



Optimising social and economic benefits of tourism

*A Policy Brief from the Policy Learning Platform
for a more social Europe*

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SOCIAL



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Summary

Tourism plays a vital role in Europe's economy, serving as a significant source of jobs and income for local and regional communities. Yet, its benefits are often accompanied by challenges, including exposure to external shocks and negative externalities such as overtourism, environmental degradation, and social tensions. This policy brief explores how local and regional authorities can best optimise the social and economic benefits of tourism by actively accompanying market actors and regulating the sector to balance growth with sustainability.

Local and regional authorities have a critical role in shaping tourism as a sustainable and inclusive sector. This brief draws on lessons from Interreg Europe projects to identify effective strategies:

- **Accompanying Market Actors:** Authorities can foster partnerships with private stakeholders, as seen in projects like Visit Savonlinna (Finland), where digital platforms empower SMEs, or Gastro Local (Romania), which connects local producers with tourism opportunities.
- **Regulating Tourism:** To manage overtourism and mitigate negative externalities, measures such as targeted taxation, limits on visitor numbers, and spatial redistribution of tourism flows (e.g., the Porikuu Festival in Estonia) can balance visitor impacts while promoting less-visited areas.
- **Building Resilience:** Authorities can encourage diversification of tourism offers, integrating local cultural and economic activities to reduce dependency on volatile markets, as exemplified by initiatives like LouléCriativo (Portugal) and East Flanders' floricultural tourism.

Local and regional authorities can leverage these insights by:

- Co-creating tourism strategies with residents and businesses to ensure alignment with local realities,
- Promoting public-private partnerships to strengthen tourism ecosystems,
- Embedding tourism development within local socio-economic contexts, supporting SMEs, and diversifying tourism offers,
- Harnessing EU policies, such as the Tourism Transition Pathway and the European Tourism Agenda 2030, to access funding and skills development opportunities,
- Encouraging sustainable and inclusive tourism practices that benefit both visitors and host communities.

By accompanying market actors and implementing effective regulatory frameworks, local and regional authorities can optimise tourism's social and economic benefits while mitigating its risks. Through thoughtful planning and collaboration, they can transform tourism into a driver of sustainable growth that benefits host communities on the short, medium and long term.

The knowledge, solutions and good practices showcased in this policy brief come mainly from Interreg Europe projects.

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Introduction

The rebound of tourism since the COVID-19 epidemic is confirmed by many studies, even if some countries and regions have not fully recovered. This also implies that local and regional authorities are confronted to unbalanced social and economic impacts of tourism. Un-planned growth occurs in many areas. This has prompted increasing demands for more proactive policies and government intervention to improve tourism management at all levels of governance, while ensuring local communities have a strong voice in shaping tourism development.

This entails implementing measures to diversify and distribute the impacts of tourism more evenly across time and space. It also involves anticipating when tourism in a destination may approach or exceed optimal levels, potentially causing negative effects. At the same time, tourism is a key component of many strategies to contain or reverse population decline in remote rural areas, or to make environmental protection measures economically viable. These parallel trends justify coordinated public policies to promote more geographically balanced tourism flows.

Public policies can also promote forms of tourism that benefit host communities and regions, creating opportunities for meaningful cultural exchanges and sustainable development. By encouraging tourism models such as creative tourism and experiences rooted in local cultural practices, policymakers can help generate authentic interactions between visitors and residents. This can for example be the case when local cultural and sports associations are involved in the design and organisation of events and activities targeting tourists.

These forms of tourism not only promote the preservation of local heritage and traditions but also provide economic benefits by supporting small businesses, artisans, and cultural initiatives. Furthermore, public policies that incentivise sustainable practices, community-led tourism projects, and the integration of local voices in tourism planning can ensure that the sector contributes to the social and economic well-being of host regions while fostering genuine connections and mutual understanding between tourists and local communities.

Local and regional authorities are uniquely positioned to address these dynamics. They play a critical role in shaping tourism's social and economic impacts through policies that regulate growth, promote inclusivity, and align tourism development with broader regional goals. By engaging with market actors, they can create enabling environments for innovation and entrepreneurship while ensuring tourism supports local communities and preserves cultural and environmental heritage.

The policy brief first provides an overview of key patterns and trends in tourism. It then analyses relevant EU policies and support mechanisms and reviews good practices implemented at the local and regional levels. On this basis, it presents actionable policy recommendations. Together, these elements offer guidance for optimising the social and economic benefits of tourism.

Impacts of tourism on local and regional economies and societies

Tourism creates jobs and drives growth but poses challenges like overtourism and economic overdependence. This chapter explores employment patterns, economic pressures, and societal dynamics linked to tourism, alongside key transformations such as green and digital transitions. It also offers insights into emerging skill requirements within the tourism sector.

Importance of tourism industries for European economies and societies

The [World Tourism Organisation \(UN Tourism\) \(2024\)](#) reports that, as of December 2024, Europe's tourism sector has fully recovered from the COVID-19 pandemic. The first quarter of 2024 saw foreign arrivals increase by 7.2% and overnight stays by 6.5% compared to the same period in 2019 ([EU Tourism Platform, 2024](#)).

This recovery is not uniform across Europe. The highest growth in arrival numbers between 2019 and 2024 was reported in Albania (+77%), Andorra (+36%), Malta (+30%), Serbia (+28%), and Luxembourg (+24%) ([WTO, 2024](#)). At the same time, arrival numbers in the Baltics, Finland, Romania, and Slovakia have reported declines ranging from 11% to 24% when compared figures for the third quarters of 2024 to 2019 ([ETC, 2024](#)). Commentators argue that this is largely a result of these destinations' proximity to conflict zones and of lower tourist flows from Russia and Ukraine.

Some figures synthesise the economic importance of tourism in Europe:

- Tourism accounted for 4.5% of gross added value in Europe in 2019 according to [Eurostat \(2023\)](#), and 9.5% according to the [World Travel and Tourism Council \(2021\)](#)¹, i.e. between EUR 578 and 1,920 billion.
- Eurostat states that 11.3 million people were employed in economic activities related to tourism in 2021 ([Eurostat, 2024](#)). This corresponds to just under 6% of the total number of employed persons in Europe. Out of these, 9.9 million people are employed in the accommodation and food service sectors ([Eurostat, 2024](#)). However, in its Annual Single Market Report 2021, the European Commission states that 20.3 million people are employed in tourism ([European Commission, 2021](#)).
- 3.2 million firms operate in the tourism sector. 99.8% of these are SMEs ([European Commission, 2021](#)).
- In 2023, the EU's accommodation sector recorded nearly 3 billion nights stayed, a 6.8% increase from 2022, surpassing pre-pandemic levels by 2.4% ([Eurostat, 2024](#)).

