

DESTINATION KVARKEN

Two countries, a world of contrasts



FUTURE STRATEGY FOR KVARKEN DESTINATIONS

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Abbreviations

AIEST Worldwide Network of Tourism Experts

BA Botnia-Atlantica Programme
CVB Convention and Visitor Bureau

DMO Destination Management Organisation

SWOT Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats

TO Tour Operator
USP Unique Selling Point

WTTC World Travel & Tourism Council

Appendix

Tour operator survey form Expert interview questions

1. Introduction

The Destination Kvarken project, which aims at increasing the number of visitors to the area, includes three provinces in Ostrobothnia, Finland; the region of Umeå; and High Coast in Sweden. For these geographic regions, the project involves the six following tourist destination organisations: High Coast Destination Development, Visit Umeå, Visit Vaasa, Visit Seinäjoki Region, Visit Kokkola, Visit Jakobstad Region and Visit Kristinestad.

The project's main activities include networking and cooperation, R&D, digitalisation, market activities and product development. Hanken Svenska handelshögskolan (Hanken) is responsible for two work packages: WP2 Research and Development and WP3 Digitalisation.

The goal of the project was to introduce the joint travel destination—Kvarken destinations—to the international audience, and thus, increase the number of foreign tourists in Kvarken. The cross-border collaboration and joint marketing efforts were considered key to achieving a position as an internationally recognised travel destination combining two countries. The starting point for this project was the message from the international tour operators (TOs), who consider the joint Kvarken area an interesting travel destination. This type of international demand is good news for the region, but in practice, the Kvarken destinations are not yet a unified destination. In the project area, there are seven destination marketing organisations (DMOs) that manage regional tourism marketing. These destinations have specific governance models and strategies in tourism development. At the start of the project, each destination focussed on marketing its own region. At the same time, there is lively cooperation, and contacts exist between the tourism actors in the region; tourism organisations have conducted several joint projects in the past years. Nevertheless, the DMOs of Kvarken have not yet found a permanent development and marketing structure by which Kvarken destinations could be marketed together on international markets.

This report presents suggestions for how to align the strategic plans of the DMOs to work in favour of the Kvarken destinations, with a particular focus on cross-border collaborations for development and marketing. To this end, data and competences of different kinds have been analysed to create a set of tactics to be followed up on.

The founding documents for our analysis in this report are the strategy plans of the DMOs. A strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis was carried out based on input from TOs interested in Kvarken destinations and experts in tourism, destination development and marketing. For Kvarken destinations, this report is a first attempt to lay out an action map for more intense cross-border collaboration in future. It should be noted that this report is only one in a series of reports produced in the project.

In practice, formulating a strategy involves making decisions, to set directions for development and goals to be achieved, and to roll out an action plan for how to reach the mission and visions of the strategy. Developing tourism destination marketing strategies is challenging because the complexity of the tourism industry. There are, in particular, dimensions that make strategy development on a destination level demanding. First, the tourism sector is multi-layered. Strategies on destination levels are a middle-layer strategy that must be adopted somewhere between the national strategies and tourism firms' strategies, the interest DMOs are to represent. Second, tourism firms have different sizes, amounts of resources and interest in development, keeping in mind that tourism is a set of service offerings to ensure that tourists and other travellers have good experiences. It is important to secure cooperation between tourism firms, as well as between companies and DMOs, in relation to specific destinations.

All DMOs have unique strategies to follow. Therefore, one of the aims of this project was to initiate a cross-destination development discussion for future joint development and marketing. Pooling tourism resources in Ostrobothnia (Finland), with resources from Westrobothnia (Sweden), for joint Kvarken destination marketing was the issue to be developed and tested (Picture 1).

Picture 1. Positioning of the Kvarken destination initiative

FINLAND **SWEDEN** Finland's tourism strategy Sweden's tourism strategy 'Achieving more together' 'Nationell strategy för Svensk besöksnäring' and 'Visit the Future' **Destination Kvarken initiative** Destination strategies **Destination strategies** Visit Kokkola, High Coast Destination Development Visit Kristinestad Visit Umeå Visit Jakobstad Region Visit Seinäjoki Region Visit Vaasa

This report is structured into six chapters. The next chapter, chapter 2, defines collaboration as a theoretical foundation for the analyses to come and conclusions drawn. Chapter 3 discusses a unified tourism strategy for Kvarken destinations. Chapter 4 lays out a SWOT analysis based on external expert interviews. Strategy processes are about continuously monitoring the current situation and planning for the future. Therefore, chapter 5 is about trends and how Kvarken destinations can take this information into consideration. Finally, in chapter 6, we present our final thoughts about Kvarken destinations in terms of how to push development and potential joint endeavours that can be established.

2. Collaborative destination marketing

Destination competitiveness means that destinations must strive to stand out, be attractive and facilitate value creation. Tourists are to be offered satisfying memorable experiences, local residents should experience enhanced well-being and tourist firms should have an to do good business (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). Existing research on destination competitiveness and marketing has primarily focussed on intra-destination collaborations (Vogt, Jordan, Grewe & Kruger, 2016; Croes & Semrad, 2018), how to engage and involve stakeholders (d'Angella & Go, 2009) and the roles of DMOs (Elbe, Hallén & Axelsson 2009). Less studied is inter-destination joint marketing activities, here defined as collaborative destination marketing (Wang, Hutchinson, Okumus & Naipaul, 2013).

Preconditions for the formation of destination marketing alliances (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2007), the roles of DMOs/CVB in coordinating joint destination marketing activities (Wang, 2007) and opportunities to use Web 2.0 for inter-destination collaboration have been studied (Stabler, Papatheodorou & Sinclair, 2010). However, tourism research has not yet considered the 'crossroads' when the DMOs must decide to continue with intra-destination activities only or also invest in collaborative destination marketing. Based on network (Bengtsson & Kock, 2000) and destination marketing theories (Wang & Krakover, 2008) and by applying a resource-based view (Barney, 1991) on destination marketing, this chapter aims at defining destination collaboration.

Defining destination collaboration

Several authors have explored destination collaboration within different contexts and settings. Alongside these studies, some definitions of these phenomena have been created. Table 1 presents definitions of 'destination collaboration' used in previous studies, as well as selected central findings for understanding the role of DMOs in collaborative cooperation.

Table 1 Destination collaboration: definitions

| AUTHOR | YEAR | DEFINITION | THEORIES | TYPE OF STUDY | RESULTS |
|--|------|---|---|--|--|
| Line & Wang | 2017 | 'While many destinations do compete directly for tourism business, destinations can also enter into collaborative arrangements with other destinations. | Stakeholder theory, value creation networks, market orientation | Conceptual study | Conceptualisation of a multi- stakeholder, market-oriented approach to destination marketing. |
| Vogt, Jordan, Grewe & Kruger | 2016 | Collaborative tourism planning: 'A way to proactively manage growth and development in a variety of destinations. | | Qualitative case study; Alaska | Residents were found to be actively aware of their well-being. Residents participating in tourism planning tended to be active, thoughtful, curious and inspired, and they desired to contribute to the community. |
| Line & Runyan | 2014 | 'A DMO's alliance-based marketing asset arise out of interactions with its industry and political stakeholders. As such, the destination promotion triad can be viewed as a de facto cross-sectional alliance between the DMO, the local government, and the tourism industry'. | Resource-based view, service- dominant logic | In-depth literature review and interviews | Development of a multidimensional construct reflecting the operant nature of strategically valuable destination marketing resources. |
| Mariani, Buhalis, Longhi & Vitouladiti | 2014 | 'Collaboration between destinations can be instrumental to improve the value of a supranational territory'. | Destination marketing, destination management | Conference communication; France | Collaborative and especially coopetitive attitudes both within destinations and among destinations can generate positive benefits for all of the actors involved. |
| Vuorinen & Vos | 2013 | 'Place brand has diverse ownership, and hence its management is a collaborative undertaking of the place's key stakeholders'. | Place branding | Focus group study; Finland | 'The establishment of a body to coordinate actions is essential for any place branding effort'. |
| Wang, Hutchinson, Okumus & Naipaul | 2013 | 'Through increased collaborative efforts, such as expanded marketing programs that market the region as one destination, there is the potential to attract more tourists to the region'. | Collaborative relationship motivations, organizational learning | Qualitative study with documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews; Central Florida | Collaboration among DMOs is beneficial in terms of cost reduction and market penetration. |
| Fyall, Garrod & Wang | 2012 | "Destination collaborations can come in the form of organic, mediated Intra-Destination- and mediated Intra and Inter Destination Collaboration". | Collaboration theory; resource-, relationship-, politics-, process-, chaos- based theories | Critical theoretical review | The implications that different theories have for each form of destination collaboration and how these collaborations are undertaken. Destinations need to perform well in all three collaborative dimensions if they are to maximise their 'collaborative' advantage. |

