

Sustainable Tourism: Strategies to counteract overtourism



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Environment and resource efficiency

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Summary

In 2011, the United Nations World Tourism Organisation ([UNWTO](#)) predicted that the international flow of tourists will have risen over 1,8 billion in 2030, focusing mostly on a few popular tourist destinations. The rapid increase of worldwide tourism activity has been fuelled by a growing middle class, cheap airflights, online rental platforms, travel bloggers and famous film locations. Overtourism (or overcrowding of destinations) had a devastating impact on the natural and cultural heritage of many popular holiday spots around the world. In Europe, the adverse effects are particularly evident in fragile world heritage sites, metropolitan areas as well as coastal or mountain areas. [Alarm bells](#) have been sounded by Amsterdam, Barcelona, Cornwall, Cinque Terre, Dubrovnik, Ibiza, Lake Königssee, Lisbon, Mallorca, Venice and many more.

With the outbreak of the Covid-19 epidemic, this trend has been abruptly reversed now. The tourism industry has been hit extremely hard as restrictions to international travel have caused a decline of the tourism economy at least between 45 and 70% in the last months, according to the [OECD](#). The ongoing pandemic could represent an opportunity to rethink tourism as a whole, by shifting more decisively from overtourism to existing models of sustainable tourism.

The present policy brief aspires to offer some solutions to the current challenges of the tourism sector. It illustrates how sustainable tourism brings an added value to the long-term socio-economic development of regions and how it helps them cope with the ongoing Covid-19 crisis. It provides valuable insight on how to sustainably manage the natural and cultural heritage through the creation of new itineraries and tourist attractions, sustainable transport, the promotion of less-known destinations and the uptake of innovative solutions for supporting local tourism. Interregional cooperation on counteracting tourism overcrowding can serve to build a more resilient tourism industry in the long run.

Introduction

European tourism: policy and trends before the coronavirus outbreak

The global travel industry has grown steadily over the past decade. During this period of sustained growth, Europe confirmed its position as the world's main tourist destination, with 710 million international arrivals in 2019 only, according to the [UNWTO](#).

Tourism fuels the economy, employment and development in all EU regions. Although it is true that since the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009 we can speak of a European tourism policy, the sector remains primarily regulated at national level. Member States have in fact decided to entrust the European Commission exclusively with the task of supplementing national measures. This gives rather narrow margins for robust EU-level policy making on tourism¹. The two main 'post-Lisbon' policy documents by the Commission are the 2010 communication on '[Europe, the world's N°1 tourist destination. A new political framework for tourism in Europe](#)' and the 2014 one on '[A European Strategy for more growth and jobs in coastal and maritime tourism](#)'. Both focused largely on fostering the competitiveness of the sector while enhancing its overall sustainability.

The EU tourism ecosystem started to transform in recent years, before Covid-19, spurred by behavioural change and increasing awareness on environmental, climate and social issues². Cities and regions were already intercepting these transformations to maximise the benefits they could reap from them. They are likely to keep doing so in the future through strategies for moving away from the still prevailing mass tourism and embracing sustainable tourism models more systematically. In this respect, they would take a great advantage if a robust and self-standing EU policy framework on sustainable tourism was in place.

¹ See Article 6(d) and Article 195 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU).

² See the Sweden-born '[flying shame](#)' movement, the petition for reinstating [night trains](#) in France or the growing appreciation in Europe towards locally sourced and organic food, among others.

The phenomenon of overtourism

The Oxford Dictionary defines overtourism as ‘the phenomenon whereby certain places of interest are visited by excessive numbers of tourists, raising undesirable effects for the places visited’. The [Responsible Tourism Partnership](#) employs the term for referring to ‘destinations where hosts or guests, locals or visitors feel that there are too many visitors and that the quality of life in the area, or the quality of the experience has deteriorated unacceptably’³. Although the term entered the travel policy debate [only in recent times](#), the excessive pressure exerted by massive tourist flows on European cities and regions has been a reality for decades now.

