	Group tours, vineyard tables, hosted dinners
Wellness & balance	Wellness, Slow Tourists	Cycling + herbal spa day, forest therapy path

These values align with ICDM's brand narrative rooted in slowness, spirituality, and emotional connection.

7.3 Persona Profiles

Persona 1: Anna, 41 – The Slow Nomad

Travels with her dog and a converted van, follows sacred routes across Europe. Prefers silence, rituals, and soulful aesthetics. Shares slow travel photos on Instagram. Uses Komoot and Google Maps to plan 2-hour loops.

Persona 2: András, 34 – The Gravel Explorer

Lives in Budapest, works in tech. Weekends are for “reset rides.” Loves long gravel routes, folklore, and fire rituals. Uses Strava. Reads travel blogs and likes drone reels.

Persona 3: Maria & Luka, 62 – The Mindful Retirees

Recently retired couple from Slovenia. Use e-bikes, prefer comfort. Love wine and heritage. Enjoy hosted events and staying in vineyard cottages. Use Facebook and Booking.

Persona 4: Éva, 28 – The Urban Seeker

Artist from Vienna, seeks aesthetic environments and meaning. Follows #aestheticcycling, listens to birdsong playlists while riding. Loves myth-infused maps and twilight visuals. Active on TikTok and YouTube Shorts.

7.4 Media Preferences

The ICDM target groups display the following digital behaviors:

- **Digital-first Planning:** Use of platforms like Google Maps, Komoot, AllTrails
- **Social Inspiration:** Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok are key sources for nature-based and slow travel content
- **Trust-based Decisions:** Reliance on peer reviews from Booking.com, Park4Night, TripAdvisor, etc.

Different segments require platform-specific strategies:

- **Instagram Reels:** best for 25–45 year-olds seeking aesthetic and emotional resonance
- **YouTube Shorts:** great for storytelling, short guided route videos
- **Facebook:** used passively by 50+, good for community building
- **Komoot/Strava:** essential for adventure route discovery and gamification
- **Newsletters:** curated theme journeys, good for loyalty building

7.5 Product Positioning & Cross-Cutting Themes

The ICDM destination is uniquely positioned to combine physical journeying with emotional and symbolic storytelling. This opens opportunities for bundled product development:

Product Axis 1: Cycling + Wine + Culinary

- Wine & Wheel: stops at local cellars
- Harvest Loops: biking routes following grape cycling
- Farm-to-Table Trails: picnic stations, food storytelling

Product Axis 2: Cycling + Spirituality

- “Sacred Silence” loops
- Cross-border rituals (bells, prayers, river stops)
- Mythwalks & stargazing rides

Product Axis 3: Cycling + Wellness

- “Pedal & Soak”: thermal springs and saunas
- Forest therapy + movement
- Yoga & cycling mini-retreats

These combinations create themed micro-products that increase both value and emotional depth, while reinforcing ICDM's brand pillars: slowness, spirituality, authenticity.

7.6 Stakeholder Readiness and Training⁴

Survey results show:

- <20% of providers currently have a content plan
- 83–86% express strong interest in training and mentorship
- Key training needs: content creation, digital marketing, community storytelling, AI tools
- Preferred formats: workshops (62%), short videos (22%), mentoring (20%)

7.7 Strategic Conclusions

Audience insights must be embedded into all brand development processes. The more clearly a destination knows its people, the more powerfully it can speak to them.

Key takeaways:

- Design route experiences around emotional and sensory motivations
- Support micro-providers with templates aligned to personas
- Create visual tone libraries to match segment expectations
- Offer training that's seasonal, tactile, and aligned with local rhythm

In the end, the ICDM destination is not just built for cyclists. It is built for people who ride to remember, to connect, to feel, and to heal.

⁴ According to The Analyses of Screened Needs, Available Knowledge and Capacities of Service providers, ZKTŠ MS, ICDM 2024

8. Brand Architecture and Structure

8.1 Modular Brand System

The ICDM destination brand is designed as a **modular brand architecture**, allowing flexibility and cohesion across multiple micro-destinations and cultural identities. This structure enables:

- **Unified recognition** in international markets,
- Respect for local distinctiveness, and
- **Scalable storytelling**, adaptable to different providers and contexts.

Brand Structure Overview:

- **Umbrella Brand:** ICDM Cycling Destination
The overarching identity with a consistent narrative tone, visual grammar, and emotional positioning.
- **Sub-Identities** (*Optional but recommended*):
Thematic trails, micro-regions, or experience zones with specific character (e.g., “Soul Enchantment” trail, “Natural Orchestra” zone).
- **Endorsed Labels:**
Visual identifiers or quality marks for service providers, experience hosts, cultural spots, accommodations, etc.

