In cooperation with Bratislava Region Tourism and Bratislava Tourist Board, the fifth General Assembly (GA) of the Danube Competence Center (DCC) was held from 5th to 6th of December in Bratislava, getting together more than 40 DCC members and welcoming 85 participants (members and guests) in total.

After official welcome of DCC’s General Secretary Boris Camernik, participants were greeted by the Director General of Ministry of transport, construction and regional development of the Slovak Republic, Ms. Ivana Magatorova, Chairman of the Board of Bratislava Tourist Board, Mr. Stano Frantisek, Chairman of the Bratislava Region Tourism Board (TBC) Mr. Ivo Nesrovnal, co-coordinators in EUSDR PA 3, Mr. Emanuel Cernat and Mr. Evgeni Spasov, CEO of Serbian National Tourism Organisation, Ms. Gordana Plamenac, and GIZ/DCC project leader, Ms. Daniela Schily. The new DCC members – Hungarian Tourism Plc. and Arge Donau also presented themselves to the participants.

The first part of the GA was focused on Activity and Financial reports for 2013. The format of the financial report was slightly different comparing to the last years, presenting financial data in a more understandable fashion. “Since DCC sustainability, in the sense of attracting new funds, is one of the major goals of the organization, it is important to note that strengthening the cooperation between the members will lead to higher level of DCC’s autonomy”, stated Chair of the Board of Directors, Ms. Gordana Plamenac.

Following, Mr. Boris Camernik presented the operational plan for the next year. Marketing activities for 2014 will relate to promotion of the Danube Region on selected tourism fairs, such are ITB Berlin, Ferien Messe in Linz, Danube festival, Blue Week in Ulm. Also, redesign of existing websites danubecc.org and danube.travel will be implemented in 2014. Apart of marketing, in 2014 DCC will focus on product development – completing (1) the Romans’ Emperors and Danube Wine Route; and development of the (2) Danube bicycle trails; and (3) Danube safaris.

The new call for biodiversity proposals was announced. The series of three workshops related with the topic of project lifecycle management, DCC is organizing in cooperation with NFI International, was also announced. Mr. Lubomir Popiordanov (Oddyseia Inn/BAAT) presented the project Spatial, while Mr. Vukman Korac (About the Danube for the Danube) presented the project Danube 2850.

After the lunch, the GIZ /DCC project in Bulgaria – Focal Point Destination Danube (FPDD) was introduced. The main objective of the session was (1) to present FPDD to the wider DCC membership and (2) to present the process of strategic change from the project into tourism support organization, (3) while seeking support from the DCC members for the process.

The following session was reserved for the ‘DCC 2020’ vision. Having in mind the necessity of continuous strategic thinking and better understanding of the times to come, the management of DCC initiated the process titled ‘DCC 2020’. The session was designed to help members to understand future challenges of DCC (such are financing of the organization and its programming), but also for the members to discuss and think of new strategic options. The outcomes of this session will be included in the follow-up Board sessions, dealing with strategic perspectives of DCC.

The official part of the GA ended with the joint dinner, organized in one of the most prominent European wineries – Elesko winery.

During the second day, the participants took a prearranged guided tour of Bratislava. In parallel, three workshops were held – (1) DCC Marketing Function and marketing operational plan for 2014; (2) Development of cycling along the Danube; and (3) Presentation of DCC to the local stakeholders.

Within the framework of the GA, a press conference was organized and total of 15 journalist from various Slovak media outlets attended.

The GA finished with joint lunch at Hradna Hviezda restaurant, situated in the Bratislava castle.
In 2013, DCC focused mostly on four fields: (1) networking/partnerships/advocacy, (2) product development, (3) promotion and marketing, and (4) external funded projects. During the year, we were engaged in a large number of activities, which include:

- establishing the first portal that promotes tourist offer of all 18 Danube countries,
- presenting DCC activities at the ITB Berlin and other significant international and regional fairs,
- organizing a series of floating conferences – one of those, Danube Parliamentarian Conference, for example, was the first gathering of parliamentarians from European, national and regional parliaments of the Danube countries,
- very active promotion of the Danube Cultural Routes – Roman Emperors Route and Danube Wine Route,
- taking part in a number of significant conferences on tourism or the Danube – such as UNWTO seminar on Sustainable tourism at inland water destinations,
- travelling thousands of kilometres up and down the Danube, within different projects and programmes focused on the river, its tourism potentials, and cooperation of the countries it flows through.

In order not to stay only on level of theory, participants were exchanging their experiences from previous projects and brainstorming on new ideas, practicing their capacity to formulate and propose projects on more precise and coherent way. In that manner, special guest of the workshop was Advisor for Strategic Planning Department Ms. Anna Cichonska, who presented her work on the projects she was managing as a part of Polish Tourist Organisation team.

In the following workshops, that will be held in February and April 2014, participants will further tackle important topics, such as defining the aims of the project and indicators, while different funding schemes that are focused on Danube tourism will also be presented and practiced.

The Danube Competence Center, in collaboration with NPI, has successfully started a project management capacity training course in three modules for DCC members. The first workshop took place from 12th to 13th of December in Belgrade. Twenty three highly motivated participants from Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova and the Ukraine were preparing their own project ideas to work on.

