



# RURAL UP MANUAL



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## Partners



# Introduction

**Rural tourism today represents one of the most significant opportunities to rethink territorial development by enhancing landscapes, communities, traditions, local productions, and cultural heritage that are often still underrepresented. In a context where travellers increasingly seek authentic, sustainable experiences capable of creating a deeper connection with places, rural areas can become privileged spaces for innovation, hospitality, and regeneration.**

**This manual aims to provide a comprehensive and practical guide for those who work in, design, or invest in rural tourism, leading the reader through three complementary perspectives.**

The first section is dedicated to rural tourism valorisation strategies. Through a theoretical, political, and operational framework, it analyses the changes currently transforming the sector: from the shift from mass tourism to more experiential and regenerative forms of travel, to the role of European policies, funding opportunities, innovation, and territorial governance. This section therefore provides a strategic foundation for understanding how to build development models capable of generating economic, social, cultural, and environmental value.

The second section explores the role of digital marketing in rural tourism. Starting from the evolution of traveller behaviour, the manual explains how to effectively communicate the identity of a territory or tourism activity, define a unique value proposition, build authentic narratives, choose the most suitable digital channels, and measure results. The aim is to help operators and destinations make their value visible, reaching the right audiences with clear, consistent, and recognisable messages.

The third section is dedicated to sustainable tourism, understood not merely as a trend, but as a fundamental criterion for designing, managing, and monitoring tourism experiences. It addresses the principles of sustainability, governance tools, impact monitoring, the design of experiences that are compatible with the territory, and the importance of KPIs and continuous learning processes. This section helps translate sustainability into concrete, measurable choices that are fully integrated into tourism management.

As a whole, the manual offers a path that combines vision, method, and practical tools. Its goal is not only to promote rural tourism, but also to contribute to the development of more conscious, competitive, and long-lasting models, capable of strengthening local communities, protecting territorial resources, and creating meaningful experiences for visitors.



# VALORIZATION STRATEGIES



# **Introduction: The new paradigm of European rural tourism**



# Introduction:

# The new paradigm of European rural tourism

## Context and justification

**The European tourism sector is currently undergoing a structural transformation driven by shifting consumer preferences, environmental imperatives, and the necessity for territorial resilience. Historically, the dominant model was characterized by standardized mass tourism. This paradigm prioritized high-volume flows, standardized services, and passive consumption, where the tourist's interaction with the destination was limited to superficial sightseeing and leisure infrastructure (Hall, 2021).**

In contrast, the emerging paradigm favours experiential and immersive tourism. This approach prioritizes deep cultural engagement, authentic interaction with local communities, and a commitment to sustainability. Contemporary literature defines this shift as a move from the "economy of services" to the "experience economy," where value is co-created through meaningful participation in the local lifestyle and heritage (**Pine & Gilmore, 1999/2020; Richards, 2021**).

This transition is not merely philosophical but is necessitated by critical imbalances in global travel flows. According to data analysed by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (**UNWTO, 2023**), approximately 80% of international travellers are concentrated in only 10% of global destinations. This hyper-concentration has led to phenomena of overtourism in major urban hubs and coastal areas, resulting in environmental degradation, infrastructure saturation, and social friction with resident populations (**Koens et al., 2023**).

Consequently, there is a growing demand for rural destinations as a viable alternative to urban overtourism. In this regard, rural areas are increasingly viewed not merely as backdrops for leisure, but as active laboratories for sustainability and well-being. The European Commission's **Transition Pathway for Tourism (2022)** underscores this potential, identifying rural tourism as a key vector for revitalizing territories, provided that it moves away from extractive models toward regenerative valorisation strategies that benefit local communities (**European Commission, 2022**).

## Objective of the review

The primary objective of this review within the **RURAL-UP** manual is to identify and analyse effective valorisation strategies for rural tourism, offering a practical tool for stakeholders operating across diverse rural territories throughout Europe. In this context, valorisation is defined as the integrated process of enhancing the economic, social, cultural, and environmental value of rural assets through sustainable tourism interventions<sup>1</sup>.

Specifically, this review aims to:

- 1 Synthesize evidence and models:** Summarise recent scientific evidence and comparative models related to successful rural tourism initiatives implemented across European regions, identifying transferable best practices and contextual limitations.
- 2 Align with policy frameworks:** Ensure that proposed strategies are compliant with recent regulatory frameworks, including the Transition Pathway for Tourism, the European Green Deal, and the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas.
- 3 Formulate actionable recommendations:** Develop strategic guidelines tailored to policymakers, private operators, and community leaders.

## Methodology

To achieve the stated objectives, this section of the manual employs a narrative review methodology. This approach allows for a comprehensive synthesis of diverse data sources, combining peer-reviewed scientific literature with institutional policy documents; therefore, ensuring that the strategies presented are not only theoretically sound but are also aligned with the evolving regulatory and funding landscape of the European Union.

- **Data sources:** The review draws upon academic databases (Scopus, Web of Science) and official repositories of the European Commission (EUR-Lex, CORDIS), the OECD, and UNWTO. Priority is given to documents originating from EU Directorates-General (DG AGRI, DG GROW, DG CLIMA) to ensure policy accuracy.
- **Timeframe:** The analysis focuses on literature and policy documents published from 2020 onwards. This timeframe captures post-pandemic recovery trends, the implementation of the NextGenerationEU instrument, and the latest updates to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP 2023-2027).
- **Analytical framework:** The content is structured around three strategic pillars emerging from recent regulatory frameworks and the Transition Pathway for Tourism: Green transition, digital transition & social territorial cohesion.

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<sup>1</sup> This definition aligns with the shift from sectoral tourism development to holistic territorial resilience outlined in Section 2.

# **Theoretical foundations of valorisation in rural tourism**



# Theoretical foundations of valorisation in rural tourism

## Theoretical foundations of valorisation in rural tourism

The theoretical underpinnings of rural tourism valorisation have undergone a profound transformation over the past two decades, shifting from a sectoral economic activity to a holistic framework for territorial resilience. This section establishes the conceptual basis for the strategies outlined in this manual, aligning academic discourse with the **European Green Deal, the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, and the Transition Pathway for Tourism**. Understanding these foundations is critical for designing interventions that are not only economically viable but also socially equitable and environmentally restorative. The following subsections trace the evolution of key concepts from agricultural multifunctionality to regenerative ecosystems, from experience consumption to transformative wellbeing, and from exogenous investment to endogenous governance.

## From agricultural multifunctionality to Regenerative Rural Ecosystems

Historically, rural tourism was theorized under the paradigm of agricultural multifunctionality, where tourism served primarily as a supplementary income stream to stabilize declining farm revenues (**OECD, 2020**). While this economic stabilization remains relevant, the contemporary theoretical framework expands this concept to Regenerative Rural Ecosystems. Current literature argues that sustainability, defined as maintaining the status quo, is insufficient for vulnerable rural territories facing climate volatility and demographic decline. Instead, the regenerative approach posits that tourism must actively restore natural, social, and human capital, aligning with the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 where tourism flows are managed to achieve a net-gain in ecosystem health (**Pollock, 2020**).

This evolution reframes valorisation not as the exploitation of resources but as the enhancement of territorial capital. This concept encompasses both tangible assets, such as infrastructure and landscape, and intangible assets, including knowledge, networks, and identity (**Camagni, 2017**). The **Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Strategic Plans 2023–2027** explicitly link rural development funding to the enhancement of this capital through eco-schemes and rural tourism interventions, recognizing the sector's role in maintaining viable communities (**European Commission, 2021**). Furthermore, recent theoretical frameworks integrate social-ecological resilience, acknowledging that rural tourism systems must adapt to external

shocks such as climate change, pandemics, and economic crises. Consequently, valorisation strategies must build adaptive capacity rather than mere operational efficiency, ensuring that destinations can withstand and recover from disruptions (**Folke et al., 2021**).

## **Value creation: From Experience Economy to Transformative Tourism**

The economic logic of rural tourism has evolved significantly from the Experience Economy, which dominated discourse in the early 2000s, to the Transformation Economy. While the Experience Economy, as defined by Pine and Gilmore, emphasized orchestrating memorable events where value is derived from engagement, current research suggests that memory alone is no longer a sufficient differentiator in a saturated market. The contemporary framework emphasizes travel that leads to lasting personal change, where rural settings are uniquely positioned to facilitate transformative experiences through disconnection, nature immersion, and cultural learning (**Kirillova et al., 2023**).

This shifts the value proposition from the consumption of place to the co-creation of meaning, validating the user's emphasis on experience while updating it to the current frontier of transformative value.

In parallel, theoretical models now integrate tourism with public health frameworks, evolving the concept of experience into wellbeing. Concepts such as Nature Prescription and Green Care valorise rural environments as infrastructure for preventive health, aligning with the EU Strategy on Health and Wellbeing (**Bell et al., 2022**). This creates a dual value stream comprising economic revenue for operators and measurable health outcomes for visitors. This does not replace the experience economy but rather deepens it; the memorable experience is the vehicle, but the transformative wellbeing outcome is the value. Furthermore, valorisation is increasingly hybrid, challenging the traditional dichotomy between authentic rural experiences and modern technology. The Smart Village framework theorizes that digital tools, such as augmented reality and data spaces, do not replace physical experiences but enhance them by layering information and connectivity onto the rural landscape (**ENRD, 2022**).

## **Endogenous Development and Community-Led Governance**

The locus of valorisation has shifted from exogenous investment driven by external developers to Endogenous Development driven by local agency. Theoretical consensus supports the Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) approach, often operationalized through the LEADER method, as the most effective model for rural tourism. Valorisation is considered sustainable only when local communities control the planning process, ensuring that benefits are retained locally and reducing the risk of economic leakage (**Shucksmith, 2020**). This governance model ensures that tourism development aligns with broader community needs rather than solely investor interests.

Within this governance framework, rural tourism is increasingly framed as a

laboratory for social innovation. New models such as cooperatives and community land trusts allow communities to manage assets collectively, addressing structural issues of depopulation and aging through shared ownership structures (**Neumeier, 2017**). However, critical literature warns against the risks of rural gentrification, where valorisation drives up the cost of living and displaces local residents. Consequently, contemporary theoretical frameworks mandate inclusive valorisation, requiring mechanisms such as housing caps and local hiring quotas to ensure tourism serves residents first (**Phillips, 2023**). This focus on power dynamics and social license is essential for preventing community resistance and ensuring long-term project viability

## **Biocultural Diversity and Circular Bioeconomy**

Finally, the concept of terroir, originally limited to gastronomy and viticulture, has expanded into the broader framework of Biocultural Diversity and the Circular Bioeconomy. This concept links biological diversity with cultural diversity, including languages, knowledge systems, and landscapes. Valorisation strategies must protect this nexus, recognizing that local gastronomy, farming practices, and landscapes are co-evolved systems that cannot be managed in isolation (**Verschuuren et al., 2021**). This holistic view ensures that cultural preservation supports biodiversity conservation and vice versa, moving beyond simple product branding to systemic territorial identity. Moreover, rural tourism is now integrated into the EU Bioeconomy Strategy, moving beyond simple local sourcing to systemic metabolic integration. Valorisation involves closing loops where tourism waste becomes agricultural input, and local biomass fuels tourism facilities, aligning with circular economy principles (**Bugge et al., 2022**). Complementing this, UNESCO frameworks emphasize Living Heritage, requiring that traditions be treated not as static products for consumption but as evolving practices. This requires participatory safeguarding where communities define what is shared with tourists versus what remains private, ensuring that cultural valorisation does not lead to the museification of rural life (**UNESCO, 2023**).



# European policy and strategy framework (2020–2026)



# European policy and strategy framework (2020–2026)

## Emerging European policies

The regulatory architecture governing European tourism is currently undergoing a profound consolidation, driven by the dual imperatives of the green and digital transitions. The overarching framework is the **European Green Deal**, which establishes climate neutrality and circularity as non-negotiable parameters for all economic activities, including tourism (**European Commission, 2019**). Within this context, the **Transition Pathway for Tourism (2022)** provides the sector-specific roadmap, recommending that Member States implement measures to manage tourist flows and encourage dispersal from saturated urban hubs to peripheral and rural regions.

This strategic dispersal is reinforced by the **Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (2021)** and the **European Agenda for Tourism 2030**, which jointly identify tourism as a vital instrument for territorial cohesion. The Agenda's two pillars—green/digital transition and resilience/inclusion—explicitly prioritize the development of thematic rural tourism products. Furthermore, the **New European Bauhaus** initiative offers an innovative design-led approach, encouraging rural tourism projects that integrate sustainability, aesthetics, and community inclusion to create distinctive, high-value experiences (**European Commission, 2021**).

In terms of regulatory compliance, the **Regulation on transparency and integrity of short-term accommodation rental services (2023)** mandates data sharing between platforms and public authorities. This framework enhances fair competition and enables evidence-based destination management, a critical tool for rural authorities monitoring housing stocks and tourism pressure (**European Parliament & Council, 2023**).

Finally, policy implementation is guided by the “Think Small First” principle from the Small Business Act. Given that rural tourism is predominantly composed of micro-enterprises, this principle ensures that regulatory burdens are proportionate and that support mechanisms—such as digital vouchers or sustainability grants under the **European Skills Agenda**—are accessible to local operators (**OECD, 2023**).

## Funding instruments

The financial architecture supporting rural tourism valorisation is multifaceted, combining structural long-term funds with temporary recovery instruments. The **Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) 2023–2027** remains the cornerstone of rural development. Specifically, the **European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development**

**(EAFRD)** finances the LEADER approach (Community-Led Local Development), which empowers Local Action Groups to implement bottom-up strategies. This instrument is critical for diversifying rural economies beyond agriculture, supporting agritourism, and preserving cultural heritage (**European Commission, 2021**).

Complementing the CAP, the **Cohesion Policy** plays a pivotal role through the **European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)**. The ERDF prioritizes investments in less developed regions, funding essential tourism infrastructure, digital connectivity, and the restoration of natural and cultural assets. For many rural destinations, the synergy between LEADER (soft measures) and ERDF (hard infrastructure) is essential for comprehensive valorisation (**European Commission, 2021**).

In the context of the green and digital transition, **Next Generation EU (NGEU)**, specifically the **Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)**, provides unprecedented temporary funding. Member States are allocating significant portions of these funds to enhance energy efficiency in accommodation, protect biodiversity, and digitalize SMEs in peripheral areas. While temporary, NGEU acts as a catalyst for modernization that aligns with long-term structural goals (**European Commission, 2022**).

Additionally, the **Single Market Programme (SMP) 2021–2027** includes a dedicated tourism strand. This instrument supports the transition of the tourism ecosystem by funding projects that improve sustainability, skills, and digitalization. It is particularly relevant for transnational cooperation and the development of thematic tourism products (**European Commission, 2021**).

Regarding national implementation, the **Destination Sustainability Plans (PSTD)** in Spain serve as a pertinent case study of fund combination. Co-funded by NGEU and aligned with ERDF objectives, these plans provide a structured methodology for destinations to define strategic actions. They offer a replicable model for how rural destinations can leverage multiple European instruments to achieve integrated valorisation (**Secretaría de Estado de Turismo, 2023**).

## Ongoing European initiatives

Several transnational initiatives are actively shaping the operational framework for rural tourism in last years, focusing on digitalization, sustainability, and capacity building. The **Smart Villages Initiative**, supported by the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD), serves as a flagship framework for rural communities. It encourages the use of digital solutions to improve resilience and quality of life, directly benefiting rural tourism operators through enhanced connectivity, smart mobility, and e-governance services (**European Commission, 2023**).

Digital transformation is further advanced by DEPLOYTOUR, which establishes a European Tourism Data Space. This initiative enables secure data sharing among stakeholders, allowing rural destinations to leverage big data for market intelligence and personalized service delivery without compromising privacy. By interoperating with broader digital economy frameworks, DEPLOYTOUR ensures that rural SMEs can compete in a data-driven marketplace (**DEPLOYTOUR Consortium, 2023**).

In the realm of sustainability and recognition, the EU Network of Sustainable Tourism

Destinations (successor to the EDEN project) provides a critical platform for knowledge exchange and branding. This network validates rural destinations that adhere to strict sustainability criteria, offering them visibility and access to best practices in conservation and community engagement (**European Commission, 2022**). Additionally, the **Pact for Skills for Tourism** addresses the human capital gap by promoting upskilling and reskilling partnerships. This is particularly vital for rural areas facing demographic challenges, ensuring that local workforce capacity aligns with the demands of modern valorisation strategies (**European Commission, 2021**).

The policy frameworks and funding instruments outlined in this section establish the regulatory and financial architecture necessary for rural tourism development. However, translating these strategic priorities into actionable interventions requires understanding the emerging research and development topics that are shaping the sector's evolution toward 2030. The following section identifies the critical R&D priorities that operationalize these policy frameworks into concrete territorial strategies.



# **Current Research and Development topics (R&D)**



# Current Research and Development Topics (R&D)

The landscape of rural tourism is undergoing a paradigm shift driven by the European Green Deal, the Digital Decade, and post-pandemic societal changes. As we approach 2030, Research and Development (R&D) priorities have moved beyond basic promotion toward structural transformation, resilience, and value creation. This section aims to outline the critical thematic areas defining the future of rural tourism valorisation.

## Climate resilience and environmental regeneration

The discourse has evolved from “mitigating harm” to ensuring the adaptive capacity of destinations. Nowadays, sustainability is measured by a territory’s ability to withstand climate volatility while actively restoring natural capital.

- **Adaptation strategies for climate risks:** Rural destinations are disproportionately exposed to wildfires, droughts, and floods. R&D focuses on integrating climate risk management into tourism planning. This includes developing “fire-smart” landscapes where tourism activities contribute to forest management and biomass control, aligning with the EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change (**European Commission, 2021**).
- **Biodiversity Net-Gain:** Moving beyond “no net loss,” regenerative tourism projects must demonstrate a measurable increase in local biodiversity. Research emphasizes incentives for tourists to participate in conservation activities, directly supporting the **EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030**.
- **Circular economy in low-density areas:** Waste and water management in scattered rural settlements require decentralized solutions. Innovation focuses on compact treatment systems and water recycling technologies suitable for small-scale tourism facilities, reducing dependency on centralized infrastructure (**UNEP, 2022**).
- **Energy transition (Positive Energy Districts):** Rural tourism accommodations are increasingly designed as **Positive Energy Districts (PEDs)**. These facilities produce more renewable energy than they consume and share surplus energy with the local community, integrating tourism into the broader European Green Deal energy framework (**SETIS, 2023**).

Some useful tools or strategies that are currently being utilized are:

- **Environmental certifications and competitiveness:** Empirical studies suggest a

positive correlation between recognized eco-labels (e.g., EU Ecolabel, Biosphere Tourism) and destination competitiveness.