Tourism is therefore a cornerstone of Europe's economy, contributing significantly to GDP, employment, and regional development. It is difficult to define the tourism sector, as many service providers cater for needs of tourists and other clients. Depending on the approach, it corresponds to approximately 5 to 10% of value creation and 6 to 12% of employment.

Looking ahead, the sector is expected to grow further, driven by rising demand for sustainable travel and digital transformation in tourism services. A key driver of growth is the increasing propensity of Europeans to travel ([European Travel Commission, 2024](#)).

¹ The Tourism sector is notoriously difficult to define. Eurostat distinguishes between:

- Tourism industries, defined as economic activities related to tourism but possibly providing services to tourists as well as non-tourists, whose economic importance is in many cases not exclusively linked to tourism. They for example include rail transport and restaurants.,
- Selected tourism industries, which rely almost entirely on tourism. These are accommodation, travel agencies/tour operators and air transport.

Economic dependence on tourism and pressures from overtourism

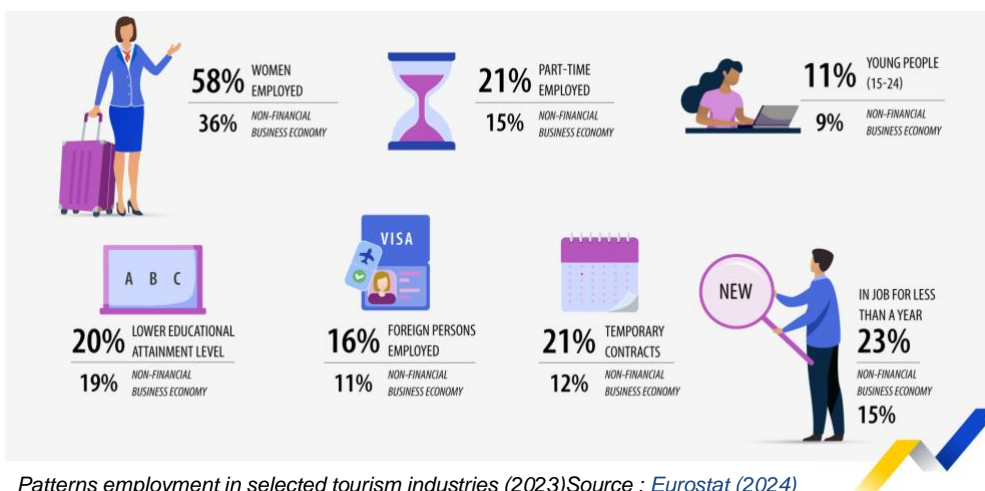
Economic dependence on international tourism can be measured by comparing foreign tourist spending to gross domestic product². In 2022, the highest rates were observed in Croatia (19.3 %), Cyprus (9.9 %), Albania (9.9%), Malta (8.8 %), Portugal (8.7 %) and Greece (8.6 %) ([European Commission, 2023](#)). Dependence on tourism increases in some of these countries. For example, Greece anticipates record tourism revenues of approximately €22 billion in 2024, a 10% increase from the €20 billion earned in 2023 ([Reuters, 2024](#)). By comparison, Greek gross domestic product (GDP) is expected to grow by 2.1% in 2024 according to the latest economic forecast ([European Commission, 2024](#)). The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the economic and social risks inherent in an overreliance on tourism.

The surge in tourist numbers in some parts of Europe has resulted in overtourism, prompting local and regional protests across Europe. In Spain, residents in the Canary Islands, Balearic Islands, and Barcelona have protested against mass tourism, citing increased living costs, housing shortages, and environmental degradation. In July 2024, approximately 3,000 people protested in Barcelona, raising concerns about rising prices and social inequality linked to tourism ([Euronews, 2024](#)). Similarly, Lisbon's municipal assembly approved a proposal for a local referendum aimed at banning short-term tourist rentals in residential buildings to tackle the housing crisis ([Reuters, 2024](#)).

In response to overtourism, several European destinations have introduced measures such as tourist taxes and entry fees. Venice has implemented a day-visitor [access fee](#) in addition to an existing accommodation tax to limit the number of day-trippers. Greece plans to introduce a €20 tourist tax for cruise ship passengers visiting islands like Santorini and Mykonos during peak summer seasons to manage overcrowding. The revenue from this tax would be used to promote tourism ([Greek Ministry of Economy and Finance, 2024](#)). Such measures aim to balance the economic advantages of tourism with the preservation of local communities and the environment.

Patterns of employment in tourism

Employment in Europe's tourism sector exhibits distinct patterns that underscore both its opportunities and challenges, as illustrated by Figure 1 below. The industry is characterised by a significant overrepresentation of women, young people and foreign workers, reflecting its accessibility and inclusiveness. According to Eurostat, women account for nearly 60% of employment in tourism-related industries, while young people aged 15–24 represent a larger proportion of the workforce compared to other sectors. Additionally, foreign workers, including seasonal and migrant labourers, play a critical role, particularly in hospitality and accommodation services. The sector also relies heavily on short-term and part-time contracts, making it particularly vulnerable to economic shocks and fluctuations in demand.



Patterns employment in selected tourism industries (2023)Source : [Eurostat \(2024\)](#)

² The assumption is that spending of domestic generate a lesser dependence, insofar as a possible reduction of such spending is likely to be accompanied by an increase in other types of spending benefiting the national economy.

These patterns raise policy considerations, such as the need to improve job security and working conditions, invest in skills training for young and foreign workers, and address gender disparities in wages and career advancement. The tourism sector is confronted to major recruitment challenges in most European countries. In 2022, the European umbrella association of Hotels, Restaurants and Cafés in Europe HOTREC for example notes that there were approximately “200,000 unfilled positions in France, 250,000 in Italy and 33,000 in Austria” ([HOTREC, 2022](#)). Key challenges to be overcome are work-life balance concerns (with long and unusual hours, including bank holidays and weekends), seasonality and low wages compared to other sectors.

