



**Good Practice Story Title:**

**No Bins, Just Wins: Running Towards a Waste-Free Future**

**Destination:** Bela Krajina

**Country:** Slovenia

**Submitting Organization:**

Bela Krajina Development Information Centre

**Category** (*check only one box*):

- Destination Management
- Nature & Scenery
- Environment & Climate
- Culture & Tradition
- Thriving Communities
- Business & Marketing



### **Destination description** (150-200 words)

Bela Krajina, located in the southeastern part of Slovenia, is a border region with Croatia. It encompasses approximately 3% of the Slovenian territory, 595 km<sup>2</sup>. The area is predominantly karst, and increasingly forested, the central part of the region is a low karst plain, confined to the north by two karst plateaus and to the south by the border river Kolpa. The destination consists of the municipalities of Črnomelj, Metlika, and Semič. Approximately 26.000 inhabitants live in the region. 46% of Bela Krajina's landscape is classified into Natura 2000, a special natural protection regime in Bela Krajina are the two landscape parks, Lahinja Landscape Park, and Kolpa Landscape Park. The Kolpa River represents the main tourist attraction in the destination. During summer, the river attracts numerous visitors to its shores and is the main reason people come to Bela Krajina. Bela Krajina is also known for its quality wines, local cuisine, preservation of its unique cultural heritage, and folklore customs.

### **Summary of Good Practice Story** (150-200 words)

What if a small trail run in a quiet Slovenian landscape park could become a blueprint for sustainable events across Europe?

Lahinja Trail started as a modest idea — a manageable local race, deeply rooted in nature and community. In just two years, it evolved into Slovenia's first fully Zero Waste event, reducing waste by 13 % per-person, engaging 107 volunteers, and inspiring neighboring organizers to follow suit.

But it's more than waste bins and reusable cups. It's about choosing November to increase the number of stays off main season. But also to protect the biodiversity, turning down mass tourism for quality engagement, and staying true to your values even when it's hard.

The story of the Lahinja Trail is not just about one race — it's about building a movement from the ground up. It shows that sustainability is possible when local communities, athletes, and organizers join forces with clarity, heart, and resilience.

If you've ever wondered whether small places can lead to big changes, read on. This is the story of how a remote corner of Bela Krajina became a national benchmark, a regional connector, and proof that green events can be both powerful and deeply personal.

### **Issues faced** (150-200 words)

In 2016, Bela Krajina joined the Slovenia Green Scheme and just a year later, with the traditional Jurjevanje festival, set a milestone as the first Zero Waste event in Slovenia. In cooperation with the NGO Ecologists Without Borders, we successfully reduced and separated waste, maintaining the Zero Waste title until 2018. Then the Covid-19 pandemic struck. People became accustomed to single-use packaging, and sustainability efforts faded. Even major events like the Vinska Vigred Wine Festival struggled to manage waste generation and separation amidst the flood of visitors.

Destination Bela krajina is facing a huge problem of the seasonality during the main tourist season. The DMO is fighting for deseasonalization through various activities and events before and after summer season. In 2022, another blow followed: Bela Krajina fell from the prestigious Slovenia Green Gold label to Bronze. But at DMO Bela Krajina, we made a decision: we would not give up.

We believed that it was possible to create an event that exceeds sustainability standards. Thus, the idea for the **Lahinja Trail** was born — a zero waste running event that, step by step, restores respect for nature and



opens a new chapter for sustainable events in Slovenia.

### **Solution** (100-150 words)

Under RIC Bela Krajina operates the DMO and Lahinja Landscape Park, whose mission is to educate about nature conservation. Our idea was clear: to create a smaller, manageable off season event that would gradually instill sustainable practices into everyone involved.

Bela krajina is an outdoor destination, making runners — athletes who already value a healthy lifestyle and nature — our ideal target group. The run takes place through the Lahinja Landscape Park, one of Slovenia's smallest yet most biodiverse parks. To ensure the event's success, we partnered with Komunala Črnomelj, local fire brigades, and local caterers and producers, creating a short food supply chain and an event that truly lives by zero waste principles.

### **Methods, Steps, and Tools applied** (500-600 words)

Zero Waste is not just about separating and recycling waste — it is about preventing waste from being created in the first place. From the very first Lahinja Trail in 2023, we committed to measures that we continuously improve with each event.