| Pinto & Kastenholz | 2011 | 'Collaboration at a destination is clearly identified as a dynamic process that occurs within a certain framework'. | Network theory | Literature review | 'Collaborative destination marketing must be seen as a dynamic process happening in a certain context involving diversified actors performing integrated activities and leading to different types of outputs with added value to its stakeholders'. |
|-------------------------|------|--|--|--|--|
| Elbe, Hallén & Axelsson | 2009 | 'A strategic alliance [has] been established when "two or more organizations decide to work together over a given time period in order to gain competitive advantage'. | Resource- dependency theory, strategic management theory, networking theory | Exploratory and conceptual case study; southern Sweden | 'DMOs need to develop both pragmatic and moral legitimacy in order to develop integrated destination marketing'. |
| dÁngella & Go | 2009 | Collaboration is defined as formal institutionalized relationships among networks of institutions, interests and/or individual stakeholders. | Stakeholder theory | Comparative case study; Spain and Austria | Formal contracts and stable involvement in the DMO's activity are a pre-requisite for linking the primary stakeholders to the DMO over time. Firms and the DMO collaborate to gain mutual benefit. |
| Wang | 2008 | 'Collaboration occurs when a group of autonomous stakeholders of a problem domain engage in an interactive process, using shared rules, norms and structures to act or decide on issues related to that domain'. | | Qualitative case study; Northern Indiana | 'CVB is regarded by most of the industry representatives as the umbrella DMO and is expected to play multiple roles in coordinating various marketing activities within the destination'. |
| Wang & Fesenmaier | 2007 | 'Collaboration can be defined as a process of shared decision-making among key stakeholders of a problem domain about the future of that domain (Gray, 1985). Within the tourism domain, this might involve joint decision-making among all those parties having an interest or stake in tourism destination marketing'. | destination marketing | Qualitative case study; Northern Indiana | 'Preconditions set the tone and provide the necessity for tourism organizations to work with each other in order to achieve their ultimate goals'. |
| Wang & Krakover | 2007 | 'A process of joint decision-making among autonomous, key stakeholders of an interorganizational, community tourism domain to resolve planning problems of the domain and/or manage issues related to the planning and development of the domain'. | Collaborative destination marketing | Qualitative case study; Northern Indiana | 'Different relationships of cooperation, competition and coopetition coexist among tourism stakeholders The perceived relationship between cooperation and competition was also found to be vital with the reference to the marketing of a destination'. |

For this project, the review inspired us to define destination collaboration as a process of linking intra-destination activities to shared inter-destination objectives of value for common planning, resource pooling, development and marketing. The results of the studies presented in Table 1 also guide us to focus on the importance of creating a shared understanding, in a context of many destination strategies, and to focus on place branding.

3. Consensus on a Kvarken destinations tourism strategy

Two destinations in Westrobothnia (Sweden) and five destinations in Ostrobothnia (Finland) joined the project to elaborate on the option to develop and market the Kvarken area as a destination by coordinating existing resources. The 'Destination Kvarken' initiative was initially presented as a new and uniting concept. However, it turned out that intra-destination strategies did not fully allow for this. Therefore, it was decided early in the project to seek consensus in joint strategies, with a mix balancing full-scale collaboration with inter-destination cooperation.

The approach discussed and agreed on was 'Kvarken destinations', which postulates competitiveness through a mix of intra- and inter-destination development, a 'crossroads' of mission, vision and activities for DMOs to deal with. For better performance, improved destination competitiveness and sustainability for a region's economy at

large, Wang et al. (2013) have called for more studies on mechanisms and practices that enable win-win solutions among destinations in collaborative settings. In this case, on the one hand, the DMOs have to take care of destinations' normal activities, and on the other, they must put resources into joint commitments.

By examining the separate tourism strategies of each of the seven destinations participating in the project, one can easily recognise similarities, which can be used to form a consensus for a 'Kvarken destinations tourism strategy', (if not a unified 'Kvarken destinations tourism strategy'). The review of the destinations' strategies is presented in Table 2, with a focus on central strategic dimensions, such as vision, goal, target group, offering and challenges.

The aim of this review, which was done in the early phase of the project, was to analyse similarities and differences in the destinations' strategies to be discussed with the managers of the DMOs, which are key actors in the project. In this, an underlying question was whether there is potential to create a unified strategy for Kvarken destinations. For the purpose of establishing a benchmark of the existing Kvarken destinations' strategies, the tourism strategy of Åland (Visiti Åland) is included in Table 2.

Information on the Kvarken destinations' strategies (Table 2) was collected in 2019–2020 with the risk that updates have occurred since then. However, the fundamentals in the existing strategies are so rigid that major changes are not expected.

Table 2 Separate destinations & unified destinations tourism strategies

| DESTINATION ORGANISATION | VISION/SLOGAN | GOAL | FOR WHOM (TARGET GROUP) | WHAT (OFFERING) | CHALLENGES |
|----------------------------------|--|--|--|--|--|
| VISIT UMEÅ | From coast to hinterland, together we will create a sustainable and attractive destination with nature and culture in focus. | To double the turnover from 2010 to 2025 with sustainable tourism development; a long-term wide offering of visit sites; activities, hotels, restaurants and stores will be created; thus, a more attractive environment will be created not only for visitors but also for residents and established companies. | Aware travellers, many types of target groups (soft, adventurers, culture and entertainment travellers, both foreign (Germanspeaking markets, Finland, Norway) and domestic visitors | mountains, forests, lakes, | The ability to package, market, sell and create thought-out concepts for the content of the region. Low level of digitalisation, only a few large visit sites, lack of capital. |
| HÖGA KUSTEN DEST. | For Höga Kusten to be developed into an attractive destination with international class. | To grow into a destination with an international class of attractiveness. The goal is to double the turnover within tourism in Höga Kusten, leading to 800 new man-hours to the end of 2025. | Active nature lovers, all ages, families, both men and women; visitors from Sweden, Finland, Germany and Netherlands | Nature, world heritage, landscape, mountains, forests, sea, outdoor activities, campfire experience, cultural heritage and tastes | Competence development is one of the main challenges for the companies. Aim to strengthen HK's offering of experiences; to increase the awareness of the destination, visit sites, activities and experiences. |
| VISIT VAASA | The sunniest, happiest, most energetic and naturally international area. | To increase tourism (within low seasons), awareness and attractiveness. To build a functioning collaboration and network with tourism actors. To offer several quality products for sale. | Long-distance travellers, Sweden and Norway, tourists from nearby, business- travellers, nature tourists | Nature (sea, countryside), international connections | Responsibility for tourism development, finding new and innovative business models, developing collaborative marketing, collaboration and networking. |
| ETELÄ- POHJANMAAN MATKAILU | Through the spirit of Ostrobothnia. 'Pohjanmaan kautta'. | To make the destination well-known and attractive to national visitors. To create pre-requisites for professional development, growth and competitiveness, and tourism operation throughout the year. Foreign visitors in quieter | National visitors, wellness, countryside and event travellers | Large and small attractions (Powerpark, Tuuri, Ähtäri), events and festivals in the summer; own culture and food as themes | To compete in a global environment, attract visitors during the quieter periods, increase the number of international travellers, increase the level of digital communication and marketing. |

| VISIT JAKOBSTAD REGION | Jakobstad region is one of Finland's most popular travel destinations on the west coast. | foreign travellers. Companies in our area engage in electronic sale channels, and the collaboration with foreign tourism operators is | couples and one- person households from the areas nearby; Finland, | biking, fishing for activity travellers; charming gardens, unique visit sites and local craftmanship; accommodation offerings | Reachability, availability, weak competency within digital channels and marketing of tourism, large number of sale |
|--|--|--|---|---|---|
| REGION | coast. 'Jakobstadens region är västkustens pärla'. | | nearby; Finland, Sweden and international markets | accommodation offerings from treetop huts to hotels; regional events and diverse & rich cultural offerings | large number of sale channels. Year-round development of tourism and service. |
| VISIT KOKKOLA | 'And there is no need to go beyond the sea'. | Increasing digitalisation, increasing awareness, creating a year-round and customer-oriented service offering. | Domestic tourists; foreign markets; DACH and Sweden & Norway | Highlighting maritime events (Tankar, M/S Jenny, coastal destinations), nature trails and their services; culture, events and a year-round city destination | Small side-by-side tourism service providers: the challenge of making products developed for groups easily available to FIT tourists as well. Yearround. Resource scarcity (both knowhow and financial) in a rapidly changing digitalisation context. |
| KVARKEN DESTINATIONS (IN COMMON) | Creating an attractive destination. | To increase the attractiveness and the number of visitors, and to make the destination well-known. Strong collaboration with companies and between regions and destinations. | Tourists from nearby areas and countries; families interested in nature | Nature, archipelago, world heritage and activities | Global competition, competency within digitalisation and lack of resources. |
| VISIT ÅLAND (BENCHMARK) | | Åland will double its tourism turnover in the next 10 years. The | The prime target | | To develop and find |

By summing up the essence of the destinations' strategies for shared understanding, the following can be observed: In the second to last row Table 2 (marked with darker shading), we recognise that the vision for Kvarken destinations should be to create an attractive destination, with the goal of making the destination well-known, and

by joint efforts, aiming for a higher number of visitors. This can be achieved on the condition that collaboration between the destinations, regions and companies improves. Furthermore, Kvarken destinations target tourists who are interested in nature, especially families, from nearby areas and countries by offering them activities in a beautiful nature and landscapes involving a World Heritage archipelago. The common challenges that the destinations face are global competition, competency within digitalisation and lack of human and financial resources.