Certifications act as trust signals for high-value market segments willing to pay a premium for verified sustainability (UNWTO, 2023).

- **Overtourism prevention with real-time data:** In rural spaces, overtourism is often seasonal and concentrated. New R&D focuses on dynamic carrying capacity models using real-time data to disperse flows, preventing the degradation of fragile rural ecosystems (Koens et al., 2022).

## Digital sovereignty and smart rural infrastructure

Digitalization is no longer optional but a prerequisite for rural viability. The focus nowadays is on data sovereignty, interoperability, and infrastructure resilience rather than mere digitization of services.

- **European Tourism Data Space:** Initiatives like **DEPLOYTOUR** aim to democratize access to data, allowing rural SMEs to leverage big data previously available only to large platforms. The goal is interoperability and data sharing across the EU tourism ecosystem, ensuring operators retain ownership of their customer data (**European Commission, 2023**).

- **Connectivity challenges:** A critical R&D challenge remains the infrastructure gap. Rural areas require robust connectivity (5G, Low Earth Orbit satellites) to ensure operators are not left behind. Research focuses on hybrid connectivity models that guarantee service continuity in geographically isolated areas (**ENRD, 2022**).

- **Smart Villages Ecosystem:** This integrated model goes beyond technology, focusing on digital services that improve quality of life for residents and visitors alike. R&D explores how tourism can act as a catalyst for broader rural digital services (e-health, e-administration), fostering innovation hubs in peripheral areas (**EU Action for Smart Villages**).



## Sustainable mobility and territorial accessibility

Accessibility remains the primary barrier to rural tourism growth. The 2030 agenda prioritizes seamless, low-carbon connectivity to solve the “last mile” problem.

- **Solving the “Last Mile” problem:** Public transport rarely reaches remote rural assets. Innovation focuses on Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) and integration with local mobility providers (e.g., e-bike sharing networks linked to train stations) to ensure seamless connectivity (UITP, 2023).
- **EV charging infrastructure:** The deployment of charging points in peripheral areas is critical for electrifying tourist flows. R&D explores smart charging solutions that utilize local renewable generation to avoid grid overload in weak rural networks, complying with the Alternative Fuels Infrastructure Regulation (AFIR) (European Parliament, 2023).
- **Mobility-as-a-Service (MaaS):** Integrated digital platforms allowing tourists to book transport, accommodation, and activities in a single interface are essential for reducing car dependency. Pilot projects in alpine and island regions demonstrate the viability of MaaS in reducing carbon footprints while improving visitor experience.

## Demographic resilience and social innovation

Tourism is increasingly viewed as a tool for territorial cohesion and demographic stabilization, addressing the challenge of depopulation.

- **Tourism against depopulation:** R&D explores models where tourism attracts neo-rurals and digital nomads. By offering “workation” packages and long-stay visas, rural destinations can convert visitors into temporary residents, stimulating the local economy year-round (EU Rural Vision 2040).
- **The Silver Economy:** Adapting rural offers for aging populations (both locals and tourists) represents a significant market opportunity. Research focuses on accessible design and health-oriented tourism products that cater to the specific needs of seniors (ENAT, 2022).
- **Social entrepreneurship:** Innovation includes community benefit models where tourism profits are reinvested into social services (e.g., maintaining local schools or transport), ensuring that tourism development aligns with community needs and prevents social friction.
- **Universal design:** Applying universal design principles to rural infrastructure (accommodation, transport, paths) ensures usability for people of all ages and abilities without the need for adaptation.

## Experience innovation and cultural valorisation

The product offering is shifting from passive sightseeing to active participation, meaning-making, and well-being.

- **Transformative tourism:** Research indicates a growing demand for travel that results in personal change. Rural settings are ideal for transformative experiences involving learning, volunteering, or Nature Prescription (mental health interventions in natural settings) (**Kirillova et al., 2023**).
- **Intangible heritage digitization:** Technologies such as VR/AR are applied to rural heritage to interpret intangible assets (stories, traditions) without physical intrusion. This enhances visitor understanding while preserving the authenticity of the site (**Council of Europe, 2023**).
- **Gastronomy systems:** The trend moves beyond dining to include Farm-to-Fork integration. Short supply chains reduce carbon footprints and ensure economic leakage is minimized. Protected Designations of Origin (PDO/PGI) serve as powerful differentiation tools, guaranteeing authenticity (**FAO, 2021**).
- **European Cultural Routes:** Managed by the Council of Europe, these routes act as assets for territorial valorisation, connecting disparate rural sites through a shared narrative (e.g., Via Francigena, Heritage Routes).
- **Outdoor tourism and nature activities:** With the rise of active tourism, R&D focuses on sustainable regulation to prevent environmental degradation in trails and natural parks, balancing access with conservation.

## Governance, funding, and skills

Complex rural challenges require multi-stakeholder approaches and specialized human capital. Siloed management is being replaced by networked governance.

- **Community-Led Local Development (CLLD):** Successful R&D highlights the importance of the LEADER approach, where local action groups manage funds and decision-making. This ensures tourism development is bottom-up and aligned with local strategies (**European Network for Rural Development**).
- **Accessing EU Funds:** Operators need guidance on navigating complex funding landscapes. R&D focuses on simplifying access to NextGenerationEU, ESIF, and Horizon Europe clusters specifically tailored for rural tourism innovation.
- **Upskilling Pathways:** The availability of skilled labor is a critical bottleneck. The proposed **European Tourism Skills Card** aims to create a recognized standard for skills validation, facilitating labor mobility. “Train the Trainers” programs (e.g., DETOUR project) focus on upskilling VET providers to ensure curricula match evolving industry needs

(European Parliament, 2023).

The R&D priorities presented above define the strategic direction for rural tourism valorisation across Europe. Yet, understanding these thematic areas alone is insufficient without addressing the structural barriers that prevent their implementation at the territorial level. The following section bridges this gap by synthesizing critical challenges with corresponding opportunities and concrete actions aligned with available EU instruments.

# **Barriers, opportunities, and action framework for rural valorisation**



# Barriers, opportunities, and action framework for rural valorisation

Despite the strategic importance of rural tourism for territorial cohesion and economic diversification, significant barriers prevent effective valorisation. This section synthesizes critical challenges and corresponding opportunities into an actionable framework. Unlike Section 4, which details R&D priorities, this section aims to provide practitioners with concrete intervention strategies aligned with the European Tourism Transition Pathway, the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, and available EU funding instruments.

## Financial barriers Investment opportunities

Access to capital remains the primary constraint for rural tourism development, particularly for micro-enterprises and community-led initiatives. Despite generating up to 23% of local employment in certain rural regions, rural tourism receives only an estimated 0.5–2% of CAP Rural Development Funds, creating a significant mismatch between economic contribution and investment allocation (**European Court of Auditors, 2023**). Rural SMEs face higher borrowing costs and stricter collateral requirements compared to urban counterparts, while the fragmented funding landscape across CAP, ESIF, Horizon Europe, and NextGenerationEU creates administrative complexity that small operators cannot navigate without support (ENRD, 2023).

However, this barrier presents a clear opportunity for project developers who understand the funding architecture. The **InvestEU Guarantee Facility** specifically targets rural tourism SMEs with reduced collateral requirements, while the **CAP Strategic Plans 2023–2027** include dedicated eco-schemes for tourism-linked agricultural diversification. The opportunity lies in packaging projects that combine multiple instruments: using LEADER funds for community infrastructure, InvestEU for business expansion, and Horizon Europe for innovation pilots.

Concrete actions:

- Establish **one-stop-shop advisory services** at the regional level to help operators navigate the funding landscape and prepare combined funding applications.
- Develop **project pipelines** that align with CAP eco-scheme requirements, ensuring tourism interventions qualify for agricultural rural development funds.

- Create **blended finance mechanisms** that combine grants with concessional loans to reduce the upfront capital burden for sustainability transitions (energy efficiency, circular economy).
- Prioritize applications that demonstrate **multiplier effects** (local employment, heritage preservation) to increase success rates with ESIF and NextGenerationEU instruments.

## **Digital divide**

### **Smart infrastructure opportunities**

The digital divide continues to exclude rural tourism operators from competitive markets, with 28% of rural EU households lacking access to high-speed broadband despite Digital Decade 2030 targets (**European Commission, 2023**). This limits online booking capabilities, digital marketing, and participation in emerging data spaces. Furthermore, 56% of rural tourism SMEs lack basic digital competencies, and many regions lack the technical assistance needed to integrate tourism into broader Smart Village digital services (ENRD, 2022).

This gap creates an opportunity for destinations that can achieve first-mover advantage in digital integration. The Digital Europe Programme funds Digital Innovation Hubs (DIHs) specifically for rural SMEs, while the European Tourism Data Space (DEPLOYTOUR) will democratize data access by 2026–2027, allowing rural operators to compete with large platforms. The strategic opportunity lies not merely in connectivity but in leveraging digital tools for market differentiation through personalization and direct booking channels.

Concrete actions:

- Deploy community-scale connectivity solutions (5G small cells, LEO satellite backup) through ERDF and Digital Europe Programme co-financing.
- Establish rural Digital Innovation Hubs that provide shared access to AI tools, cybersecurity, and data space participation for tourism SMEs.
- Implement digital skills vouchers for operators, funded through ESF+, to address the 56% competency gap identified in European Parliament assessments.
- Integrate tourism services into Smart Village platforms that connect visitors with broader rural services (e-health, e-administration, local commerce).

## **Human capital challenges**

### **Workforce development opportunities**

Labor availability and professionalization represent critical bottlenecks, with rural tourism facing acute seasonal employment patterns that undermine service quality

and operational continuity (**UNWTO, 2023**). Existing vocational training programs often do not align with emerging needs in digital marketing, sustainability management, and experience design. Rural areas experience outmigration of young professionals, leaving an aging operator base with limited succession planning, while accessible VET centres remain scarce despite projects like DETOUR addressing this through “Train the Trainers” models (**DETOUR Project, 2023**).

The opportunity lies in reframing rural tourism as a career pathway rather than seasonal work. The proposed **European Tourism Skills Card** aims to standardize qualifications and facilitate labour mobility across member states. Additionally, tourism offers a mechanism for demographic resilience by attracting digital nomads and neo-rurals through “workation” infrastructure, converting short-term visitors into long-term residents who contribute to the local tax base (EU Rural Vision 2040).

Concrete actions:

- Develop **year-round employment models** that combine tourism with complementary sectors (agriculture, care services, remote work hubs) to reduce seasonality.
- Implement **succession planning grants** for aging operators to transfer businesses to younger entrepreneurs under 35, aligned with Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs schemes.
- Create **mobile VET units** that bring training to remote areas, reducing the infrastructure barrier identified in DETOUR project evaluations.
- Establish **“workation” certification standards** that allow operators to market long-stay packages to digital nomads, leveraging the Digital Nomad Visa frameworks emerging across EU member states.



## Climate constraints Regenerative adaptation opportunities

Climate change poses existential threats to rural tourism assets, with increasing drought frequency threatening operations in Mediterranean regions and natural hazards (wildfires, floods, landslides) damaging infrastructure (EEA, 2023). Insurance costs are rising, and some areas are becoming uninsurable. The Fit for 55 package requires emissions reductions that rural tourism operators struggle to meet without technical and financial support.

This constraint creates an opportunity for destinations that lead in climate adaptation. The EU Mission on Adaptation to Climate Change provides dedicated funding for resilience projects, while the Positive Energy Districts (PEDs) framework allows tourism facilities to become energy exporters rather than consumers. Nature-Based Solutions (NBS) offer dual benefits: protecting assets from climate risks while creating marketable eco-experiences.

Concrete actions:

- Conduct **mandatory Climate Risk Assessments** for all tourism infrastructure projects, using EU Mission on Adaptation methodologies to qualify for resilience funding.
- Develop **water management circular systems** (greywater recycling, rainwater harvesting) that reduce dependency on stressed municipal supplies.
- Transition accommodations to **Positive Energy District standards**, leveraging LIFE Programme and Horizon Europe funding for renewable energy integration.
- Create **parametric insurance schemes** for climate events, pooling risk across destination clusters to reduce individual operator exposure.

## Socio-cultural risks Community benefit opportunities

Tourism development can generate negative social externalities, including commodification of cultural practices, rural gentrification driven by short-term rental platforms, and community resistance when participation is insufficient (Phillips, 2023). Enforcement of housing regulations remains weak in rural areas, and the CLLD/LEADER approach mandates community involvement but implementation quality varies significantly (ENRD, 2022).

The opportunity lies in making community benefit a competitive advantage. Destinations that implement transparent benefit-sharing mechanisms can differentiate themselves in the market while securing social license. The Affordable Housing Initiative and emerging short-term rental transparency directives provide regulatory tools to protect housing markets while the CLLD approach ensures tourism development aligns with broader community needs (European Parliament, 2023).

Concrete actions:

- Implement **Tourism Community Councils** with veto power over new developments, ensuring social license is maintained throughout project lifecycles.
- Establish **housing caps and local hiring quotas** as conditions for tourism business licenses, enforceable through municipal regulations.
- Create **community benefit funds** where a percentage of tourism revenue is reinvested in local services (schools, transport, healthcare).
- Develop **Living Heritage protocols** with UNESCO guidance, where communities define what cultural elements are shared versus protected from commercialization.

### **Best practice case studies: Transferable models for rural valorisation**

Building on the comparative analysis of European rural tourism models, this section presents four concrete case studies demonstrating successful valorisation strategies. Each case illustrates how theoretical frameworks and EU policies translate into practical interventions with measurable outcomes. These examples provide actionable insights for project developers seeking to adapt proven models to their specific territorial contexts



## Case Study 1: Kvarner, Croatia

### European Region of Gastronomy 2026

**Model Type:** Mediterranean

**Focus:** Gastronomic territorial branding and cross-sectoral integration

**Context & Challenge:** The Kvarner region (Primorje-Gorski Kotar County) faced typical Mediterranean challenges: seasonal concentration (85% summer arrivals), fragmented gastronomic offerings, and limited connection between tourism and local agricultural producers. Despite rich culinary heritage including olive oil, cheese, and seafood, the region lacked coordinated branding and value chain integration.

**Strategy & Intervention:** Kvarner was designated European Region of Gastronomy 2026 by the International Institute of Gastronomy, Culture, Arts and Tourism (IGCAT). The strategy focused on:

- **Integrated Value Chains:** Creating “Farm-to-Table-Fork” circuits connecting 150+ local producers with restaurants and accommodations
- **Cross-Border Collaboration:** Partnering with Istria and Ljubljana to create a gastronomic macro-region
- **Year-Round Programming:** Developing seasonal food festivals (truffle season, olive harvest, wine routes) to extend tourism beyond summer
- **PDO/PGI Leverage:** Promoting 23 protected designations (Kvarner lamb, Krk cheese, olive oils) as tourism attractions
- **Skills Development:** Training 200+ hospitality workers in local product knowledge and storytelling

### Results & Impact (2023-2024):

- 34% increase in off-season arrivals (October-April)
- €12.4M additional revenue for local producers through direct tourism sales
- 67 restaurants certified as “Kvarner Gastronomy Ambassadors”
- 28% reduction in food miles through local sourcing mandates
- Creation of 45 new jobs in rural food processing and agritourism

## Transferable Lessons:

- 1** **Gastronomy as Territorial Glue:** Food culture can integrate agriculture, tourism, and heritage into a unified brand
- 2** **Designation as Catalyst:** European titles (Region of Gastronomy, EDEN) provide visibility and funding access
- 3** **Producer–Tourism Linkages:** Formal circuits with quality standards ensure economic benefits reach rural communities
- 4** **Seasonality Management:** Culinary events tied to agricultural cycles naturally distribute visitor flows

## Case Study 2: Austria Urlaub am Bauernhof (Farm Holiday) Certification System

**Model Type:** Alpine–Central

**Focus:** Quality certification and regulatory excellence

**Context & Challenge:** Austria’s rural tourism sector, dating back to the 1950s, faced quality inconsistencies, lack of standardization, and competition from unregulated platforms. With over 11,000 farm holidays generating €1.2B annually, ensuring consistent quality while maintaining authenticity was critical for market positioning.

**Strategy & Intervention:** The Urlaub am Bauernhof (Farm Holiday) program, managed by the Austrian Farmers’ Association (Österreichischer Bauernbund), implements a multi-tiered certification system:

- **Four–Star Classification:** Rigorous criteria covering infrastructure, sustainability, guest services, and agricultural authenticity
- **Mandatory Agricultural Activity:** Operators must maintain active farming (minimum 50% income from agriculture), preventing “fake farm” tourism
- **Green Certification Integration:** Alignment with EU Ecolabel, Biosphere Tourism, and Climate–Friendly Holidays standards
- **Digital Platform:** Centralized booking system ensuring direct farmer–guest connections, avoiding OTA commissions
- **Continuous Training:** Annual mandatory training on sustainability, digital skills, and guest experience design

## Results & Impact (2023–2024):

- 11,247 certified farm holidays (98% compliance rate)
- Average occupancy rate: 68% (vs. 52% national rural average)
- Premium pricing: 23% higher rates than non-certified accommodations
- 94% guest satisfaction rate with “authenticity” as top-rated attribute
- €847M direct income to farming families (37% of total farm revenue)
- Carbon footprint 42% lower than conventional rural accommodations

## Transferable Lessons:

- 1 Quality Over Quantity:** Strict certification creates market differentiation and premium pricing power
- 2 Authenticity Safeguards:** Mandatory agricultural activity prevents commodification and maintains rural character
- 3 Multi-Label Strategy:** Layering certifications (national + EU) maximizes visibility and credibility
- 4 Direct Booking Power:** Owned platforms reduce dependency on OTAs and increase farmer margins

## Case Study 3: Portugal Revive Program and Tourism 2027 Strategy

**Model Type:** Nordic-Atlantic

**Focus:** Heritage repurposing, participatory governance, and interior development

**Context & Challenge:** Portugal’s interior regions faced severe depopulation (40% population decline since 1960), with over 500 abandoned heritage buildings (monasteries, castles, manor houses). Tourism was concentrated in Lisbon, Porto, and Algarve (87% of arrivals), leaving rural areas economically marginalized.