2020 data show that hourly gross salaries for employees were 36% lower in selected tourism industries than in other service industries when considering the EU as a whole. This ratio varies considerably from country to country. Tourism sector salaries in the tourism sectors were 54 to 59% lower in Cyprus, Spain and Austria. At the other end of the scale, tourism sector salaries were less than 20% lower in Finland, Iceland, Luxembourg and France, and above other service industries in Portugal (+2.3%) and Latvia (+8.3%).

Tourism is a sector offering **numerous employment opportunities for young people persons without formal qualifications**. HOTREC notes that 29.6% of workers in the EU hospitality sector are “relatively unskilled”, compared to 16.1% in the overall economy, and 17.4% are under 25 years, compares to 7.6% in the overall economy ([HOTREC, 2022](#)). The tourism sector therefore contributes to make the **labour market more inclusive**.

Transformations of the tourism sector

The tourism sector in Europe is undergoing multiple parallel transitions, shaped by evolving societal, economic, and environmental dynamics. These shifts present both challenges and opportunities for local and regional tourism development.

Green Transition in Tourism

A growing emphasis on sustainability is redefining tourism practices across Europe. Travellers and host regions are encouraged to prioritise environmentally conscious choices, such as low-carbon transportation, eco-certified accommodations, and destinations that promote sustainable tourism practices. This transition is fuelled by global climate goals and the EU Green Deal, which encourage tourism stakeholders to adopt circular economy principles, reduce carbon footprints, and invest in green infrastructure.

As noted in a [previous Interreg Europe Editorial](#), an effective green transition may lead to significant job losses in some regions and localities dependent on traditional tourism industries. By contrast, rural areas that develop eco-tourism and are accessible with low-carbon transportation may experience an increase in tourism activities.

Digital Transformation

Digitalisation is revolutionising how tourism services are accessed, experienced, and managed. Technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), big data, and virtual reality (VR) are enhancing personalised travel experiences and destination marketing. For local authorities, digital tools enable smarter resource management, crowd monitoring, and the promotion of lesser-known destinations to mitigate overtourism.

The European Commission notes that the digital transformation of tourism creates new types of business opportunities, and makes it easier to establish integrated tourism offers. It observes that impacts of the digital transformation can be particularly important in rural and remote localities. However, it also emphasizes that this presupposes that stakeholders acquire necessary skills and that governance system making it possible to take advantage of digital opportunities are established. ([European Commission, 2021](#))

Changing Demographics and Travel Preferences

Shifts in demographics, including an ageing population and preferences of younger generations, are reshaping travel demand. Seniors are increasingly prone to travel, as a result of improved life expectancy, health and wealth. Furthermore, as a result of ageing, retirement migration concerns an increasing proportion of the population. Many tourism destinations are also destinations for retirement migration. Synergies may therefore develop between service offers targeting ‘permanent’ and ‘visiting’ seniors. Silver tourism is identified as a major

development opportunity for localities that offer adapted amenities, accessible infrastructure and tailored services ([Silvertour, 2023](#)).

Surveys also show that younger generations tend to take more frequent trips and are more interested in discovering new and international destinations. Furthermore, their trips are extensively motivated by social media, and they extensively share stories of own journey on social media. This implies that tourists are increasingly prepared to spend money on “creative experiences that are tailored to their priorities and personal narratives” ([McKinsey, 2024](#)). This generates new types of businesses and employment opportunities in connection to tourism.

Geopolitical and Economic Influences

Geopolitical factors, such as the war in Ukraine, economic pressures, natural disasters and climate change significantly influence tourism flows. Destinations must adapt to changing patterns of demand while maintaining resilience to external shocks. Different strategies may be envisaged to this end, e.g. a diversification of the tourism offer ([Climate ADAPT, 2024](#)), a promotion of services targeting both domestic and foreign clients, and a diversification into complementary sectors, such as food production, creative industries and digital services.

More generally, risk and exposure analyses are an increasingly important component of all local and regional tourism development strategies. The identification of risks and areas of exposure allows tourism destinations to develop tailored strategies to mitigate these impacts. Such analyses also enable more targeted investments in crisis preparedness, ensuring that local economies and communities are better equipped to adapt and recover. Ultimately, integrating risk and exposure assessments into tourism planning fosters long-term stability and protects livelihoods.

New types of skills are needed in the tourism sector

The transitions described above are addressed by designing adaptive strategies that balance economic growth with sustainability and social inclusivity. Such strategies can be elaborated at local, regional and national levels. The objective is to align tourism practices with broader development goals, e.g. in the field of greenhouse gas emissions, territorial cohesion and economic prosperity.

At the same time, the digital, social and green transitions in the tourism sector generate new types of skill needs. The evolving tourism sector requires a broad range of skills to tackle emerging challenges and seize new opportunities. **Digital skills** are crucial for adapting to the labour market's digital transformation, including data management, online business operations, and advanced technologies such as augmented reality, artificial intelligence, and blockchain. **Green skills** are becoming increasingly important as sustainability takes centre stage, with a focus on energy efficiency, sustainable resource use, and environmentally conscious practices within tourism and hospitality. Moreover, new types of **social skills** are needed in an increasingly digitalised environment, fostering problem-solving, creativity, entrepreneurship, and multicultural awareness. Tourism development presupposes successful partnerships between institutions and a broad range of private actors.

The [Next Tourism Generation Skills Alliance](#) has elaborated a [Blueprint for sectoral cooperation](#) to address them³. This Blueprint includes multiple tools to address skills needs, e.g. a skills assessment methodology, learning and training methods, an international careers platform and overviews of national and European Union (EU) frameworks for skills standards of relevant for tourism. Many of these tools can help regional and local authorities elaborate skill supply strategies. This Alliance includes [13 partners from 10 countries](#). Any European region or locality can apply to become an [affiliated](#) or [associated](#) partner.

³ These activities have been implemented in two successive projects co-funded by the ERASMUS+ programme of the European Union, NTG (Next Tourism Generation Skills Alliance) and PANTOUR.