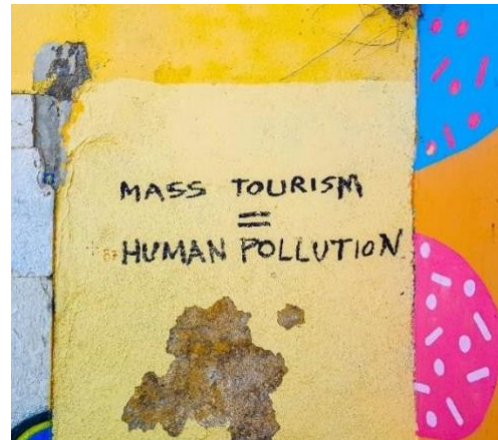


Image source: Photo by [Mark de Jong](#) from [Unsplash](#)

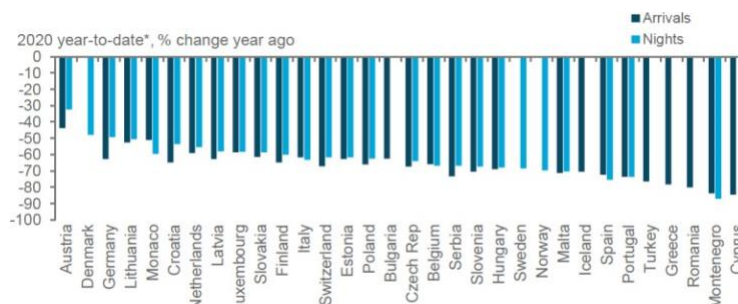
Overtourism is detrimental to the preservation of the global natural heritage. Hordes of tourists coming and going from heavenly vacation spots are responsible for environmental pollution (waste and litter, harmful emissions) which lead to the degradation of entire ecosystems (loss of flora and fauna or soil degradation). In order to avoid irreparable damages, preventive or remedial actions become often necessary, as exemplified by the temporary closure of [Maya Bay beach](#) in Thailand.

Overtourism is equally damaging for the long-term conservation of the cultural heritage. Concerns over this issue are mounting all over the planet. The very recent Chinese [plan to limit visitor access to grotto temples](#) throughout the country mirrors the seriousness of a problem which is very well known at our latitude. In cities like Venice or Florence, while exerting an extraordinary pressure on the cultural heritage, overtourism limits the residents’ possibility to enjoy a liveable habitat (skyrocketing prices, disappearance of essential goods shops and loss of overall city authenticity).

In 2018 the UNWTO defined an interesting set of [strategies](#) against overtourism, which encompasses the creation of new itineraries and attractions and the promotion of out-of-season experiences, among others. As we will clearly see in the next sections, the good practices developed within the Interreg Europe community contain valuable suggestions for giving a very tangible dimension to such strategies.

Tourism in times of Covid-19: present and future challenges

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development ([OECD](#)) tourism in Europe will experience a steep decline that could range from 45% to 70% depending on the duration of the health emergency and the pace of the recovery. The European Commission Joint Research Centre ([JRC](#)) estimates that the first and the second coronavirus waves could lead to a decrease in EU travel of 68% and jeopardise between 6.6 and 11.7 million jobs.



Source: TourMIS *date varies (Jan-Sep) by destination

Table 1 – Decline of foreign visit and overnights in selected European countries (available data), [European Travel Commission 'Trends & Prospects' \(Quarterly Report Q3/2020\)](#)

³ Both definitions stress the unsustainability of overtourism, which generates fervent protest movements. See *inter alia* the local oppositon to [cruise ships](#) in Venice or [tourist aversion](#) in Barcelona.

Against this backdrop, on 13 May 2020 the European Commission published a communication on '[Transport and tourism in 2020 and beyond](#)'⁴. Its twofold goal is to lay down the conditions for the recovery of these sectors from the Covid-19 crisis and to confirm Europe's position as global leader for sustainable and innovative tourism. With its adoption the EU executive made a leap forward in further acknowledging sustainability as the lead criterion to guide the development of a vital EU tourism ecosystem in the context of the wider green and digital transition pursued by the European Green Deal.