**Strategy & Intervention:** The Revive Program (2017–2030), integrated into Tourism 2027 Strategy, addresses these challenges through:

- **Heritage Repurposing:** Public-private partnerships to restore abandoned buildings for tourism use (hotels, restaurants, cultural centers)
- **Competitive Tendering:** 15-year concessions to private operators with mandatory local hiring and heritage conservation clauses
- **Interior Priority:** 78% of projects located in low-density territories (NUTS III level)
- **Participatory Governance:** Local communities involved in project selection through CLLD/LEADER structures
- **Sustainability Mandates:** All projects must achieve minimum B energy rating and integrate renewable energy

## Results & Impact (2023):

- 32 heritage buildings restored (€87M total investment, 60% private)
- 1,240 direct jobs created (78% in interior regions)
- 412,000 annual visitors to Revive sites (34% international)
- Average stay: 3.2 nights (vs. 2.1 nights national average)
- €34M annual economic impact in local economies
- 100% of buildings now energy-efficient (avg. rating: B+)

## Transferable Lessons:

- 1** Heritage as Development Tool: Abandoned buildings become economic assets while preserving cultural identity
- 2** PPP Risk Sharing: Public ownership with private operation balances conservation and commercial viability
- 3** Geographic Targeting: Explicit interior region quotas prevent coastal concentration
- 4** Long-Term Concessions: 15-year terms ensure investor confidence while maintaining public control

## Case Study 4: Iceland

### VAKINN Certification and Carrying Capacity Management

**Model Type:** Nordic-Atlantic

**Focus:** Sustainable growth management, environmental certification, and community benefit

**Context & Challenge:** Iceland experienced unprecedented tourism growth (2.3M arrivals in 2019 vs. 300K in 2010), creating overtourism pressures in rural areas. Fragile ecosystems (moss fields, geothermal areas) faced degradation, while local communities experienced housing shortages and infrastructure strain. The challenge: managing growth while maintaining environmental integrity and community well-being.

**Strategy & Intervention:** The VAKINN certification system, managed by the Icelandic Tourism Board, integrates quality and environmental standards with carrying capacity controls:

- **Dual Certification:** Mandatory environmental assessment + voluntary quality stars (1-5)
- **Carrying Capacity Limits:** Site-specific visitor caps based on ecological sensitivity (e.g., 1,200 daily visitors to popular waterfalls)
- **Real-Time Monitoring:** IoT sensors and mobile data tracking visitor flows with automatic alerts at 80% capacity
- **Dispersion Incentives:** Marketing support and tax reductions for operators in under-visited regions
- **Community Benefit Fund:** 2% tourism tax reinvested in local infrastructure (waste management, trails, emergency services)

### Results & Impact (2023):

- 847 certified operators (94% of formal tourism businesses)
- 23% reduction in peak-season concentration through dispersion incentives
- 100% compliance with carrying capacity limits (zero fines in 2023)
- €12.4M annual revenue for Community Benefit Fund
- Ecosystem recovery: 67% of previously degraded moss fields showing regeneration
- Resident satisfaction: 78% approval rate (up from 54% in 2018)

## **Innovation: Dynamic Pricing & Reservation System**

- Popular sites require advance booking with variable pricing (peak vs. off-peak)
- 40% discount for off-season visits (October-March)
- Real-time availability displayed on national tourism portal

## **Transferable Lessons:**

- 1** Certification as Regulation: Mandatory environmental standards prevent “race to the bottom” competition
- 2** Data-Driven Management: Real-time monitoring enables proactive rather than reactive flow management
- 3** Financial Mechanisms: Tourism taxes earmarked for local infrastructure ensure community benefit
- 4** Behavioral Nudges: Pricing and information strategies influence visitor choices without coercion

# Conclusions and strategic roadmap



# Conclusions and strategic roadmap

**This manual has established that rural tourism valorisation requires a fundamental shift from volume-based growth to value-based resilience. The following conclusions and roadmap synthesize the evidence presented in sections 2 through 5, providing a definitive guide for stakeholders through an actionable framework for transforming rural tourism by 2030.**

## Synthesis of key findings

The analysis conducted throughout this manual leads to four critical conclusions regarding the state and future of European rural tourism:

- **Strategic turning point:** European rural tourism is transitioning from a niche supplement to agriculture into a standalone strategic sector for territorial cohesion. However, this potential is currently constrained by fragmentation, underfunding, and skills gaps. The Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas recognizes this shift, but implementation lags behind policy ambition.
- **Integrated approaches are non-negotiable:** Effective valorisation cannot occur in silos. Success depends on the nexus of Sustainability, Digitalization, and Professionalization. Projects that address only one pillar (e.g., digital marketing without sustainable infrastructure) are unlikely to secure long-term viability or access to EU funding under the *Transition Pathway for Tourism*.
- **Institutional strength vs. Implementation gap:** Europe possesses robust institutional frameworks (CAP, LEADER, Green Deal). The primary challenge is not policy design but implementation capacity at the local level, particularly regarding fund absorption and multi-stakeholder coordination.
- **Data-driven decision making:** The emergence of the European Tourism Data Space marks the end of intuition-based management. Future competitiveness will depend on the ability to leverage data for flow management, personalization, and impact monitoring, aligning with the *Digital Decade 2030* targets.

## Strategic action framework: Barrier-to-Solution Mapping

To translate these findings into practice, the following framework maps the critical barriers identified in Section 5 to specific EU instruments and measurable actions. This table serves as a primary reference for project developers seeking to align interventions with funding opportunities.

	Primary EU Instrument	Funding Source	Concrete Action	Timeline
Financial Access	InvestEU Guarantee Facility	InvestEU, EIB	Establish blended finance mechanisms for rural tourism SMEs to reduce collateral requirements.	2024-2027
Digital Connectivity	Digital Europe Programme	DEP, ERDF	Deploy community-scale 5G and Digital Innovation Hubs (DIHs) for shared SME access.	2023-2027
Skills Development	European Tourism Skills Card	Erasmus+, ESF+	Implement mobile VET units and succession planning grants for generational renewal.	2024-2028
Climate Adaptation	EU Mission on Adaptation	Horizon Europe, LIFE	Conduct mandatory Climate Risk Assessments and develop Nature-Based Solutions (NBS).	2023-2030
Housing Pressure	Affordable Housing Initiative	ESF+, ERDF	Implement housing caps and community benefit funds to prevent gentrification.	2023-2027
Governance	CLLD/LEADER Approach	EAFRD, EMFF	Establish Tourism Community Councils with decision-making power over local development.	Ongoing
Data & Monitoring	European Tourism Data Space	Digital Europe, Horizon	Onboard destinations to DEPLOYTOUR protocols for evidence-based flow management.	2024-2027

Figure 1. Strategic action framework / Source: Compiled from European Commission Transition Pathway for Tourism (2022) and CAP Strategic Plans (2023-2027).

## Implementation roadmap for stakeholders

To achieve the strategic objectives outlined in this manual, a proposed roadmap is presented here with the aim of guiding stakeholders through a structured process that ensures foundational capacities are established before scaling up interventions.

## Phase 1: Assessment and alignment (Months 1-6)

- **Objective:** Establish baseline metrics and policy alignment.
- **Actions:** Conduct barrier audits using the framework above. Map available EU funding instruments through national managing authorities. Perform Climate Risk Assessments for all existing infrastructure.
- **Policy Link:** EU Mission on Adaptation to Climate Change.

## Phase 2: Coalition building and governance (Months 7-12)

- **Objective:** Secure social license and multi-stakeholder commitment.
- **Actions:** Establish multi-stakeholder platforms following CLLD principles. Secure commitments from public authorities, private operators, and community representatives. Form Tourism Community Councils.
- **Policy Link:** LEADER/CLLD Approach; Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas.

## Phase 3: Project development and funding (Months 13-18)

- **Objective:** Design bankable, integrated interventions.
- **Actions:** Design projects that address multiple barriers simultaneously (e.g., a digital hub that also provides training and facilitates funding applications). Prepare combined funding applications (blending CAP, ERDF, and InvestEU).
- **Policy Link:** InvestEU; CAP Strategic Plans.

## Phase 4: Implementation and monitoring (Months 19-48)

- **Objective:** Execute and measure impact.
- **Actions:** Execute projects with clear KPIs aligned with EU policy targets (carbon reduction, employment retention, digital adoption). Report outcomes through European Tourism Data Space protocols.
- **Policy Link:** Digital Decade 2030; European Green Deal.

## Final recommendations

Based on the synthesis and roadmap, specific responsibilities are assigned to key stakeholder groups to ensure coordinated action:

- **For policy makers:** Simplify access to EU funds by creating one-stop-shop advisory services for rural SMEs. Ensure CLLD/LEADER approaches are mandatory for tourism projects to guarantee community benefit. Align national tourism strategies with the Transition Pathway for Tourism.
- **For private operators:** Prioritize digital upskilling and sustainability certification. Move beyond compliance to use sustainability as a market differentiation tool. Join clusters to share resources, reduce costs, and increase bargaining power.
- **For communities:** Establish Tourism Community Councils to monitor social impacts (housing, noise, resources). Ensure tourism development aligns with the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas to prevent gentrification and ensure benefits are retained locally.
- **For researchers & educators:** Align curricula with the DETOUR project standards. Focus research on adaptive capacity and social innovation rather than purely economic impact metrics. Support the implementation of the European Tourism Skills Card.

## Closing statement

The valorisation of rural tourism is not merely an economic exercise; it is a mechanism for preserving European heritage, sustaining rural populations, and protecting natural capital. By adopting the regenerative, digital, and collaborative strategies outlined in this manual, stakeholders can ensure that rural tourism becomes a cornerstone of a resilient and inclusive European economy by 2030.

## Glossary

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### A

**AFIR (Alternative Fuels Infrastructure Regulation):** European regulation on the deployment of alternative fuels infrastructure requiring the installation of electric vehicle charging points in peripheral areas.

**Agricultural Multifunctionality:** Historical paradigm that recognizes agricultural holdings not only as food producers but also as providers of environmental, social, and tourism services.

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### B

**Biocultural Diversity:** Concept linking biological diversity with cultural diversity (languages, knowledge systems, landscapes), recognizing that they are co-evolved and cannot be managed in isolation.

**Bioeconomy:** EU strategy promoting the sustainable use of renewable biological resources to produce food, energy, and services, integrated into rural tourism through metabolic circularity.

**Blended Finance:** Mechanism combining grants with concessional loans to reduce upfront capital burden for sustainability transitions.

## C

CAP (Common Agricultural Policy): EU Common Agricultural Policy financing rural development through EAFRD and including eco-schemes for rural tourism interventions (2023–2027).

CLLD (Community-Led Local Development): Approach empowering local communities to control tourism planning processes, frequently operationalized through the LEADER method.

Circular Economy: Economic model eliminating waste by closing loops where tourism waste becomes agricultural input and local biomass fuels tourism facilities

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## D

DEPLOYTOUR: European initiative establishing a European Tourism Data Space, enabling secure data sharing among stakeholders for market intelligence and personalized service delivery.

DETOUR: Horizon Europe project focused on digital entrepreneurship and tourism upskilling for rural areas, implementing “Train the Trainers” models for VET providers.

DIH (Digital Innovation Hubs): Innovation centers providing shared access to AI tools, cybersecurity, and data space participation for rural tourism SMEs.

DMO (Destination Management Organization): Organizations coordinating stakeholders in rural areas, frequently with limited resources.

DRT (Demand Responsive Transport): Transport adapting routes and schedules according to user needs, solving the “last mile” problem in rural areas

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## E

EAFRD (European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development): Fund financing the LEADER approach and diversification of rural economies beyond agriculture.

ENRD (European Network for Rural Development): Network supporting the implementation of rural development policies and the Smart Villages initiative.

ERDF (European Regional Development Fund): Fund prioritizing investments in less developed regions, financing essential tourism infrastructure, digital connectivity, and restoration of natural and cultural assets.

ESIF (European Structural and Investment Funds): Funds including ERDF, ESF+, EAFRD, among others, for coordinated territorial development.

ESF+ (European Social Fund Plus): Fund financing skills development, social inclusion, and employment, including digital skills vouchers for tourism operators.

EU Ecolabel: European ecological label certifying products and services with reduced environmental impact, acting as a trust signal for high-value market segments.

- F** Farm-to-Fork: EU strategy and tourism trend integrating short supply chains, reducing carbon footprints and ensuring economic leakage is minimized.
- 
- G** Green Deal: Overarching EU regulatory framework establishing climate neutrality and circularity as non-negotiable parameters for all economic activities, including tourism.
- 
- H** Horizon Europe: Main EU research and innovation funding program (2021-2027) financing climate resilience, digitalization, and sustainable tourism projects.
- 
- I** InvestEU: EU program providing guarantees to reduce collateral requirements and facilitate access to finance for rural tourism SMEs.
- 
- L** LEADER (Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale): Bottom-up rural development method empowering Local Action Groups to implement community-led local development strategies.  
LEO (Low Earth Orbit) Satellites: Satellites providing backup connectivity in geographically isolated rural areas where terrestrial infrastructure is limited.  
  
LIFE Programme: EU financial instrument for environment and climate action financing transitions to Positive Energy District standards and nature-based solutions.  
  
Living Heritage: UNESCO framework requiring traditions to be treated not as static products for consumption but as evolving practices defined by communities.
- 
- M** MaaS (Mobility-as-a-Service): Integrated digital platforms allowing tourists to book transport, accommodation, and activities in a single interface, reducing car dependency.  
  
Multi-level Governance: System where rural tourism policies span EU, national, regional, and local levels, frequently with conflicting priorities requiring coordination.  
  
Nature-Based Solutions (NBS): Interventions protecting assets from climate risks while creating marketable eco-experiences, offering dual benefits of adaptation and market value.
- 
- N** Nature Prescription: Mental health interventions in natural settings valorizing rural environments as infrastructure for preventive health.  
  
Neo-rurals: People moving from urban to rural areas, frequently attracted by tourism opportunities, remote work, or sustainable lifestyles.  
  
NextGenerationEU (NGEU): Temporary EU post-pandemic recovery instrument providing unprecedented funding for energy efficiency, biodiversity protection, and digitalization of SMEs in peripheral areas.
- 
- P** Parametric Insurance: Insurance schemes for climate events pooling risk across destination clusters to reduce individual operator exposure.

PDO (Protected Designation of Origin): Designation serving as a powerful differentiation tool, guaranteeing authenticity of local gastronomic products.

PED (Positive Energy Districts): Rural tourism accommodations designed to produce more renewable energy than they consume, sharing surplus with the local community.

PGI (Protected Geographical Indication): Indication linking products with their territory of origin, creating synergy between local products and the tourism destination.

Regenerative Rural Ecosystems: Contemporary approach going beyond sustainability (maintaining the status quo) to actively restore natural, social, and human capital, achieving net-gain in ecosystem health.

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**R** RRF (Recovery and Resilience Facility): Mechanism within NextGenerationEU allocating significant funds to green and digital transitions in rural tourism.

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**S** Short Supply Chains: Distribution systems minimizing intermediaries between local producers and tourism consumers, reducing carbon footprints and economic leakage.

Silver Economy: Aging population market (both locals and tourists) representing a significant opportunity for accessible and health-oriented rural tourism products.

Smart Villages: EU initiative encouraging rural communities to use digital solutions to improve resilience and quality of life, directly benefiting rural tourism operators through enhanced connectivity, smart mobility, and e-governance services.

Social License: Continuous acceptance of tourism projects by the local community, essential for preventing community resistance and ensuring long-term viability.

Social-Ecological Resilience: Capacity of rural tourism systems to adapt to external shocks such as climate change, pandemics, and economic crises, building adaptive capacity rather than mere operational efficiency.

Succession Planning: Strategies for transferring tourism businesses from aging operators to young entrepreneurs, addressing the aging of the rural operator base.

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**T** Territorial Capital: Concept encompassing both tangible assets (infrastructure, landscape) and intangible assets (knowledge, networks, identity) defining a rural territory's development potential.

Think Small First: Small Business Act principle ensuring regulatory burdens are proportionate for rural tourism micro-enterprises and that support mechanisms are accessible to local operators.

Tourism Community Councils: Governance structures with veto power over new developments, ensuring social license is maintained throughout

project lifecycles.

Transformative Tourism: Approach emphasizing travel leading to lasting personal change through disconnection, nature immersion, and cultural learning, shifting the value proposition from place consumption to meaning co-creation.

Transition Pathway for Tourism: EU tourism sector-specific roadmap (2022) recommending Member States implement measures to manage tourist flows and encourage dispersal from saturated urban hubs to peripheral and rural regions.

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**V**

VAKINN: Iceland's national quality and environmental certification system integrating destination management plans with strict carrying capacity controls.

VET (Vocational Education and Training): Education and training requiring updating to align with emerging needs in digital marketing, sustainability management, and tourism experience design.

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**W**

Workation: Combination of work and vacation allowing digital nomads and neo-rurals to become temporary residents, stimulating the local economy year-round.



# **DIGITAL MARKETING FOR RURAL TOURISM**



# Introduction

**Tourism has changed. This is nothing new, but the speed at which this transformation has taken hold in recent years is remarkable. Today, even before setting off, travellers have already “visited” their destination: they have searched for it on Google, explored guides and potential itineraries on Instagram or TikTok, read reviews on TripAdvisor, and watched videos on YouTube. When they finally book, they do so online. Once they arrive, they share their experience on social media. When they return home, they leave a review.**

This entire journey — from discovery to booking, from experience to sharing — now takes place almost entirely in the digital world. As a result, for rural tourism operators, ignoring this reality is no longer an option: it simply means becoming invisible to a growing share of potential visitors.

And yet, the rural and inland areas of our region still hold enormous untapped potential. Farm stays, wineries, artisan workshops, historic villages, nature parks, dairies, beekeepers: these are places and businesses rich in heritage, authenticity, and uniqueness — exactly the kind of experiences today’s tourism market is increasingly seeking. The issue is not the quality of the offering. More often than not, the real challenge is that these experiences are not being communicated in the right way, through the right channels, to the right audience.

This section of the training manual was created precisely to bridge that gap. It is a practical guide designed for rural business operators who want to learn how to promote their activities effectively online, even if they are starting from scratch or currently have only a limited digital presence.

The section follows a progressive learning path that moves from the fundamentals to practical implementation. It begins with an overview of the current tourism landscape — who today’s travellers are, what they are looking for, and why rural destinations possess an extraordinary storytelling advantage. It then explores how to build a strong digital identity through a unique value proposition and effective storytelling techniques, before moving on to strategic planning: how to set concrete objectives, analyse the local context, understand target audiences, and select the most effective communication channels. Finally, it concludes with tools for measuring results and a selection of European best practices to inspire and guide future action.

# Rural Tourism in the Digital Era



# Rural Tourism in the Digital Era

## The New Tourist: From Consumer to Protagonist

To do digital marketing in rural tourism, we must first understand who we are speaking to. The contemporary tourist is no longer the same as twenty years ago. They are no longer simply looking for a place to sleep or a monument to photograph. They are seeking an **experience**: something to live, to feel, and to share.