European tourism policies

This chapter explores how European tourism policies support local and regional authorities in maximising the sector's social and economic benefits. It examines key frameworks like the European Agenda for Tourism 2030 and the Transition Pathway for Tourism, which provide strategies to foster sustainability, resilience, and inclusivity. These tools can empower local and regional authorities to align tourism policies with social and economic development priorities, while addressing challenges such as overtourism and economic shocks.

Enhanced national commitments to proactive tourism development policies since COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the fragility of tourism ecosystems and the need for resilience, driving initiatives aimed at supporting recovery and ensuring long-term sustainability. As part of efforts to address the pandemics' severe social and economic impacts in regions heavily reliant on tourism, European institutions developed new strategies and policy instruments.

Even though tourism has largely rebounded across Europe, the multiple tools, measures and cooperation platforms established during the pandemic, such as funding programmes, digitalisation initiatives and partnerships, remain relevant. These resources can be mobilised to renew and strengthen local and regional tourism policies, with a focus on optimising the sector's social and economic benefits. Local and regional authorities can leverage these mechanisms to foster more sustainable, inclusive, and competitive tourism.

The [Council conclusions on the European Agenda for Tourism 2030](#), adopted in December 2022, reaffirms the European Union's commitment to fostering a resilient, inclusive and sustainable tourism sector. Building on earlier initiatives, such as the EU's transition pathway for tourism and the overarching goals of the European Green Deal, these conclusions emphasise the importance of creating sustainable jobs while promoting local culture, products and services. The Council advocates the mobilisation of a range of policy instruments, including funding mechanisms such as the Recovery and Resilience Facility, Horizon Europe and the European Regional Development Fund, to support this vision. Key measures include fostering digitalisation in tourism SMEs, enhancing skills development for tourism professionals, and incentivising environmentally friendly practices across the sector. Additionally, the conclusions highlight the need for stronger collaboration between public and private stakeholders to develop tourism ecosystems that are economically robust, environmentally responsible, and deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of local communities.

National authorities' commitment to these policy objectives was confirmed at the informal meeting of EU tourism ministers in October 2023. During this meeting, the ministers signed the [Palma Declaration](#). In this declaration, EU Member State confirm their joint commitment to the following objectives:

- **Inclusive Tourism:** making tourism accessible for everyone, emphasising infrastructure for travellers with reduced mobility, affordable options, and programmes celebrating diversity.
- **Stakeholder Collaboration:** encourage public-private partnerships, knowledge sharing, and aligning tourism with community well-being.
- **Resilient Communities:** diversify tourism, addressing over-tourism in popular areas, and promoting economic opportunities in rural and under-served regions.
- **Environmental Sustainability:** reduce tourism's environmental impact through low-carbon transport, circular economy principles, and eco-certification.
- **Monitoring Progress:** track social, economic, and environmental impacts of tourism with annual reviews and adaptive strategies.

The tourism transition pathway and European Tourism Agenda 2030

The European Commission's **Transition Pathway for Tourism**, unveiled in February 2022, serves as a strategic framework to guide the tourism sector towards sustainability, digitalisation, resilience, and inclusivity. Developed through an eight-month [co-creation process](#) with Member States and thematic stakeholders, the pathway identifies 27 key areas of action to support the sector's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and align with the EU's Green Deal and Digital Decade objectives.

The **European Tourism Agenda 2030**, was adopted by the Council of the European Union jointly with the above-mentioned conclusions in December 2022. It outlines a strategic framework to guide the tourism sector towards sustainability, digitalisation, resilience, and inclusivity. The European Commission describes it as a “common compass for Member States, stakeholders and the Commission to work together towards a greener, more digital and resilient tourism ecosystem” ([European Commission, 2022](#)). This initiative includes a workplan structured around 5 key priority areas.

The EU Commission ‘Transition Pathway’ and EU Council ‘Workplan’ are aligned. This implies that each of the 27 areas of actions sorts under one of the 5 priority areas (see Text Box 1 below). Some of these are particularly relevant for the optimisation of social and economic benefits of tourism:

- Under Priority Area 1 – Enabling policy frameworks and governance, key area 4 (comprehensive strategies) implies that specific attention should be paid to **economic and social sustainability**.
- Under Priority Area 3 - Digital transition, key areas 14 and 16 are expected to lead to better monitoring of destination carrying capacity and well-being of local residents and better economic performances of tourism SMEs. **Digitalisation in tourism can also contribute to digitalisation in other parts of local economies**.
- Under Priority Area 4, key area 19 (Fairness and Equality in Tourism Jobs) is essential to ensure that tourism generates **economic benefits that are valued by local communities**. Key area 26 (Tourism Services for Visitors and Residents Alike) implies measures to increase the variety and diversity of tourism offer which also supports links between residents and visitors, and authentic tourism experiences linked with the local culture.
- Under Priority Area 4, key areas 22 on skills development and 23 on one-stop-shop for learning opportunities for SMEs help ensure that tourism offers develop continuously.

Transition pathway ‘key areas of action’ by workplan priority area

‘Key areas of action’ have been identified as part of the elaboration of Transition Pathway for Tourism by the European Commission. ‘Priority areas’ were listed in European Council’s Tourism Agenda 2030. While both documents are aligned, ‘Key areas of action’ were initially presented in a different order. This explains why their numbering is not continuous, as shown below.

Priority area 1: Enabling policy frameworks and governance

1. **Fair Measures for Short-Term Rentals (STR):** Implementing regulations to ensure short-term rentals operate on a level playing field with traditional accommodation providers.
2. **Regulatory Support for Multimodal Travelling:** Establishing policies that facilitate seamless travel across different modes of transport, enhancing connectivity for tourists.
3. **Improving Statistics and Indicators for Tourism:** Enhancing data collection and analysis to better understand tourism trends and impacts.
4. **Comprehensive Tourism Strategies Development or Update:** Encouraging destinations to create or revise tourism strategies that integrate economic, social, and environmental sustainability.
5. **Collaborative Governance of Tourism Destinations:** Promoting cooperation among stakeholders to manage tourism in a way that benefits all parties involved.

