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GreenMove Project:

Sustainable Tourism and Mobility in Coastal & rural Regions: Eco-friendly Transportation Options



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GreenMove Project

Reference number 101192067 - CERV-2024-
CITIZENS-TOWN-NT

Servicing to diverse demographic spectra in coastal & rural areas

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Date 16 October 2025

Rural area's tourism profile

Gotse Delchev Municipality is located in Southwestern Bulgaria, along the Mesta River at the foot of the middle Pirin Mountains. The region and its surroundings offer a variety of natural and cultural landmarks that attract tourists year-round, although tourism is relatively poorly developed and not strongly represented in the local economy. The beautiful nature of Pirin National Park, the proximity of the international tourist route E-4, Orelyak Nature Reserve, and Ali Botush Reserve in the Slavyanka Mountain are visited throughout the year.

The villages of Delchevo, Kovachevitsa and Leshten also attract tourists who enjoy rural idyll and the tranquility of small resort areas. They are architectural reserves, famous for their Revival-period houses and cobblestone streets, offering a unique glimpse into traditional Bulgarian architecture. In these villages, summer cultural, folklore, and other music festivals are organized, drawing visitors of all ages, both locals and people from other parts of the country. Visitors from abroad, however, remain more of an exception.

Delchevo village



Top 3 mobility challenges for tourists and locals

The three main mobility challenges for tourists and locals in the Gotse Delchev and Ognyanovo area are:

1. Limited public transport infrastructure.

Infrequent and irregular bus connections between small villages and Gotse Delchev make travel difficult, especially for people without a private car. There are no direct connections to some tourist attractions and natural landmarks.



2. Insufficient parking spaces and amenities for tourists with cars.

In the busier tourist areas and resorts, there are limited parking and car service options, which can lead to traffic jams and inconvenience.



3. Unmaintained and narrow roads in mountainous areas.

Many of the roads to more remote villages and natural landmarks are poorly paved, narrow and dangerous, especially in winter conditions. This creates risks and hinders convenient and fast travel.

Eco-friendly transport options in Gotse Delchev area

In the area of Gotse Delchev and Ognyanovo, there are several ecological transport options that are used by both locals and tourists.

- Hiking routes

A number of marked trails and tourist routes that allow walking in nature without using motorized vehicles. The trails are mainly in Pirin, but due to the proximity of two other mountains – Slavyanka and Rhodopi, there are many opportunities for walking tours with varying degrees of difficulty.

- Bicycle routes.

There are no separate bicycle routes, but in recent years, outdoor activities and a healthy lifestyle have been developed and promoted, which has made cycling increasingly popular. This is a preferred activity for many people, as it combines sport, tourism and ecological transport.

- Urban transport.

Despite the limitations, public transport is used as a more ecological alternative to personal cars for moving between cities and villages. It is used mainly by local people – shift workers, students and pensioners.

- Shared travel and organized tours.

Some hotels offer organized transfers and shared travel, which reduces the number of individual cars. But this type of transportation is not yet a factor in green transportation.

The area does not yet have widespread electric vehicles or charging stations, which is a potential opportunity for the future development of greener transportation.

Innovative project or policy in Gotse Delchev region that promotes sustainable tourism mobility

The Municipality of Gotse Delchev is working on the implementation of a sustainable transport mobility policy through the preparation and adoption of a Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan (SUMP) for the city of Gotse Delchev. This strategic document is part of the integrated development plan of the municipality for the period 2021–2027 and has a horizon until 2040, including possibilities for updating.

Main characteristics of the SUMP project:

- **Objective:** Responding to the mobility needs of the population and business through a better quality of life and a more environmentally friendly approach to transport. The plan follows the European concept of sustainable urban mobility planning
- **Public involvement:** The project was subject to a 30-day public consultation, giving citizens the opportunity to offer their opinions and comments.
- **Strategic focus:** The SUMP directs efforts towards the development of a sustainable urban transport system, including measures such as improving pedestrian infrastructure, bicycle lanes, optimizing public transport and other initiatives to reduce dependence on the private car.

The **Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan** lays the foundations for the gradual introduction of environmentally friendly and efficient transport solutions in the region, aiming to achieve a more environmentally friendly and safe transport system.

Barriers that hinder wider adoption of the solutions for sustainable tourism mobility



Financial barriers:

- **Limited municipal budgets**

Investments in sustainable mobility (cycle lanes, ecological public transport, electric vehicles) require significant funds that exceed the resources of a small municipality like Gotse Delchev.