For a future and more elaborate unified strategy, it is recommended to use this draft as a base and adjust it according to the current situation and needs. Plans and tactics are to be developed at a later stage when the 'roadmap' (strategy) is in place. The possibilities are there, as the similarities of the different destinations' strategies are evident.

DMOs' view on strategic collaborations

One of the tasks of the project was to find out how the Kvarken destinations could be jointly marketed as a cooperation of destinations. For this to happen, a consensus among key actors, such as managers of the different DMOs, is vital. Therefore, in the early phase of the project (summer 2019), the opinions of the DMOs. were measured by means of an interview (Latvasalo 2019). Questions about interest in collaborative tourism strategies and joint marketing activities were asked.

The destinations acknowledged that the strategic collaboration could be an advantage for Kvarken, but this was considered very challenging to put into practice. It can be noted in the responses of the destination managers that strategy making was seen as a huge job, and individual destinations did not want a greater strategic workload. However, the destinations considered cooperation between the countries and Kvarken destinations worthwhile otherwise. From the responses, it can be concluded that the destinations want cross-border collaborations but not a common unifying strategy on top of their own strategies. Consequently, the responses of the destinations reflect some doubts. There is a slight fear of producing useless strategy papers that is linked to questions about who will coordinate the strategy, document it and keep it up to date. Some destinations are also concerned with how the destination organisation will perform and 'please' the company members and other financiers if a destination goes beyond implementing its strategy and puts resources into implementing a larger collaborative strategy.

Despite the challenges with the common strategy, the destinations know that there is a ground for fruitful collaboration between Finland and Sweden. The destinations can share knowledge and tackle some common challenges together. The destination collaboration is partly experienced as beneficial from the resource point of view. In addition, destination managers are of the opinion that it is valuable to learn from other destinations. Making Kvarken internationally visible is a clear area for collaboration. It is expressed by the destination managers that by collaborating, Kvarken reaches better international visibility, and there is a wider offering available for international guests. A joint strategy between the destinations in the Kvarken region could be beneficial for reaching international markets; one DMO manager commented that the competition in the domestic market is so fierce that it could be challenging to come up with a common strategy between domestic destinations.

How a common strategy discussion should be continued after the Destination Kvarken project comes to an end was of concern. Progressing with the common goals and strategy is very difficult if you do not meet with the other destinations. According to DMO managers, there is a call for workshops where the tourism strategies of the destinations could be further discussed. In general, destination managers do not know each other's strategies, but they would be interested in having more knowledge.

The DMOs were asked what is needed to create the first version of the collaborative strategy and what may hinder the collaborative action. The answers can be interpreted as DMOs suggesting that need to convince their organisations to engage in strategic collaboration. DMOs identify different visions, organisational sizes and budgets

as barriers. A lack of resources and geographical and cultural distance can also be barriers in collaborative strategy making. There are a few suggestions for how the collaborative strategy process could be started. There is one DMO placing particular emphasis on starting some sort of structure and follow-up work in the case of starting the collaborative journey. For example, branding, a communication plan and an action plan are needed. It is clear from the DMO comments that the structure for collaboration and personnel resources from the destinations are needed. Some kind of common marketing plan and plan for financing joint marketing should be put in place. One suggests that it would be a good idea to analyse a destination's strategy first and then to think what the output of the collaborative strategy would be. DMOs call for clarity and fairness as the rules in the collaboration. It is important that there are realistic goals for all parties and that the strategy benefits everyone equally.

Identifying common ground is the key to collaboration. The question of what unites us in Kvarken is essential. It appears that DMOs are interested in continuing to know 'neighbouring destinations' better and discussing the joint future. Apparently, it would be helpful to find areas for collaboration by sharing more information between the destinations about what is going on. The DMOs are not alone working with the tourism industry, but they have constant contact with politics and development organisations. In sum, the DMOs address the importance of the engagement of municipalities and politics in tourism development. This implies that regional politics and organisations need to be involved in the process of planning the joint future of Kvarken destinations.

As there are doubts about a unifying tourism strategy for Kvarken destinations, there is a suggestion of emphasising joint activities and joint travel routes instead of collaborative strategy. Consensus of activities are achievable. Collaboration on specific activities, such as 'travel route' development as a roadmap—which can also include common aims, target markets and so on—has been presented. However, even at this strategic level, DMOs see some risks of conflict in joint marketing communication. Mainly, destinations see collaborative marketing as an advantage, but they seem to have a sceptical attitude about how the collaborative strategy at the moment fits in properly with the organisation's strategy. In addition, DMOs have doubts about how the strategy would be managed and with what resources.

4. SWOT

This chapter introduces the SWOT analysis of Kvarken destinations. To build a foundation for the after-project development of Kvarken destinations, we draw up a SWOT based on external experts' view. Our purpose was to gain an understanding of how Kvarken destinations is perceived from an outsiders' perspective. Therefore, we interviewed tourism experts and sent a survey to TOs who have been in contact with Kvarken destinations through sales meetings. The expert interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams, and the TO survey was conducted by Webropol online form. The interviews and the survey were conducted in March 2021.

General opinion about Kvarken

Kvarken is an unknown destination in the German-speaking markets. The typical story is that travel operators were hearing about Kvarken for the first time. Even travel operators selling Northern Europe or Scandinavia did not recognise the area or know where it is located on the map. The lack of knowledge of Kvarken among travel professionals could be suggest that consumers in German markets have even less knowledge of Kvarken's existence. There is not much knowledge about the Kvarken region's coastline; according to one interviewee, Germans tend to vacation in southern Sweden. In general, it is difficult to get German travellers north of Stockholm. A lot of work has been done to raise the profile of the Kvarken area. For instance, there have been sample travel packages available at sales events that introduce the area for the travel operators. Yet, the travel experts

interviewed still said that Kvarken is an unknown destination. This has significant implications when considering the tourism development and marketing of Kvarken.

Kvarken's best attractions are nature, UNESCO World Heritage designation for nature sites and the 2-in-1 tourist package (two countries in one journey). From the travel experts' view, our joint destination, a combination of two countries (2-in-1) and the ferry connection in between, makes Kvarken appealing for international markets. By visiting two countries, the tourists are offered the possibility to see distinct types of scenery in one trip; whereas Finland has a low coast, Sweden has totally contrasting scenery with its high coast. Nature is the biggest highlight of Kvarken destinations, making Kvarken unique, which is also why UNESCO status was achieved. The UNESCO heritage site is the most important unique selling point (USP) for Kvarken Destinations. One travel expert suggests that Kvarken should emphasise even more the combination of two countries in its marketing:

I think what makes it special...I think the [USP] you have, obviously, is nature—rich nature and the way of life there, natural lifestyle and so on. This is also why you should not only promote Finland or Sweden, but you actually want to promote Kvarken—that 2-in-1 thought, I think, is very appealing, two countries in one area. And I think this you could work actually a bit more explicitly. I have been looking at your home page and so on, and I think you could really emphasise that you could experience two countries with two cultures, with many things in common but also some differences. (Expert interviews)

Cooperation & development

The joint travel destination is apparently attractive internationally, but much cross-border cooperation needs to be done to develop it. For instance, the participation of Swedish and Finnish travel professionals in sales events helps to market a joint travel destination.

There is a good offering of products in Kvarken. Nurturing the quality of products and raising the USPs of Kvarken into travel catalogues and sales events are means for achieving success in the travel market. One suggestion was to develop 'cycling' for one product offering. This could be an interesting opening for Kvarken tourism. The archipelago of Turku, for example, has been active in developing cycling routes and services around this activity.