#### **1. Planning and Communication**

Thorough planning and clear communication are the foundation of a sustainable event. For the first Lahinja Trail (2023), the goal was to achieve Zero Waste certification; in 2024, we aimed even higher — to earn all three Zero Waste stars. All partners and stakeholders were informed about the goals through email and phone calls to reduce carbon emissions. Runners and visitors were introduced to the Zero Waste concept via a fully digital marketing campaign and our website. After the first event, we also created the **Bela Krajina Guidelines for Green Events** and visitor tips for sustainable travel in the region — resources that can be easily adapted by other destinations.

#### **2. Venue and Transport**

Our first event took place at the Lahinja Landscape Park Information Center, but the site quickly proved too small. In 2024, we moved the event to a local primary school, which provided free use of larger parking facilities and infrastructure. Local fire brigades marked additional parking areas to protect natural grasslands. Due to limited public transport options, visitors arrived mostly by car, but carpooling was actively encouraged among participants and organizers. Other destinations facing similar transport challenges can apply similar low-impact solutions.

#### **3. Waste Management**

We established two eco-islands with clearly marked waste separation instructions. In 2023, volunteer students acted as a "Green Patrol" to assist visitors with waste sorting; in 2024, due to the minimal waste generated, organizers managed the stations themselves. Reusable cups, first borrowed and later branded with the destination logo, replaced disposable ones. After initially using compostable wooden food containers, we shifted to reusable plates and utensils in 2024, significantly reducing waste.



Along the trail, runners were supplied with water and isotonic drinks in stainless steel tanks, using reusable plastic cups.

#### **4. Food and Drinks – Local Sourcing and Shared Responsibility**

Food and beverages at the event were organized in two segments: (A) provided by the organizers, and (B) by the local volunteer fire department, who were offered this opportunity as an additional source of income.

All food was sourced from local suppliers and delivered in reusable packaging. Meat came in standard butcher crates, and bread from the local bakery was delivered without individual plastic wrapping. Across the entire venue, meals and drinks were served on reusable plates and in reusable cups.

**A: The organizers** offered tap water and homemade isotonic drinks served from large aluminum containers. Fresh seasonal food was prepared on-site in two large cooking pots and provided free of charge to runners. They got to choose between a meat dish and a meatless dish. A meal voucher was printed directly on their race numbers to avoid unnecessary paper use. Runners could also enjoy fresh local apples and dried apple slices, certified with the "Bela Krajina Finest" label.

**B: The firefighter department** sold beverages from returnable glass bottles and served grilled meat (čevapčiči) delivered in reusable containers. Signs placed near the bar informed visitors that all cups, plates, and utensils were reusable and should not be discarded.

#### **5. Community Engagement – Powered by Local Support**

The event was deeply rooted in the local community of the Lahinja Landscape Park. The local volunteer fire brigade mobilized support by coordinating with neighboring fire departments, showcasing the strong tradition of volunteerism among Slovenian firefighters. We partnered with the local primary school, which generously offered its facilities for the event, and collaborated with a nearby inn to help prepare meals. Residents were informed in advance about road closures and warmly encouraged to cheer for the runners. Over two years, a total of 107 volunteers supported the event — a true testament to the community spirit that made the zero waste trail possible.

#### **6. Award Ceremony – Sustainable and Local**

*The award ceremony took place at the event site, on simple wooden podiums that reflected the natural spirit of the trail. Runners received wooden medals and running shirts. The gifts, donated by the organizers, local producers, and tourism providers, were packaged in recyclable paper bags featuring the destination's logo. All promotional materials included in the bags were taken from existing stock, supporting waste reduction and responsible resource use.*

### **Achievements and Results (250-300 words)**

#### **2. 13% decrease in waste**

Despite tripling the number of participants between the first and second year (from 97 to 300), we managed to reduce the total waste generated **per person** from **71 grams in 2023 to 61.7 grams in 2024**. This represents a **13.1% decrease in waste per visitor**, achieved through reusable materials, better waste sorting, and a clear, shared zero waste commitment.



This result demonstrates that event growth does not have to come at the cost of sustainability. With careful planning and local cooperation, **less waste and more people can go hand-in-hand** — a model that can be applied to events in other destinations, regardless of the scale.

## 2. Reintroduction and consolidation of the Zero Waste approach

After several years of interruption, the destination successfully reintroduced event organization according to Zero Waste guidelines — first achieving a **2-star rating (2023)**, and then all **3 stars in 2024**, marking a milestone both for the destination and for Slovenia.

## 3. Pilot model for other destinations and events

By starting with a small, manageable event, the organizers developed a **replicable and transferable model** for sustainable event planning. It includes thorough preparation, waste reduction, local sourcing, and community involvement. *“Lahinja Trail is a great example that even sports events, which typically generate large amounts of waste, can reduce their impact if everyone participates and focuses on solutions. We hope other events across Slovenia will follow this inspiring lead, until such practices become the norm,”* emphasizes Ana Golja, head of zero waste tourism at Ecologists Without Borders.