- **Dependence on European and national funding**

Projects such as the SUMP often rely on external funding under programs such as the RDP or INTERREG. This slows down implementation and makes it dependent on administrative procedures. And the funds under the programs are also limited.



Cultural barriers

- **High dependence on the private car**

Many residents, especially in villages and the periphery, rely entirely on private vehicles. Public transport or cycling are often perceived as inconvenient or "temporary solutions".

- **Low awareness and attitudes towards change**

Lack of knowledge about the benefits of sustainable mobility and habits anchored in the "car culture" hinder the adoption of alternative methods of transport.



Logistical and infrastructural barriers

- **Outdated or missing infrastructure**

Many streets and areas in the city and villages are not adapted for cyclists or pedestrians. Bicycle lanes are almost non-existent, and pedestrian paths are limited and often unmaintained. Often the sidewalks are full of parked cars due to the many times increased number of private cars compared to the situation 10 or more years ago. Pedestrians are pushed out onto the street where vehicles are moving.

Successful community-led mobility/tourism project in Gotse Delchev area

Gotse Delchev Municipality does not have an implemented tourism mobility project. There is also no data on a similar project implemented by the community.

However, there are projects implemented to support tourism both by the municipality and by other non-governmental organizations that support small and medium-sized enterprises, conduct information campaigns on tourism-related topics, and involve the community in the implementation through their participation in various events and initiatives.

Such a project is “Our common past-road to the joint future”, implemented in the period 2019 – 2021 and funded by the INTERREG - IPA Bulgaria - Macedonia 2014-2020 program.

The project aimed to find better ideas and ways to promote traditional culture and protect cultural heritage in the cross-border region and to boost cultural exchange between the two countries – Bulgaria and N Macedonia.

The project strategy was built on use of the following opportunities: **change in tourist behavior, increasing demand for tourist experience and growing demand for events in the field of cultural tourism.**

Taking into account the common needs of the partners, joint initiatives were planned within the project to promote cultural traditions, intangible cultural heritage and to present cultural tourism in the region in order to increase the number of tourists. The main activities included capacity building, building a network of stakeholders in the field of tourism and culture, organizing thematic excursions for students, reconstruction and creation of a summer children's camp in the mountains.

The project had a **positive impact on stakeholders in the field of culture and tourism**, visitors and tourists, public administration and the local population, increasing local incomes and improving the environment for new jobs in the field of culture and tourism, public and cultural institutions. There are also positive effects on the profitability of cultural infrastructures

Successful community-led mobility and tourism project in implementation

Example for cross-border EU funded project is currently implemented project “*Integrated development of distinctive cultural and nature-friendly tourism*”. It **improves the infrastructure, accessibility and tourist services** in the area, creating an attractive, all-season tourist product through partnerships at a local level.

The emphasis is on improving access through infrastructure, establishing a cycle path and promoting the area by organizing a summer cultural festival using the local intangible cultural heritage.



Demographic groups that face mobility exclusion



Vulnerable demographic groups in Gotse Delchev region are no different from other settlements in Bulgaria (or in Europe).

First of all, these are **elderly people over 65**. The villages around Gotse Delchev have a **high percentage of aging population**, which means that the group is by no means small. Public transport is **infrequent and irregular**, which makes access to health, social and administrative services difficult for them. Their low pensions and lack of information about transport options reinforce their isolation.



People with disabilities are another vulnerable group. Their problems are related to the almost complete **lack of accessible transport** – neither buses, nor sidewalks and stops are adapted. There are no **publicly available platforms or applications** with accessibility information. The problem is intensified by the weak commitment of institutions to integration through mobility.



For the third vulnerable group of **people with low incomes and the unemployed**, the financial barrier is significant – especially for residents of more remote villages. Some cannot afford daily trips to the city for work, services or education. The lack of transport limits opportunities for employment and social mobility.

How could this be improved: In order to solve the problem of social exclusion from mobility, the Municipality needs to create new or improve existing social services such as free travel cards, the introduction of “transport on demand”, subsidized tickets. Significant investments are also needed in improving the accessibility of stops and sidewalks, the introduction of transport vans with platforms and space for wheelchairs.

Seasonal trends that impact transport sustainability

In Gotse Delchev region and neighboring settlements, seasonal factors have a major impact on the sustainability of transport – both in terms of tourist demand and in terms of the accessibility of small settlements.

Overcrowding is observed in **the summer**, because in the peak summer months of July and August there is an inflow of domestic tourists coming to the mineral water pools in Ognyanovo; tourists on their way to Greece who stay in the hotels and guesthouses in the region for a few nights; abroad workers who return to their native villages.