Priority area 2: Green Transition

6. **Sustainable Mobility:** Advancing eco-friendly transportation options for tourists to reduce the sector's carbon footprint.
7. **Circularity of Tourism Services:** Encouraging practices that minimise waste and promote resource efficiency within tourism operations.
8. **Green Transition of Tourism Companies and SMEs:** Supporting businesses in adopting sustainable practices to lessen environmental impacts.
12. **R&I Projects and Pilots on Circular and Climate-Friendly Tourism:** Investing in research and innovation initiatives that explore sustainable tourism models.
13. **Promoting the Use of Product Environmental Footprint (PEF) and Organisation Environmental Footprint (OEF) Methodology for Tourism Ecosystem:** Encouraging the adoption of Product Environmental Footprint and Organisation Environmental Footprint methods to assess environmental impacts.

Priority area 3: Digital transition

9. **Innovative and Data-Driven Tourism Services:** Leveraging data to enhance service delivery and personalise tourist experiences.
10. **Improving the Availability of Online Information on Tourism Offer:** Ensuring accurate and comprehensive information is accessible online to assist tourists in planning their visits.
14. **Technical Implementation for Common European Data Space for Tourism:** Developing a unified digital framework to facilitate data sharing across the tourism sector.
15. **R&I for Digital Tools and Services in Tourism:** Supporting research and innovation in developing digital solutions to enhance the tourist experience.
16. **Support for Digitalisation of Tourism SMEs and Destinations:** Assisting small businesses and destinations in adopting digital technologies to improve competitiveness.

Priority area 4: Resilience and inclusion

17. **Seamless Cross-Border Travelling:** Removing barriers to ensure smooth travel experiences across European borders.
18. **Coordinated Management and Updated Information on Travelling:** Providing up-to-date travel information to assist tourists in making informed decisions.
19. **Fairness and Equality in Tourism Jobs:** Promoting equitable working conditions and opportunities within the tourism industry.
25. **Enhancing Accessible Tourism Services:** Improving services to ensure they are accessible to all individuals, regardless of physical abilities.
26. **Tourism Services for Visitors and Residents Alike:** Developing tourism offerings that benefit both visitors and local communities.

Priority area 5: Skills and support for transition

11. **Easily Accessible Best Practices, Peer Learning and Networking for SMEs:** Facilitating knowledge sharing among small and medium-sized enterprises to foster innovation and improvement.
19. **Awareness Raising on Skills Needs for Twin Transition in Tourism:** Highlighting the importance of developing skills necessary for both green and digital transitions in the sector.
20. **Awareness Raising on Changes in Tourism Demand and the Opportunities of Twin Transition:** Informing stakeholders about evolving tourist preferences and the benefits of adopting sustainable and digital practices.
21. **Educational Organisations to Engage in Developing and Renewing Tourism Education:** Encouraging academic institutions to update curricula to reflect current industry needs.
22. **Pact for Skills in Tourism:** Establishing partnerships to promote skill development and address labour shortages in the tourism sector.
23. **One-Stop-Shop for Learning Opportunities for Tourism SMEs:** Creating a centralised platform where small businesses can access training and development resources.
27. **Support Visibility of Funding Opportunities for Tourism Actors:** Increasing awareness of available financial resources to support tourism initiatives

The European Commission published a first stock-taking report in January 2024. This report established a mechanism for regular progress assessment. This involves the design of indicators to evaluate effort and progress for each transition pathway topic. The report suggests that while improvements are needed, the overall approach has been effective in advancing the EU tourism ecosystem's transition and resilience.

By October 2023, 204 organisations across 34 countries had made [424 pledges](#) supporting the pathway's objectives, indicating broad stakeholder engagement⁴. These pledges encompass a wide range of actions aimed at advancing the green and digital transitions within the tourism sector, as well as enhancing its resilience. Common commitments include developing comprehensive tourism strategies that integrate economic, social, and environmental sustainability; supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in adopting sustainable practices; promoting digitalisation among tourism businesses and destinations; and investing in skills development to address workforce challenges. For instance, several regional administrations have pledged to update their tourism strategies to align with sustainability goals, while business associations have committed to providing training and resources to help SMEs transition to greener operations ([European Commission, 2024](#)). These collective efforts reflect a sector-wide dedication to achieving the objectives outlined in the Transition Pathway for Tourism, fostering a more sustainable, digital, and resilient future for European tourism.

The EU Tourism Platform

The EU Tourism Platform serves as a vital hub for collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and strategic coordination across the tourism sector. Designed to support stakeholders at every level, it offers significant value to local and regional authorities, particularly to senior officials responsible for tourism development. The platform's tools, resources, and network connections can enhance the effectiveness of daily operations while enabling long-term strategic planning.

The platform includes the following key features:

- 1. Access to Up-to-Date information and trends:** the platform provides a centralised repository of the latest data, trends, and insights in tourism, including a database of [good practices](#), e.g in sustainability, digitalisation, and crisis management and updates on tourism policy initiatives and funding opportunities, events and new publications.
- 2. Funding calls and support mechanisms:** through the platform, authorities can learn about a [wide range](#) of national and regional calls and support mechanisms, in addition to information on EU funding programmes, such as Horizon Europe, Cohesion Policy funds, European Investment Fund and European Bauhaus. They can also access detailed guidance on how to apply for grants and utilise financial resources effectively for tourism projects.
- 3. Networking and partnerships:** it is possible to register as an “ecosystem member” and to [contact other members](#). The platform also fosters collaboration among stakeholders by connecting local and regional authorities with industry experts, private sector actors, and other European regions. Moreover, it promotes cross-border cooperation and joint ventures to develop transnational tourism routes or themed experiences.
- 4. Training and capacity building:** the platform regularly organises workshops, webinars, and [training programmes](#) on key topics such as sustainable tourism practices, digital transformation and smart destination management, crisis preparedness and resilience strategies.
- 5. Benchmarking and performance monitoring:** through access to benchmarking tools such as the [EU Tourism Dashboard](#) and case studies (e.g. on [unbalanced tourism growth](#)), authorities can compare their region's performance against others across Europe and identify areas for improvement and success factors to replicate.

⁴ These pledge originate from 24 Member States, together with 10 other countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovia, Japan, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, the UK, Switzerland, and the USA)

6. Supporting inclusive tourism development: the platform promotes inclusive tourism strategies by sharing resources to improve accessibility for people with [disabilities](#), in cooperation with the [Accessible EU Resource Centre](#) and tools for engaging underrepresented groups in tourism initiatives.