The Commission points to digital solutions and artificial intelligence as viable tools for coping with Covid-19 and underlines their structural role in the long run for ensuring a well-balanced development of the travel industry, including for managing tourist flows and counteracting overcrowding. Technology that made possible to access to the cultural heritage during the first months of the pandemic is equally depicted as decisive factor for the reinvention of cultural tourism, which fuelled the economy of many EU cities and regions before the coronavirus outbreak. This is indeed in line with what is already happening in the context of interregional cooperation, where projects like [CD-ETA](#), [Cult-CreaTE](#), [Innocastle](#) and [IMPACT](#) have already started to foster the use of digital tools to increase accessibility of the natural and cultural heritage, during the pandemic and beyond. The [on-line meeting](#) of 18 June 2020 on 'Digital technologies and museums: post-pandemic experiences' organised by the Policy Learning Platform, also demonstrated the great importance attached to this topic by the Interreg Europe community.

"Together we will have to reinvent and rethink a sustainable, digital and resilient European tourism sector. Any recovery plan, any public support for tourism, must be accompanied by transition, in order to embrace, as in all other sectors, environmental, digital and strategic realities. This was a necessity before this crisis, and it is now becoming an exit imperative"

Thierry Breton, European
Commissioner for the Internal Market

With regards to regions, the communication acknowledges that the crisis has struck heavier where the economy relies structurally on tourism and international air travel, like islands and coastal regions. It does not overlook either the adverse consequences on less touristic areas, which are regarded as a mine of opportunities. In Covid-19 times they offer citizens post-lockdown recovery and the chance of experiencing 'hidden or forgotten natural and cultural heritage close to home'. They can also generate off-season business opportunities, which is key for counterbalancing the seasonal character of tourism.

In terms of vision, this communication is important because it prepared the ground for the on-line [European Tourism Convention](#) of 12 October 2020, which kicked-off the work for shaping the tourism of tomorrow based on a roadmap towards a sustainable, innovative and resilient European tourism ecosystem ('European Agenda for Tourism 2050'). Cities and regions will play a crucial role in defining the proposed roadmap⁵.

The European Parliament has convincingly [backed](#) the Commission's package. EU lawmakers called for the launching of a EU-wide campaign to promote intra-EU travel and the establishment of a 'EU Tourism Brand'. MEPs also hinted at cycling and reinforcing the coherence of infrastructure networks as key elements for enabling a future-proof EU tourism sector. They stressed the importance of seizing the opportunities from agri-ecotourism, which they value as the perfect antidote to overtourism. Its capacity to generate out-of-season travel and allow the geographical dispersion of touristic flows while creating 'innovative, resilient and high-quality' products and services is viewed as a plus in the EP.

The next sections will shed light on how all this can be done, within the relevant EU policy context, based on a more widespread deployment of winning solutions and best practices exchanged within the Interreg Europe community.

⁴ European Commission, Communication on Tourism and transport in 2020 and beyond, COM(2020) 550 final of 13 May 2020. It accompanied a comprehensive [package](#) to coordinate Member States lifting travel restrictions in the aftermath of lockdown measures and allow a smooth restart of tourism in line with epidemiological and public health criteria.

⁵ The Network of European Regions for Competitive and Sustainable Tourism (NECSTouR) has already committed to 'build and finance the strategies (...) to accelerate the greening and digital transition of our tourism ecosystems' and to 'come up with concrete proposal for us to share during the European Tourism Convention'. See [here](#).

Creating new sustainable itineraries

Interregional cooperation brought about solutions that proved successful in creating new sustainable itineraries and new tourist attractions. They may inspire strategies for decongesting overcrowded tourist destinations all over Europe. Very frequently the good practices coming from the Interreg Europe community offer a model for sustainable and responsible tourism that seamlessly integrates the local and regional tourist offer all year long, thereby allowing visitors to experience the cultural and natural heritage also off the tourist season.



The Iron Curtain Trail (“EuroVelo 13”)

The idea of an Iron Curtain Trail was initially conceived in 2005 by Michal Cramer, a former MEP and Chair of the European Parliament’s Committee on Transport and Tourism, to commemorate the former division of Europe in a way that would promote sustainable development. In 2011, the Iron Curtain Trail was designated as “EuroVelo 13” thus officially becoming part of the EuroVelo network, a pan-European project run by the European Cyclists’ Federation (ECF).