Different opportunities for visitors should be highlighted even more when marketing Kvarken:

Things like—you talked about the archipelago. Is it possible to do island hopping? How do you do this? Talk about UNESCO. According to other experts, we should highlight UNESCO status even more. True. That is very true. It is sort of like a quality sign as well, if you can highlight that. Definitely! And I must say myself, I went to Höga Kusten on a press trip in the autumn, with the international journalists, and I think also you have excellent food. I was surprised at how good the food was. High quality of food and so on. And it is something you could really work more around, I think. What you also could highlight is unique places to stay like in a treetop hotel or on a boat or in a house on an island just by yourself. (Expert interviews)

According to the interviewees, new tour suggestions would be very welcome. The tours can be based on different themes:

And it could be different themes: It could be hiking routes, it could be bicycling routes, could be themes on food or like a fun tour for families, and things like that. And really be visual about it. (Expert interviews)

In the interviews, we received suggestions on how to promote the unity of the Kvarken region by developing a website design:

I think right now you need to tie destinations more together. Now it is more like islands on the home page. You need to tie them more tightly together so it is like a region as such that can be highlighted. Otherwise you need to, like I said, click your way through very many links and so on. (Expert interviews)

The new Aurora Botnia ferry brings opportunities for the marketing of Kvarken that should not be ignored. One interviewee described the ferry as follows:

A It's NEW
B It's ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY
C It's a really FAST connection
D It's still CHEAP.
(Expert interviews)

Sustainability issues were discussed with experts:

Here comes the discussion that has been going on here for a long time. Customers can be very responsible in their daily lives that they follow a lot of things, sort the trash and use bicycles for transport, and use the green energy—and then, when they go to travel, all of these things are forgotten. The second point is, of course, that the demand for sustainable tourism is growing, its importance is being emphasised and it is also being taken into account more and more by [TOs]. And here we come to the conclusion that travelling in your own car is not the best possible way, but again, in air travel, we are very careful not to do any day charters—if you fly, then you stay for at least 7 days or such a rule in this market. Now there is clearly also a growing demand for this rail travel product. At the same time, keep in mind that it's a small segment, it's a niche segment. That is the reality at the moment. Of course, you can already find the first electric car tours, starting from Hamburg and going to southern Sweden and back. By electric rental car. In other words, these are coming and are already on the market, but it will take some time before these are all out of the volume business. (Expert interviews)

Based on the expert interviews, a SWOT table is presented below (Table 3).

Table 3 SWOT Based on Tour Operator Survey & Expert interviews

| Strengt | hs | Weaknesses | |
|---------|--|--|--|
| | UNESCO brand/World Heritage | - Little-known destination | |
| | 2-in-1 joint destination | - Lack of brand awareness | |
| | Ferry connection | - Marketing of USPs | |
| | Closeness of neighbouring countries, Finland and Sweden Combination of two countries during one trip with the ferry connection Nature Nature/outdoor activities Space/room to roam | Lack of nature close accommodation Inadequate service offering Lack of cooperation partners Scattered small tourism companies | |
| - | Hospitality | | |
| - | Culture | | |
| Opport | unities | Threats | |
| - | New Aurora Botnia ferry | - Language | |
| - | Weekly programme of activities | - Only small stops in larger tours | |
| - | Space | - Southern Sweden | |
| - | Tour suggestions | - Lack of export products | |
| - | Diversity of offerings for different customer segments | | |
| - | Outdoor-minded tourists | | |
| - | Increasing marketing of the archipelago and sea | | |
| - | Post-Covid tourists | | |

Strengths

UNESCO is a well-known brand worldwide. Therefore, the UNESCO status has significant value for the tourism marketing of Kvarken. The UNESCO status guarantees quality in the eyes of foreign customers and travel operators:

UNESCO is a brand that represents a certain value. People in the international markets recognise UNESCO and think that we must have something special here in Kvarken if we have achieved the UNESCO World Heritage status. (Expert interviews)

UNESCO is the USP, and UNESCO status helps different tourism actors sell the area to foreign customers:

When the word UNESCO is used to create a certain image, it is a trademark, quality assurance. It immediately adds value to the whole area, and it is noticed when discussing with professionals that even if they had not heard of Kvarken, saying that it is a UNESCO natural heritage site will 'ring a bell'! That is, it is a [USP]. It has a selling argument, which in turn will help them [TOs] market that area [Kvarken]. (Expert interviews)

TOs emphasised that *World Heritage* is an absolute strength factor for Kvarken destinations. TOs also saw the different landscapes of the two countries as a strength for Kvarken.

In terms of the 2-in-1 joint destination, the interviewed travel experts all emphasised that combining two countries is appealing for international markets, and the ferry connection is a big plus regarding developing the tours connecting the two countries. The TOs' opinion (TO survey 2021) was similar to that of the travel experts. TOs consider the combination of the two countries to be the most significant strength of Kvarken.

The *ferry connection* is a key factor for tourism because Kvarken destinations aim to brand themselves as a joint tourist destination in two countries. The ferry connection enables tours comprising both countries. According to an expert interviewee, the ferry connection is beneficial not only for TOs making travel programmes in the region but also for individual travellers. The connection makes it easy to combine Kvarken destinations in both countries because individual travellers can easily buy affordable transportation by sea.

The closeness of Sweden and Finland is exciting for travellers because they can explore two countries in the same trip. Again, the fast ferry connection makes the transition between countries easy. The countries complement each other by their scenery—Finland with the low coast and Sweden with the high coast. Tourists can experience different sceneries and cultures inside the small geographical area. It is also a strength that both sides Umeå and Vaasa have airports thus it is possible to arrive and depart in both countries by air. Moreover, the current trend of the possibility of buying one-way tickets will make this type of travelling smoother. Travellers can fly into one country, cross the Gulf of Bothnia by ferry and depart from the other country.

According to the expert interviews, *nature* is seen as a great asset for Kvarken. After the pandemic, space and access to nature are even more appreciated features of a travel destination:

I think that having hospitality and kind people is a great strength, in combination with lots of space and access to nature. (Expert interviews)

Nature and outdoor activities in nature are a huge advantage and the strength of Kvarken destinations, according to the TOs.

In addition to nature, the TOs named *culture* as a strength of Kvarken. Swedes and Finns may be modest about how they are as persons and how they host their foreign guests, but in the expert interviews, it appeared that German visitors love the great *hospitality* they experience in Sweden and Finland:

I think NATURE is obviously the big PLUS, but I also think about the great hospitality, the kind people. This is something that maybe we Swedes and Finns take for granted, but when Germans come to Sweden and when they talk about Sweden or Finland, it is always about the hospitality and the great people that they meet. (Expert interviews)

Weaknesses

A main weakness is that Kvarken is still a *little-known destination*, and there is a *lack of brand awareness*. Many do not know that Kvarken exists. The name 'Kvarken' is even unknown to many Swedes. According to expert interviews, Destination Kvarken is an unknown brand and name for consumers in the German market, as well as travel professionals. TOs also stated that Kvarken is a rather unknown 'brand' in the travel market. The TOs suggested that more work should be done to make 'Destination Kvarken' more familiar (TO survey 2021).

Kvarken's USPs were not clear for some of the TOs (TO survey 2021), and therefore, *marketing of USPs* of Kvarken destinations is seen as a weakness. Emphasising USPs in marketing could differentiate Kvarken from its competitors.

Lack of accommodation close to nature can be seen as a problem because Kvarken is a nature-based destination. However, compared with the crowded cities of Central Europe, hotel accommodation in the city centre of Vaasa is almost like staying in nature:

Helsinki is marketed by urban nature, so it could be exploited in Vaasa that in a way...nature is all around, even if you stay in any hotel downtown. Nature is always close. (Expert interviews)

Inadequate service offering was seen as another weakness. The travel experts viewed the product offering as interesting, but they asked whether the service offering in Kvarken destinations is sufficient when considering a multi-day travel programme.

The TOs did not complain about lack of products, but some of the TOs referred to a *lack of cooperation partners* as a weakness. They would like to find cooperation partners in Kvarken who could help with the product packaging.