The effect on transport is **congested roads and lack of parking lots** in villages with narrow streets; increased emissions and noise in cultural and natural areas; safety problems when sharing narrow roads with cars, buses and bicycles. A possible solution is again the **introduction of seasonal shuttle lines** with electric buses from Gotse Delchev; temporary bicycle and pedestrian routes with markings.

Remote villages in the region suffer from **isolation in winter**. The reason is reduced tourist traffic after the end of the autumn holidays; **poor road conditions** – snow, ice, landslides in mountainous areas; fewer bus lines due to low profitability. The effect on transport is **difficult access to cultural sites; social isolation of residents**, especially the elderly; disruption of connections between villages and municipal centers. A possible solution is mobile transport services “on demand” (demand-responsive transport) with electric or hybrid buses to serve the more isolated populated villages.

The transition seasons are **spring and autumn**. Then there are fewer tourists who visit various organized festivals. At this time, the effect on transport is low bus occupancy on weekdays; **local peaks during holidays** – for example religious holidays. A possible solution is the introduction of flexible routes that adapt according to the event calendar and advance reservations.

Local or national policies that **SUPPORT** sustainable tourism mobility in Bulgaria



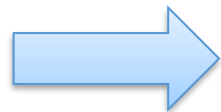
The **National Strategy for Sustainable Mobility and Transport (2021–2030)** aims to reduce emissions and stimulate **public, shared and low-carbon transport**. It envisages the development of **electric bus and hybrid lines** in small settlements; incentives for **bicycle networks** and intermodal connections (bus + bicycle). In the context of tourism, it facilitates the construction of “green” routes between cultural and natural sites.



The **National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development (2014–2030)** recognizes the need for **environmentally friendly transport** in tourist areas. It encourages the integration of **transport services with tourist packages**. It recommends the development of seasonal and thematic routes (including cultural and historical).



The **National Recovery and Resilience Plan** includes investments in electric vehicles and charging infrastructure; modernization of railway and bus transport; digitalization for the integration of transport and tourist services. The “Sustainable Tourism” component supports the modernization of infrastructure to cultural sites.



The **Tourism Act, the Environmental Protection Act and the Cultural Heritage Act** indirectly support sustainable mobility by restricting vehicle access to protected areas and reserves; they introduce requirements for the preservation of the authentic environment around cultural sites.

Local or national policies that HINDER sustainable tourism mobility in Bulgaria

There are **policies and factors that hinder sustainable tourist mobility**. These include the **lack of an integrated national tourist transport scheme**. Currently, transport and tourism are planned separately, which makes it difficult to connect sites and routes. **Low funding for rural and seasonal lines** often does not cover real costs, and this leads to the reduction or closure of lines in the lower seasons.

Weak coordination between ministries also has a negative impact. The Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Transport rarely have joint programs aimed at sustainable mobility in tourist areas. There are also **regulatory restrictions** - the procedures for introducing new transport services, especially shared or on-demand, are complex, and there are no clear standards for eco-transport in protected areas.

To support sustainable tourist mobility in the Gotse Delchev region, the municipality will need to coordinate efforts between the cultural and transport sectors, because national policies do not yet connect them effectively enough.



Possible GreenMove collaborations with local EU projects

The GreenMove project can partner **not with current, but with future EU projects** in the region (not just the Municipality of Gotse Delchev) through various mechanisms and forms of cooperation.

Sharing experience and good practices is the best way to cooperate, which can include organizing **joint seminars, webinars and trainings for municipal experts, transport operators and tourist organizations**.

Also developing **guides and manuals that summarize successful measures** (e.g. implementation of electric buses, construction of bike lanes, integrated tickets for tourists).

Another good practice is **pilot testing of solutions from one territory to another** (example: a "tourist mobility card" is first implemented in one city, then adapted for the partner).

It would be useful for the region to **share joint tourist products** such as: developing thematic routes connecting the two territories – for example, cultural or nature trails that offer a combined trip by train/bus + bicycle; Creating a common brand or marketing campaign for "sustainable destinations"; Synchronizing cultural events and festivals to create "green tourism packages" (e.g. a cross-border festival ticket + transport).

Joint digitalization is also a successful practice that could be applied to the Gotse Delchev region. This could include developing a **common mobile application** or **online platform for tourist mobility** – with information on transport, tickets, accommodation, attractions and carbon footprint; Introducing smart monitoring technologies: bicycle counters, mobile route maps, statistics on the use of eco-transport.



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