Today, EuroVelo13 stretches over more than 10,400 kilometres, from the Barents Sea to the Black Sea, passing through 20 European States (including 6 non-EU countries). The peculiarity of this trail is combining cycling tourism with the valorisation of both cultural and natural heritage along the line that used to divide our continent in two blocks. While celebrating the reunification of Europe, this cycling trail also intends to promote high-value natural landscapes treasured by the European Green Belt (biodiversity-rich areas where nature took over the former border).

In 2018 the ECF submitted an application with the support of the Cult-RinG project partners, the Region of Central Macedonia (Greece) and the Vidzeme Tourism Association (Latvia), to seek the designation of the Iron Curtain Trail as a Cultural Route of the Council of Europe which was successfully granted in April 2019.

Further information about the practice is available [here](#).

Image Source: www.austria.info

Cross-border cooperation for creating new itineraries can take different forms. It varies enormously according to local and regional peculiarities. While the development of a new cultural route with the support from [Cult-RinG](#) project partners in the example above led to the establishment of a large-scale pan-European cycling trail based on our common history, in other cases it can result in the valorisation of other specific elements of a shared heritage or in the adoption of tailor-made policy measures to boost sustainable tourism.

Sustainable itineraries at cross border and regional level

The [EPICAH](#) project, which seeks to exploit the tourism attraction factor of sustainably managed border areas, is particularly illustrative of successful cross-border practices in different EU regions. They range from celebrating food as one of the most bonding elements of a common intangible cultural heritage, as exemplified by the [Carpathian Culinary Heritage Network](#) set up by the neighbouring regions of Slovakia and Hungary, Romania and Ukraine, to the [Eixo Atlantico Strategy](#) for sustainable tourism, which aims to avoid the adverse effects of tourism seasonality between Galicia (Spain) and Northern Portugal.

The [ThreeT](#) project, which aspires to maximise the potential of ecotourism by fostering the accessibility of thematic trails to natural and cultural heritage sites, offers valuable insight in this respect.



Alvar Aalto routes in Jyväskylä region (Finland)

Native of the Jyväskylä region, Alvar Aalto was an architect who surged to international fame in the XXth century and is now universally regarded as one of the most prominent representatives of the Modern Movement.

In order to celebrate his work, the publicly-owned company 'Visit Jyväskylä' has been developing since 2016 an *ad hoc* cultural route stretching around 29 significant locations. It is managed on behalf of 9 Municipalities of the Jyväskylä Region in close partnership with stakeholders such as the Alvar Aalto Foundation and the Finnish Tourist Guides Associations. This attraction has become very popular and recently it made it to the Top 5 of the most favourite Finnish destinations for international tourists.

By conjugating access to cultural heritage with sustainable tourism and the natural heritage, this route is fully in line with the vision expressed under the second pillar of the 2018 European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage. It could indeed serve as model for local and regional policymakers interested in creating similar thematic trails for valorising the legacy of other European figures who, like Alvar Aalto, had a very strong bond with nature and their native landscapes.

Further information about the practice is available [here](#).

Image Source: www.alvaraalto.fi



Parks and museums without barriers in Val di Cornia, Tuscany (Italy)

Val di Cornia is a portion of land facing the Elba Island, which is a touristic hotspot typically affected by summer overcrowding. Efforts for the implementation of an integrated network of parks and museums without barriers allowed the valley to become a stop for non-invasive tourism. The network is composed of an archaeological museum, a museum of mediaeval pottery hosted in a castle, two archaeological sites, two coastal and two natural parks extended over the entire territory of the valley.

Parks and museums in Val di Cornia were set up with the aim of valorising both the natural and the cultural heritage along this part of the Etruscan Coast. In that way, the whole system could be promoted as the unique tourist destination of the so-called *Toscana Minore* featuring itineraries overlooked by mainstream tourism in the Region.