Scattered small tourism companies were also identified as a weakness. There is a lot of potential and high-quality products in Kvarken destinations, but more cooperation is needed to unite the destinations with their companies into a joint travel tour that could be marketed and sold by the foreign TOs:

What probably comes up often in this point is that in the case of so many small business owners, it's very fragmented. And it also comes across in this [TO] collaboration that you don't know how to figure A: that there are so many varied but also high-quality offerings, but then you cannot combine it. That is, in a way, what is missing here is those...I would say that the shipping line is such a very uniting factor. But it happens a lot of times to come to the Umeå, go over by ship, and then come to Vaasa and continue towards Lapland. But to stay in the region, to keep it up, it requires from the companies, the regional organisations, actions to enhance the level of understanding that there will be activities on both sides of the sea for a week or two. (Expert interviews)

Opportunities

The *new Aurora Botnia ferry* creates opportunities. The new ferry will be faster and more comfortable. Experts are saying that we should emphasise the speed of the ferry connection and the environmental friendliness of the new ship. Moreover, it is not clear to everyone that there is a ferry connection between these two countries. The existence of a ferry connection must be marketed continuously according to interviewed travel experts and TOs:

An absolute strength, or whether it's more of an opportunity, I don't know, is that ship specifically. It increases that capacity, and travel time is shortened and travel comfort is increased. But also, that novelty value is really important! (Expert interviews)

A weekly programme of activities would help convince fully independent travellers (FITs) to stay longer in the region. Tourism entrepreneurs could cooperate in creating the activity programme, which would help the participating companies to attract more guests.

Space is an absolute strength of Kvarken, and in post-Covid travel, space is even more appreciated. The trends show, and the travel experts say, that people look for peaceful travel destinations located away from crowds that offer outdoor activities and experiences in nature. In sum, space is the strength of Kvarken and creates opportunities for travel in Kvarken.

It is worth investing resources in making *tour suggestions* on the marketing websites of destinations. Germans want to plan their travels well in time before their holiday, and during their stay, they like to explore a lot. According to the expert interviews, it is highlighted how important is to provide information about the region on a destination website. The tour suggestions are appreciated among the German tourists because they want to get the most out of their vacation and do not want to waste time searching while in the destination:

My recommendation is to make suggestions of routes, actually with maps, you do have the tours, built sort of like a PDF but actually on the homepage to make it easy to navigate, to make like a tour suggestion—rather than have different destinations, sort of trying to connect samples in a more visible way as well. (Expert interviews)

TOs suggested that we should be highlighting the great *diversity of offerings for different customer segments*: As a travel destination, Kvarken offers something for everybody; it is family friendly, as well as having offerings for VIPs.

Outdoor-minded people are potential customers for Kvarken destinations. Moreover, the similar destinations in neighbouring countries are more of an advantage than competitors. *Outdoor-minded tourists* who are interested in hiking and other outdoor activities may be interested in Kvarken destinations. The neighbouring nature-based destinations, such as Norway, are seen as an advantage rather than a competitor because tourists visiting another Nordic country are likely to visit other Nordic destinations. (Expert interviews)

Marketing of the archipelago and sea should be increased. The travel experts said that the sea and archipelago have great potential because Germans do not have similar access to water in their homes as people do in Sweden and Finland:

The archipelago has huge potential, especially in Germany, because Germany is a crowded country and we don't have that much water or the access to water is not as easy as in Sweden and Finland. Therefore, I think that it could be a huge advantage to talk about archipelagos and the nature there, so definitely. (Expert interviews)

According to current trends, *post-Covid tourists* are searching for calm outdoor destinations with space, such as Kvarken destinations. Therefore post-Covid tourists can be seen as a great opportunity.

Threats

A first threat relates to *language*, in that Germans expect to find information in their language. The basic information should be found on the website and on site. It does not matter if the personnel cannot speak German. They can do a lot by being hospitable, but basic information should be made available in German if there are German guests. A lack of adequate information written in German may result in losing potential visitors:

The language. If you want to reach out, especially now, to the German market, you must ensure that you have information in German. Because even if they sort of know a bit of English they very often...although they can speak and understand English, they don't bother to read so much in English. So, if you really want to reach out to the Germans, make sure that you have at least the basics in German. (Expert interviews)

Another threat is Kvarken being *only a small stop on a larger tour*. Germans have said in surveys that they would like to visit many countries during their trips to Nordic regions. The general opinion of the interviewed travel experts is that Kvarken is an interesting destination combining two countries, but German and other foreign markets are combining many more countries during a holiday, and then Kvarken will become just a tiny piece of a trip. In addition, from the perspective of long-haul markets, such as the United States and Asia, the Kvarken destinations are small spots on the map. Tourists from those areas are interested in discovering many European countries on their trips. All this means that Kvarken destinations should be happy if tourists choose some of their destinations for their tours in Nordic countries. Although a lot of work has been done to make visitors stay a few days in the region, the result—and therefore, the threat—can be that Kvarken is just a nice little destination in which one town is visited on the tourists' way to Norway. However, Kvarken's advantage is the fast ferry connection serving tourists planning to combine Finland, Sweden and perhaps Norway in their travel itinerary.

Southern Sweden is a competitor for Kvarken destinations and Swedish Lapland, according to one expert interview, and this constitutes a threat. Southern Sweden has a wide selection of travel products, such as cottages and travel tours, and the offering is marketed extensively in German. In this sense, southern Sweden is a threat to Kvarken tourism. Kvarken destinations must have something unique and different on offer so that German tourists have a reason to head towards the north or above Stockholm.

A *lack of export products* is another threat. Some of the travel products of Kvarken destinations are perhaps not ready for travel export. Experts suspected that not all companies of Kvarken destinations had thought out the product from beginning to end from the point of view of foreign customers. Often, the product is designed from the perspective of domestic customers. For example, some nature trails can only be accessed by boat, and the boat is difficult to book in advance, or some restaurants offer self-service dining, which is not the preference of German guests on holiday. All the interviewed experts suggested that products must always be designed in detail by having a foreign customer clear in mind. Advance work is important when foreign (German) markets are targeted. The German market is not an ad hoc market. The work in the market must be done one year beforehand. Germans book their holidays well in advance and pay for a service where someone plans the tour for them. Routes, accommodations and activities are all booked when Germans arrive at the destination, and the time on holiday can be enjoyed without worrying about what to do the next day or what the ferry schedule is.

The Destination Kvarken project aims to create a strategy for marketing Kvarken destinations such that Kvarken will become a better known travel destination internationally. During the project time, marketing and selling of

Kvarken destinations, our travel destination owned by two countries, was done by employees working for the project. How the two-countries comprising Kvarken destinations will be managed and marketed after the project is a question to be solved

5. Trends in the recovery of tourism

Four trends—Demand evolution, Health & hygiene, Innovation & digitisation and Sustainability—are said to lead the recovery, based on the report of the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC, September 2020). We will use WTTC's trends as a basis for discussion of trends that will likely affect post-Covid tourism and tourism in Kvarken destinations.

1. Demand evolution

Covid-19 has changed visitor/traveller behaviour. Domestic and regional vacations have become popular. Especially, tourism products offering outdoor experiences have gained in popularity. To meet this type of demand, there are already available services, although they have not been fully developed. Travellers of today are searching for trusted, familiar destinations with low risk. The comfort of travelling regionally or domestically is that of safety, avoiding infection with Covid-19, and in the worst case scenario, being close to home (WTTC, September 2020).

Travellers seek destinations and adventures with no crowds. The interest in outdoor activities and off-the-grid experiences is on the rise. Lesser known travel destinations are becoming more interesting, and the authenticity of a destination is a great plus. Moreover, there are signs that visitors will be looking at 'on-the-ground experiences' that they can experience first-hand and not only virtually. The virtual channels are for presenting the offering, but the experience happens in real surroundings. Mass tourism is perhaps declining, and isolated destinations are on the rise (WTTC, September 2020).

Customers expect flexibility and favourable terms for bookings. Future tourists need to know how health and safety issues are executed in hotels and travel destinations (WTTC, September 2020).

Communicating how safety and hygiene are executed in the hotels will be the key factor in the work of winning the customer trust back and convincing the customers to book travels again (WTTC, September 2020).

Authenticity and uniqueness should be highlighted in the destination marketing. The customers need to be convinced to travel to the destination. Then, the tourism product must meet the expectations created by the marketing (WTTC, September 2020).

The young segment will start travelling in recovery, and the marketing should happen on the right channels to reach this segment. The travel of young people may boost the demand among other customer groups as well (WTTC, September 2020).

Local communities play a central role in rebounding tourism because future tourists are searching for authentic experiences. The locals may be out of work, and there is an opportunity to create new products generated out of the locality (WTTC, September 2020).