Since this was first in the series of three workshops, main goal of introductory part was to explain what is actually meant by a word project, what activities can be defined as a project and how to tackle important issues in the process of every project writing such as project drafting, budgeting and its presentation.

Improving the marketing function is vital for strengthening tourism in the Danube Region and to market it as a coherent destination. The establishment of a transnational marketing structure is a suitable means for promoting this process.

Functioning marketing structures are essential to professional tourism development, management and coordination. On the other hand, effective internal marketing efforts are absolutely vital for achieving successful external marketing. Our plans for 2014 therefore include:

- Refurbishment of danubecc.org
- New functionalities that allow better interaction among members
- Revitalization of danube.travel
- More visually attractive and user friendly for visitors
- Social media strategy development
- Regular maintenance and integration of Youtube, Pinterest, Instagram
- Mobile apps
- Development of mobile applications in cooperation with corporate sector
- Video and photo production
- More focus on individual experience of Danube and production of viral campaigns
- Fairs
- Based on previous research by mascontour, suggested fairs were selected by their timing and thematic focus. In the months ahead, these include ITB Berlin and Ferienmesse Linz
- Public Relations
- Regular media relations and involvement of tourism bloggers

Europe in December so closely resembles that storybook version of Christmas that we all secretly envision, that it becomes nearly impossible to resist the sounds of carolers strolling near St. Stephen’s Cathedral in Vienna, or the spicy aroma of hot Gluhwein wafting through the air in Nuremberg. At every market I visited, friends and families would gather well into the night to enjoy the candies and treats offered at every market, and the atmosphere is abuzz with festive cheer.

These words, coming from a tourist—既是 the AmaWaterways, can easily describe the impression of each person taking a Danube cruise during Christmas time. Traditional Christmas Markets have become an integral part of the Danube winter tourism offer, and all the visitors agree that they are unforgettable experience – the markets represent, as Ms. Waterways said, Christmas as we all “secretly envisioned”.

The tradition of Christmas markets originates from German-speaking part of Europe. Christkindlmarkte, as they are called (literally, Christ-child market), were at first organized as a celebration of the „Christ Child“ who delivers presents to kids. There are two versions of the markets history. Since famous religious reformer Martin Luther was the first to suggest that gifts should be given to children to celebrate Christmas time, it subsequently led to modern December festivities – street markets, among others. One the other hand, the fact is that the first market was held much before Luther’s time: the Vienna „December Market“ first opened in 1294.

Nevertheless, these markets have been a tradition since the middle of the 15th century, in the form which has stayed more or less the same for five hundred years. They take place during the four weeks of Advent, which is the period of Christmas celebrations. At first, they appeared only in Germany, Austria and France, but during the time they „took over“ almost all parts of Europe.

Each and every Christmas market is specific, but still they share some general characteristics: they are held in town squares or public places, and they sell food, drink and handicraft souvenirs. At a number of stalls, visitors will definitely find bratwursts, mulled wine, all sorts of candies and various non-alcoholic spiced juices. Depending of the country or the region, people also may enjoy a lot of music, theatrical or magician acts, and all sorts of animations.

The city of Vienna boasts one of the most unique and famous Christmas markets – it is held on City Hall Square and hosts more than hundred stalls visited by almost 3 million visitors each year. It opens mid-November, and offers traditional gingerbread, roasted almonds, handmade souvenirs, toys and decorations, made of wood, glass, stone or felt. Only a few hundred meters away, all over the city centre, one finds a dozen of other smaller markets, with different atmosphere and programmes.

Passau Christmas market is famous for its local gingerbread and baked apples, live music and choirs. However, some of the visitors who share their experiences on the internet, remember a chocolatier who specialized in sweet treats made to resemble industrial tools such as wrenches, bolts, or hammers.

One of the biggest Christmas markets is the one held in Nuremberg, with more than two hundred stalls and two million visitors. It is famous for a grand opening celebration, with the appearance of “The Nuremberg Christmas Angel” (played by a local girl), but also for the stalls themselves. Apart from selling stuff, stall owners take part in a competition for the most beautiful stall – the stalls are therefore a real peaces of art.

Medieval city of Regensburg offers a unique Romantic Christmas Market, with fire-lit torches and a specific atmosphere around its monastic buildings. When someone thinks of the Danube, Christmas markets are probably not one of the first associations. But, the diversity of the markets, their tradition and importance to both local people and visitors, are significant part of the culture and life styles which evolved the banks of the river.
MY DANUBE PHOTO – PHOTOGRAPHY COMPETITION

During the last year, you had the opportunity to send us your photographs of the Danube – its landscapes, wild life, nature, people, traditions, heritage, buildings and other aspect of the river – and that way take part in our photography competition. Based on the quality of the photographs, their artistic value and atmosphere, DCC’s Jury consisted of photographer Miodrag mitja Bogdanović, DCC Marketing expert Jaša Gabrijan and project assistant Vladan Krečković decided that the winner should be Željko Vladić, amateur photographer from Donji Milanovac, who will be awarded GoPro 2 camera.

We hope that this award will inspire him to get to know both the Danube and the photography even better.