Further information about the practice is available [here](#).

Image Source: www.parchivaldicornia.it

Communicating the local sustainable tourism offer

Models of sustainable tourism that would bring people to discover cultural and natural treasures hidden in less known tourism destinations have been promoted by regions throughout Europe for years.

Evidence from interregional cooperation offers an immense catalogue of communication strategies for diverting pressure away from mainstream touristic destinations.

Most often they take the form of targeted campaigns for encouraging the discovery of minor touristic spots, such as the [Lethorad Quiz](#) (Slovakia) for promoting tourist flows to newly restored castles, and the '[Tourist Passport](#)' launched by the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Region (Poland) in the context of the [ThreeT](#) project. They may also entail the organisation of actual events with the objective of advertising lesser known elements of the cultural heritage. The [CRinMA](#) project, aimed at enhancing the visibility of cultural heritage in mountain areas, constitutes a source of valuable information for policymakers and stakeholders interested in the development of a local tourism promotion strategy. Another project rich of solutions to diversify the local tourist offer through targeted branding is the [BRANDTour](#) project. Many of its project partners managed to promote less known destinations thanks to winning communication campaigns, as in the case of Eastern Flanders (Belgium), where [beer](#) is becoming an extraordinary asset for local tourism.

Actions to counteract overcrowding comprise also innovative approaches for diverting tourists from the very 'epicentre' to parts of mainstream post-card destinations generally overlooked by mass tourism. It is worth mentioning in this respect the efforts of the [Venezia Nativa](#) Consortium (Italy), a good practice of the [CHRISTA](#) project, which intends to foster the sustainable development of islands in the Northern part of the Venetian lagoon by presenting their peculiarities as strong points in the eyes of a tourist.

Building the infrastructure for sustainable tourism

Ecosystem services offered by nature constitute the primarily infrastructure enabling sustainable tourism as any other economic activity to flourish. Therefore, their preservation is of fundamental importance. In addition, sustainable tourism thrives when accompanied by the implementation of digital infrastructures. The two good practices showcased below provide valuable information on how to build or enhance natural and digital infrastructures to the benefit of sustainable tourism.



Riverways. Development of water tourism (Latvia, Estonia)

The Riverways project was conducted to improve the conditions for sustainable water tourism development and increase its competitiveness *vis-à-vis* other segments of the travel industry while tackling seasonality and overcrowding in popular tourist destinations. Interested stakeholders (i.e. municipalities, entrepreneurs, tourism experts) jointly worked along three lines: a) identifying new products and businesses opportunities; b) improving the infrastructure and c) developing a targeted marketing strategy.

As a result of their cooperation, the concerned rivers are now being revitalised to the benefit of nature, domestic and international tourists alike. Thanks to the project 15 new water tourism products were developed or improved. This strengthened the business environment for around 300 local SMEs.

Knowledge exchange under the aegis of the SWARE project was crucial for improving the recognition of rivers as an important part of the natural heritage and as a tourism resource in Latvia. Learning about the experience of the *Tidal Park in Rotterdam* (The Netherlands) had a great weight on the decision taken by the Valmiera City Council to proceed with the valorisation of the Gauja River. A project to this end was included in the Investment Plan of the City for 2015–2020 and its implementation is currently underway.

Further information about the practice is available [here](#).

Image Source: Photo by [Roman Pohorecki](#) from [Pexels](#)



Digitalisation of a pilgrim trail (Sweden)

The trail from Ödeshög to Vadstena was abandoned in the 16th century during the Reformation and only started to regain attention in the 1990's. To make the mediaeval pilgrim trail accessible to modern-times pilgrims, the Östergötland Region revitalised the trail with the help of digitalisation.

Now pilgrims can rely on digital maps and on-line info-points providing information both on logistics including shelters, restaurants, water refill points, waste bins and toilets, and on the cultural and natural heritage along the way. The developed software also enables the pilgrim to share prayers, thoughts and reflections on the pilgrimage experience with the community of pilgrims if so desired.