The International Association of Scientific Experts in Tourism (AIEST, May 2020) analysed customer behaviour changes, assessing how customer behaviour will change along the course of the coronavirus pandemic. It is

predicted that customers will make travel decisions on a short-term basis, and the durations of stay may be reduced. Customers prefer to travel with their family and close friends, as well as in smaller groups rather than larger ones. Perhaps the type of trip will change into more individual (FIT) rather than group kinds of activity. Future travellers will choose a private car for transport, especially for longer distances, and there may appear some avoidance of public transport and planes. In addition, the AIEST experts suggest a rising interest in bicycling in the context of transport. The travel destinations are chosen by criteria where maintaining social distance is possible. The remote and less crowded areas are more favourable than big cities and traditional touristic hotspots are. When selecting accommodation, places with enough space them around are interesting for travellers, for example, cabins, holiday homes and campsites. Hotels are a less favourable alternative. To think about what activities the future customer is engaging in in a destination, clearly, the pandemic has made outdoor activities popular and indoor activities not at all popular (AIEST, May 2020).

2. Health & hygiene

Hygiene of hotels or accommodations will become as important a criterion in visitor's decision-making processes as price and location (WTTC, September 2020). Health and safety improvements across the industry are seen as a common effort by all actors in tourism.

The leaders in the tourism and travel industry agree that increasing health and hygiene standards of industry is not an area to compete in; rather, it is a venue for collaboration where the best practices are shared. By creating joint health and safety protocols and sharing knowledge, it is possible to rebuild confidence among travellers. In other words, to put safety and health in order in a business is not a competitive advantage but rather 'a must-be-done' type of work (WTTC, September 2020).

Common health and safety protocols are needed to ensure safe travels across the end-to-end journey. It is recognised in the industry that the safety efforts of an independent tourism company are not enough. The whole supply chain must follow the same protocols for safe travels. In addition, it is expected that in the future, companies will partner with those with similar health and safety protocols (WTTC, September 2020).

Solutions for healthier and safer travel include spreading the word when the first happy travellers have visited the safe destination. Customer recommendations and feedback can be shared to show that safety improvements have being put in place, and they are not only empty words. Destinations should look for partners that share similar protocols and commitment on safety matters, and they should educate staff about new standards of hygiene and safety. There will be a challenge with health infrastructure when travellers desire remote and rural destinations to allow vacationing without crowds. Tourism operations need to cooperate with private and public healthcare providers to ensure the health infrastructure is in place for travellers (WTTC, September 2020).

3. Innovation & digitisation

Covid-19 has caused a giant digital leap for people as consumers and as employees or entrepreneurs. There were small companies without a website before the pandemic, but they must have gone online to survive. Online shopping has increased among customers during the pandemic. Online and mobile platforms are increasingly used to search for travel inspiration (WTTC, September 2020).

Data privacy becomes a matter of concern as different digital solutions are developed. There is a lot of discussion about biometric verifications or 'bio-passports' to be taken into use at airports, and these possibilities cause concerns around capturing health data. However, digital identity and biometric identification will represent the future of travel (WTTC, September 2020). The industry will see a wide range of technological innovations, such as disinfection robots and all types of touchless solutions in different phases of travel (WTTC, September 2020).

A shift to web conferencing is not just a withering factor for the industry with conference facilities; future events will be held by a hybrid model, with both a physical event and a virtual audience. The hybrid model will enable destinations to reach greater exposure for the subject, products or sponsors of the event (WTTC, September 2020).

Destinations and travel companies can offer virtual experiences to travel lovers across the world to remind them about their existence once travelling is safe again. The national parks and museums have gone online through virtual reality. This trend will remain an important part of marketing after Covid-19 (WTTC, September 2020).

The trend of remote work is here to stay. Employees can work from remote areas (countryside) and work from home. Employers are in a changed position of hiring because employees can be recruited from a larger area. (WTTC, September 2020).

Ideas for development in the increasingly digitised world include making sure that organisations' or companies' online presence is in order. Customers often search for information on mobile platforms. Companies should develop social media strategies, create trust and facilitate further engagement. One suggestion is that companies should have an agile approach to technological advancements, taking them into use and cooperating in their development. Digitalisation enables the personalisation of the product for a customer. The companies that succeed in combining personal service offline and convincing online presences seem to be the future winners. At the same time, for companies having the opportunity to customise services based on artificial intelligence, cybersecurity is a concerning issue, representing a factor that needs to be invested in. Remote work divides employees into two groups: One group loves its freedom and flexibility, whereas the other wants to get back to the office as fast as possible. Companies will need to adjust to remote work because it is a trend that will stay. The staff in travel businesses need new digital and technical skills. The emerging destinations (not yet familiar destinations) will need finances and a strong emphasis on digitalisation for tourism in the area to rebound. Moreover, public–private–community partnerships are a way of developing sustainable destinations in after-pandemic tourism (WTTC, September 2020).

4. Sustainability

According to the WTTC, 'This is the time for the Travel & Tourism sector to seize the moment and enact meaningful changes that will transform the world and make a lasting difference for the future generations' (September 2020). Tourism has made a significant contribution to preservation work all over the world. Environmentally, good things have happened because of Covid-19. The fact that the world has been on pause has had positive effects on nature, as we have heard about dolphins in clear channels of Venice and blue skies above the polluted cities of Asia. Yet, although there are several positive outcomes for the environment, a lot of severe damage is happening because of the lack of tourism in many destinations. Tourism has an important role in preserving protected areas and natural habitats. In many of these areas, tourism is the only livelihood for the locals. After the outbreak of coronavirus, plenty of families have lost their livelihood, which has led to illegal poaching and fishing in preserved areas. Therefore, tourists are needed to provide jobs and to preserve wildlife in several destinations. The tourists also bring most of the conservation funds by paying park fees and so on, and now this funding has been on pause because of the lack of tourists (WTTC September 2020).

Respect for nature is on the rise. The virus originating from animals has made people more aware of global wildlife and the value of nature. Some travel firms have already started producing virtual safaris while 'real' travel is not yet possible yet (WTTC September 2020).

Tourism plays an important role in promoting intercultural dialogue and tolerance. The tourism industry is a significant employer of women and minorities. The recovery of tourism will help certain groups to return to their position in society (WTTC September 2020).

Sustainability issues will be taken more seriously by travellers after Covid-19. According to surveys, customers are paying attention to firms making a positive impact during the crisis. In addition, governments are expecting tourism companies to adopt more sustainable practices, and more funds are being allocated for advancing sustainability (WTTC September 2020).

What can be done to promote sustainability? Destinations can fulfil their role in protecting nature by promoting ecofriendly destinations. Destinations may partner with conservation organisations to make a positive impact on sustainability. Sustainability is not only an environmental issue but also has a social dimension. The successful companies need to take social impact on local communities into consideration when planning the sustainable strategy of a company. The tourism companies need skilled staff that can be resiliently re-allocated into other tasks in the future changes. Digital skills of staff are valuable to have in the ever-digitalising working environment. Technology can be used for advancing sustainable travel. Digital platforms and social media are effective tools to spread information about wildlife, nature and environmental conservation work. With technological solutions, such as tracking systems, perhaps some overcrowding in popular tourist spots can be avoided. Finally, the local communities need to participate in the development work of the destinations. The long-term sustainability in a destination is only reached by cooperation that includes the local residents (WTTC September 2020).

6. Destination Kvarken's strategy for the future

This concluding chapter will list actions to be considered as necessary next steps to fully benefit from the consensus on the Kvarken destinations strategy discussed in this project. The actions presented are based on a literature review, expert interviews, analyses of the strategies of the seven destinations participating in the project and the trends that will guide us into the future.

Resources to package

The Kvarken area has a lot of potential to be a successful travel destination. Thus, the current trends are in favour of Kvarken destinations. The area has a unique nature and room to roam, and it is still quite exotic (Reiseanalys 2020). In addition, there are still many travellers who have not yet experienced the beauty of Kvarken destinations. There is an increasing interest in outdoor activities, and tourists are searching for destinations with authentic experiences. The Nordic lifestyle, including outdoor activities and food, as well as some Scandinavian design, could be ingredients that European tourists are longing for. Based on this, 'Kvarken tourism packages', in which tourists can experience the real Nordic lifestyle with a lot of authentic encounters with the residents of the region, can be suggested for future development. Another suggestion is to develop 'Route Kvarken', in the style of 'Route 66' in the United States and engage the tourist attractions and companies to be part of this new and exciting travel route. Furthermore, the travel experts say that the '2-in-1' concept and fast ferry connection between the countries are strengths that will be of interest for the German-speaking travel markets.

UNESCO is a known brand, but Kvarken is not. Therefore, Kvarken has a huge advantage in being able to use its World Heritage status in its marketing. Nature is a major attraction factor for Kvarken, and according to trends, there is a growing interest in nature-based destinations. UNESCO World Heritage status gives us an edge in being a UNESCO world-renowned brand; according to the travel expert interviews, this is a guarantee of quality.