Day-to-Day applications for regional and local authorities:

- **Strategic planning:** Utilise data and case studies to develop evidence-based tourism strategies.
- **Policy alignment:** Ensure local initiatives align with EU priorities, such as the Green Deal and Digital Decade goals.
- **Contingency planning:** Access tools and frameworks for addressing disruptions like health crises or environmental challenges.
- **Stakeholder engagement:** Leverage networking opportunities to collaborate with local businesses and international partners.

Local and regional tourism strategies

This chapter highlights a selection of Interreg Europe good practices that demonstrate how local and regional policies can optimise the social and economic benefits of tourism. Each practice offers a unique approach to addressing common challenges in the tourism sector, such as seasonality, community engagement, economic inclusivity, and the need to promote less-explored destinations. Collectively, these examples serve as valuable sources of inspiration for policymakers and practitioners seeking to design effective and sustainable tourism strategies.

Grouped into four thematic areas, these practices showcase **the importance of co-creation, alignment with local needs, effective public-private partnerships, and embedding tourism within the local socio-economic context**. They reveal how collaboration among stakeholders—ranging from local governments and businesses to community groups—can result in tourism models that generate long-term benefits, including job creation, cultural preservation, and balanced regional development.

From the co-creation of tourism strategies and products in Alma Vii (Romania), and Ibiza (Spain), to job creation initiatives like LouléCriativo in Portugal and Gastro Local in Romania, the practices illustrate how engaging local stakeholders can foster community pride and build sustainable economic opportunities. Similarly, examples like the Porikuu Festival in Estonia and the Visit Savonlinna platform in Finland highlight the transformative power of public-private partnerships in reducing seasonality and leveraging digital tools for regional revitalisation.

The influence of Interreg Europe projects on local and regional policies

Past Interreg Europe projects have contributed to improve co-creation and public-private partnerships. The [Cult-CreaTE](#) project helped the Italian region of Veneto involve private stakeholders in the design of calls for proposals to enhance tourism destinations and products. It also provided valuable insights for local authorities on integrating cultural and creative industries into the tourism value chain. More concretely, the **Regional Operational Programme 2014-2020 was modified with the introduction of a new measure and related calls for proposals dedicated to the reinforcement of the links between CCIs and the tourism sector**. The update of the ROP derives from the learnings of the project CultCreaTE, in particular when the Veneto Region representatives learned about the co-design and co-creation experiences developed by the Cypriot partner and about Spanish examples brought by ECTN.

Similarly, the [BRANDTour](#) project helped the Belgian region of East Flanders design strategies to enhance the competitiveness of tourism SMEs. The **revised Strategic Policy Plan for Tourism in East-Flanders 2020-2025 is developed around the themes of gastronomy, craftsmanship and open days at local producers' sites**. The objectives and strategic focus were redefined to be more focused on tourism entrepreneurship. Following the experience of the Ministry of Economy of Latvia and Region Tuscany in Italy, collective efforts to develop storytelling around regional food traditions were identified as a lever to promote food tourism.

Other practices, such as Val-de-Marne's Migrant Tour and East Flanders' Floricultural Tourism, demonstrate the added value of tourism rooted in local realities. This approach can in turn develop the promotion of intangible cultural heritage targeting both visitors and residents. An interesting example of this kind comes from Central Macedonia, where the lessons learnt from the partners in the project [CHRISTA](#) resulted in the **revision of the ROP and in particular of its Priority no 6, where the focus was shifted towards the promotion of intangible cultural heritage** (music, dance, myths, local cuisine, and digitization of archives) of the Region as well as to the **expansion and use of new technology and innovative tools**, in order to promote the local identity not only to visitors and tourists but also to the residents of the region. Depending on the context, tourism can therefore create opportunities for social inclusion, cultural exchange or industrial development.

These initiatives illustrate the value of designing tourism experiences that reflect the unique identity and aspirations of a region, while simultaneously fostering economic resilience and sustainability. By showcasing these diverse approaches, this chapter offers practical insights and transferable models for local and regional strategies to optimise social and economic benefits of tourism. Multiple recently initiated projects will provide additional good practices in the months to come. One can for example mention:

- [SLOWDOWN](#) aims at promoting slow tourism, a sustainable and enriching approach that fosters a deeper connection with destinations,
- [TIB – Tourism in Balance](#) help cities and regions address overtourism.
- [Tourism4SDG](#) focuses on the improvement of tourism policy instruments (PI) in the scope of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) of the United Nations,
- [JEWELS TOUR - JEWish hEritage as Leverage for Sustainable TOURism](#) is dedicated to preserving and enhancing the Jewish Cultural Heritage.

By prioritising inclusivity, sustainability, and collaboration, destinations can harness the full potential of tourism to deliver social and economic benefits for their communities.

Co-creation of tourism strategies and products

GOOD PRACTICE 1: Local co-creation of tourism strategies



The Mihai Eminescu Trust Foundation successfully implemented a project in Alma Vii, Transylvania, creating a model of sustainable local and regional development by restoring and interpreting its rich multi-ethnic cultural heritage. Focusing on Romanian and Roma communities, the initiative transformed the Saxon fortification into a key economic and social resource, fostering sustainable income through heritage valorisation. Restored spaces now house exhibitions showcasing local multi-ethnic culture, with community-donated artefacts enhancing the interpretation. Regular co-creation meetings engaged nearly 400 residents.

The project demonstrated the power of co-creating tourism strategies with local populations, fostering community pride, and generating economic opportunities. A Centre for the Interpretation of Traditional Culture was opened, traditional crafts were revitalised, and a management plan for the heritage site was developed. Enhanced by multidisciplinary research, a documentary, and digital tools, Alma Vii now attracts both tourists and potential new residents, ensuring its sustainable growth and preserving its cultural legacy.



Image source: [RAMSAT project](#)

[Click here to find out more about this practice.](#)

GOOD PRACTICE 2: Local co-creation of creative tourism experiences

The **Ibiza Creativa** programme, launched by the Ibiza Island Council, is a prime example of co-creating a local tourism strategy that addresses the island's reliance on seasonal tourism. Leveraging Ibiza's unique cultural DNA, the initiative focuses on sustainable tourism, particularly during the mid and low seasons, by revitalising its tangible and intangible heritage.