This brand hierarchy ensures coherence while allowing space for creativity and place-specific expression.

To approach ensures a **multi-tier storytelling capacity**: the umbrella brand delivers universal emotional appeal (soulfulness, accessibility, slowness), while sub-identities translate this into concrete regional expressions. For example, a Hungarian micro-destination might emphasize “spiritual silence and healing waters”, whereas a Slovenian partner could focus on “vineyard rhythms and ritual paths.”

The endorsed label system plays a key role in making the brand **tangible at the micro-level**. It allows small providers—guesthouses, guides, artists—to co-own the brand while

highlighting their contribution to its soul. This is not a top-down system but a **community-fed narrative ecosystem**.

8.2 Integration with Local Identities

The ICDM branding model **does not aim to replace** existing identities but acts as a **curatorial connector**—weaving a shared story from diverse threads.

Each micro-region brings its own:

- **Cultural expressions** (e.g., folk music, wine roads, crafts)
- **Historical landmarks** (e.g., Parzival legacy, Attila’s Tomb)
- **Spiritual traditions** (e.g., religious pluralism, sacred spaces)

The brand functions as a **narrative frame**, through which local stories gain additional visibility and emotional layering. Instead of homogenization, ICDM promotes **differentiated harmony**—a mosaic of connected experiences under one soulful roof.

This approach follows the logic of **narrative layering**, where the destination brand acts as a **semantic frame**, not a dominant voice. Local expressions—be it a grape harvest festival, a dragon legend, or a folk melody—are not overwritten but **amplified** within the ICDM narrative.

Each micro-destination is seen as a **cultural receptor**, translating the brand’s core message (“cycling to the soul”) into its own emotional vocabulary. For example:

- A region with a Jewish heritage site may emphasize “sacred remembrance”.
- A forested village may focus on “ritual stillness and elemental contact”.
- A wine valley may lead with “liquid stories and vineyard rhythms”.

This **polylayered narrative map** becomes a tool for place-making, co-branding, and community pride.

8.3 Visual and Verbal Identity Guidelines

A coherent brand experience depends on **visual and verbal discipline**, especially when deployed by a wide network of local actors with varying levels of marketing skill.

Key Style Guidelines:

Element	Recommendation
Core tone	Poetic, reflective, metaphorical
Typography	Soft, flowing, humanistic fonts – never rigid or corporate
Color Palette	Nature-based (earth tones, misty greens, vineyard reds, twilight blues); seasonal adaptations allowed
Imagery Style	Close-ups, textures, authentic human moments, landscape movement
Slogan Use	Always integrated into visuals or copy with emotional intent, not as decoration
Voice	Calm, trustworthy, layered with mysticism; never salesy

A **Brand Manual** will be delivered as a follow-up to this strategy, containing:

- Logo and font usage,
- Moodboards and filters,
- Ready-made content blocks,
- Sample posts and layouts (social/web/print).

A visual and verbal identity only works if it can be **understood, adapted, and re-used** by local providers. The ICDM strategy proposes a “**human-first**” **branding system**, rooted in clarity, emotion, and practical usability.

Tone of Voice:

- **Emotional:** Use metaphors, rhythm, and poetic imagery
- **Inviting:** Avoid institutional or corporate jargon
- **Reflective:** Pause over sensory and spiritual moments

- **Confident, but soft:** Express knowledge without arrogance

Visual Style Examples:

- Colors: ochre, misty green, soft copper, twilight blue
- Typography: curved sans-serif fonts, custom hand-drawn accents
- Imagery: blurred forest edges, smiling locals, textures of wind or stone

Example – Social Media Post:

Do:

“Ride where the wind speaks softly and the rivers carry old secrets. Find your rhythm in the quiet heart of Europe.”

(with photo of cyclist near foggy river)

Don’t:

“Visit our cycling destination today and book now. We offer 23 marked trails.”

(generic, transactional, lacks soul)

These identity cues are not restrictive—they are enabling. When providers align with the brand voice, their stories gain depth and resonance. The goal is **not visual perfection**, but **emotional coherence**.

8.4 Stakeholder Onboarding and Consistency

As shown in the ICDM analysis, **many providers lack formal marketing education** and need practical tools to implement brand communication.