However, UNESCO value alone is not enough; it is necessary to develop activities and tourism infrastructure through which visitors can experience Kvarken's unique nature. Smaller companies in particular are not able to offer activities for many days on their own, but in cooperation, it would be possible to create packages in which tourists would have activities for a longer stay in Kvarken.

Ready-made packages or tourist routes may make it easier to make purchase decisions in the German tourism market. When aiming for a foreign market—and Germans in this project—it should be noted that the Germans are willing to pay for someone to plan a route, accommodation and places to visit and take care of tickets, for example. According to German tourism market experts, Germans want to experience a lot during their trip, so they prefer to buy a pre-planned trip in their home country (Expert interviews 2021).

Joint travel routes, combining the two countries, could be a way to continue collaboration after the project. Based on our interviews, the DMOs in Kvarken need concrete action. Common routes would make the companies involved feel a sense of belonging: 'We are part of Kvarken destinations'.

Destination Kvarken has worked towards improved visibility and 'brand awareness' in international markets, especially in the markets of German-speaking countries. Until now, the project has acted as a convening force, and the Kvarken has been marketed as a joint travel destination. What will happen after the project? Who will be in charge, and in what way would this good start of tourism collaboration between the neighbouring countries keep developing after the project? To maintain the achieved brand awareness among TOs and end customers and to be able to continue marketing of Kvarken destinations, a common vision and strategic agreement must be built in collaboration with the seven destinations. We suggest that the destinations organise together and decide how to continue international marketing as a joint destination. We see the joint website Kvarkendestinations.com as a natural arena for further marketing collaboration.

The future will show whether there is a common will to market Kvarken internationally as a joint travel destination combining the two countries or whether the destinations will focus solely on marketing their proper regions. With the increase in local and domestic travel because of the pandemic, it may be that the destinations turn their attention more to the domestic market than to the international market, at least temporarily.

Digitalisation

The website Kvarkendestinations.com brings together the tourism offerings of the Kvarken region. Destination Kvarken launched the website Kvarkendestinations.com in September 2019 with the aim of providing inspiring photos, videos and articles of the Kvarken region for TOs, travel professionals and media. From the beginning, the website was a B2B platform. The website contains seven destinations, as well as selected export tourism companies or attractions and a map with some tour suggestions. The products are presented by theme, rather than focusing on the country of location. The content bank provides a wide selection of pictures, videos and articles in German and English. The feedback from TOs has been positive, and many have reported that the website helped them at work. The website could be developed by highlighting route suggestions that pass through both countries. In some respects, the website does not fully reflect the image of a joint destination; thus, this should be developed so that the destinations are not like islands on the homepage (Expert interviews 2021). The website hosting is paid for a couple of years after the project, so the website can be used for collaborative marketing of Kvarken destinations. While the maintenance of the site is technically taken care of, a person to manage the site is also required.

The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated digitalisation in the tourism companies of Kvarken. In the Corona report, it became evident that some tourism companies (Pollari & Björk 2020) were able to use 'quiet times', when there were no customers, to develop their service offerings and the company's digital presence and digital skills. The

DMOs also developed their digital presence during 2020, and they have kept themselves in people's minds through virtual campaigns. For the future, digitalisation will prevail, and there are no reasons to stop the development.

Joint marketing and responsibilities

For branding purposes, the shorter a name is, the better. This makes us consider dropping the 'destinations' concept out of the brand name 'Kvarken' when the project comes to an end. It can be discussed whether Kvarken as a name would be more memorable.

This project aimed to increase collaboration between tourism firms and to promote company cooperation across the sea. The cooperation between the hospitality firms in the region does not happen by DMOs or project personnel telling it to happen. Based on our findings, cooperation between companies could be advanced, for example, through a common travel route or package. The company needs to see the collaboration as beneficial. The challenge with this is who will sell the jointly developed travel package? Is it a cooperating company, or is an external sales organisation needed?

Based on the challenges of discussing collaborative joint strategies for Kvarken destinations, we suggest that future tourism projects in the Kvarken region would be more company-oriented from the start. Destination Kvarken and many other tourism development projects often lack the engagement of tourism companies. When the DMO level is coordinating the project, it may result in ignorance from the companies because there is a coordinator already taking care of their part.

Kvarken destinations must be strategically marketed to become familiar destinations for international and domestic visitors. For those of us living in the region, Kvarken (Merenkurkku in Finnish) is quite familiar; it is the narrowest part of the Gulf of Bothnia, and there is a ferry connection between Vaasa and Umeå. However, for international travel professionals or tourists, Kvarken is not yet a well-established tourist destination, and we can suspect that even domestic tourists, either in Finland or in Sweden, are not yet familiar with it. If the whole country of Finland is experienced as an exotic and unknown destination in the study of destination image among German consumers (n = 2,611; Reiseanalyse 2020), it is hard to imagine that a small piece of Finland, Kvarken, would then be familiar among German consumers. This is a clear sign that collaborative cross-border marketing cooperation is needed if Kvarken aims to gain attention in domestic or international markets.

The German market is a good example of travellers aiming to see many countries when travelling. Here, Kvarken destinations can appeal to tourists as a travel destination of two countries. The German tourists like to experience many countries during their vacations. The whole of Scandinavia is interesting for Germans and not only one specific country (Reiseanalyse 2020). Kvarken destinations have a lot of potential to be of interest because many tourists have not yet visited the region; moreover, the region has UNESCO status, which makes the scenery unique. However, based on our knowledge, international and German tourists are willing to discover many countries on their journey north. This means that they are likely to visit only one destination in the Kvarken region and continue their journey to Norway, for example. The interviewed travel experts (Expert interviews 2021) said that we should emphasise even more that Kvarken destinations are a 2-in-1 destination, meaning that visitors can experience two countries and two cultures and different types of scenery while travelling between the countries. In addition, they urged us to vigorously market the new environmentally friendly ferry and the short duration of the ferry trip (3.5 h). As one interviewed travel expert commented, 'For Germans, a ferry trip of a couple of hours is really short'.

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Appendix

Tour Operator survey form

Dear Recipient,

We have most likely met at a workshop, fair, or on another event, in person or virtually.

In continuous development, we at Kvarken Destinations, are kindly asking for your input in the process.

If we do better, you will have an improved offering to add to your production. Let this be a simple reason to participate.

The survey which is administered by Hanken School of Economics will not take more than 7 minutes to complete. Do it now! Please, find the link to the survey at the end of this email.

The responses will be handled confidentially and the results are presented as a summary, not as individual company responses.

Thank you in advance!

With Best Regards, The team of Kvarken Destinations Erja, Peter, Marianne & Andreas





Link to the SURVEY here:

https://link.webropolsurveys.com/R/LINKKIESIMERKKI_EI_AKTIIVINEN_LINKKI

Tour operator view on Kvarken Destinations

This survey is conducted by Hanken Svenska handelshögskolan as a part of the project Destination Kvarken (the marketing name Kvarken Destinations). The Project Destination Kvarken is financed by the Interreg Botnia-Atlantica program and the project partners are; Kvarken Council (Lead Part), Vaasa Region Development Company VASEK, Hanken School of Economics, Umeå Municipality, Visit Umeå AB, Höga Kusten Destinationsutveckling AB.

Kindly answer the following questions. It takes about 7 minutes to answer the survey. The study follows the GDPR principles of Hanken Svenska handelshögskolan.