This trail aims at becoming a reference for stakeholders and policymakers interested in developing fully digitalised trails especially targeting new pilgrims. A key factor for its success was its full integration into the web portal that describes the tourist offer of the whole Östergötland Region.

Further information about the practice is available [here](#).

Image Source: www.visitostergotland.se

Beside the value of the green and digital infrastructure, multiple evidence from the Interreg Europe community shows the great importance of the mobility and transport infrastructure for channelling tourist flows from overcrowded places to alternative destinations ready to respond to an increased tourist demand.

Improving public transportation and involving tour operators proved essential for decongesting the portion of the Sierras de Tejada, Almijara and Alhama Natural Park in the Province of Malaga (Spain), usually packed with tourists. As reported by a [good practice](#) under the Interreg Europe [IMPACT](#) project, offering adequate transport links enabled a more evenly balanced distribution of tourists also around the City of Granada, i.e. the area of the Park originally overlooked by visitors.

The same project also reported that tourism can be a powerful tool for giving new life to old transport infrastructures. The 1897 railway from Sulmona to Isernia (Italy) was saved from closure thanks to a sustainable tourism initiative that is bringing tourists all year long to hidden villages and natural reserves on the Central Apennines. Renamed as the '[Trans-Siberian of Italy](#)', the railway is now up and running. In a similar vein, the revamped '[Nostalgic Trains](#)' ([Last Mile](#) project) are now bringing tourists to UNESCO heritage sites in the Košice region (Slovakia).

Interregional cooperation equally points to the importance of having in place networks of tourist reception facilities able to respond to the increasing demand of alternative tourism.

Portrayed as a [good practice](#) in the context of the [HERICOAST](#) project, which intends to promote the management of heritage in coastal landscapes, the concept of '[albergo diffuso](#)' (i.e. dispersed hotel) has a much bigger scope of application. It constitutes one of the most established forms of scattered hospitality in Italy and Europe. Its origin dates back to the earthquake that violently struck the Friuli-Venezia-Giulia Region in 1976. In



Image source: [Senuscape](#) from [Pexels](#)

the aftermath of the seism, funds for the reconstruction were partly used to restore houses for touristic purposes. Although from a legislative perspective their regime may still vary from one region to the other, this kind of tourist reception came a long way since its inception. As explained by the [Alberghi diffusi national association](#), the natural location of an *albergo diffuso* is to be found in little historical towns as well as in countryside and mountain villages.

Sustainable Tourism in Covid-19 times

Covid-19 incompatibility with mass tourism

The new reality imposed by the coronavirus pandemic requires widespread and unprecedented efforts by public authorities and economic operators alike to mitigate as much as possible the negative effects of the health crisis.

The tourism sector has been one of the most negatively struck by Covid-19 thus far, which is why it has already been targeted by a wide array of fiscal and economic support measures adopted by all EU-27 governments. For the same reason, its recovery is expected to be further sustained in the context of the NextGenerationEU.

At the same time, Covid-19 has clearly exposed the unsustainability of mass tourism and the need to accelerate the efforts for strengthening existing models of alternative and sustainable tourism as a way to quickly respond and adapt to the crisis. During summer 2020, proximity tourism was embraced as a valid holidays option by many citizens across the EU. Local and regional policymakers have often done their part in this sense, as exemplified by the experience showcased below from the [RAMSAT](#) project, which seeks to revitalise mountain areas through sustainable tourism.



Avoiding the Covid-19 impact on tourism in Teruel (Spain)

In April 2020, the Province of Teruel (Aragón) revised its Strategy for sustainable tourism to comply with the new reality imposed by the coronavirus outbreak. The Province used all flexibilities provided by its budget and scrapped activities that would not be compatible with Covid-19 prevention measures. In doing so, they managed to offer a rather quick and effective response to mitigate the effect of the pandemic on local tourism. The revised strategy included, *inter alia*:

- Storytelling - for increasing the attractiveness of the Province as a safe destination;
- Enhanced promotion of the *El Cid* cultural route – a usually less beaten track;
- Marketing of sustainable locally sourced products;
- Discounts of 30 € on 3,000 overnight stays – to incentivise proximity tourism;
- Measures to ‘put on the map’ villages with less than 500 inhabitants – normally overlooked by tourist flows;
- Partnership with restaurants and local media outlets.