Recommendations:

- **Training workshops** in visual storytelling, tone-of-voice, and emotional branding
- **Template packs** for social media, brochures, signage
- Shared online content hub with:
 - Editable graphics (e.g. Canva templates)

- Licensed photos and icon sets
- Copywriting snippets and slogan library
- **Certification or label system** for brand-aligned providers (voluntary)

Alignment mechanisms:

- Bi-annual co-creation reviews with stakeholders
- Open brand feedback channel
- Cross-border storytelling exchange sessions

By creating a **supportive ecosystem**, the ICDM project brand becomes not only a marketing tool, but a **shared language and identity** that providers are proud to embody.

To sustain brand coherence, **onboarding must be ongoing**—not a one-time act, but a continuous dialogue. The ICDM ecosystem proposes a **three-tiered model of stakeholder support**:

1. Foundation: Orientation & Templates

- Quick-start onboarding packs (brand intro, slogans, Canva templates)
- Printable cheat-sheets (What to say, What not to say)
- Monthly inspiration mail (seasonal motifs, visual cues, stories to tell)

2. Practice: Mentoring and Co-Creation Loops

- **Mentorship network**: experienced hosts guide new entrants in using branding tools
- **Storytelling labs**: small thematic workshops for joint content creation (e.g. “Wine & Wind Stories”)
- **Community voice walls**: open calls for photos, metaphors, phrases – to be featured in shared content

3. Alignment: Certification and Evaluation

- Voluntary **“ICDM Aligned” label** for providers using brand materials with care

- Annual review process with feedback from:
 - Visitors (perceived coherence and uniqueness)
 - Peers (use of tone, imagery, language)
 - Brand team (visual and narrative alignment)
- Reward mechanisms: visibility boost, story highlights, invitation to co-create new campaigns

Culture of Belonging

The brand becomes **not only a tool**, but a **badge of pride** and a **symbol of co-ownership**. Stakeholders aren't just users—they're **co-authors** of the ICDM narrative.

“Every host becomes a storyteller. Every local moment becomes part of a wider journey.”

9. Promotion Strategy (WP3 Alignment)

9.1 Strategic Objectives

The promotional strategy translates the brand architecture into actionable campaigns and communication formats. It aligns directly with the objectives of **Work Package 3 (WP3)**, which emphasizes joint destination promotion and stakeholder engagement.

Core promotional objectives:

- **Generate visibility** for the new cross-border cycling destination
- **Engage targeted audiences** through channels they already trust and use
- **Strengthen emotional identity** by reinforcing storytelling across borders
- Support stakeholder activation with clear guidance and tools
- **Ensure long-term scalability** through content systems, campaigns, and evaluation models

By combining digital-first methods, emotional branding, and strategic coordination, the ICDM promotional strategy builds a foundation for visibility and resilience beyond the project duration.

9.2 Communication Pillars

Drawing from branding insights and audience research, the promotional strategy is structured around **four narrative pillars**, each representing a cluster of themes and stories:

Pillar	Focus	Example Themes
Inner Journeys	Soulful, introspective experiences	Silence, transformation, rituals
Slow Adventure	Sensory cycling through nature and heritage	Vineyard trails, forest rides, e-bike loops
Sacred Landscapes	Multifaith, mythic, or symbolic sites	Churches, Kurent, Parzival, Attila's tomb
Community Encounters	Local people and micro-entrepreneurs	Hosts, makers, storytellers

Each pillar enables **coordinated yet diverse campaign content**, such as slogan lines, imagery, hashtags, influencer briefs, and thematic media kits. Seasonal emphasis (e.g. "autumn for soul rides") can be layered over these pillars.

9.2.1 Emotional Depth of Each Pillar

1. Inner Journeys

Cycling here is not about speed—it's about presence. This pillar taps into the post-pandemic hunger for **meaningful travel**, echoing global trends in **transformative tourism**. It pairs well with spiritual hosts, forest bathing, meditative trails, and sacred stops (e.g. cemeteries, shrines, heritage chapels).

→ Ideal content: *"A ride of remembrance", "The silence between two breaths", "Trail of light and loss"*

→ Hashtag cluster: #SoulCycling #BikeWithin #StillnessInMotion

2. Slow Adventure

This pillar resonates with **eco-conscious travelers, families**, and those choosing **e-bikes** or **leisure trails**. It's about reclaiming time. Perfect for photo journeys, "one-day stories", slow gastronomy, and overnight stays with hosts.

→ Ideal content: *"Ride, taste, rest, repeat", "A picnic on the pedals"*

→ Hashtag cluster: #SlowCycling #WheelsAndWine #EbikeEscape

3. Sacred Landscapes

Focuses on **multi-faith narratives**, old rituals, symbols, and **sacred nature**. This pillar frames the destination as a cultural and spiritual archive, ready to be uncovered. Think of it as "pilgrimage without dogma".