Thank you for helping us to develop the Kvarken Destinations!

| 1. Your Company information |
|---|
| Founded (year) |
| Country (location of your headquarter) |
| Number of employees working with Nordic countries |
| 2. Your company is (you may choose several) |
| Tour Operator |
| DMC |
| Incoming Agency |
| ☐ OTA |
| Other |
| 3. The customers of your company (you may choose several) |
| Fly&Drive |
| Groups |
| Company/ Incentive |
| Travel Agency/ Incoming |
| Other |
| |
| |
| |
| |
| |
| |

| 4. The country of origin of your customers (you may choose several) |
|---|
| Germany |
| Switzerland |
| Belgium |
| Austria |
| Netherlands |
| United Kingdom |
| Italy |
| France |
| Other |
| |
| 5. How did you find about Kvarken destinations? |
| Travel Fairs (live) |
| Digital meetings (Fairs, Workshops, Sales events) |
| FAM trips |
| Brochures |
| Guide books |
| Internet |
| Word of Mouth |
| Other |
| |
| |
| |
| |
| |
| |
| |
| |
| |
| |

| | u visited i | in the Kv | /arken regio | on? | |
|---|---------------------|----------------------|------------------------|------------------|--------------------|
| Umeå Höga Kusten Vaasa Seinäjoki region Jakobstad-Pietarsaari Kokkola-Karleby Kristinestad- Kristiinankaupunki Other 7. We would like to know how to the total like to know how to the total | ly familia | | | | |
| | Not at all familiar | Slightly familiar | Moderately familiar | Very familiar | Extremely familiar |
| I know the Kvarken destinations | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| I know where Kvarken Destinations is geographically (on the map) | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| I know that Kvarken destinations is a Joint travel destination of Finland and Sweden | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Harry Bot Bossis a Harry Natural | | | | | |
| I know that there is a Unesco Natural World Heritage site located in the area of Kvarken destinations | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| World Heritage site located in the area | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| World Heritage site located in the area of Kvarken destinations I know there is a ferry connection | 0 | 0 0 | 0 | 0 0 | 0 |

| 8. I have used kvarkendestinations.com for searching information about the region |
|---|
| Yes |
| ○ No |
| O I don't know |
| 9. I have used the Content bank (photos, videos) included on kvarkendestinations.com |
| ○ Yes |
| ○ No |
| O I don't know |
| 10. Answer if you have visited our website kvarkendestinations.com. Is there something we could develop on the website such as what kind of content you would like to find? |
| there something we could develop on the website such as what kind of |
| there something we could develop on the website such as what kind of |

| 13. W | eaknesses of Kvarken destinations as a travel destination? |
|--------|---|
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| 14. St | uggestions for travel development at Kvarken Destinations? |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | Kvarken Destinations lacking something in your opinion as a Tour |
| | Kvarken Destinations lacking something in your opinion as a Tour ator? (you can choose several options) |
| | |
| | ntor? (you can choose several options) |
| | Luxury accommodation |
| | Luxury accommodation Room allotments |
| | Luxury accommodation Room allotments Nature activities |
| | Luxury accommodation Room allotments Nature activities Culture activities |
| | Luxury accommodation Room allotments Nature activities Culture activities Activities for families |
| | Luxury accommodation Room allotments Nature activities Culture activities Activities for families Sustainable products |

| travel destination combining Sweden and Finland. Please, evaluate your evel of knowledge of Kvarken destinations in that period of time? Low Moderate High Very High No response Two years ago (2019) my level of knowledge of Kvarken destinations was Today (2021) my level of knowledge of Kvarken destinations is | autumn winter spring 17. In recent two years, we have increased marketing activities of our Joint travel destination combining Sweden and Finland. Please, evaluate your level of knowledge of Kvarken destinations in that period of time? Low Moderate High Very High No response Two years ago (2019) my level of knowledge of Kvarken destinations was Today (2021) my level of knowledge of Kvarken destinations is 18. Did you have production to the Kvarken area 2 years ago? Yes, What kind of production? No | autumn winter spring 17. In recent two years, we have increased marketing activities of our Joint travel destination combining Sweden and Finland. Please, evaluate your level of knowledge of Kvarken destinations in that period of time? Low Moderate High Very High No response Two years ago (2019) my level of knowledge of Kvarken destinations was Today (2021) my level of knowledge of Kvarken destinations is 18. Did you have production to the Kvarken area 2 years ago? Yes, What kind of production? No | l am interested in selling tours destinations: | in the | following | seaso | ns in Kvar | ken |
|---|--|---|---|----------------|--------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| ravel destination combining Sweden and Finland. Please, evaluate your evel of knowledge of Kvarken destinations in that period of time? Low Moderate High Very High No response Two years ago (2019) my level of knowledge of Kvarken destinations was Today (2021) my level of knowledge of Kvarken destinations is 18. Did you have production to the Kvarken area 2 years ago? Yes, What kind of production? No | ravel destination combining Sweden and Finland. Please, evaluate your evel of knowledge of Kvarken destinations in that period of time? Low Moderate High Very High No response Two years ago (2019) my level of knowledge of Kvarken destinations was Today (2021) my level of knowledge of Kvarken destinations is 18. Did you have production to the Kvarken area 2 years ago? Yes, What kind of production? No | ravel destination combining Sweden and Finland. Please, evaluate your evel of knowledge of Kvarken destinations in that period of time? Low Moderate High Very High No response Two years ago (2019) my level of knowledge of Kvarken destinations was Today (2021) my level of knowledge of Kvarken destinations is 18. Did you have production to the Kvarken area 2 years ago? Yes, What kind of production? No | autumn winter | | | | | |
| Two years ago (2019) my level of knowledge of Kvarken destinations | Two years ago (2019) my level of knowledge of Kvarken destinations | Two years ago (2019) my level of knowledge of Kvarken destinations | ravel destination combining S | wede destii | n and Finl nations in | and. Pl that pe | ease, evalueriod of tim | uate your ie? |
| Was Today (2021) my level of knowledge of Kvarken destinations is 18. Did you have production to the Kvarken area 2 years ago? Yes, What kind of production? No | Was Today (2021) my level of knowledge of Kvarken destinations is 18. Did you have production to the Kvarken area 2 years ago? Yes, What kind of production? No | Was Today (2021) my level of knowledge of Kvarken destinations is 18. Did you have production to the Kvarken area 2 years ago? Yes, What kind of production? No | Two years ago (2019) my level of | Low | Moderate | High | Very High | No response |
| 8. Did you have production to the Kvarken area 2 years ago? Yes, What kind of production? No | 8. Did you have production to the Kvarken area 2 years ago? Yes, What kind of production? No | 8. Did you have production to the Kvarken area 2 years ago? Yes, What kind of production? No | | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Yes, What kind of production? No | Yes, What kind of production? No | Yes, What kind of production? No | | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| O No | O No | O No | 18. Did you have production to | the K | (varken ar | ea 2 ye | ars ago? | |
| | | | | | | | | |
| | | | 0 | | | | | |

| | plans to include h | (varken area into your future production? |
|----------------------|--------------------|---|
| O Yes | | |
| ○ No | | |
| Interested b because | ut not yet decided | |
| • | | e the travel preferences of customers. It in Kvarken destinations in post-corona |
| i a rei i | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| 14. Commonto o | nd greetings to Kv | arken destinations |
| 1. Comments a | | |
| 1. Comments a | | |
| 21. Comments a | | |
| 21. Comments a | | |

Expert Interview questions

Expert interviews

Questions:

- 1. General opinion
- What do you think Kvarken destinations have to offer to international tourists (markets)?
 (Resources, service package)
- Do you think tourists (in Europe for example) know Kvarken region? Can they locate Kvarken on the map? (what is the best way to market Kvarken destinations?). When international tourist think of Finland and Sweden, what do you think is "top of mind", what is the first thing they think of, when does Destinations Kvarken come up?
- 2. Strengths
- Do you think we have something unique/attractive for international markets?
- What are the Strengths of Kvarken destinations as a travel destination?
- 3. Weaknesses
- Do you think we miss or lack something (services/products) that should be developed for international tourists?
- What are the Weaknesses of Kvarken destinations as a travel destination?
- 4. Threats
- For Kvarken destinations, a) do we have services that attract international tourists, b) who are our competitors?
- 5. Opportunities
- Covid-19 pandemic may change the travel preferences of customers. What do you think we should highlight in Kvarken destinations in post-corona travel?
- 6. Doing things together, cooperation and future
- Is this kind of Joint destination, when we combine two countries in the travel itinerary, interesting for European tourist market?
- Have a look at https://kvarkendestinations.com/ and give us your opinion about the products we have in the region. Keep in mind that we are targeting international markets with our products (on this website).
- Have a look at the tour suggestions on https://kvarkendestinations.com/tour-suggestions/, what do you think? Would you recommend us to show different type of tours?
- Suggestions for travel development at Kvarken Destinations?
- Other comments?

The Destination Kvarken project will help small and medium enterprises with focus on hospitality industry to reach out to new and bigger markets for more growth and competitiveness.

The purpose is to increase the amount of visitors in the region.

Read more: kvarken.org/destinationkvarken

Projekt Destination Kvarken ska hjälpa exportmogna små och medelstora företag med fokus på besöksnäring att nå ut till nya marknader för ökad tillväxt och konkurrenskraft.

Syftet är att öka antalet besökare i regionen.

Läs mer: kvarken.org/destinationkvarken

Hankkeessa Destination Kvarken autetaan matkailuelinkeinon parissa toimivia vientikelpoisia pkyrityksiä saavuttamaan uusia, yrityksen kasvuun johtavia ja sen kilpailukykyä parantavia markkinoita. Tavoitteena on lisätä alueen kävijämääriä.

Lue lisää: kvarken.org/destinationkvarken

WWW.KVARKENDESTINATIONS.COM