Provisional data indicate that, despite the pandemic, small hotels and rural houses scored good reservation rates in the first part of the touristic season. The approach adopted by local policymakers helped their businesses to cope with the new circumstances.

Further information about the practice is available [here](#).

Image Source: www.caminodelcid.org

The case of Teruel indicates also that SMEs mobilisation is fundamental for keeping the local tourism economy afloat in Covid-19 times. In the past few months businesses, including from the creative and cultural industry, were often the protagonists of this effort as reported by [Cult-CreaTE](#) partners.

Cycling Tourism

In times of COVID-19, cycling has gained much drive as an individual and safe transport mode, while the tourism sector has been hit particularly hard by lockdown measures.

The multiple benefits that cycling yields for public health, the economy and the environment constitute an evident contribution to the zero pollution and carbon neutrality goals of European Green Deal. The ongoing pandemic is further substantiating the urgency of constructing extended cycle infrastructure networks in our cities and beyond.

On 30 June 2020 the Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform proposed a [webinar](#) to explore the synergies between cycling and tourism and to hear from good practices successfully implemented in different EU regions on how to best support cycling tourism as an added-value leisure activity for the territories.

New opportunities for cycling are likely to arise during the recovery phase. Pop-up bike lanes in cities like Paris or Milan responding to the increased demand for urban cycling during the crisis are expected to remain as an integral part of the mobility infrastructure once Covid-19 restrictions will be lifted. This will increase the appeal of tourism destinations as well as the sustainability of the travel industry as a whole⁶.



Image source: [Coen van de Broek](#) from [Pexels](#)



LEBONPICNIC - Locally-sourced picnics available for cycle tourists (France)

LEBONPICNIC is an online marketplace connecting cycle tourists to local artisan food makers based in the Pays de la Loire. Its goal is to support local SMEs and local food traditions in a sustainable way by offering cyclists and cycling tourists affordable and healthy meals from short supply chains.

The marketplace has been established in 2016 as an initiative of 15 artisan food makers and relies on a wider network of more than 30 small local businesses including tourist reception facilities, farmers and small family-run businesses. The close cooperation of the network is a decisive success factor for the initiative as it offers a vital ecosystem that can put up with major players competing on the market.

In 2018, the initiative won the *Palmes du Tourisme Durable* award for its innovation and scalability potential and by the end of 2019 it had managed to increase by 60% the number of picnics ordered compared to the first year of activity. The fact that LEBONPICNIC is currently in the process of expanding in other areas (e.g. *La Baie de Saint-Brieuc* in Brittany or the *Haute Vallée de Chevreuse* Natural Regional Park in the *Île-de-France*) constitutes an evident sign of its success and transferability.

In the context of the current pandemic, digital solutions that allow tourists to pre-order their locally-sourced meals and to consume them outdoor without having to worry about finding a place in a restaurant should be viewed positively. They facilitate the adherence to Covid-19 rules while supporting sustainable tourism.

Further information about the practice is available [here](#).

Image Source: Photo by [Anna Guerrero](#) from [Pexels](#)

⁶See e.g. ECF, '#RestartCycleTourism for a safe COVID-19 recovery and a more sustainable future for Europe', available [here](#).

European support for sustainable tourism

Financial Support

As in the current programming period, also in the next one (2021-2027) sustainable tourism will not have a dedicated EU budget line. Nevertheless, being a cross-cutting ground for projects that contribute to multiple thematic objectives of regional development and cohesion policy, it will be transversally supported by European structural and investment funds, such as the [European Regional Development Fund](#) (ERDF) and the [European Social Fund](#) (ESF). Support from existing funding instruments such as the [LIFE](#) Programme and the [Connecting Europe Facility](#) (CEF) will also continue.

In the next seven years sustainable tourism projects designed to make Europe smarter, greener, more social and more connected will certainly attract EU investments.