→ Ideal content: *"Cycling the myth lines", "Parzival's loop", "Dragon's breath trail"*

→ Hashtag cluster: #SacredTrails #RideTheMyth #SoulEnchantment

4. Community Encounters

This is about **human connection**. "Meet the host" features, shared cooking moments, vineyard blessings, market visits. Emphasize **generosity, spontaneity, and**

playfulness.

→ Ideal content: “*Maria teaches me to pickle cabbage*”, “*The shoemaker’s secret bench*”

→ Hashtag cluster: #CyclingWithLocals #LivingDestinations #KindRoutes

9.3 Tools and Channels

The ICDM promotional mix is **blended** – balancing digital presence with physical touchpoints and participatory content creation.

Digital Presence:

- **Dedicated Website** (mobile-first, SEO-optimized): hosting stories, trails, booking links, maps
- **Interactive Route Maps** (Komoot, AllTrails, RideWithGPS): with layers for difficulty, themes, accessibility
- Social Media:
 - *Instagram*: slow travel reels, photo diaries, aesthetic curation
 - *Facebook*: community building, events, live moments
 - *YouTube Shorts / TikTok*: micro-stories, voice-overs from providers, seasonal reels
- **Newsletter Campaigns**: curated by theme ("Wheels & Wine", "Sacred Loops")

Print & Events:

- Pocket-sized cycling maps
- Thematic leaflets (per trail or season)
- Branded signposts (slogans, quotes, QR links)
- Presence at cycling expos, slow travel fairs, and EU tourism forums

Content Formats:

- *Soul Routes*: 2–5 min branded mini-documentaries

- *Host Portraits*: microblogs, podcast segments
- *Trail Collections*: downloadable or printed (e.g. “5 Sacred Loops for Autumn”)

These channels are supported by **templated visual and narrative guidelines** from the brand manual (see 7.4), ensuring clarity and consistency.

9.3.1 Example Content Flow for a Seasonal Campaign

Campaign Name: “*Autumn Awakening – Soul Loops for October*”

Duration: 6 weeks (mid-September to end of October)

Structure:

- Week 1: Instagram Reel → “Why we ride in fog”
- Week 2: Blog post → “3 Sacred Trails to Hear Yourself Again”
- Week 3: *Host spotlight* → Meet “Eva, forest healer” & cyclist
- Week 4: *Newsletter feature* → “A soul ride to Attila’s tomb”
- Week 5: *Mini-podcast* → “Birdsong from the Drava riverbed”
- Week 6: *User-generated content call* → “What do you hear when you ride?”

Goal: Emotional resonance, brand consistency, and reusability for local TICs.

9.4 Joint vs. Local Communication

The ICDM strategy adopts a **glocal** model of communication – combining joint narratives with localized adaptations.

Joint Communication	Local Adaptation
Umbrella campaigns and slogans	Use of slogans in native language
Shared visuals and templates	Photos and stories from each region
Website and social hub	Local events, influencer takeovers

Example:

A **Hungarian sacred route** can be promoted under the “**Soul Enchantment**” concept using project-wide visuals, while integrating **local rituals, festivals, and host stories** into daily posts.

The **brand manual and training (D1.5)** will equip stakeholders with guidelines, templates, and storytelling support.

9.5 Stakeholder Activation

Recognizing low digital maturity among providers, the promotional strategy embeds **capacity-building** into its rollout.

Findings (from ICDM survey of 112 providers)⁵:

- Only **17–21%** use a content strategy or analytics
- Preferred platforms: **Facebook (74%), Instagram (52%), TikTok (future interest)**
- Most requested skills: **Content creation (50%), Advertising (45%), Strategy (35%), Community-building (27%)**
- Over 80% expressed interest in mentorship and AI-based tools

Support Tools:

- **Visual Communication Toolkit** (logos, slogans, icons, templates)
- **Training modules** (social media strategy, ad design, AI-powered content writing)
- **Brand-aligned templates** (posters, web banners, hashtags, alt text)
- **Mentoring loops** (regional coordinators, cross-border examples)

⁵ According to The Analyses of Screened Needs, Available Knowledge and Capacities of Service providers, ZKTŠ MS, ICDM 2024

“The survey results clearly indicate a low level of strategic use of digital platforms, but a very high motivation to improve skills — particularly in content creation, digital advertising, and the use of AI tools for storytelling and community engagement.”