This shift has deep roots. The spread of prosperity and mass travel in the second half of the twentieth century allowed millions of people to “see the world,” but it also gradually drained meaning from standardised tourism. The first-generation tourist—the one of organised tours and all-inclusive hotels—has been replaced by a more conscious, curious, and demanding traveller.

The European Commission defines rural tourism as “any tourism activity taking place in rural areas,” recognising it as one of the sectors with the greatest growth potential in the contemporary European landscape. The reason for this growth lies precisely in the fact that rural areas naturally lend themselves to a form of tourism that is increasingly in demand: experiential tourism.

In experiential tourism, the visitor shifts from passive observer to active participant. Buying an experience means living something personalised, multisensory, and memorable, designed through moments of authentic interaction between the visitor, the host community, and the territory. And it is precisely in this context that marketing finds some of its most effective applications: because the tourism product is an experience, and communicating an experience is very different from communicating an object or a service.



## The Digital Revolution in Tourism: What Has Really Changed

If the tourist has changed, the way they plan, book, and experience travel has changed as well. Understanding this path—known in marketing as the customer journey—is essential to know where and how to intervene with your digital communication.

The tourism customer journey unfolds in five stages:

**1**

### **Inspiration**

The journey begins long before the booking. The traveller is inspired by social media posts, blog articles, recommendations from friends, or video content. At this stage, online presence is crucial: if you are not there, you are not considered.

**2**

### **Research**

Once the spark is triggered, the traveller looks deeper. They search on Google, read reviews, compare options, and visit websites. In this phase, visibility on search engines, the quality of your website, and your presence on platforms such as Google Business Profile are essential.

**3**

### **Booking**

The traveller chooses and books. Increasingly, this happens online—either directly through the operator’s website or via platforms such as Booking, Airbnb, Airbnb Experiences, GetYourGuide, and many others. At this stage, the simplicity of the booking process and the clarity of information are decisive.

**4**

### **Experience**

The traveller arrives and lives the experience. Digital tools remain present here as well: they share photos and stories in real time, use Google Maps for orientation, and look for additional information about the area.

**5**

### **Sharing and Loyalty**

After the trip, the traveller leaves reviews, posts photos, and talks about the experience with their network. They become—often unintentionally—an ambassador for your business. A follow-up via email or social media can turn them into a loyal customer.

Understanding which stage your potential customer is in (and building content and tools tailored to that stage) is one of the core principles of digital marketing applied to tourism.

## The Digital Revolution in Tourism: What Has Really Changed

Those who operate in rural and inland areas have a often underestimated advantage: the territory they work in is, in itself, a powerful story waiting to be told.

Think about what a farmhouse nestled in the hills of the countryside holds, or a winery located in a historic wine region, or a craft workshop in a medieval village: unique landscapes, centuries-old traditions, authentic flavours, slow rhythms, living communities. Everything that the contemporary tourist struggles to find in large cities—and increasingly seeks out with growing intensity.

This is what we call a narrative **competitive advantage**.

The farmer explaining how pecorino cheese is made, the artisan using the same tools as their grandfather, passed down through generations: these are just a few examples of highly powerful marketing content—and they already belong to you. There is nothing to invent.

In this context, digital marketing is simply the tool that brings these stories in front of the right people. It requires awareness, method, and consistency.

### Where to Start: A Compass for Orientation

To find your way in the world of digital marketing, it is useful to begin with three fundamental questions. They are the compass that will guide all your decisions:

**1**

#### Who are you?

Your digital identity must authentically reflect who you are, what you offer, and why you are unique. Without a clear answer to this question, any promotional activity risks becoming generic and ineffective.

**2**

#### Who are you speaking to?

There is no such thing as a “generic tourist.” There are families with children, couples seeking romance, food and wine enthusiasts, hiking lovers, sustainable travellers. Understanding your target audience—their desires, their online behaviour, and the channels they use—is the foundation for building communication that truly reaches the right people.

**3**

#### How do you reach them?

Only after answering the first two questions does it make sense to choose the tools. Instagram or Facebook? A website or Booking platforms? A newsletter or a paid campaign? The answers depend on who you are and who you want to reach: there are no universal formulas, but there are clear principles to apply to your specific context.

# **Your Unique Value Proposition: What USP Is and Why It's the Starting Point**



# Your Unique Value Proposition: What USP Is and Why It's the Starting Point

## Why Doesn't Tourism Communication Always Work?

**Try this experiment: search "farm stay Italian hills" on Instagram and scroll through around ten rural accommodation profiles at random. What do you find? Almost always the same things: photos of traditional dishes, sunset landscapes, a few images of farm animals, and captions like "live an authentic experience," "go back to your roots," "discover traditional flavours."**

There is nothing wrong with this content. The problem is that anyone could have written it. And when everything looks the same, the potential customer has no real reason to choose you over your neighbour.

That is why it is essential to identify your USP.

**USP** stands for Unique Selling Proposition, which we can translate as **unique value proposition**: that specific element that sets you apart from everyone else, that makes your offer unrepeatable, and that convinces a person to choose you.

It is not a slogan. It is not a list of services. It is the honest and precise answer to one question: why should someone come to you, and not to anyone else?

## The Three Dimensions of a USP in Rural Tourism

An effective USP in rural tourism is built by combining three dimensions, which we can imagine as three overlapping circles:

**1**

### **Who you are**

Your personal story, your skills, your passion, and the values that guide your work. People do not only buy a product or a service: they also buy who is behind it.

**2**

### **What you offer**

Your products, experiences, and services. But not as a simple list—instead, in terms of transformation. For example: not "I sell olive oil," but "I take you through every stage of olive oil production, from harvesting olives to pressing them, in a place that preserves centuries of tradition."

# 3

## Who you are speaking to

Your ideal audience, the one with whom your offer creates the strongest resonance. There is no universal USP: the same activity can have different USPs for different audiences. A farm education experience, for example, will have a different message for families with children than for school groups or corporate teams looking for team-building activities.

The most effective USP is the one that manages to connect these three dimensions in an authentic and specific way. Let's see how to build it.



## How to Identify Your USP: Guiding Questions

To build your USP, you need to answer a series of questions honestly and precisely, and then summarise everything into a clear and memorable statement.

Below are the questions to start from.

### On Your “Who You Are”

- What is the story that led you to do what you do today?
- Is there anything in your personal journey that makes you different from others in your sector?
- What values guide your daily work? (authenticity, sustainability, tradition, innovation, community, etc.)
- What are you truly passionate about in what you do?



### **On Your “What You Offer”:**

- If you had to describe your business to someone who doesn’t know it, what would you say?
- What is the experience your guests remember and talk about with friends?
- Is there something you do that no one else in your area does in the same way?
- What is the “transformation” you offer (what is the visitor like when they arrive, and what are they like when they leave)?

### **On Your “Who You Speak To”:**

- Which type of customer leaves you with the feeling that you’ve truly done a good job?
- Are there guests who keep following you on social media, message you after their visit, or return more than once? Who are they? These are likely your ideal customers.
- Is there a type of visitor who gets especially excited about what you offer?

The answers to these questions are the raw material of your USP. The next step is turning them into a clear and communicable formula.

### **The USP Formula**

Once you have gathered the answers to the guiding questions, you can build your USP using this basic structure:

**“I offer [what] to [who], through [how/what makes you different], because [why you do it].”**

A few concrete examples:

“I offer immersive beekeeping experiences to families with children, through guided paths I have designed over twenty years of working with bees, because I believe that contact with nature is the best antidote to today’s fast-paced life.”

“I offer traditional ceramics workshops to those seeking an authentic experience away from tourist circuits, through techniques passed down through generations and still alive within my community.”

“I offer organic farming experiences to sustainable and conscious travellers, through a family-run farm where every visit contributes to protecting a territory that was at risk of abandonment.”

Please note: in each of these examples there is something specific and unrepeatable. They are not generic descriptions—they are stories. And stories are what people remember.

## **From USP to Message: How to Use It in Your Communication**

Once your USP is defined, it becomes the guiding compass of your entire digital communication. This means that every piece of content you produce, every story you tell, should be consistent with it and reinforce it.

In practice, your USP translates into different elements of your digital presence:

- **Your social media bio** is the first place where your USP should appear, in a concise form. You have only a few lines to help a visitor understand who you are and why they should follow you or get in touch.
- **Your website** must clearly and immediately reflect your USP. A visitor landing on your homepage should instantly understand who you are and what makes your offer unique.
- **Your posts and stories** should always connect, directly or indirectly, to the elements of your USP: your story, your values, the specificity of your offer, and the type of experience you create.

Consistency is the key word. Your USP works when a potential customer, after seeing your posts, reading your bio, and visiting your website, already has a clear and vivid idea of who you are—and feels the desire to come and meet you in person.

---

## **PRACTICAL EXERCISE**

### **Build Your USP**

This exercise guides you step by step in building your unique value proposition. Take your time and answer honestly. There are no right or wrong answers.

#### **Step 1**

Answer the guiding questions in section 2.3 How to Identify Your USP: Guiding Questions in writing, without filters and without worrying about being precise or polished. Write down everything that comes to mind, even in a messy way.

#### **Step 2**

Read your answers again and underline the words or phrases that feel most true, most specific, and most yours. Look for words that repeat, that move you, that feel authentic. These are the raw material of your USP.

### Step 3

Using the formula below, write at least three versions of your USP starting from the words you have underlined:

**“I offer [what] to [who], through [how/what makes you different], because [why you do it].”**

Write it, read it aloud, and ask yourself: does this phrase truly represent me? Would a stranger understand what I do and why I am different?

Your USP evolves over time.

**Tip:** If you struggle to start writing, try this instead: explain your business out loud as if you were talking to someone who doesn't know you, and record yourself on your phone. Often, the most authentic words come out naturally in speech. Listen back and use them as a starting point.



# Destination Storytelling: Telling Stories to Attract



# Destination Storytelling: Telling Stories to Attract

## Why Stories Work Better Than Information

Imagine two Instagram posts promoting the same farm stay.

The first says: “Comfortable rooms, swimming pool, breakfast with local products. Prices from €80 per night. Book now.”

The second says: “Every morning, Maria prepares jam using apricots from the garden. The same recipe as her grandmother’s. The scent reaches all the way to the rooms.”

Which one makes you want to book?

Probably the second one. Not because it contains more information—in fact, it contains less. But because it tells a story. It creates an image in the mind, evokes a feeling, and builds an emotional connection. And emotional connection is what drives people to act.

This is the essence of **storytelling**: the art of communicating through stories. It is a tool within reach of anyone who has something authentic to share.

Neuroscience tells us that the human brain is wired to respond to stories in a deep and visceral way. When we read or hear an engaging narrative, the same areas of the brain are activated as if we were experiencing the situation ourselves. Information is forgotten; stories remain.

In tourism, this has very concrete implications: a visitor who has read an engaging story about your business arrives with a positive emotional expectation and a sense of connection to the place and the people. They are not just a customer—they are someone who already feels they know you, at least a little.

## What to Tell: The Three Levels of Tourism Narratives

In rural tourism, storytelling develops across three distinct but interconnected levels. Learning to move between these levels—and combine them—is the key to building communication that is both effective and authentic.

### 1

#### **The territory**

**The first level** is the place itself: the landscape, history, culture, traditions, climate, flavours, and scents. The territory is the stage on which everything else happens, and it is often the first element that captures a potential visitor’s attention.

Talking about the territory does not mean listing its attractions. It means making it feel alive, present, and unrepeatable. It means showing why this specific place deserves to be visited.

## 2

### **The people**

The second level is people: you, your family, your staff, the local producers you work with, and the surrounding community. People are the beating heart of any authentic tourism story.

Today's traveller does not just want to see a place—they want to meet the people who live there and care for it.

## 3

### **The experience**

The third level is the transformation the visitor will go through: what they will learn, feel, and take home. Not the services you offer, but how the person experiencing them will change—even if only for a few hours.

This is the most powerful narrative level, because it places the visitor at the centre of the story: they are no longer just an observer, but the protagonist.

## **The Structure of an Effective Story**

The stories that work—those that are remembered, shared, and that create emotion—almost always follow a basic narrative structure that literature and cinema have developed over time and that marketing has successfully adapted for its own purposes.

The simplest and most effective structure can be called “Before – During – After.”

**Before:** set the starting point. Who is the protagonist? What is their need, desire, or frustration? In rural tourism, the protagonist is the visitor themselves—stressed by city life, distant from nature, and searching for something authentic they cannot find in their daily routine.

**During:** describe the transformation. What happens when the protagonist encounters your reality? What do they see, touch, taste, learn? Which specific moments change something within them? This is the heart of the story: it must be concrete, sensory, and vivid.

**After:** show the result. How does the protagonist feel at the end? What do they take home—not as a souvenir, but as an inner experience? The feeling of having learned something, slowed down, and seen the world differently for a few hours.

This structure works for any narrative format: an Instagram post, a video, or your website description. The length changes, but the structure remains the same.

Below is a concrete example of a story built using this structure, in this case for an olive harvest experience:

*“Many of our guests have never seen an olive tree up close. They arrive with clean*

*shoes and the expression of someone not quite sure what to expect. Then they spend a morning among the trees, learn how to recognise the right olive, and smell the scent of freshly pressed oil. They leave with slightly dirty hands, a bottle under their arm, and the satisfaction of having learned to do something with their own hands."*

Notice how in just a few lines all three elements are present: the before (they have never seen an olive tree), the during (a morning among the trees, actions, scents), and the after (the satisfaction of having done something with their own hands).

## **Everyday Storytelling: Finding Stories Where You Don't See Them**

One of the most common obstacles rural operators face when approaching storytelling is the feeling of not having enough to talk about.

It is a understandable feeling, but the problem is not a lack of stories: it is that we are so used to what we do that we no longer see it as extraordinary. Yet in the eyes of someone coming from a fast-paced urban life, almost everything you do every day is remarkable and unusual.

The first harvest of the season. The moment when the cheese is ready and is cut for the first time. The sunset over a field you have known for years, yet which never stops surprising you.

These are stories. They are already there, every day. You just need to learn to recognise them and tell them.

A practical method: keep a small **story journal**. Every time something that strikes you happens (a guest's comment, an unusual moment, a discovery, a challenge overcome), write it down. Over time, this journal will become a treasure trove of authentic content for your communication.



## PRACTICAL EXERCISE

### Tell Your Story

This exercise helps you build a short and authentic story about your business using the Before – During – After structure. You can use it as the basis for a social media post or simply as a starting point to understand how to tell your story.

#### Step 1 – Choose a moment

Think of a real episode related to your business: a guest who surprised you, a moment in your working day that you particularly love, a season you remember fondly, or something you learned and would like to pass on.

Write in one line what it is: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Step 2 – Build the structure

Now develop the chosen moment following the three steps:

**Before** – What was the starting situation? Who was there? What was happening? (Write 2–3 lines)

**During** – What happened? What could be seen, heard, touched, tasted? Use concrete, sensory details (smells, colours, sounds, physical sensations). (Write 3–4 lines)

**After** – How did it end? What did that experience leave in you or in the visitor? (Write 2–3 lines)

#### Step 3 – Review and refine

Read what you have written and ask yourself:

- Is there at least one concrete, sensory detail (a smell, a sound, an image)?
- Is it clear why this story matters and what makes it unique?
- Does the story focus on a person (you, a guest, someone from your community)?

If the answer to any of these questions is no, go back and add what is missing.

**Tip:** the best stories are almost always the simplest ones.

Don't look for the extraordinary episode—look for the real one. An authentic, specific moment is always more powerful than a generic description, no matter how well written.

# Structuring a Digital Marketing Strategy



# Structuring a Digital Marketing Strategy

## What a Digital Marketing Strategy Is

Having a well-curated Instagram profile, an up-to-date website, and a complete Google Business Profile is an excellent starting point. But a digital presence alone is not enough to generate consistent bookings. To turn online visibility into concrete results, you need a **digital marketing strategy**.

A strategy is a structured and intentional plan that defines where you want to go, who you want to reach, what you want to communicate, and through which tools—all in a coherent and measurable way. It is the compass that guides every operational decision: what content to publish, on which channel, with which message, and at what time.

Without a strategy, even the most carefully crafted activities risk being ineffective. With a strategy, every action—no matter how small—contributes to building something bigger.

## Building the Strategy: Objectives, Analysis, and Audience

An effective digital marketing strategy is built through three fundamental and sequential steps: defining objectives, analysing the context, and understanding your audience.

### Defining objectives: the SMART method

The first step of any strategy is knowing where you want to go. Objectives must be defined clearly, using what in marketing is called the SMART method, an acronym that describes the characteristics of a well-structured goal:

- **S – Specific**

The objective must be clear and well defined, with no ambiguity about what you want to achieve.

- **M – Measurable**

It must be quantifiable, so you can verify whether it has been achieved. Not “I want more followers,” but “I want to reach 500 Instagram followers by June.”

- **A – Achievable** (*often also expressed as Attainable*)

It must be realistic based on the resources available. An overly ambitious goal risks demotivating rather than motivating.

- **R – Relevant**

It must be aligned with the broader goals of your business.

- **T – Time-bound**

It must have a clear deadline. Without a timeframe, any goal risks remaining indefinitely “in progress.”

## Analysing the Context: the SWOT Matrix

Before deciding what to communicate and how, it is essential to understand the context in which you operate. The most useful tool for doing this is the **SWOT analysis**, a framework that allows you to systematically map the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of your business.

SWOT is an acronym made up of four English words: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. The first two refer to the **internal** environment (what depends directly on you), while the latter two refer to the **external** environment (what you do not directly control but must take into account).

### Strengths (points of strength)

These are the distinctive characteristics of your business that give you an advantage over others. In rural tourism, these might include a unique geographical location, a centuries-old production tradition, an original experiential offer, or a particularly engaging family story.

To identify them, ask yourself: *What is my competitive advantage? What do my customers appreciate most? What do I do better than others?*

### Weaknesses (points of weakness)

These are internal factors that limit your effectiveness or competitiveness. They might include, for example, a weak online presence, accessibility challenges, limited resources, strong seasonality, or a lack of specific skills.

Identifying them is not about discouragement, but about understanding where to improve. Ask yourself: *What could I improve? What resources do I lack? In what areas do my competitors perform better than me?*

### Opportunities

These are external factors you can leverage to your advantage. In rural tourism, opportunities might include the growing demand for experiential and sustainable tourism, new European funding for rural development, favourable cultural trends, or the possibility of collaborating with other local operators.

Ask yourself: *What market trends can I take advantage of? Are there regulatory changes or new funding opportunities available?*

### Threats

These are external factors that could hinder your business. They might include increased competition, climate change impacting seasonality, economic instability reducing tourism spending, or changes in social media algorithms reducing organic visibility.