Local stakeholders, including residents, SMEs, and creative professionals, were actively engaged through training and workshops to co-create over 35 authentic creative tourism experiences. This collaborative process, supported by the [Creative Tourism Network](#), ensured that the offerings reflected the island's identity while aligning with international market standards.

The programme strengthened community ties, diversified tourism offerings, and empowered SMEs, especially in the creative and cultural industries. It serves as a model for regions seeking sustainable tourism strategies.

[Click here to find out more about this practice.](#)

Job generation aligned on local needs and aspirations

GOOD PRACTICE 3: Creative tourism generating high quality jobs

Loulé district in Faro, Portugal, has developed a pioneering approach to tourism policies through the "[LouléCriativo](#)" initiative, which focuses on crafts and creative activities. The objective is to revitalise the historic city centre, reduce reliance on sun-and-beach tourism, and extend activity into the low season. The initiative capitalises on Loulé's rich cultural heritage.

A local network of craftsmen, artists, festival organisers, SMEs, and public bodies co-created diverse creative tourism experiences, showcased on a digital platform. This approach revived traditional trades through "[ECO](#)" craft spaces and the internationally renowned Loulé Design Lab, transforming the crafts sector into a global creative hub.



Image source: [Loulé Criativo](#)

Direct beneficiaries include SMEs, particularly in traditional crafts such as coppersmithing and luthiery, with measurable impacts on training, job creation, economic growth, and inclusivity. LouléCriativo fosters a year-round, authentic tourism offer, linking stakeholders to promote the destination while empowering vulnerable communities and enhancing heritage preservation.

[Click here to find out more about this practice.](#)

GOOD PRACTICE 4: Tourism income for private households and local producers



Image source: [Gastro Local](#)

[Gastro Local](#) is a remarkable initiative showcasing how areas can attract tourism by offering authentic culinary experiences while supporting local communities. Originating in Vama Buzăului, Romania, the project enables private households to serve meals prepared with traditional ingredients in compliance with hygiene standards, providing visitors with a rustic yet safe gastronomic experience.

Gastro Local has effectively spread tourism from crowded urban areas to rural regions. It also supports sustainable practices by encouraging the use of locally sourced ingredients, benefiting both local producers and residents.

This initiative demonstrates how traditional gastronomy can become a unique attraction while creating economic opportunities for private households as well as local producers of foodstuff.

[Click here to find out more about this practice.](#)

Effective public-private partnerships

GOOD PRACTICE 5:

Involving companies actively in online tourism platform



Savonlinna, located in the region of Saimaa in southeast Finland, is known for its stunning lake landscapes and rich cultural heritage. Like many remote areas, the municipality faces challenges such as population decline and economic dependency on seasonal tourism.

[Visit Savonlinna](#) is an innovative public service platform designed to promote local businesses and services in a region facing population decline. Using adaptive website design and open interfaces, it allows over 400 companies to manage and update their own content directly, reducing maintenance costs and ensuring rich, up-to-date information. By leveraging crowdsourcing and distributing management responsibilities among collaborators, the platform mobilises local businesses to reach a wide audience. The integration of #SaimaaMoments further boosts visibility and engagement.



Image source: [Visit Savonlinna](#)

With over 400,000 annual page views for Visit Savonlinna and 550,000 for its event calendar, the platform has proven its success in connecting local businesses with domestic and international visitors. This low-cost, community-driven solution demonstrates how digital tools can revitalise remote areas, fostering sustainable tourism and supporting local economies.

[Click here to find out more about this practice.](#)

GOOD PRACTICE 6: Joint efforts to reduce seasonality in tourism



TIB



Image source: [Porikuu](#)

The [Porikuu \("Mud Month"\) Festival](#) in Northwestern Estonia is an inspiring example of how festivals can tackle tourism seasonality and redirect visitors to lesser-known areas. Held annually in October, during the low season, the festival offers diverse activities such as hikes, workshops, and cultural performances.

By engaging over 100 local tourism businesses and cultural organisers, the initiative fosters strong public-private cooperation. Its success demonstrates how collaborative efforts can revitalise off-peak tourism.

Supported by the EU Leader Programme, the Porikuu Festival has drawn over 7,000 participants, proving the effectiveness of festivals in attracting tourists during quieter periods. It reduces seasonality, support local businesses, and promotes less-explored destinations. Key lessons include leveraging partnerships, embracing local culture, and tailoring events to diverse visitor interests.

[Click here to find out more about this practice.](#)

Tourism practices embedded in local social and economic realities

GOOD PRACTICE 7: Migrant Tours



The [Migrant Tour programme](#) in Val-de-Marne, Paris, uses tourism as a tool to empower migrant communities, foster social cohesion, and revitalise urban neighbourhoods. This initiative provides free training for residents, equipping them to become tour guides who share the cultural richness, migration histories, and diversity of their local districts. Delivered by institutions such as the University of Paris-Descartes and the Museum of the History of Immigration, the training includes memory transmission, storytelling, and tour design.



Image source: [STAR Cities](#)

Guides, many from migrant backgrounds, lead walking tours revealing Val-de-Marne's urban heritage, personal migration stories, and cultural traditions. This solidarity tourism initiative not only promotes mutual understanding between residents and visitors but also supports integration, employment, and social inclusion for migrants.

The programme, co-financed by Val-de-Marne County Council for €15,000, has trained five guides, launched 12 tours, and attracted nearly 100 visitors in its first year. It highlights the potential of bottom-up tourism to create meaningful connections, enhance local identity, and stimulate sustainable development in urban areas.

[Click here to find out more about this practice.](#)

GOOD PRACTICE 8: Floricultural Tourism: collaboration of Industry and tourism



East Flanders has developed an innovative approach to industrial tourism by uniting the plant nursery and tourism industries. The initiative promotes the region's floricultural heritage while creating engaging tourist experiences that benefit local businesses within and beyond the tourism sector.



Image source: [STAR Cities](#)

The project led to the creation of maps featuring walking and cycling trails through the "flower region," accessible both in print and online. A flower tapestry event attracted 22,000 visitors, while 30 hotel, restaurant, and bar owners were trained as Floricultural Tourist Ambassadors. Eight ornamental growers developed and promoted guided company visits for tourists, enhancing direct engagement with the industry.