9.5.1 Mentorship Format Proposal (Pilot, WP3.4)

Concept: “From Story to Storyteller”

- 5 local mentors (Slovenia/Hungary)
- 15 providers per country (selection via open call)
- 3 sessions (online + 1 field visit)
- AI support: Suggested tools = Grammarly, ChatGPT prompts, Canva Brand Hub

Output: Each provider creates one mini campaign, aligned with the brand (e.g. a reel, blog, post pack).

Goal: Confidence, autonomy, emotional connection to the brand

9.6 Monitoring and Evaluation

The ICDM promotional strategy integrates a robust monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework to ensure strategic alignment, continuous improvement, and adaptive learning across all participating regions.

9.6.1 Monitoring Objectives

- **Measure brand resonance** across borders and user segments
- Track content engagement and platform performance
- Support data-driven decisions for campaign iteration
- **Demonstrate accountability** to stakeholders and funding bodies
- **Foster a learning ecosystem** that supports providers' growth

9.6.2 Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

Category	Indicator	Tool/Source
Website Metrics	Unique visitors, bounce rate, time-on-page	Google Analytics
Social Media	Reach, engagement rate, follower growth, hashtag usage	Meta Insights, TikTok Analytics
Content	Number of providers using templates or	Hub download stats
Route Use	GPX downloads, Komoot & RideWithGPS	Platform dashboards
Stakeholder Activation	Training attendance, toolkit use, mentor feedback	Internal records, surveys
Campaign Impact	Media mentions, backlinks, user-generated content submissions	Google Alerts, manual logging
Brand	Visual and tonal consistency in public-facing	

9.6.3 Tools and Data Infrastructure

- **Central Evaluation Dashboard** (Google Data Studio or similar): integrates all available metrics into one visual interface.
- Feedback Loops:
 - Quarterly stakeholder surveys
 - “What worked / what didn’t” retrospectives after each campaign
 - Option for anonymous provider input
- **Hashtag Monitoring Software** (e.g. Brand24, SproutSocial): used to track campaign hashtags like #SoulCycling, #ICDMRoutes, etc.
- **AI-Powered Analysis** (optional): sentiment analysis of comments, topic clustering across UGC (user-generated content)

9.6.4 Evaluation Timeline

Period	Evaluation Activity
Q3 2025	Baseline data collection, stakeholder onboarding
Q4 2025	First campaign tests, route tool activation
Q1 2026	Primary promotional push, KPIs tracking initiated
Q2 2026	Mid-project evaluation report (internal + WP3 deliverable)
Q3 2026	Stakeholder interviews, campaign adaptations
Q4 2026	Final cross-border report + visibility impact analysis

9.6.5 Sample Evaluation Questions

For internal feedback and partner reflection (to be included in surveys or review forms):

- Did the brand improve your perceived visibility or legitimacy?
- Which tools/templates were most helpful to you?
- Were there any communication barriers in applying joint campaign guidelines?
- Do you feel your local identity was respected within the joint brand?
- What kind of support would you need to participate more actively in future?

9.6.6 Continuous Learning Mechanism

To avoid “dead PDFs” and ensure real use, ICDM will implement:

- “Open Library” of best-performing content, tagged by campaign type and pillar
- **Provider Spotlights:** celebrating examples of excellent implementation
- **Annual Learning Forum:** an online or hybrid event to share lessons, tools, and micro-awards (e.g. “Best Soul Campaign”)

To measure impact and iterate campaigns, ICDM will deploy a **mixed-method monitoring model**, aligned with WP3 indicators.

Primary KPIs:

- Website analytics: traffic, bounce rate, keyword position
- Social metrics: reach, engagement, hashtag use
- Route usage: downloads, GPS heatmaps (Komoot, RideWithGPS)
- Stakeholder feedback: ease of use, tool adoption

Evaluation Timeline:

- **Quarterly reviews** during project duration
- **Annual report** summarizing cross-border reach, campaign results, and recommendations
- Integration with EU visibility reporting (D1.6)

The long-term aim is to develop an **evidence-based promotional ecosystem**, supporting sustainable growth, continuous learning, and bottom-up visibility.

9.7 Recommendations for Long-Term Promotional Impact

To ensure the ICDM promotional strategy remains effective, adaptable, and grounded in stakeholder reality beyond the project lifecycling, we outline key strategic recommendations across five dimensions:

1. Sustain the Emotional Core of the Brand

- Continue building campaigns around emotional and symbolic pillars (soul, nature, slowness, spirituality).
- Use storytelling formats that preserve intimacy and authenticity – avoid generic tourism language.
- Encourage providers to share personal narratives, rituals, and seasonal rhythms from their communities.