Ask yourself: *What could damage my business? How are competitors evolving?*

Once the analysis is completed, the four elements are placed in relation to one another within the **SWOT matrix**. It is precisely in these relationships that strategy is born:

How can I use my strengths to seize the opportunities offered by the market? *How can I work on my weaknesses to reduce the impact of external threats?* The answers to these questions become the concrete foundation on which to build your communication decisions.

	POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
INTERNAL	Strengths	Weaknesses
EXTERNAL	Opportunities	Threats

Please note: SWOT analysis is not a one-off exercise. It should be carried out regularly, because the context changes over time and your strategy must evolve with it.

### Knowing Your Audience: Research and Segmentation

An effective marketing strategy cannot exist without a deep understanding of your audience. There is no such thing as a “generic tourist”—there are different people with different motivations, habits, and expectations, each requiring tailored messages and channels.

The first tool for understanding your audience is market research: the process of collecting and analysing information that helps you understand who your potential visitors are, what they are looking for, and how they behave. It can be carried out in simple ways, such as surveys of existing customers, analysis of reviews received, direct observation of online behaviour, and examination of available data such as social media insights.

Once this information has been gathered, the next step is segmentation: dividing the market into homogeneous groups of people with similar characteristics and behaviours, in order to create more targeted and effective messages and offers.

Segmentation can be based **Demographic criteria** (age, origin, income), **Psychographic criteria** (values, lifestyle, motivations), **Behavioural criteria** (buying habits, loyalty, price sensitivity)

In experiential rural tourism, some relevant segments might include:

- **Nature lovers:** looking for outdoor experiences, hiking, and contact with local flora and fauna.
- **Food and wine enthusiasts:** attracted by tastings, cooking classes, and visits to local producers.
- **Sustainable travellers:** choosing environmentally and community-conscious destinations, preferring slow tourism.
- **Families with children:** seeking educational and engaging experiences suitable for kids.
- **Couples seeking relaxation:** wanting to disconnect from daily life and rediscover slowness and authenticity.

Knowing which segment you are addressing allows you to create much more precise and convincing messages. As already mentioned when discussing USP, it is far more effective to speak clearly to a few than vaguely to many.

## **From Strategic Plan to Operational Phase: the Tourism Funnel**

Once objectives have been defined, the context analysed, and the target audience identified, it is time to move to the operational phase: deciding what content to produce, on which channels, and with which messages. This choice must be guided by a precise question: *at what stage of their journey is your potential visitor?*

The tool that helps answer this question is the **tourism funnel**, an inverted pyramid model that represents the path a person takes from the first discovery of your business to becoming a loyal customer and, ideally, a spontaneous brand ambassador. Each stage of the funnel requires different content, different tones of voice, and different channels: what works for someone who does not know you yet is not the same as what works for someone who is ready to book.

### **The Tourism Funnel consists of six main stages:**

**1**

#### **Awareness — Making people aware**

At this stage, the potential visitor does not yet know your business. The goal is to reach as many potentially interested people as possible through, for example, a consistent presence on social media, blog articles, OTA listings, and Google Business Profile. The message should be inspirational and narrative.

**2**

#### **Interest — Sparking interest**

The potential visitor has discovered your business and wants to learn more. The goal is to increase engagement through original and informative content, local guides, videos showcasing experiences, and active management of reviews.

**3**

#### **Consideration — Building trust and convincing**

The potential visitor knows you but is still evaluating options. The goal is to highlight your strengths compared to competitors through, for example, engaging photos and videos, and collaborations with other local operators.

**4**

#### **Conversion — Turning interest into booking**

The visitor is ready to book. At this stage, simplicity of the booking process, clear pricing, and fast responses are crucial. Every obstacle (a slow website, a complicated form, a delayed reply) can result in a lost booking.

**5**

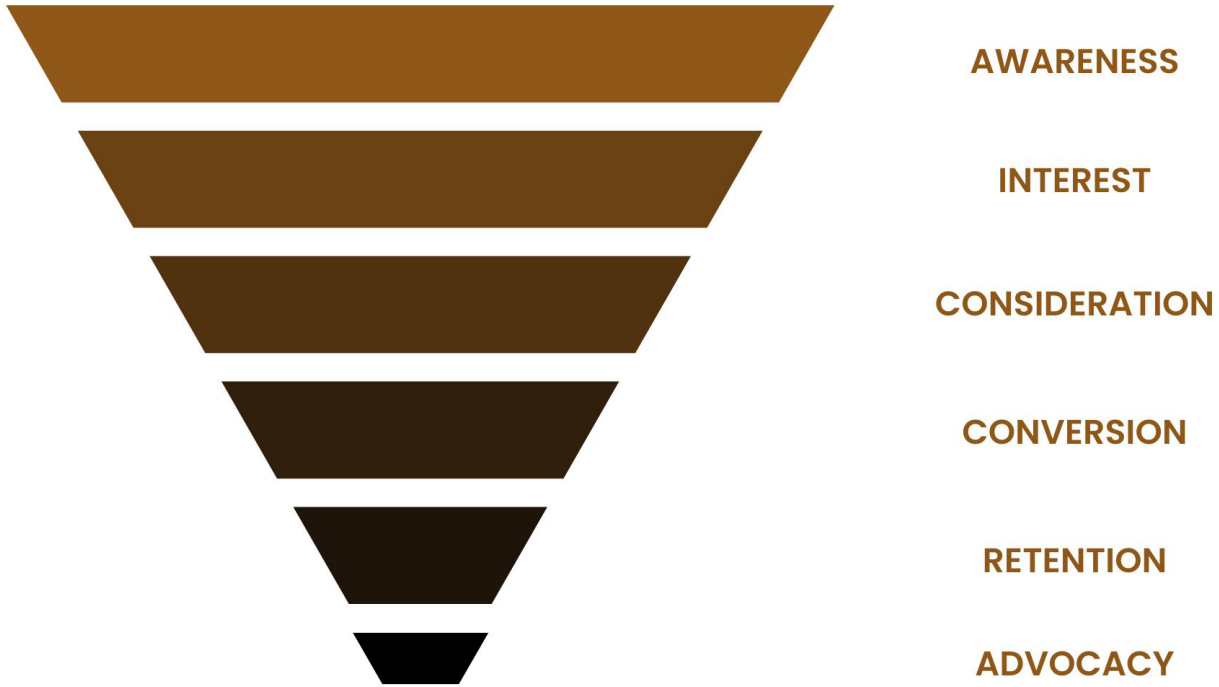
#### **Retention — Building loyalty**

The visitor has experienced your offer. The goal is to keep them connected to your business and encourage them to return through, for example, newsletters with dedicated offers, seasonal events, and referral programmes.

# 6

## Advocacy – Turning guests into ambassadors

The visitor is so satisfied that they spontaneously talk about you to others. In this phase, online communities and digital word-of-mouth play a key role: encourage guests to share photos and reviews, and collect and publish their testimonials.



### PRACTICAL EXERCISE Build Your Strategy

This exercise guides you through the three fundamental steps to build a digital marketing strategy for your business. Take your time: this is an exercise worth doing carefully, because the result will become the compass for all your communication.

#### Step 1 – Define your SMART objectives

Write three objectives for your digital communication over the next six months. For each one, make sure it meets all the SMART criteria:

**Objective 1:** \_\_\_\_\_

Specific  Measurable  Achievable  Relevant  Time-bound

**Objective 2:** \_\_\_\_\_

Specific  Measurable  Achievable  Relevant  Time-bound

**Objective 3:** \_\_\_\_\_

Specific  Measurable  Achievable  Relevant  Time-bound

## Step 2 – Analyse your context with the SWOT matrix

Complete the SWOT matrix for your business. For each quadrant, try to identify at least three elements.

Strengths	Weaknesses

Opportunities	Threats

Once you have completed the matrix, ask yourself: *how can I use my strengths to seize opportunities? And how can I reduce my weaknesses to limit the impact of threats?*

## Step 3 – Define your target audience

Choose your main target audience segment and describe it in detail:

- Who are they? (age, origin, lifestyle): \_\_\_\_\_
- What are they looking for in an experience like yours?: \_\_\_\_\_
- Which digital channels do they use most?: \_\_\_\_\_
- What convinces them to book?: \_\_\_\_\_
- What might hold them back?: \_\_\_\_\_

**Tip:** do not try to address all segments at the same time. Start with the audience you know best (most likely your most loyal customers) and build your strategy around them. You can always expand later.

# Digital Marketing Channels: A Practical Map



# Digital Marketing Channels: A Practical Map

## The Problem of Choice: Too Many Channels, Too Little Time

One of the most common challenges for those approaching digital marketing is the feeling of needing to be everywhere at once. Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, website, newsletter, Booking, TripAdvisor, Google Business Profile, WhatsApp Business... the list feels endless, and the temptation to do everything is very strong.

This is a mistake worth avoiding. Managing five channels poorly is far worse than managing two well. Spreading your efforts too thin leads to low-quality content, irregular updates, and a fragmented digital identity that creates confusion instead of trust.

The guiding principle is simple: choose the channels where your ideal customers are, and manage them with consistency and quality. It does not matter if you are not on TikTok, but it does matter that the channels you do use tell your story in a coherent and up-to-date way.

### Social Media: Instagram, Facebook, TikTok

Social media are today the first point of contact with potential visitors. This is where the inspiration stage of the customer journey takes place (that moment when someone comes across your business and thinks for the first time: "I'd like to go there").

#### Instagram

Instagram is the most visual channel and, in rural tourism, probably the most important. Landscapes, products, experiences, and people naturally fit its visual format.

In detail, the platform works on three levels:

- The **feed** gradually builds your visual and narrative identity over time
- **Stories** allow for more spontaneous, daily, and personal communication
- **Reels** are currently the most widespread format with the highest organic reach, meaning the ability to reach people who do not yet follow you

Instagram is particularly effective for reaching an audience between 25 and 45 years old, often the core target of experiential rural tourism.

#### Facebook

Facebook has a generally older audience compared to Instagram (mainly 35–40+), but it remains a relevant tool, especially for managing a complete business page with information, reviews, and opening hours, as well as for creating thematic groups around your business or territory.

#### TikTok

TikTok is the fastest-growing platform globally and has a predominantly young audience,

although in recent years it has been expanding into older age groups as well. In rural tourism, it works particularly well for authentic and engaging content: educational videos showing production processes or traditions, behind-the-scenes moments from daily activities, micro-stories about the territory and its people, or participation in trending topics reinterpreted in your own context.

The common denominator is spontaneity: on TikTok, less “advertising-like” and more real content almost always performs better. If your target audience includes millennials and Gen Z, TikTok is worth exploring.

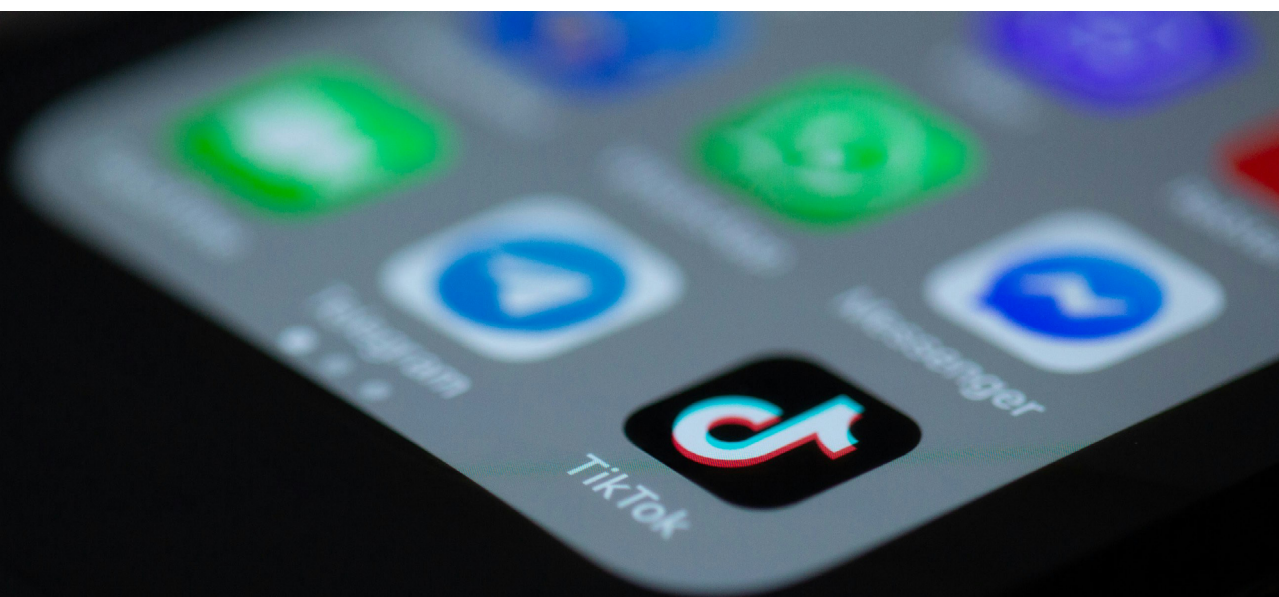
### **The Website: Your Digital Home**

If social media are the shop windows where people discover you, your website is your home: the place where interested visitors go to learn more, explore in depth, and ideally, make a booking.

An effective website must clearly answer three questions that every visitor asks within the first few seconds: Who are you? What do you offer? How can I book or contact you?

The essential elements of a strong rural tourism website include a clear and visually appealing homepage that immediately communicates your identity, an “About Us” page that tells your story authentically, a services or experiences page with detailed descriptions, high-quality images, and transparent pricing, a simple and functional contact or booking section, a photo gallery that showcases your business in an engaging and realistic way.

One often overlooked but crucial aspect is **search engine optimisation (SEO)**. Using the right keywords in your content, along with clear titles and accurate descriptions, helps your website appear in Google searches when potential visitors are looking for experiences like yours.



## **Google Business Profile: Your Local Business Card**

Google Business Profile is one of the most underrated tools, yet it is often the very first point of contact between your business and a potential visitor searching for you on Google.

When someone types a query like “farm stay near me” or “food and wine experience [area name],” Google displays a panel with a selection of relevant businesses, each showing key information: name, address, opening hours, phone number, website, photos, and reviews. To appear in that section, you need a Google Business Profile—a completely free tool that allows you to be visible on Google and manage how your business is presented in local searches.

A well-optimised profile—with up-to-date photos, accurate opening hours, a clear description, and active responses to reviews—significantly increases the likelihood that a potential visitor will choose you. Reviews, in particular, are crucial: most people read them before booking any tourism experience. Responding professionally and courteously to both positive and negative feedback builds trust and credibility.

If you haven't yet created or claimed your Google Business Profile, this should be one of your top priorities. It takes only a few minutes and has an immediate impact on your local visibility.

## **Booking Platforms (OTAs)**

OTAs (Online Travel Agencies) are platforms such as Booking, Airbnb, Airbnb Experiences, TripAdvisor, or Viator that act as intermediaries between tourism operators and visitors. They allow you to reach a vast international audience that is already actively searching for experiences or accommodation.

The main advantage of OTAs is visibility: millions of people use them every day to plan their trips, and being present on these platforms means reaching an audience that might otherwise never find you.

However, one key factor to consider is commissions: OTAs take a percentage of each booking, which varies depending on the platform and the type of offer.

## **The Newsletter: The Most Underrated Channel**

Among all digital marketing tools, the newsletter is probably the most underrated—yet often the most effective in the medium to long term.

Unlike social media, where your content is shown to only a portion of your followers based on algorithms, a newsletter lands directly in the inbox of people who have actively chosen to receive it. These are already interested individuals (past visitors, curious prospects, lovers of your territory), and the level of attention they give to a newsletter is generally much higher than what they dedicate to a social media post.

A monthly or seasonal newsletter can include updates about the current season, a story related to your business, a special offer for loyal guests, or simply an authentic account of something that has happened.

The first step is building your list: invite your guests to subscribe, add a sign-up form to your website, and offer something in return (a discount, a recipe, a local guide). The list

grows slowly, but every subscriber is a potential loyal customer.

## Channel Map

The table below summarises the main channels covered in this chapter. Use it as a reference to guide your choices based on the objectives and target audience defined in your strategy.

Channel	Prupose	Ideal audience	Effort
Instagram	Inspiration, visual identity, storytelling	Ages 25–45, experiential travellers	High
Facebook	Information, community, advertising	35–40+, local and national audience	Medium
Tiktok	Visibility, viral content, new audiences	Under 35, millennials and Gen Z	High
Website	Credibility, information, bookings	Everyone	Medium (setup)
Google Business Profile	Local visibility, reviews	People searching online in your area	Low
OTAs (Booking, Airbnb, etc.)	New customer acquisition	International travellers	Medium
Newsletter	Loyalty, direct relationship	Past visitors, enthusiasts	Low-Medium

# Measuring Results



# Measuring Results

## Why Measurement Is Part of the Strategy

A digital marketing strategy does not end with publishing content. It ends—and begins again—with analysing what happened. Measuring results is the only way to understand whether you are moving in the right direction, what is working, and what needs to be improved.

Without measurement, even the most carefully executed activities risk becoming a repetitive exercise without direction. With measurement, every action becomes a learning opportunity: you begin to understand what resonates with your audience, which channels deliver concrete results, at what time of year your communication is most effective, and much more.

It is enough to develop the habit of regularly reviewing your data and asking a few simple questions: what worked? What didn't? Why?

The process of analysis and optimisation is cyclical: you publish, measure, learn, adjust, and publish again. It is this continuous cycle that transforms a generic digital presence into a strategy that evolves and improves over time.

## Analytics Tools: An Overview

For every digital channel you choose to invest in, there are specific analytics tools that help you understand how your communication is performing.

Below are some of the most important ones:

### Meta Insights

Meta Insights is the built-in tool within Facebook and Instagram that allows you to analyse the performance of your social media content: how many people have seen it, how many have interacted, which formats perform best, and when your audience is most active.

Reviewing it regularly helps you understand which content resonates most with your audience and adjust your strategy accordingly.

### Google Analytics

Google Analytics is the main tool for analysing website traffic. It shows how many people visit your site, where they come from, which pages they view, and how long they stay.



If you have a website, it is an essential ally: it provides valuable insights into how visitors find your business online and what encourages them to stay or get in touch.

### **Google Business Profile Insights**

Google Business Profile Insights provides data about your listing: how many people have found it, which keywords they used, how many clicked through to your website, called you, or requested directions.

It is a very useful tool for understanding how your local visibility evolves over time.

### **How to Use Data to Improve**

Once you have collected the data, the next step is to interpret it. A practical approach could be the following: once a month, set aside an hour to review the numbers from your main channels and ask yourself a few key questions:

- Which channels are bringing the most website visits or contact requests?
- Which content has performed best?
- Is your Google Business Profile growing in visibility?
- Did your newsletter generate bookings?
- Are there performance differences between formats (photos, videos, reels, stories)?