The collaboration has brought visibility to the plant nursery industry while enriching the local tourism offer. This project demonstrates how industrial tourism can benefit regional products and strengthen local economic and cultural ties, offering a replicable model for other regions.

[Click here to find out more about this practice.](#)

Policy recommendations

These recommendations focus on how local and regional authorities can maximise the social and economic benefits of tourism. They build upon successful practices from Interreg Europe projects and align with EU tourism policies, providing actionable strategies for fostering balanced, community-oriented tourism development.

1. Co-create tourism strategies with local communities

- **Engage Residents and Stakeholders:** Involving residents, SMEs, and cultural organisations helps develop more effective tourism development strategies. Co-creation fosters ownership, reflects the identity of the destination, and generates sustainable economic opportunities.
- **Embrace Diverse Approaches of Cultural Preservation:** Initiatives such as Migrant Tours in France show how integrating diverse cultural narratives into tourism enhances inclusivity and enriches visitor experiences while benefiting local communities.

2. Promote public-private partnerships

- **Leverage Local Businesses:** Visit Savonlinna (Finland) and the Porikuu Festival (Estonia) provide examples of well-functioning collaborations between public institutions and private actors to design and manage tourism initiatives. Digital platforms and joint marketing efforts can optimise resource use and increase visibility for local attractions.
- **Adopt Creative Approaches to Enhanced SME Competitiveness:** A wide range of measures can help improve support tourism SMEs. Public authorities can compare cost-benefit ratios of different initiatives. Storytelling around food traditions is an example of cost-efficient support to SMEs involved in gastronomy tourism.

3. Align tourism development with local realities

- **Integrate Tourism with Local Economies:** Initiatives such as Gastro Local (Romania) and Floricultural Tourism (Belgium) demonstrate how embedding tourism within existing economic activities creates shared benefits. Prioritising partnerships that link tourism with sectors such as agriculture, crafts, and creative industries helps optimise social and economic benefits.
- **Target Underserved Areas:** Redirecting visitors to lesser-known regions, as shown by the Porikuu Festival, can alleviate overtourism in urban hubs and promote equitable regional development.

4. Capitalise on EU policies and funding

- **Use EU Tourism Tools:** Leverage frameworks like the Tourism Transition Pathway and the European Tourism Agenda 2030 to access funding, skills development programmes, and digitalisation initiatives. These tools can support green transitions, improve SME competitiveness, and strengthen community-oriented tourism.
- **Tap into Knowledge Platforms:** The EU Tourism Platform offers essential resources for benchmarking, peer learning, and partnership building, enabling local authorities to adopt best practices and align their strategies with EU priorities.

5. Foster sustainable and inclusive tourism

- **Encourage Green and Accessible Tourism:** Eco-friendly practices and services for underrepresented groups, such as seniors and travellers with reduced mobility can be components of strategies to establish a destination within specific market niches. Interreg Europe Projects such as [STAR Cities](#) and [Cult-CreaTE](#) provide actionable insights into creating tourism offers that are inclusive and environmentally responsible.
- **Monitor and Evaluate Impacts:** Implement tools to measure tourism's economic, social, and environmental effects. Regular evaluations ensure that tourism remains a driver of sustainable development while addressing challenges like seasonality and resource overuse.

Sources and further information

The Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform experts provide a tailored set of resources, contacts, or in-depth analyses to help you find the answers you are looking for. Explore our services that can help you solve regional policy challenges.

Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform information

- Policy brief on [Sustainable tourism: strategies to counteract overtourism](#)
- Policy brief on [Digital solutions in the field of cultural heritage](#)
- Policy brief on [Regional branding for SME success](#), addressing agritourism.
- Policy brief on [Sustainable tourism](#)
- E-workshop recording on [Sustainable and competitive tourism](#)
- Story on [Solidarity tourism – different ways to discover a territory](#)
- Story on [Rural tourism based on local heritage and gastronomy](#)
- Story on [Regional strategies boosting tourism through heritage](#)

Other sources

- [Overview of EU tourism policy](#)
- [Multi-annual EU Work Plan of the European Agenda for Tourism 2030](#)
- [Single platform for the EU Tourism Transition Pathway](#)
- [PANTOUR: Pact for Next Tourism Generation Skills](#)
- [OECD Tourism Trends and Policies 2024](#)

Interreg Europe Programme

Interreg Europe is an interregional cooperation programme co-financed by the European Union. With a budget of 379 million euros for 2021-2027, Interreg Europe helps local, regional and national governments across Europe to develop and deliver better policies through interregional cooperation projects and its Policy Learning Platform services. The programme promotes good practice sharing and policy learning among European regions in 36 countries – the 27 Member States, as well as Norway, Switzerland and the 7 EU candidate countries. Interreg Europe contributes to the EU cohesion policy together with the other European Territorial Cooperation programmes known as Interreg.

Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform

The Policy Learning Platform is the second action of the Interreg Europe programme. It aims to boost EU-wide policy learning and builds on good practices related to regional development policies.

The Platform is a space where the European policy-making community can tap into the know-how of regional policy experts and peers. It offers information on a variety of topics via thematic publications, online and onsite events, and direct communication with a team of experts.

Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform expert services

Our team of experts provide a set of services that can help you with regional policy challenges. Get in contact with our experts to discuss the possibilities:



Via the [policy helpdesk](#), policymakers may submit their questions to receive a set of resources ranging from inspiring good practices from across Europe, policy briefs, webinar recordings, information about upcoming events, available European support and contacts of relevant people, as well as matchmaking recommendations and peer review opportunities.



A [matchmaking session](#) is a thematic discussion hosted and moderated by the Policy Learning Platform, designed around the policy needs and questions put forward by the requesting public authority or agency. It brings together peers from other European regions to present their experience and successes, to provide inspiration for overcoming regional challenges.



[Peer reviews](#) are the deepest and most intensive of the on-demand services, bringing together peers from a number of regions for a two-day work session, to examine the specific territorial and thematic context of the requesting region, discuss with stakeholders, and devise recommendations.

Discover more: www.interregeurope.eu/policylearning

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