2. Empower Stakeholders Through Ongoing Capacity Building

- Embed training cycles into regional development plans (e.g., 2x per year workshops).
- Provide blended learning formats (online modules + live mentoring).
- Prioritize practical skills: AI-powered writing, content scheduling, ad campaign planning, photography for non-photographers.
- Set up a **storytelling support desk** in each region as part of long-term sustainability planning.

3. Create a Living Content Ecosystem

- Launch and maintain a shared digital content hub with:
 - Editable Canva templates
 - Open-source visuals and icons
 - Brand voice guide with copywriting snippets
 - Calendar of suggested posts by season/event
- Allow providers to submit and reuse content (crowdsourced storytelling).
- Develop a repository of testimonials, sacred trail diaries, cycling diaries – all tagged and searchable.

4. Connect with Broader Audiences Through Strategic Partnerships

- Partner with influencers in spiritual travel, slow cycling, and nature wellness.
- Engage with thematic travel platforms (e.g. Soul Travel, Responsible Travel).
- Collaborate with regional/national tourism boards to feature ICDM stories on flagship channels.
- Explore B2C partnerships (wellbeing apps, e-bike brands, spiritual retreat platforms).

5. Measure What Matters – and Tell That Story

- Move beyond vanity metrics (likes/followers) to **meaningful indicators**:
 - “Stories told by locals”
 - “First-time visits from emotional campaigns”
 - “Stakeholder confidence in digital promotion”
- Share **impact stories** in annual reports and strategy updates – e.g.:

“After attending an ICDM training, I started my first Instagram account and got booked by a family from Belgium who saw my video. This was the first time I felt part of something bigger.”

Summary Table: Key Actions for Continuity

Area	Action	Timeline	Responsible
Emotional Branding	Update storytelling kits each year	Annual	Aura Trail Brand Lead
Stakeholder Training	Seasonal digital bootcamps	2x/year	Local Coordinators
Content Hub	Launch & community management	Q1 2026	ZRS + Providers
Monitoring	Co-design indicators + reports	Quarterly	WP3 Lead
Strategic Partnerships	Map & approach aligned platforms	Ongoing	Brand & Comms Team

10. Implementation and Governance

10.1 Roles and Responsibilities

Effective implementation of the ICDM branding strategy hinges on a clearly defined governance structure, shared ownership, and agile coordination. The proposed model distributes responsibility across the following levels:

Lead Partner: To be defined

- Strategic oversight and coordination of implementation activities
- Quality assurance for branding, content, and promotional tools
- Central communication node for cross-border alignment

Local Stakeholders (TICs, Municipalities, Tourism Providers)

- Deployment of storytelling tools and brand narratives in day-to-day visitor communication
- Adaptation of core content into local language, visuals, and formats
- Hosting of visitors, activation of routes, participation in campaigns

Project Partners (SI-HU Consortium)

- Co-creation and piloting of promotional actions (e.g. content series, campaign formats)
- Contribution to governance and quality monitoring
- Training and mentoring support in capacity-building phases

This distributed model supports both **strategic coherence** and **grassroots activation**, reflecting the core values of the ICDM community-based approach.

10.2 Implementation Timeline

The implementation follows a **phased roadmap**, aligned with deliverable deadlines and capacity development goals:

Phase	Timeline	Key Activities
Phase 1: Brand Finalization	Q3 2025	Visual identity, tone-of-voice manual, website wireframe
Phase 2: Capacity Activation	Q4 2025	Stakeholder training, brand manual distribution, pilot storytelling
Phase 3: Soft Launch	Q1 2026	Initial campaign roll-out, feedback collection, on-site branding
Phase 4: Cross-Border Promotion	Q2 2026	Full campaign deployment, joint storytelling, event participation
Phase 5: Monitoring & Refinement	Q3 2026	KPI evaluation, social media and stakeholder analysis
Phase 6: Sustainability & Handover	Q4 2026	Local ownership, integration into municipal planning, content refresh strategy

This approach ensures that the brand is not simply launched but **lived, tested, and refined** in real-time.

10.3 Coordination Tools

To maintain coherence across the cross-border consortium and facilitate daily operations, the following tools will be deployed:

- **Central Brand Repository:** A shared cloud-based folder with logos, slogans, templates, color codes, tone-of-voice guidelines, and example campaigns
- **Editorial Calendar:** Quarterly shared calendar with content themes, campaign hashtags, and suggested post formats

- **Partner Dashboard:** Real-time updates on campaign reach, website traffic, stakeholder feedback, and route engagement
- **Feedback Mechanisms:** Anonymous suggestion box, structured online forms, and regional coordination check-ins

These tools create a framework for decentralized creativity within a unified strategic shell.