The answers to these questions help you make more informed decisions: produce more of what works, experiment with what you have not yet tried, and let go of what does not deliver results.

This is the real value of measurement: not the data itself, but the direction that data suggests.

# European Best Practices and Operational Roadmap



# European Best Practices and Operational Roadmap

## Learning from Those Who Do It Well

One of the most valuable sources of learning is observing businesses that achieve excellent results. Not to copy them, but to understand the principles behind their success and adapt them to your own context. The European rural tourism landscape offers outstanding examples of how a clear identity, authentic storytelling, and strategic use of digital tools can transform even small and remote businesses into desirable and recognisable destinations.

Below are three particularly relevant European case studies, along with the key lessons that can be drawn from each.

## European Case Studies

### Visit Norway — The Power of Integrated Digital Storytelling

Visit Norway is the official tourism portal of Norway and is internationally regarded as one of the most advanced benchmarks for the digital promotion of rural and nature-based destinations.

What sets it apart is not so much the quantity of content produced, but the quality and consistency of its storytelling: every photo, video, and article tells a specific story linked to a place, a person, or an experience—never generic, always authentic.

Its strategy seamlessly integrates website, social media, video content, and trip planning tools, creating a continuous digital experience that guides potential visitors from the inspiration stage all the way to booking. Particularly effective is its use of visual storytelling on Instagram and YouTube: the content showcases real experiences, in real places, lived by real people.

**Key takeaway:** narrative consistency across all digital channels creates a strong and recognisable identity that builds trust and desire. It is not necessary to produce a large volume of content—it is essential that each piece of content tells something real and specific.

### Camino del Cid — Territory and Digital as a Unique Experience

The Camino del Cid is a cultural and natural route in Spain that crosses rural areas and historic villages linked to the legend of El Cid Campeador. Its digital strategy is an excellent example of how a territory can transform its historical and cultural identity into

an engaging and accessible digital experience.

Through a dedicated app, georeferenced maps, augmented reality content at historical sites, and QR codes that tell the stories of each location, the Camino del Cid has created a digital ecosystem that accompanies the visitor before, during, and after the journey. Every point along the route has a story to tell, accessible directly from a smartphone. The website and social media channels amplify this narrative, showcasing travellers' experiences and highlighting the local communities along the way.

**Key takeaway:** digital tools do not replace the physical experience—they enrich it. Even simple tools like QR codes or interactive maps can transform a visit into a memorable and shareable experience.

### **Aldeias do Xisto — Community, Authenticity and Rural Regeneration**

Aldeias do Xisto is a network of rural villages in central Portugal that has built a model of sustainable tourism based on the valorisation of traditional schist stone architecture, local products, and craft traditions. Its digital communication perfectly reflects the project's values: authentic, rooted in the territory, and centred on people and community.

The website and social media channels tell not only about tourist attractions, but also the stories of artisans, local producers, and residents. The visual content shows the villages in their everyday life, highlighting authentic imperfection over polished perfection.

This narrative choice has gradually built a loyal community of followers and visitors, attracted precisely by the authenticity they perceive in the communication.

**Key takeaway:** in rural tourism, authenticity is the most powerful value to communicate. Showing real life—people, processes, and genuine places—is far more effective than any artificially constructed campaign.



# **SUSTAINABLE TOURISM**



# Introduction

**In the contemporary context, sustainable tourism stands out as one of the main evolutionary trajectories of the global tourism sector, as well as an essential regulatory criterion for destination planning and governance. It should not be understood merely as a type of tourism offering or a market trend, but rather as a systemic paradigm guiding the design, management, and use of territories, grounded in the integration of economic development, environmental protection, and the socio-cultural well-being of host communities.**

Tourism can no longer be regarded as an economically neutral activity. On the contrary, it exerts a structural influence on territorial dynamics, ecosystems, urban configurations, real estate markets, and social balances. By 2025, with the full recovery of global tourism flows and the increasing intensification of international mobility, these impacts have become even more pronounced, making it necessary to adopt development models based on sustainability, resilience, and effective territorial governance.

In line with the definition promoted by the UNWTO, sustainable tourism entails an integrated consideration of the economic, environmental, and social effects generated by tourism activities, moving beyond a short-term logic focused solely on efficiency and quantitative growth. Instead, it introduces a long-term perspective oriented toward the resilience of territorial systems, the balanced management of resources, and the preservation of their accessibility for future generations.

Within this framework, sustainable tourism also plays a central role in European and international policy agendas, emerging as a field of integration among climate strategies, ecological transition, territorial development, and social cohesion.

# Conceptual Foundations of Sustainable Tourism



# Conceptual Foundations of Sustainable Tourism

The concept of sustainable tourism is embedded within the broader paradigm of sustainable development, which has progressively consolidated in international law, multi-level public policies, and scientific literature as a guiding criterion for regulating economic and territorial processes. By 2025, this notion can no longer be interpreted as a mere regulatory qualification or a marketing label, but rather as a structural principle for **organizing the tourism system**, capable of decisively guiding the planning, management, and governance of destinations.

From this perspective, sustainable tourism assumes a general regulatory function, positioning itself at the intersection of environmental policies, territorial development strategies, economic dynamics, and socio-cultural processes. It does not merely aim to mitigate the negative impacts generated by tourism flows, but entails a **systemic transformation of the tourism development model**, influencing the ways in which tourism offerings are designed, public regulation is structured, and stakeholders behave.

Sustainable tourism therefore presupposes a dynamic and relational understanding of territory, which cannot be reduced to a simple destination for consumption, but must be interpreted as a **complex ecosystem** composed of natural resources, cultural heritage, local economic systems, and social relations. Within this framework, territory becomes both the object and the subject of the tourism process, requiring an approach grounded in compatibility, balance, and regenerative capacity.

At the international level, the established definition identifies sustainable tourism as a development model capable of simultaneously pursuing a plurality of interdependent objectives, which in the contemporary context can be articulated into four fundamental dimensions.

First, it requires the optimal and responsible use of environmental resources, recognizing natural capital as a fundamental infrastructure of the tourism experience. Ecosystems, landscapes, biodiversity, and water and energy resources are not ancillary elements of the tourism offer, but rather constitute the very foundation of destination competitiveness and attractiveness. Sustainability therefore entails the adoption of policies aimed at preventing degradation, reducing negative externalities, and promoting efficient production and consumption models aligned with decarbonization and ecological transition objectives.

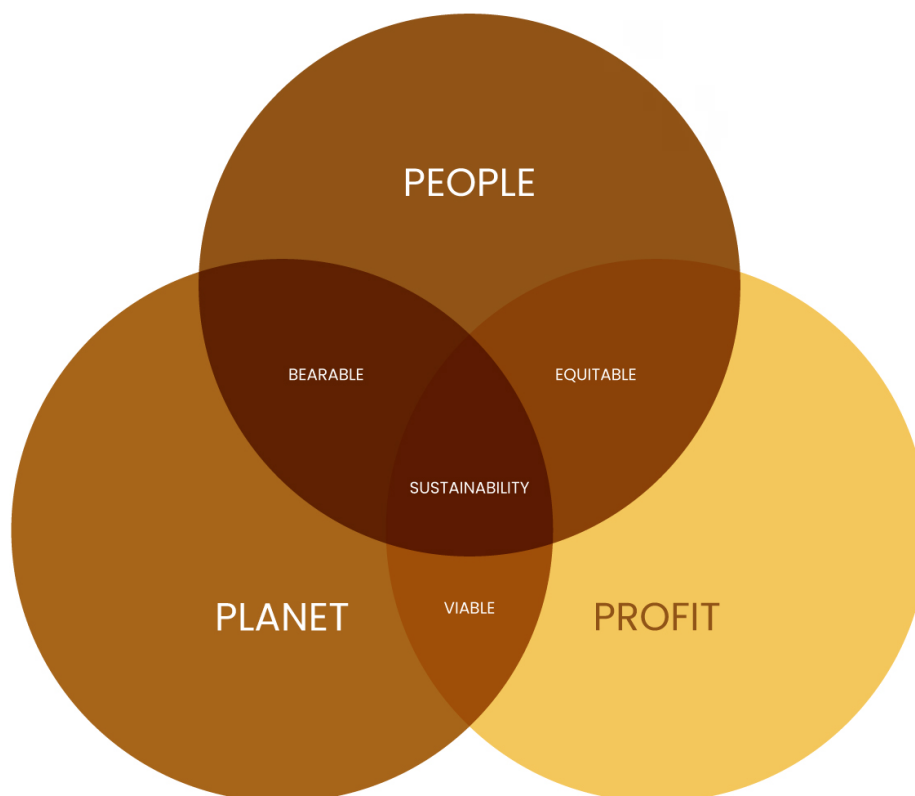
Second, sustainable tourism presupposes respect for and enhancement of the socio-cultural authenticity of local communities. Tourism destinations are not neutral spaces, but inhabited contexts characterized by identities, cultural practices, and relational systems. From this perspective, sustainable tourism emerges as a tool for the protection and promotion of intangible heritage, counteracting processes of homogenization, folklorization, or commodification of local cultures. Host communities

play a central role, not as passive recipients of tourism flows, but as **co-producers of the tourism experience**, with significant implications in terms of participation, legitimacy, and governance.

A third dimension concerns the fair and inclusive distribution of economic benefits. Economic sustainability cannot be reduced to the quantitative growth of flows or revenues, but must be assessed in terms of the **quality, stability, and territorial embeddedness of the value generated**. Tourism models characterized by high volumes of flows but limited local redistribution tend to produce economic dependency, structural vulnerabilities, and social tensions. By contrast, sustainable tourism promotes the strengthening of local value chains, skilled employment, economic diversification, and the resilience of territorial economies.

Finally, sustainable tourism entails preserving the regenerative capacity of territories, introducing an extended temporal dimension that directs policies toward intergenerational sustainability. Natural and cultural resources must be used in a way that does not compromise their future availability, requiring the adoption of long-term planning tools, the definition of carrying capacities, and the assessment of cumulative impacts. This dimension is closely linked to the principles of environmental law, particularly the precautionary principle and the logic of prevention.

These dimensions reflect the traditional articulation of sustainability across its three fundamental pillars—environmental, social, and economic—which, in the contemporary context, must be understood not as separate domains, but as interdependent **components of an integrated system**.



Environmental sustainability concerns the conservation of ecosystems, the protection of biodiversity, the reduction of climate-altering emissions, and the efficient use of natural resources, in line with European ecological transition strategies. Social sustainability relates to the quality of life of local communities, inclusion, equity, the protection of cultural rights, and territorial cohesion. Economic sustainability, in turn, entails the capacity of tourism to generate stable and long-lasting value without producing structural distortions or systemic dependencies.

The balance among these dimensions constitutes a necessary condition for the long-term stability and resilience of destinations. The absence or underestimation of any one of them inevitably undermines the overall sustainability of the tourism system. A model that is economically efficient but environmentally destructive or socially conflictual cannot be considered sustainable; likewise, policies exclusively focused on environmental protection, lacking economic sustainability, are unlikely to be effectively implemented or maintained over time.

By 2025, sustainable tourism thus takes on the role of a cross-cutting regulatory criterion, intended to guide not only public policies and business strategies, but also consumer behavior. From this perspective, it emerges as a central element of European policy frameworks, particularly within the context of the Green Deal, climate strategies, and the broader transition toward more equitable, resilient, and climate-neutral development models.

## Sustainable Tourism and the 2030 Agenda

The inclusion of tourism within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development represents a paradigmatically significant step, as it formalizes the recognition of tourism not merely as an economic sector, but as a complex phenomenon capable of exerting a cross-cutting influence on global development dynamics, social cohesion, and environmental protection. This recognition entails a shift in perspective: tourism is no longer regarded as a self-contained policy domain, but rather as a **strategic lever integrated into sustainable development policies**.



The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outline a systemic framework of political, economic, and social priorities, within which tourism assumes an enabling and cross-cutting function. Sustainable tourism therefore emerges as a structural component of global strategies, requiring an integrated, multi-level, and impact-oriented approach.

First, the contribution of sustainable tourism is evident in relation to SDG 8, which promotes inclusive and sustainable economic growth, as well as decent work. Tourism is one of the leading employment-generating sectors worldwide and can act as a driver for economic diversification, particularly in rural, peripheral, or economically fragile areas. However, sustainability requires that such growth be accompanied by fair working conditions, employment stability, skills development, and the enhancement of human capital, avoiding the precarization and exploitation often associated with unregulated tourism models.

Particular relevance is attached to SDG 12, concerning responsible consumption and production patterns, an area in which tourism is characterized by high resource intensity. The transition toward sustainable models calls for the adoption of circular practices, energy efficiency measures, sustainable waste management, the reduction of food waste, and the optimization of natural resource use. In this context, visitor behavior plays a crucial role, making awareness-raising policies and nudging tools essential to steer choices toward lower-impact options.

Sustainable tourism also makes a significant contribution to environmental protection goals, particularly SDG 14 and SDG 15, which focus on the conservation of marine and terrestrial ecosystems. Tourism activities, if not properly managed, can exert considerable pressure on fragile habitats, biodiversity, and natural resources. However, with appropriate governance **mechanisms in place, tourism can become a driver for conservation** and a source of funding for environmental protection, supporting ecosystem preservation and fostering a broader culture of sustainability.

SDG 11, dedicated to sustainable cities and communities, further highlights the territorial and urban dimension of tourism. Tourist destinations, particularly highly attractive ones, must address complex challenges related to flow management, mobility, real estate pressure, and the quality of life of residents. Sustainable tourism therefore requires integrated urban planning policies, tools for managing carrying capacity, and strategies to rebalance the relationship between tourism and residential functions, in order to prevent congestion and social conflict.

Beyond the SDGs most directly related to tourism, sustainable tourism presents significant interconnections with other targets of the 2030 Agenda, including SDG 13 (climate action), in relation to emission reduction and climate change adaptation, and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities), with regard to the fair distribution of economic benefits and the inclusion of local communities in decision-making processes.

By 2025, sustainable tourism must be interpreted as a structural component of sustainable development policies, in coherence with international and European climate, environmental, economic, and social strategies. In particular, the European Union framework—through the Green Deal, ecological transition policies, and funding instruments—further strengthens the role of tourism as a field for the practical implementation of the SDGs.

This approach implies the definitive overcoming of a sectoral view of tourism, recognizing instead its systemic nature and its capacity to interact with a wide range



of public policies. From this perspective, sustainable tourism emerges as a **privileged space for experimenting** with innovative governance models, based on policy integration, stakeholder participation, impact monitoring, and long-term planning.

Destinations that adopt integrated strategies based on empirical evidence, monitoring tools, and the active involvement of local communities prove to be more resilient, competitive, and capable of addressing contemporary challenges, thereby making a significant contribution to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda objectives.

## **European Regulatory Foundations**

Within the legal system of the European Union, tourism occupies a distinctive position, characterized by the absence of an exclusive EU competence and the predominance of regulatory powers held by Member States. This arrangement is grounded in Article 195 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), which grants the EU a supporting, coordinating, and complementary competence in relation to national policies, explicitly excluding any direct legislative harmonization.

This configuration reflects the inherently cross-sectoral nature of tourism. Tourism is not a legally autonomous sector, but rather an intersectoral field regulated through the interaction of multiple European policies. As a result, it operates within a “diffuse” regulatory framework, in which EU law affects tourism not through a single unified legal corpus, but via an **integrated system of rules, principles, and instruments originating from different yet interconnected legal domains**.

By 2025, the emergence of sustainability as a general regulatory principle introduces an additional layer of complexity. Sustainable tourism becomes the object of predominantly indirect but substantively impactful regulation, derived from the application of European legislation that, although not formally designed for tourism, profoundly shapes its development models, operational standards, and market conditions.

A first and fundamental reference area is European environmental law, whose primary legal basis is Article 191 TFEU. This provision defines the objectives of the Union's environmental policy, including the preservation and improvement of environmental quality, the protection of human health, the prudent and rational use of natural resources, and the promotion of measures to combat climate change. Given the high resource intensity and territorial impact of tourism, the sector falls fully within the scope of environmental law principles and instruments, including environmental impact assessments, biodiversity protection, and sustainable resource management.

Tourism sustainability is also deeply influenced by European climate policies, which are expressed through the European Green Deal and the related regulatory framework on emissions reduction, energy efficiency, and the transition toward a climate-neutral economy. In this context, tourism is increasingly recognized as a climate-relevant sector, expected to actively contribute to decarbonization goals, particularly in mobility, hospitality, and infrastructure systems.

Further constraints and opportunities arise from European energy legislation, which promotes energy efficiency, the use of renewable sources, and the reduction of consumption. Accommodation facilities, transport systems, and tourism infrastructure are directly affected by these standards, with significant implications in terms of technological adaptation, investment requirements, and the transformation of management models.

Sustainable tourism is also closely intertwined with the rules governing the internal market and competition, which ensure conditions of fairness, transparency, and non-discrimination. In this field, EU law affects several key aspects, including:

- the regulation of State aid to the tourism sector;
- the rules governing digital platforms and the collaborative economy;
- the dynamics of the short-term tourist rental market;
- the protection of economic operators and competitive conditions.

Particular importance is also attached to consumer protection legislation, which in the context of sustainable tourism translates into the need to ensure accurate information, transparency, and verifiability of environmental claims. From this perspective, greenwashing takes on a legally relevant dimension, requiring strict oversight of commercial practices and sustainability certifications, also in light of recent European initiatives on environmental communications and corporate accountability.

Overall, sustainable tourism within the European context emerges as a field governed by a plurality of legal sources operating through a logic of integration, interdependence, and complementarity. This configuration reinforces the role of sustainability as a **cross-cutting regulatory principle**, capable of guiding public policies, business strategies, and consumption patterns alike.

## Relevant Legal Principles

The legal dimension of sustainable tourism is grounded in a set of general principles of European and international environmental law, which perform an interpretative, regulatory, and guiding function. These principles do not merely constitute abstract criteria, but have a concrete impact on the design of public policies, territorial planning, and the operational management of tourism activities.

## Precautionary Principle

The precautionary principle is one of the cornerstones of European environmental law, requiring public authorities to adopt preventive measures even in the presence of scientific uncertainty, where there is a risk of serious or irreversible damage to the environment or human health.

In the tourism context, this principle is particularly significant due to the cumulative nature and often not immediately measurable impacts generated by tourist flows. Uncertainty regarding long-term effects does not justify inaction; on the contrary, it reinforces the need for prudent and anticipatory policies.