## 4. Integrated local supply chain

Local food producers, schools, fire brigades, and hospitality providers were all involved. This not only shortened supply chains but also strengthened the local economy.

## 5. Sustainable infrastructure and materials

Reusable cups, cutlery, and plates were used, along with returnable packaging, digital (paper-free) communication, and existing promotional materials, minimizing additional environmental footprint.

## 6. Zero waste was a reason to participate

The clear commitment to the Zero Waste concept became one of the key reasons for participation. In 2024, runners were not only from Slovenia, but also from neighbouring Croatia, several of whom explicitly stated that the sustainable approach of the event was what attracted them to join.

This confirms that environmentally responsible events not only reduce impact but also increase appeal, becoming magnets for conscious travellers and athletes beyond regional borders.

## 7. Strong volunteer network

A total of **107 volunteers** contributed over two years, showing exceptional local engagement and support from the community.

## 8. Introduction of new destination guidelines

After the first event, the team developed and published **local green guidelines** for sustainable event organization, making them freely available to other event planners across the destination and further.

## 9. Good practice for other running events

In March 2025, the local running club from Metlika decided to organize their race, Metlika Night Run, following Zero Waste principles. As a result, Lahinja Trail became part of the regional Bela Krajina running cup for the first time. Other organizers have shown interest and will join Lahinja Trail 2025 as volunteers to



learn from our approach, proving that sustainable practices can inspire and spread through local sports communities.

### **10. Increasing stays in November by 21,6%**

In year 2023 the number of tourists staying off season in Bela krajina was 2699. We checked results of Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia what happened in November 2024, as we were promoting our Zero waste Trail run in Slovenia and Croatia. Stays were increased by 21,6 % which is more than we expected. This was a big economic help for local tourist providers.

### **Lessons Learned and Advice (150-200 words)**

Although nearly every Slovenian destination has its running event, we remain the first to organize one entirely in a sustainable way. Still, there's always room for improvement. Just when you think you've checked every box, you discover overlooked details, like uncovered trash bins not meant for use during the event. Even if marked, someone will likely still use them. One key lesson: limit the number of participants to what you can manage well. We capped the number of runners for the 2025 Lahinja Trail at 250, knowing that a larger crowd would compromise our organization and harm the sensitive environment of Lahinja Landscape Park. Respect for nature and life within it is not negotiable. Some urged us to move the race to warmer months, but we chose November intentionally — to protect the natural cycles of the park and to help counter tourism seasonality. We've learned that holding firm to your values matters. Don't give in to pressure. Involve the local community from day one. Not everyone may live sustainably, but by including them, you raise awareness and create new advocates. True sustainability isn't about perfection — it's about consistency, courage, and making choices that reflect the future you believe in.

### **Recognitions and Additional References**

Recognitions:

BIG SEE award 2023 ( <https://bigsee.eu/otons-adventure-in-landscape-park-lahinja/>)

Bela Krajina 2024 Top 100 Green destinations ( <https://radio-odeon.com/novice/bela-krajina-med-100-najbolj-trajnostnimi-turisticnimi-praksami/>)

Bela Krajina as first Slovenian Zero Waste event ( <https://ebm.si/zw/o/2024/lahinja-trail-prva-slovenska-prireditve-na-poti-zero-waste-s-tremi-zvezdicami/>)

Lahinja Trail: Slovenia's First Three-Star Zero Waste Event Sets New Standards

( <https://www.slovenia.info/en/press-centre/news-of-the-tourism-press-agency/31091-lahinja-trail-slovenia-s-first-three-star-zero-waste-event-sets-new-standards>)

Lahinja Trail – A Model Zero Waste Event ( <https://www.ekodezela.si/eko-turizem/lahinja-trail-zgled-zero-waste-prireditve/>)

Documents:

New destination guidelines ( <https://www.belakrajina.si/sl/b2b/dokumenti-in-stevilke/belokranjske-smernice-za-zelene-dogodke/>)

Additional References:

Webpage: <https://www.belakrajina.si/en/>

Lahinja Trail page: <https://www.belakrajina.si/sl/outdoor/lahinja-trail/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/belakrajina/>



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Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/bela.krajina/>  
YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/@bela.krajina/>  
Tik Tok: [https://www.tiktok.com/@bela.krajina\\_official](https://www.tiktok.com/@bela.krajina_official)