10.4 Quality Assurance

Maintaining brand integrity, visual consistency, and emotional resonance requires a structured quality assurance process. The following practices are recommended:

- **Brand Review Committee:** Comprised of communication lead(s) and representatives from both countries, meeting quarterly to review content
- **Stakeholder Loops:** Online feedback forms and on-site interviews to collect qualitative feedback on materials and implementation ease
- **Visual Audits:** Random monthly audits of social posts, print materials, and signage to ensure alignment with branding guidelines
- **Training Follow-Ups:** Post-workshop calls and surveys to assess knowledge retention and tool usage

This system safeguards against content drift and enhances stakeholder confidence.

10.5 Synergies with Other Deliverables

The governance model and implementation tools directly reinforce several other project deliverables, ensuring a **cohesive operational ecosystem**:

- D1.5: Mentoring & Storytelling Training
 - Provides the human infrastructure for content generation
- D3.2: Website & Online Platform

- Acts as the brand's digital home and first point of contact
- D4.1: Joint Product Development
 - Embeds brand logic into packages, itineraries, and booking processes

These synergies ensure that the ICDM strategy is not siloed but **interwoven** into the operational and promotional fabric of the entire project.

10.6 Strategic Model for Governance and Longevity

Building on best practices from cycling tourism frameworks (e.g. *EpicRoadRides*), ICDM implementation will follow a **six-phase governance cycle**:

- 1. Build & Maintain Infrastructure:** Ensure signage, route clarity, and accessibility
- 2. Improve Intermodality:** Integrate train-bike, e-bike services, and rural transport
- 3. Develop Services:** Equip hosts with bike-friendly certifications, digital presence
- 4. Activate Communication:** Launch stories, social reels, mini-docs
- 5. Expand Governance:** Include new actors (youth, artisans, faith groups)
- 6. Monitor & Iterate:** Use analytics and feedback to adapt yearly

This cyclical model supports a living brand: one that evolves with its community, audience, and seasonal pulse.

11. Recommendations and Long-Term Vision

The sustainability of the Aura Trail brand hinges not on a singular campaign, but on the **embedding of a shared narrative into local systems, identities, and practices**. Branding in community-based contexts is a process of ongoing meaning-making, requiring time, trust, and iteration. This chapter outlines the key pathways for ensuring long-term relevance, resilience, and resonance.

11.1 Sustaining the Aura Trail Brand

To maintain the vitality of the ICDM destination and its Aura Trail brand beyond the project duration, the following strategies are recommended:

- **Strategic Embedding:** Integrate the Aura Trail brand into local tourism strategies, action plans, and municipal communications.
- **Capacity Building Continuity:** Deliver stakeholder training every 6–12 months, aligned with seasonal shifts and campaign cycles.
- **Institutional Coordination:** Establish a **cross-border Brand Coordination Group** with representatives from each region to oversee alignment and evolution.
- **Feedback and Adaptation:** Introduce cyclical brand audits, visitor surveys, and social media sentiment analysis to refine tone and content.

“A brand is not a logo – it is a living relationship between meaning, memory, and community.”

11.2 Pathway to Formal Adoption

To institutionalize the brand and ensure political and administrative support, a formal pathway to adoption should include:

- **Endorsement by Councils and Tourism Boards:** Secure resolutions or declarations that recognize ICDM as a regional identity framework.

- **Integration into Funding Instruments:** Align ICDM with local and regional grant programs, tourism development schemes, and marketing budgets.
- **Inclusion on National Portals:** Position ICDM on the Slovenian and Hungarian national tourism websites as a thematic cross-border destination.
- **Co-Branding Guidelines:** Provide templates for municipalities, TICs, and providers to co-brand their materials with ICDM visuals and slogans.

These steps enhance legitimacy, visibility, and intersectoral collaboration.

11.3 Fostering Community Ownership

Community ownership is the cornerstone of brand authenticity. To ensure ICDM remains locally rooted:

- **Involve residents and providers** in content creation, feedback loops, and public storytelling.
- **Celebrate local heroes and hosts** by highlighting their stories in newsletters, blogs, and videos.
- **Keep tools open and accessible** – via editable templates, open-source toolkits, and regular idea calls.
- Encourage multilingual and cross-generational participation, particularly among youth, seniors, and minority groups.

By lowering the barriers to contribution, the brand becomes an open space for shared authorship.