Operational applications include:

- limiting and capping tourist flows in ecologically sensitive areas;
- urban planning restrictions aimed at limiting land consumption;
- preventive measures for biodiversity protection;
- regulation of access to vulnerable natural and cultural sites.

The precautionary principle thus translates into a logic of **anticipatory prevention**, which prioritizes the preservation of natural capital over the immediate maximization of economic benefits.

## “Polluter Pays” Principle

The “polluter pays” principle, enshrined in European law, establishes that the costs arising from pollution or environmental degradation must be borne by those responsible. It introduces a mechanism for the internalisation of negative externalities, correcting market distortions and aligning economic incentives with environmental objectives.

In sustainable tourism, this principle is implemented through economic, fiscal, and regulatory instruments, including:

- destination entry taxes;
- environmental and tourist levies;
- differentiated pricing systems;
- environmental compensation obligations;
- extended producer responsibility schemes for operators.

These tools pursue a dual purpose: on the one hand, they encourage more sustainable behaviour; on the other, they generate financial resources to support environmental protection and flow management. In this way, the principle helps integrate the economic dimension with the environmental one.

## Integration Principle

The integration principle represents one of the most significant developments in contemporary environmental law. It requires that environmental protection be systematically embedded across all public policies and decision-making processes, overcoming the traditional separation between environmental policy and sectoral policies.

In sustainable tourism, this principle assumes a systemic and strategic function. Tourism policies must necessarily be coordinated with a range of regulatory and strategic domains, including:

- urban and spatial planning;

- landscape and cultural heritage protection;
- energy and climate policies;
- sustainable mobility strategies;
- social and inclusion policies.

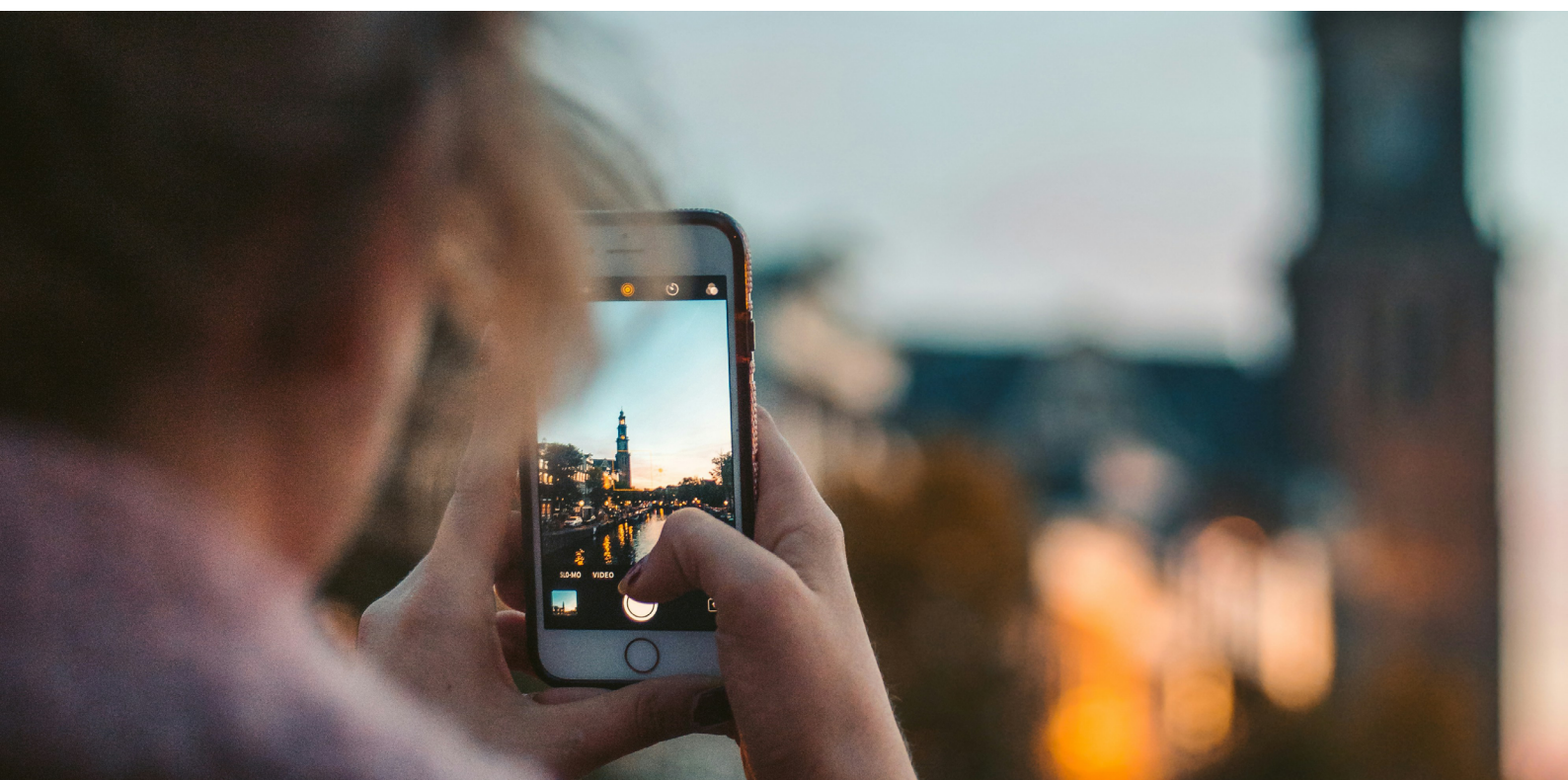
Integration helps prevent fragmented and inconsistent approaches, fostering the development of balanced and sustainable development models. In this perspective, the management of tourist flows, infrastructure planning, and the protection of local communities must be addressed in a coordinated and multi-level manner.

The integration principle thus reinforces a holistic vision of tourism, recognising its intersectoral nature and the need for coordination among institutions, economic operators, and local communities, in line with contemporary models of sustainable governance.

## Contemporary Tourism Challenges

In the current debate on sustainable tourism, the phenomenon of overtourism occupies a central position, emerging as one of the most evident manifestations of the imbalances generated by tourism development models that are either unregulated or excessively focused on quantitative growth. Overtourism cannot be reduced to a mere condition of physical overcrowding; rather, it should be understood as a **systemic dynamic of excessive pressure** capable of structurally altering the economic, social, environmental, and functional equilibrium of destinations.

Scientific literature and major international organisations converge in defining overtourism as a situation in which the volume and concentration of tourist flows exceed the carrying capacity of a territory, producing negative effects for both residents and visitors. From this perspective, the phenomenon is not only an operational issue, but a problem of territorial governance and strategic planning, closely linked to the long-term sustainability of destinations.

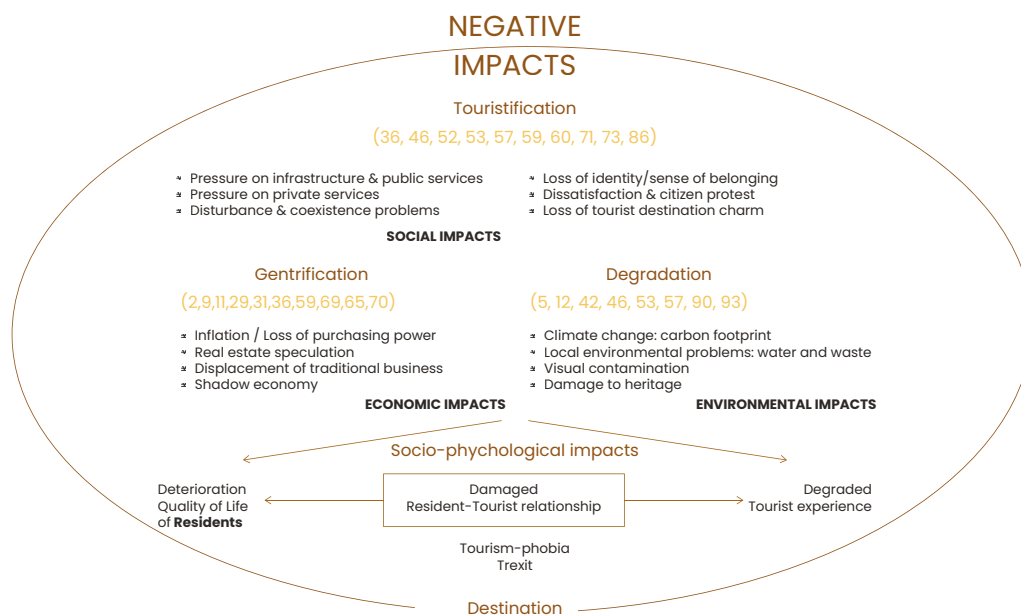


The unsustainability associated with overtourism manifests itself through a range of interconnected dimensions.

First, there is a deterioration in the quality of life of resident communities. Excessive tourism pressure affects the availability and accessibility of public services, urban mobility, safety, the use of public spaces, and the cost of living. In many highly attractive urban destinations, these dynamics result in conflicts between residents and visitors, highlighting how social sustainability is an essential precondition for the legitimacy of tourism policies.

A second dimension concerns the preservation of cultural and environmental heritage. Sites of high historical, artistic, or natural value are particularly vulnerable to cumulative pressures generated by excessive flows. The physical deterioration of cultural assets, environmental degradation, and the progressive loss of the authenticity of places constitute concrete risks, requiring protection strategies based on prevention, monitoring, and active management.

An additional critical factor is the transformation of economic and territorial dynamics. Overtourism can foster processes of tourism monoculture, leading to increasing economic dependence on the sector and reducing productive diversification. In urban contexts, these dynamics frequently result in changes in property use, a reduction in housing availability for residents, and the replacement of traditional commercial activities with services exclusively oriented toward tourism.



In this context, the role of the platform economy becomes particularly significant, as the spread of short-term tourist rentals has intensified real estate pressure and accelerated the touristification of urban spaces. The initial deregulation of these platforms has contributed to imbalances between residential and tourism functions, making regulatory intervention by public authorities necessary.

Paradoxically, overtourism also undermines the quality of the tourism experience itself. Overcrowding, infrastructural congestion, and the loss of authenticity reduce the perceived value of destinations, generating dissatisfaction and potential negative reputational effects. This dynamic highlights the intrinsic contradiction of non-

sustainable expansion models: quantitative growth, if not properly managed, tends to erode the very resources that underpin tourism attractiveness.

By 2025, public administrations and territorial authorities are required to address these challenges through regulatory and planning tools that reflect an evolved understanding of tourism as a phenomenon to be governed rather than simply promoted. The contemporary approach is based on adaptive flow management, protection of local communities, and preservation of territorial capital.

Among the most widely adopted instruments, visitor caps play a key role, allowing authorities to limit pressure on specific sites or urban areas. Mandatory booking systems, daily visitor quotas, and time-based regulations represent operational tools aimed at ensuring a balance between use and conservation, introducing mechanisms for active demand management.

A second area of intervention concerns the regulation of short-term tourist rentals, through instruments such as mandatory registries, quantitative limits, licensing requirements, and urban planning constraints. These measures aim to restore balance between tourism and residential functions, counteracting the distortive effects of touristification.

Particular relevance is also given to the planning of carrying capacity limits, which introduces a scientific and multidimensional approach to managing tourism pressure. This concept includes environmental, infrastructural, and social components, requiring integrated assessments and continuous monitoring systems. The definition of sustainability thresholds helps prevent saturation phenomena and guides policies toward more balanced models.

Alongside regulatory instruments, contemporary policies increasingly rely on economic and fiscal disincentives, consistent with the “polluter pays” principle. Access taxes, tourist levies, and dynamic pricing systems make it possible to modulate tourism demand and internalize social and environmental costs, while also **generating financial resources for the sustainable management of destinations**.

More broadly, this set of measures reflects a paradigm shift in tourism policy: sustainability no longer coincides with the indiscriminate promotion of tourist flows, but with the ability to manage tourism pressure within the ecological, social, and economic limits of territories.

From this perspective, the concept of sustainable **destination management** emerges, based on monitoring tools, multi-level governance, stakeholder participation, and policy integration. Destinations that adopt evidence-based approaches, indicator systems, and adaptive capacity tend to be more resilient and competitive.

In conclusion, overtourism represents a structural challenge of contemporary tourism, requiring a rethinking of planning, regulation, and management logics. Destinations that develop integrated and proactive strategies, grounded in appropriate legal-administrative tools and inclusive governance models, are better able to preserve their territorial capital and ensure long-term sustainability.

# **Sustainable Governance Tools**



# Sustainable Governance Tools

## Monitoring and the ETIS System

In the contemporary paradigm of sustainable tourism, monitoring plays a strategic rather than merely technical role. Sustainability cannot be effectively pursued without measurement systems capable of translating general objectives, normative principles, and strategic guidelines into empirically observable and comparable variables. In other words, sustainable **governance presupposes a solid, continuous, and structured information base**, without which decision-making inevitably becomes incomplete or ineffective.

Within this context, the European Tourism Indicators System (ETIS – European Tourism Indicators System), developed by the European Commission, provides a methodological tool designed to support tourism destinations in analysing, assessing, and managing their sustainability performance. ETIS is not merely a set of statistical indicators, but a genuine **data-driven governance device** capable of integrating data collection, comparative analysis, strategic evaluation, and decision-making support.

The logic underlying the system reflects a significant evolution in contemporary public policy: sustainability is no longer understood exclusively as a programmatic value or an abstract political objective, but as a measurable operational dimension, subject to continuous monitoring, benchmarking, and impact evaluation.

The adoption of ETIS enables destinations to pursue a range of systemically relevant objectives.

First, the system allows for an integrated assessment of destination performance, offering an analytical overview of the economic, environmental, and social dynamics associated with tourism activities. This assessment goes beyond the simple quantitative analysis of tourist flows, incorporating structural variables such as resource use intensity, territorial pressure, and impacts on local communities.

Second, ETIS promotes the production of comparable data, an essential condition for the harmonisation of European policies and for multi-level institutional coordination. Comparability makes it possible to overcome fragmented approaches and to situate local strategies within a broader European framework, facilitating mutual learning processes and the dissemination of best practices.

A third function concerns support for strategic planning. Indicators do not serve a purely descriptive role; rather, they guide the definition of policy priorities, the programming of interventions, and the evaluation of policy effectiveness. In this sense, ETIS strengthens the rationality of public decision-making, reducing the risk of reactive or non-evidence-based interventions.

Finally, the system allows for the identification of emerging critical issues and systemic vulnerabilities, enabling destinations to adopt preventive and corrective measures in line with the principles of precaution and sustainable planning. Continuous monitoring thus becomes an essential tool for **adaptive management**, capable of accompanying the evolution of territorial contexts.

By 2025, the relevance of ETIS must also be understood in light of the growing importance of accountability mechanisms, transparency, and ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) reporting, which involve both public administrations and economic operators. Monitoring tourism impacts therefore becomes a structural component of responsible governance strategies and results-oriented European policies.

In summary, ETIS contributes to transforming sustainability from a normative principle into a **structured management process**, grounded in data, indicators, and systematic evaluation.

### Sustainability Indicators

The conceptual architecture of the ETIS system is based on the integrated measurement of the three fundamental dimensions of sustainability—economic, environmental, and social—which must be understood as interdependent components of a single system.

Indicators are not merely quantitative tools, but true **interpretative and decision-making** devices, capable of capturing the complexity of tourism dynamics and guiding development strategies in line with sustainability principles.

### Economic Dimension

The economic dimension of tourism sustainability goes beyond the traditional logic of growth in visitor numbers or revenues, focusing instead on the quality, resilience, and stability of the value generated.

Indicators related to visitor flows allow for the analysis of pressure exerted on the destination, seasonality patterns, and the territorial distribution of demand. The objective is not quantitative maximisation, but rather an understanding of the balance between carrying capacity, infrastructure, and territorial sustainability.

Tourism expenditure represents a key indicator of the economic quality of flows. Destinations characterised by high volumes but low average spending may display structural fragilities, with negative effects on overall sustainability.

Another key element is the resilience of tourism enterprises, understood as their ability to adapt to external shocks, changes in demand, and environmental constraints. This implies diversified, innovative business models integrated with local value chains.

Finally, human capital plays a central role. The availability of qualified skills, decent working conditions, and employment stability represents a determining factor for the economic and social sustainability of the tourism system.

### Environmental Dimension

The environmental dimension represents one of the most critical pillars of sustainable tourism, as the sector directly depends on the quality of natural capital while simultaneously exerting significant pressure on ecosystems.

Indicators related to the use of natural resources—water, energy, and materials—allow for the assessment of system efficiency and environmental impact. Sustainability requires the adoption of efficient consumption models, circular economy practices, and waste reduction.

Pressures on ecosystems constitute another key area of monitoring, including impacts on biodiversity, habitats, and landscapes. Sustainable management implies the prevention of degradation and the protection of natural resources as strategic capital.

Energy management is of growing importance within the framework of European decarbonisation policies. Indicators related to energy efficiency, renewable energy use, and emissions reduction allow for the assessment of tourism's contribution to climate objectives.

Additional indicators concern waste and wastewater management, which are essential for evaluating a destination's capacity to absorb the impacts generated by tourism flows.

### **Social Dimension**

The social dimension of tourism sustainability represents one of the most complex and strategic areas, as it concerns the relationship between tourism, local communities, and territorial cohesion.

Inclusion is a fundamental indicator, implying accessibility, participation, and the fair distribution of opportunities. Sustainable tourism must promote open and inclusive models, avoiding forms of economic, social, or cultural exclusion.

Equity concerns the distribution of both benefits and costs generated by tourism. Imbalances in this area can lead to social conflict, loss of legitimacy, and resistance from local communities.

Particular importance is attached to labour rights, given the sector's traditionally precarious employment conditions. Social sustainability requires decent working conditions, contractual protection, and the enhancement of skills and competencies.

The well-being of local communities is a central indicator, encompassing quality of life, access to services, and perceptions of tourism impacts. Phenomena such as congestion, gentrification, or social displacement must be carefully monitored and managed.

Finally, territorial cohesion reflects the ability of tourism to promote balanced development, avoiding excessive concentration and supporting the enhancement of peripheral or less developed areas.

# Design of Sustainable Experiences



# Design of Sustainable Experiences

The design of sustainable tourism experiences represents one of the most complex and strategic dimensions of contemporary tourism, situated at the intersection of territorial planning, service innovation, and sustainable development policies. In the current paradigm, the design phase plays a decisive role, as it is precisely at the ideation stage that not only the characteristics of the experience are defined, but also its environmental, social, and economic impacts, the ways resources are used, and the distribution of the value generated.

A sustainable experience does not emerge as the result of subsequent corrective interventions; rather, it requires a **systemic integration of sustainability principles from the very beginning of the design phase**. This approach reflects a preventive and forward-looking logic, consistent with environmental law principles—particularly precaution and prevention—and with contemporary European strategies such as the Green Deal and ESG objectives. Sustainability is therefore not an accessory attribute, but a structural **criterion for ex-ante design and evaluation**.

