

From Family Memory to Professional Skills: Integrating Roots Tourism into Tourism Schools and VET Programs

Roots tourism is often presented as travel connected with family origins, ancestral places, migration histories and cultural identity. Yet its educational potential is still broader. For tourism schools and VET programs, roots tourism can become a practical field of learning: it helps future tourism professionals understand how to work with memory, emotions, local heritage, communities and personal stories.

This article focuses on roots tourism as an educational topic. It does not present a ready-made tourism product or a single country case study. Instead, it asks a practical question: how can roots tourism be introduced into tourism education in a responsible and useful way?

The answer lies in connecting heritage tourism education with professional skills. Learners can work with maps, interviews, archives, family narratives, local routes and digital storytelling. In this way, roots tourism becomes not only a subject to discuss, but also a method for developing competences needed in contemporary tourism.

1. Why roots tourism should be taught

Roots tourism differs from many other forms of tourism because it begins with personal meaning. A visitor may not be looking primarily for the most famous monument or the most popular attraction. Instead, they may want to find a family house, a cemetery, a village name, a parish record, a workplace, a migration route or a story remembered by older generations.

This makes roots tourism important for education. It shows learners that tourism is not only about services, promotion and destination management. It is also about understanding why places matter to people.

In tourism schools and VET training, this topic can help learners explore several key questions:

- How do family memories become connected with places?
- Why do diaspora communities return to ancestral regions?
- What makes a local story meaningful for visitors?

- How can tourism professionals work with personal memories respectfully?
- How can local communities be involved in creating authentic experiences?

These questions are useful because they combine theory and practice. They help learners understand heritage, identity and migration, but they also lead to concrete tourism skills: communication, interpretation, itinerary design, cooperation with stakeholders and use of digital tools.

2. From heritage to experience

In ordinary cultural tourism, the main focus is often placed on visible heritage: museums, monuments, historic buildings, festivals or landscapes. In roots tourism, visible heritage is important, but it is not always enough. The visitor's experience is shaped by the relationship between place and personal memory.

A small village, an old school, a cemetery, a local archive or a traditional neighbourhood may become meaningful because it connects with a family story. These places may not always appear in standard tourism promotion, but for roots travellers they can be central to the journey.

This is where heritage tourism education becomes especially important. Learners need to understand that heritage is not only a collection of attractions. It is also a set of meanings created by people, communities and memories. Some of these meanings are public and well documented. Others are personal, fragile or transmitted through oral history.

For this reason, roots tourism education should include both knowledge and sensitivity. Learners should be able to identify heritage resources, but also to recognise emotional and ethical dimensions of working with family histories.

3. Skills future tourism professionals need

Integrating roots tourism into education means developing a specific set of professional competences.

Historical and cultural sensitivity

Roots tourism may involve migration, displacement, changing borders, religious heritage, ethnic diversity or family separation. Learners should understand that such topics cannot be treated superficially. They require context, careful language and respect for different perspectives.

Communication and listening

Travellers searching for their roots often ask personal questions and may share emotional stories. Tourism professionals should be able to listen actively, ask respectful questions and adapt the experience to the visitor's needs.

Ethical storytelling

Roots tourism depends on stories, but not every story should be turned into a simple promotional message. Ethical storytelling means avoiding stereotypes, exaggeration and emotional exploitation. It also means acknowledging that local histories may be complex and sometimes difficult.

Work with local communities

Local residents, schools, archives, cultural institutions, parishes, museums and associations can all contribute to roots tourism. Learners should understand how to cooperate with these partners and how to involve communities not as background, but as active participants.

Use of heritage sources

Family photographs, oral histories, maps, cemetery inscriptions, local chronicles and archival documents can enrich roots tourism experiences. Students do not need to become professional genealogists, but they should know how such materials can support responsible interpretation.

Digital storytelling

Digital tools can make roots tourism more accessible, especially for diaspora communities that begin their search online. Learners can use digital maps, short videos, audio recordings, QR codes, online archives or simple storytelling platforms to connect people with places before, during and after a visit.

4. Practical learning activities

Roots tourism can be taught through active and project-based methods. The following activities can be adapted to different educational levels and local contexts.

Activity 1: Family memory map

Students create a map of places connected with family stories, migration routes, ancestral places or local memories. The map may include villages, streets, cemeteries, schools, churches, workplaces or landscapes. The aim is to show that tourism value can be based on meaning, not only on popularity.

Activity 2: Oral history interview

Learners conduct a short interview with an older family member, local resident or community representative. They ask about places, traditions, migration, work,

school life or changes in the local landscape. This activity teaches how oral history can support heritage tourism education.

Activity 3: Archival photograph exercise

Students analyse an old photograph connected with family or local history. They describe what is visible, what questions the image raises and how it could become part of a tourism narrative. This develops observation, interpretation and storytelling skills.

Activity 4: Local roots route

Learners design a short route based on meaningful local places. The route may include official heritage sites, but also everyday spaces such as a former workplace, cemetery, railway station, school, religious site or neighbourhood. The aim is to interpret a place through memory and identity.

Activity 5: One-day roots tourism itinerary

Students prepare an itinerary for a fictional visitor searching for family roots. The itinerary should include practical tourism elements, but also time for archival research, local meetings, storytelling and reflection. This activity combines planning with ethical interpretation.

Activity 6: Digital storytelling mini-project

Learners prepare a short digital story about one place connected with memory, migration or identity. They can use photographs, maps without sensitive personal data, short captions, audio recordings or video. This exercise connects heritage interpretation with digital skills.

5. How to embed roots tourism in VET programs

Roots tourism can be introduced into VET training in different ways. It can be used as a single lesson, a workshop, a project module or a longer interdisciplinary assignment.

In tourism schools, it can support subjects related to guiding, destination management, cultural tourism, customer service, digital promotion and local heritage. In vocational and technical education, it can develop communication, research, digital and project-management skills. In guide training, it can strengthen interpretation skills and ethical awareness.

The topic is also flexible because it can be adapted to any region. Every place has memories, migrations, family histories and local heritage. This makes roots

tourism useful not only for famous destinations, but also for smaller towns, villages and neighbourhoods that are often absent from mainstream tourism promotion.

For educators, roots tourism has one more advantage: it encourages learners to work with real places and real people. Instead of only learning definitions, students can collect stories, compare sources, design routes, prepare digital materials and reflect on the social meaning of tourism.

6. What responsible roots tourism education should include

A good educational approach to roots tourism should be based on several principles.

First, it should combine emotion with knowledge. Personal stories are important, but they should be supported by reliable historical and cultural context.

Second, it should involve local communities. Roots tourism should not be designed only for visitors. Local residents and institutions can help interpret places and protect the dignity of local memory.

Third, it should avoid stereotypes. Family and local histories should not be simplified into attractive but inaccurate images of the past.

Fourth, it should include ethical reflection. Learners should discuss consent, privacy, difficult heritage and the limits of using personal stories in tourism.

Finally, it should use digital tools responsibly. Digital storytelling can support education and promotion, but it should not replace contact with real places, communities and sources.

Conclusion

Roots tourism can help future tourism professionals understand tourism as a meaningful relationship between people, places and stories. It connects travel with memory, identity, local heritage and diaspora tourism.

For tourism schools and VET programs, it offers practical learning opportunities. Learners can work with maps, interviews, archives, family narratives, local routes and digital storytelling. They can develop skills that are useful not only in tourism, but also in heritage education, community work and cultural communication.

Integrating roots tourism into education can therefore support more responsible, authentic and community-based tourism. It prepares learners to create experiences that are not only attractive, but also respectful and connected with real human stories.

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