11.4 Next Steps

Upon validation of this strategic document, the following actions are foreseen:

Action	Timeline	Lead Entity
Finalize Visual Identity & CGP	Q3 2025	Design Team + WP3 Leader
Launch Promotional Campaigns	Q1 2026	Project Consortium
Deploy ICDM Online Platform (D3.2)	Q1 2026	WP3 + D3 Coordination
Evaluate & Adjust (D4.3)	Q3–Q4 2026	Project Evaluation Lead

These deliverables will activate the brand and ensure that its conceptual base transitions into **real-world engagement**.

11.5 Capacity Building for a Living Brand

Survey findings confirm strong local appetite for learning and self-improvement:

“62% of respondents prefer hands-on, job-integrated formats. Seasonal timing and real-life application were cited as key success factors.”

To this end, it is recommended that:

- Training modules are short, focused, and contextual.
- Peer-to-peer mentoring is encouraged between experienced and new providers.
- AI-powered tools for content creation, analytics, and campaign ideation are included in future workshops.

“The brand’s voice may be poetic and gentle – but its roots must be practical, inclusive, and locally owned.”

Final Reflection

The ICDM identity is more than a tourism brand. It is an invitation into a shared emotional landscape — one shaped by rivers, silence, symbols, and stories. It belongs to

no single institution and every local voice. This strategy provides the scaffolding. Its future depends on continued care, courage, and co-creation.

12. Annexes

The following annexes complement the ICDM branding strategy with supporting data, co-creation results, visual directions, and evaluation templates. They serve both as documentation and practical tools for implementation.

12.1 Workshop Outputs

- Transcripts and summaries from stakeholder co-creation workshops in Slovenia (Murska Sobota) and Hungary (cross-border region)
- Thematic maps: **Sensory anchors, Identity markers, Narrative tones**
- Voting results from **Mentimeter**: preferred slogans, names, and communication tones

These outputs form the emotional and symbolic core of the ICDM identity and guided the brand narrative development.

12.2 Visual Moodboard (Slides)

- Emotional imagery identified by workshop participants
- Preliminary design cues for CGP:
 - Color palette: natural tones, misty gradients, gold accents
 - Typography: flowing, humanistic, organic
 - Visual textures: fog, rivers, vineyard lines, layered light

Moodboard images serve as **visual vocabulary** for the brand's emotional and symbolic tone.

12.3 Target Personas – Summary Table

Persona	Profile	Motivation	Media	Tone
Anna (41)	Slow nomad (Germany)	Meaningful stops, silence	Komoot, Instagram	Poetic, authentic
András (34)	Gravel explorer (Budapest)	Remote rides, nature	Reels, GPS apps	Edgy, soulful
Maria & Luka (60+)	E-bike seniors (Slovenia)	Scenic loops, rest stops	Booking, local guides	Warm, peaceful

Additional personas are available in internal research files - see PDF:

- Personas_ICDM_PF).

12.4 Messaging Grid (Draft)

A table aligning:

- Emotional pillars → "Soulfulness", "Slowness", "Sacredness", "Authenticity"
- Target groups → cycling types, motivations, media habits
- Story formats → blog, video, podcast, photo essays
- Brand tone → gentle confidence, metaphoric language

(Full version available in Content Brief: Messaging_Grid_PF_v2.docx)

12.5 Literature and Source Materials

- **ICDM Application Form** + Work Package Descriptions
- Polona Flis:
 - KONCEPT_USPOSABLJANJA_IN_MENTORSTVA_FVo3
 - 1_Analiza_ICDM_FVo2
- **EpicRoadRides.com**: "Cycling Tourism Destination Marketing"

- **Cycling Virginia:** Strategy for Recreational Cycling Events
- **South Baltic Programme:** Case Studies on Cross-Border Cycling
- **Internal Reports:** Amazing AoE, Iron Curtain Cycling (ICC), Guide2Visit

12.6 Evaluation Templates

- **Brand Consistency Checklist**
Key points: visual alignment, slogan use, tone of voice, hashtag structure
- **Stakeholder Feedback Form**
Includes: ease of use, clarity of materials, perception of emotional alignment
- **Route Activation Dashboard**
KPIs: number of downloads, GPS route completions, Instagram hashtag usage

12.7 Capacity Building Recommendation

"Capacity building must align with the preferred learning styles identified: 62% of respondents favor hands-on, job-integrated training formats. Seasonal timing and practical application are key success factors."

(Source: ICDM Needs Analysis Survey, May 2025)

Training and mentoring models are further detailed in WP1.5 and the document: *KONCEPT_USPOSABLJANJA* by Polona Flis.