From this perspective, sustainable design is structured into a logical sequence of interdependent phases, which can also be understood as components of a broader integrated design cycle, consistent with methodologies applied in European programmes.

## Target Identification and Buyer Personas

Defining the target audience is the first stage of the design process and plays a **strategic role not only from a commercial perspective**, but also in terms of sustainability. Audience characteristics directly influence resource pressure, consumption patterns, flow intensity, and the nature of territorial impacts.

In sustainable tourism, target analysis goes beyond traditional market segmentation and becomes a tool for responsible design. It is not simply about identifying potential users, but about understanding behaviours, values, expectations, and modes of interaction with the territory.

The analysis must include multidimensional variables:

- **socio-demographic characteristics**, which influence usage patterns and logistical needs;
- **travel motivations**, often linked to authenticity, learning, well-being, and cultural immersion;
- **environmental awareness**, increasingly relevant in the contemporary context;
- **spending capacity**, which is crucial for economic sustainability and territorial pressure;
- **consumption behaviours**, including the propensity toward sustainable and responsible practices.



The construction of buyer personas allows these elements to be synthesised into an operational model, reducing design uncertainty and enabling **alignment between demand and the sustainability** of the offer, thereby avoiding mismatches that could generate negative impacts.

### **Territorial Context Assessment**

The sustainability of a tourism experience cannot be evaluated in isolation, but must be analysed in relation to the territorial context in which it is embedded. Each destination constitutes a complex system, characterised by resources, constraints, balances, and vulnerabilities.

The assessment of context therefore plays a preventive and strategic role, functioning as a true territorial **compatibility analysis**.

The main analytical dimensions include:

- **impact on the local community**, with particular attention to quality of life and potential conflicts;
- **accessibility and inclusion**, in line with principles of equity and participation;
- **gender equality**, consistent with the SDGs and European policies;
- **climate impact**, through the assessment of emissions and consumption;
- **management of natural resources**, with reference to water, energy, and land use;
- **protection of cultural heritage**, avoiding processes of trivialisation or exploitation.

This phase makes it possible to integrate the project within the ecological, social, and infrastructural limits of the destination, introducing a “**place-based**” design logic centred on territorial specificities.

### **Service Concept and Value Design**

The definition of the Service Concept represents one of the most innovative elements

of sustainable design. It constitutes the logical structure that integrates operational, experiential, and economic dimensions, enabling sustainability principles to be translated into concrete solutions.

The model is structured around four fundamental components: service operativity, relating to organisation, logistics, resource use, and flow management;

- **user experience**, including emotional engagement, perceived quality, and educational dimension;
- **service outcomes**, understood as benefits generated for both visitors and the territory;
- **socio-economic value**, relating to benefit distribution and overall sustainability.

In sustainable tourism, the Service Concept also assumes a transformative function: the experience is not only consumption, but becomes a vehicle for awareness, learning, and behavioural change.

### **Economic Sustainability and Business Models**

Within the sustainable tourism paradigm, the economic dimension plays a structural and indispensable role. Sustainability cannot be limited to environmental protection or social responsibility, but must include financial feasibility and the resilience of the business model.

An experience that is not economically sustainable is destined to fail in the medium to long term, also undermining environmental and social objectives.

Economic sustainability must be understood from a systemic perspective, including:

- **revenue** stability and income diversification;
- balance between **costs and benefits**, including environmental and social costs;
- integration with **local economies**, avoiding extractive models;
- **resilience to external shocks**, such as economic crises or changes in demand.

In this context, innovative business models oriented toward sustainability are emerging, including:

- **circular economy-based** models;
- **co-creation approaches** with local communities;
- public-private **partnerships**;
- integration with **European funding instruments**.

Economic design thus becomes a key element of overall sustainability, requiring an integrated approach between financial dimension, territorial impact, and governance.

### **Cost Structure and Financial Resilience**

Defining the cost structure is one of the key stages of sustainable design, as it directly affects the feasibility, stability, and financial resilience of tourism experiences. In the contemporary context, tourism initiatives cannot be assessed solely in terms of attractiveness or innovation, but must be analysed through an integrated financial perspective capable of considering cost dynamics, long-term sustainability, and adaptability to changing conditions.

A sustainable experience must, first of all, ensure coverage of operational costs, which

include all expenses necessary for service delivery. These costs include, among others:

- human resources and professional skills;
- logistics and organisation;
- materials and infrastructure;
- external services and supplies;
- environmental management and mitigation measures.

Within the sustainability paradigm, operational costs take on a qualitatively different dimension compared to traditional models. The adoption of eco-friendly practices, efficient technologies, and high environmental standards may entail higher initial costs; however, such investments often generate structural medium- to long-term benefits, such as reduced consumption, resource optimisation, and strengthened reputation and competitiveness.

A second element concerns initial investments, which represent the capital required to launch and develop the experience. These may include infrastructural interventions, technological innovations, environmental certifications, training activities, and product development. In sustainable tourism, such investments must be interpreted as **strategic levers of resilience**, capable of enhancing the system's ability to adapt to external shocks and shifts in demand.

Particular importance is attached to the assessment of long-term economic sustainability, which involves a forward-looking analysis of financial flows, risks, and exogenous variables. Tourism experiences are in fact exposed to factors such as seasonality, demand volatility, regulatory changes, and macroeconomic shocks. Financial resilience therefore requires flexible and diversified business models capable of integrating risk scenarios.

From this perspective, the ability to internalise environmental and social costs also becomes relevant, moving beyond a narrow focus on purely monetary costs. The integration of ESG principles into the cost structure enables a more comprehensive assessment of project sustainability and ensures alignment with European policies and funding criteria.

Another dimension concerns compatibility with local economies. Initiatives that are coherently embedded in the territorial fabric tend to generate positive multiplier effects, strengthening local supply chains, employment, and social cohesion. Conversely, extractive or overly externally dependent models can create structural vulnerabilities and reduce overall system resilience.

Overall, economic sustainability requires an integrated view of cost structure, oriented not toward immediate minimisation, but toward the stability, adaptability, and systemic resilience of the project.

## **Financing Strategies**

The economic sustainability of tourism experiences is closely linked to the definition of diversified, coherent, and integrated financing strategies. By 2025, the landscape of funding sources is particularly complex, reflecting the growing relevance of sustainable tourism within public policies and investment dynamics.

Sponsorships represent a significant instrument, as they enable partnerships with public and private actors interested in associating their brand identity with sustainable initiatives. They perform not only a financial function, but also a strategic one, contributing to network building, visibility, and the positioning of the initiative.

Public funding plays a central role, particularly within the European context, where sustainable tourism is recognised as a strategic field for the green transition, territorial cohesion, and regional development. Access to these resources is generally conditioned by strict criteria related to sustainability, innovation, impact, and alignment with policy priorities.

Private investors constitute another important source of financing, increasingly oriented toward responsible investment models. The growing adoption of ESG criteria makes sustainable tourism a potentially attractive sector for private capital, provided that projects are able to demonstrate measurable impacts and economic viability.

Co-financing and blended finance models are particularly relevant, as they combine public and private resources, allowing financial risk to be shared and strengthening project stability. These models are consistent with the collaborative and multi-level approach of sustainable tourism.

Finally, European funding instruments represent a key strategic lever. European Union programmes support initiatives focused on sustainability, innovation, and territorial development, while requiring strong coherence between project design, expected impact, and performance indicators. The integration of sustainable design and access to European funds enhances both the economic feasibility and scalability of tourism experiences.

Overall, the diversification of funding sources is an essential condition for economic resilience, reducing dependence on single actors and increasing the project's capacity to adapt over time.

## **Participatory Governance and Stakeholders**

In sustainable tourism, governance assumes a central role, moving beyond the traditional separation between the public sector and economic operators. Tourist destinations are understood as complex ecosystems, characterised by a plurality of interdependent actors who bring different interests, resources, and competencies.

Sustainability therefore requires a participatory, inclusive, and multi-level governance approach, capable of integrating economic, social, environmental, and institutional dimensions within a coherent framework.

### **Role of Stakeholders**

Stakeholders include all actors involved in the development, management, and use of tourism experiences. Within the sustainable paradigm, their involvement is not optional but represents a structural **condition of sustainability**.

Public authorities perform a regulatory, planning, and coordination function, defining the legal framework, managing carrying capacities, and ensuring a balance between economic interests and territorial protection.

Local communities are central actors in social sustainability. Their involvement helps

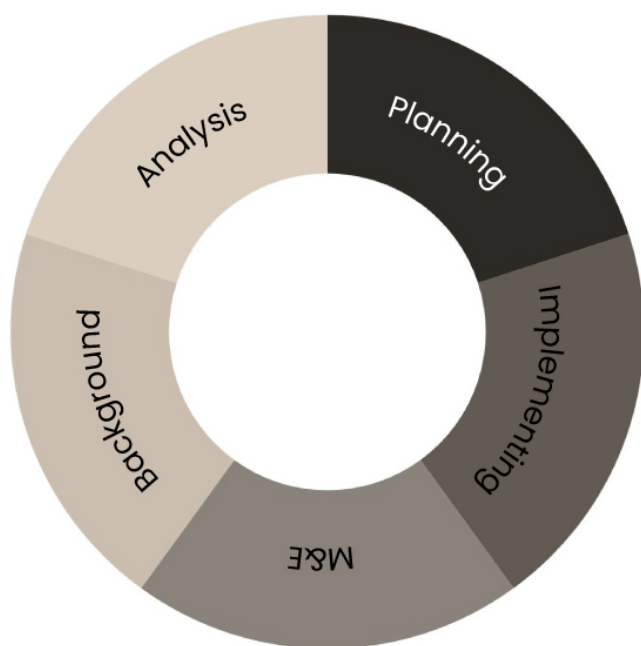
preserve cultural identity, reduce conflicts, and increase the legitimacy of tourism policies. In this perspective, the community is not a passive recipient but a **co-producer of value**.

Businesses play a key role in innovation, investment, and economic value creation. Sustainability requires that business strategies be aligned with environmental limits and the social needs of the territory.

Institutions, service providers, and other system actors contribute to the quality and efficiency of experiences by integrating technical expertise and operational capabilities.

The active involvement of stakeholders generates significant systemic effects: it reduces conflict, improves decision-making quality, strengthens project resilience, and promotes a more equitable distribution of benefits.

By 2025, the most effective governance models are those based on **multi-level coordination**, active participation, and policy integration, in line with European practices of sustainable governance.



## Integrated Action Plan

### STAP Sustainable Tourism Action Plan

**Investigation and mapping phase**  
Collection of Data on tourism management, EU, national and local policies and territorial objectives

**Diagnostic of the state of the art**  
Assessment of objectives, status quo, and planning conditions SWOT and Pest analysis

**Planning Phase**  
Design and identification of goals, actions-good practices, timeframes, actors, indicators and budget

**Implementing phase**  
Execution of the plan (actions/good practices)

**M&E Phase (monitoring and assessment)**  
Study of the progress of the project on the way and its effectiveness at the end of the predetermined time

### Stakeholder Participation

- Territorial structure of stakeholders
- Stakeholder profiles identification and
- Protocol of stakeholder's involvement (working groups, participatory methodologies and engagement strategy definition)
- Legal framework

Co-design activities to develop the design of eco-innovative solutions and strategies.

## Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning

In the sustainable tourism paradigm, monitoring and evaluation are structural components rather than optional phases of a project or tourism experience lifecycle. Sustainability cannot be considered a static or permanently achieved condition; instead, it must be understood as a **dynamic and adaptive process**, subject to periodic assessment, strategic review, and continuous improvement.

From this perspective, the sustainable management cycle is structured as a circular process integrating **planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and learning**, in line with European policy models and impact assessment frameworks.

The evolution of territorial contexts, variability in tourist flows, regulatory changes, and socio-economic dynamics make it essential to adopt analytical tools capable of measuring, interpreting, and managing the impacts of tourism activities. Performance measurement and knowledge capitalisation therefore play a strategic role, not only from a managerial perspective, but also in terms of accountability, transparency, and the quality of public and private decision-making.

## **Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)**

The definition of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) is one of the main operational tools for sustainability control and management. KPIs allow strategic objectives, policy priorities, and sustainability principles to be translated into measurable, verifiable, and comparable variables over time.

In sustainable tourism, the function of KPIs goes beyond traditional financial and economic monitoring, extending to the integrated assessment of environmental, social, and territorial dimensions. They act as decision-support tools, essential for guiding policies, evaluating the effectiveness of interventions, and improving governance.

### **Environmental KPIs**

A first category of indicators concerns environmental impacts, a central dimension in the context of the ecological transition and European policies.

These KPIs allow the measurement of:

- consumption of natural resources (energy, water, materials);
- emissions associated with tourism activities;
- waste generation and management;
- pressures on ecosystems;
- effectiveness of mitigation measures.

The measurement of environmental impacts is not merely descriptive; it also enables the identification of inefficiencies, the guidance of investments, and the improvement of the ecological compatibility of experiences, contributing to decarbonisation objectives and biodiversity protection.

### **Economic KPIs**

A second category concerns the economic dimension, which must be analysed not only in quantitative terms, but also in qualitative and distributive terms.

Relevant indicators include:

- average visitor expenditure;
- revenue stability and diversification;
- integration with local economic supply chains;
- employment generated and job quality;
- business model resilience.

From this perspective, economic sustainability implies the ability to generate stable, inclusive, and territorially rooted value, avoiding dependency dynamics or structural imbalances.

## **Social KPIs**

Particular importance is attached to the social dimension, which reflects the impact of tourism on local communities and territorial cohesion.

Social KPIs may include:

- physical, economic, and cultural accessibility;
- level of participation of local communities;
- working conditions and protection of rights;
- fairness in the distribution of benefits;
- absence of exclusionary or conflictual dynamics.

This dimension has become increasingly central in 2025, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals and European policies focused on inclusion and social cohesion.

## **Experiential and Reputational KPIs**

Another area of monitoring concerns user satisfaction, which integrates qualitative, reputational, and experiential dimensions.

These indicators allow the analysis of:

- consistency between expectations and experience;
- perceived service quality;
- acceptance of sustainability measures;
- propensity for loyalty;
- destination reputation.

User satisfaction represents a key element for destination competitiveness and the long-term sustainability of tourism experiences.

## **Territorial and Pressure KPIs**

Finally, indicators related to territorial pressure are particularly important, as they allow for the assessment of the balance between tourist flows, carrying capacity, and infrastructural sustainability.

These include:

- density and concentration of flows;
- seasonality;
- spatial congestion;
- pressure on public services;
- territorial distribution of overnight stays and visits.

These indicators are essential for managing overtourism and for the adoption of sustainable regulation and planning policies.

## **Evaluation and Learning (Learning Loop)**

In the contemporary paradigm, KPI monitoring must be integrated with structured evaluation and learning processes that transform data into operational knowledge.

Evaluation is not limited to verifying whether objectives have been achieved, but involves a critical analysis of impacts, adopted strategies, and any emerging issues. In this perspective, the concept of a learning loop becomes central, whereby monitoring results feed a continuous process of improvement and adaptation.

This approach enables:

- the correction of inefficiencies and critical issues;
- the adaptation of strategies to contextual changes;
- the improvement of policy and service quality;
- the strengthening of the resilience of the tourism system.

Within European projects, these processes are particularly relevant, as they are closely linked to impact evaluation, reporting requirements, and the replicability of best practices.

## **Lesson Learnt System**

In the context of sustainable tourism, quantitative monitoring must necessarily be complemented by structured organisational learning processes aimed at capitalising on the experience gained during the design and implementation of initiatives. Within this framework lies the lesson learnt system, a concept well established in project management literature and progressively integrated into sustainable governance models and European policy practices.

Sustainability, by its very nature, implies a continuous process of adaptation. Destinations and tourism operators in fact operate in complex and dynamic contexts, characterised by demand variability, regulatory evolution, technological innovation, and socio-economic transformations. In this scenario, systematic learning represents a strategic lever of resilience, capable of improving decision-making quality, reducing uncertainty, and preventing the recurrence of inefficiencies.

### **Ex-post Evaluation and Systemic Learning**

Ex-post evaluation plays a central role within the lesson learnt system. It is not limited to verifying whether objectives have been achieved, but instead functions as an analytical process aimed at understanding:

- the effectiveness of adopted strategies;
- implementation dynamics;
- emerging operational issues;
- replicable success factors.

From this perspective, evaluation becomes a tool for systemic learning, capable of transforming project outcomes into knowledge that can be applied to future interventions.

### **Strategic Functions of Lesson Learnt**

The lesson learnt system pursues a range of operational and strategic objectives:

- correction of inefficiencies, through the identification of structural and organisational causes;
- improvement of strategies, promoting the continuous adaptation of policies and intervention models;
- consolidation of best practices, through the systematisation of effective solutions;
- replicability and scalability, which are central elements in European policies and funding programmes.

In particular, replicability plays a key role in the European context, where projects are also assessed based on their ability to be transferred and adapted to other territorial settings.



### **From Lesson Learnt to Adaptive Governance**

Lessons learnt should not be interpreted as simple descriptive observations or ex-post reports, but as operational governance tools capable of guiding future decisions.

In the contemporary paradigm, they are embedded within models of adaptive governance, in which:

- data collected through monitoring (KPIs);
- evidence emerging from evaluation;
- operational experience gained

are integrated into a continuous process of policy and practice review and improvement.

This approach enables:

- increased flexibility of tourism systems;
- improved responsiveness to uncertain contexts;
- strengthened coherence between objectives, actions, and impacts;
- enhanced innovation in management models.

### **Operational Dimension: Structuring Lesson Learnt**

For lesson learnt systems to be effective, they must be collected and systematised through structured methodologies. Among the most commonly used tools are:

- ex-post evaluation reports;
- participatory workshops with stakeholders;
- comparative analyses between expected and actual results;
- knowledge management and experience archiving systems;
- integration with monitoring systems (e.g. KPIs and ETIS).

An effective lesson learnt system also requires:

- formalisation of collection and analysis processes;
- stakeholder involvement, including operators and local communities;
- integration into decision-making processes, avoiding the risk that generated knowledge remains unused.

## **Lesson Learnt and European Programmes**

Within European programmes, the lesson learnt system plays an increasingly strategic role. European Union policies place strong emphasis on:

- impact evaluation;
- transferability of results;
- replicability of best practices;
- long-term sustainability of initiatives.

Lessons learnt therefore become an essential tool to:

- improve project quality;
- strengthen alignment with European objectives;
- increase the competitiveness of applications;
- facilitate the dissemination and reuse of results.

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