For a detailed overview on how EU thematic programmes have supported sustainable tourism between 2014 and 2020 and how they are likely to continue doing so in the next 7-year period, policymakers may consult the '[Guide on EU funding for the tourism sector](#)'.

Interreg Europe

Interreg Europe projects entail the sharing of experience and development of regional action plans to improve policy frameworks. Each project gathers and studies policy examples, hundreds of which are available through the Policy Learning Platform's [Good Practice Database](#). Some of them have been featured in this brief.

The Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform is pro-actively supporting learning and exchange of experience and a number of on-demand services which can support regions in their effort to promote sustainable tourism, including an online helpdesk, matchmakings and a [peer review](#) service. The peer reviews are a constructive way for managing authorities and other local or regional authorities to obtain input and feedback on the challenges that policy makers are facing. Carefully selected European peers are invited to the host region for a structured exchange of experiences and to provide input and recommendations addressing the specific local challenge.

Recommendations and key learnings

The recent communication on [Transport and tourism in 2020 and beyond](#) and the European Tourism Convention reaffirmed the EU commitment to accompany the sector along the way to recovery. The crisis represents a unique opportunity for tourism to put sustainability more radically at its core. This is necessary both for managing the coexistence with the virus and for taking full advantage of the green and digital transformations pursued by the European Green Deal.

The next generation of Regional Funds are being negotiated at present and interregional cooperation provides inspiration as it offers the possibility to learn about good practices and policies, explore synergies and discover new perspectives for sustainable tourism. A plurality of strategies for counteracting overtourism already exists in Europe. Their common element lies in the future-proof management of the cultural and natural heritage.

The main lessons that can be drawn from interregional cooperation on this matter as presented in this policy brief can be summarised as follows:

Creating new sustainable itineraries

- Identify which natural and cultural heritage elements can trigger the creation of new itineraries and attractions;
- Choose the scale of your initiative (i.e. local, cross-border, transnational itineraries/attractions) and establish adequate partnerships to enable implementation;
- Find creative ways to communicate the lesser renowned components for your heritage;
- View cultural routes, cycling trails and pilgrimage trails as increasingly consolidated models for their valorisation;

Building the infrastructure for sustainable tourism

- Adopt strategies for developing your local tourism offer;
- Focus on enhancing the attraction potential of small towns, villages and protected areas, rivers; Work with nature to design sustainable tourism products and services;
- Engage with SMEs, tourist operators etc., to create an ecosystem favourable to their valorisation;
- Increase their accessibility through better urban and mobility planning;
- Support 'scattered' forms of tourism reception and hospitality throughout your territory;
- Invest on digitalising accessibility of the cultural and natural heritage;
- Exploit synergies between digital tools and sustainable initiatives that foster the local economy.

Sustainable tourism in Covid-19 times and beyond

- Revise strategies on local sustainable tourism in light of Covid-19;
- Accelerate their implementation to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on the whole sector;
- Foster cycling tourism, ecotourism, tourism in mountain and rural areas as antidotes to tourism overcrowding and tourism seasonality;
- Value them as safe travel options during the pandemic and beyond;
- Invest on technology and digitalisation to better manage tourist flows;
- Consider them as tools enabling an evenly balanced geographical distribution and dispersion of tourists during the pandemic and beyond.

Sources for further information

Policy Learning Platform information:

- Policy Brief on [Cultural Routes in Europe](#)
- Policy Brief on [Digital Solutions for the Cultural Heritage](#)
- Policy Brief on [Cycling Cities](#)
- Policy Brief on [Sustainable Tourism: an opportunity for Regions to benefit from their cultural and natural heritage](#)
- On-line discussion on [Digital technologies and museums: post-pandemic experiences](#)
- On-line discussion on [Sustainable cultural tourism as an opportunity for local development](#)
- On-line discussion on [Tourism and cultural and creative industries in the post Covid-19 period](#)
- Webinar on [Cycling Tourism](#)
- Webinar on [Eco-tourism in riverside territories](#)
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Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform on Environment and resource efficiency



Marco Citelli & Astrid Severin

m.citelli@policylearning.eu a.severin@policylearning.eu

www.interregeurope.eu

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