REPORT ON THE IDENTIFICATION OF KEY CHALLENGES & BEST PRACTICES
MAIN FINDINGS

SUSTAINABLE EU TOURISM

Shaping the Tourism of Tomorrow

The report provides an analysis of case studies showing successful tourism development strategies in **50 best practice destinations in 19 EU countries**, categorised into urban, rural, coastal and mixed types, with cultural tourism being the most common type of tourism (78%), followed by rural and coastal tourism.

Tourism challenges were categorised into **economic, social, environmental and governance dimension**. Solutions were grouped into nine categories, with stakeholder engagement (90%) representing the most adopted, followed by the adoption of tourism strategies and monitoring frameworks, digital tools and infrastructure investments. These strategies varied in importance depending on the type of challenge, but consistently relied on collaboration and strategic frameworks. In principle, **all best practice cases have a high replicability potential and a high degree of innovation**, as these served as selection criteria for the cases. But each destination presents a unique approach that not only addresses its key challenges, but also provides replicable models for other destinations with similar problems.

Detailed results on the key solutions are:

- **Adoption of a tourism strategy and monitoring framework:** Around 60% of the analysed destinations have adopted a sustainable tourism strategy or monitoring framework, integrating tourism with urban planning, transport, and environmental protection. Notable examples include **Borkum**, which developed the "Living Space Borkum 2030+" strategy with stakeholder participation, emphasising climate neutrality and high-quality tourism. This cyclical strategy process involves ongoing review and adaptation every few years, driven by KPI-based management, earning broad support from locals and stakeholders. **Malta**, moving away from a growth-focused model, developed a strategy prioritising sustainable development, using data-driven decision-making and research to balance economic, social, and environmental objectives. A comprehensive monitoring system tracks progress, and Malta is involved in innovative research to tackle future tourism challenges, supported by strong collaboration among stakeholders and political commitment. In **Lower Saxony**, a climate change adaptation strategy was created through a collaborative process involving various stakeholders. It began with a climate risk analysis and the development of region-specific tools and guidelines to help adapt to climate impacts. Workshops and networking events offer ongoing support, backed by a state funding program. This strategy's success is attributed to its scientific basis and strong stakeholder communication.

- **Stakeholder participation and management:** Most destinations have established some form of stakeholder engagement to enhance tourism management. Common practices include public-private partnerships, which foster cooperation between local authorities, businesses, and tourism providers, promoting sustainable practices. Community involvement through volunteer programs and forums helps create a sense of ownership and improves interaction with tourists. Digital platforms are increasingly used to facilitate communication and efficiency. Innovative examples include the **Azores**, which utilises a collaborative governance model involving community groups, sustainability teams, and local businesses to support sustainable tourism and address changing demands. **Florence** has developed a multi-level management system coordinated by a Steering Committee that includes various stakeholders to create and implement tourism strategies. **Aarhus**'s "ReThinker" program integrates volunteers into local events, enhancing community engagement and tourism experiences.
Overall, stakeholder participation focuses on collaborative management, sustainability, and inclusivity, leveraging digital tools and multi-level governance to involve a broad range of stakeholders in tourism development.

- **Laws and regulations:** Destinations like Barcelona, Bohinj, Bruges, Dubrovnik, Florence, and Mallorca have implemented various laws and regulations to mitigate the negative impacts of high tourism volumes. **Barcelona, Dubrovnik, and Florence** have introduced restrictions on souvenir shops, bars, and take-away establishments to combat commercial gentrification, and regulated short-term rentals to prevent rising housing costs. **Bruges** has banned new holiday homes and restricted shared accommodations like Airbnb to residents only. Additionally, these cities have limited cruise ship arrivals by capping the number of ships and passengers. Traffic control measures have been enacted in **Bohinj** and **Dubrovnik** to manage vehicle access in sensitive areas, while Bruges has also restricted tourist transport options like boats and horse-drawn carriages. **Mallorca** has introduced regulations as part of its Circular Economy strategy to reduce plastic waste and enhance environmental sustainability. These regulations primarily affect local authorities, residents, tourists, and local businesses, with a focus on managing the impact of tourism on infrastructure and local environments.

- **Certification:** Thirteen destinations have adopted certification schemes to promote sustainable tourism. These certifications include both internationally recognised labels, such as EarthCheck, which cover comprehensive sustainability criteria including environmental, social, and economic factors, and local or national certifications tailored to specific regional needs and cultural values. For instance, the **Lika** Quality Label in Croatia supports local food and products, while Lyon offers several labels to promote sustainable practices and regional cuisine. Local certifications address unique challenges and opportunities, enhancing a destination's cultural identity and ensuring community involvement. They often involve extensive capacity-building activities and require regular audits to foster continuous improvement. While certifications demand significant financial and human resources, innovative solutions like **Montafon**'s "Host Role Model" program help ease the process for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) by offering workshops and consultations to achieve sustainability goals.
  Overall, sustainability certifications are vital for promoting responsible tourism. They enhance a destination's global reputation, support local economies, and adapt to evolving global tourism trends, balancing international standards with local needs and capacities.
- **Promotional Campaigns**: Several destinations, including Ahrtal, Benidorm, and Copenhagen, have launched promotional campaigns to bolster their sustainability efforts. These campaigns primarily focus on sustainability, local engagement, environmental protection, and responsible tourism. **Copenhagen's** "Sustainable Choice CPH" encourages eco-friendly activities, while the "Planet Copenhagen Manifesto" highlights the city's environmental goals. **Prague's** "Enjoy and Respect" campaign fosters responsible tourism and sustainable travel habits, also targeting high-quality tourism segments. **Bohinj's** campaigns focus on sustainable mobility and transport, educating tourists about environmental protection. Additional themes include promoting off-season tourism and water protection.
- **Digital Solutions:** Half of the destinations analysed have adopted innovative digital solutions to advance sustainable and resilient tourism. Key digital tools include mobile apps for tourism services, which are used in 15 destinations to provide real-time information on transportation, attractions, and eco-friendly options, thereby enhancing visitor navigation and promoting sustainable mobility. For instance, **Florence's** "FeelFlorence" app helps manage tourist flows and suggest less crowded attractions, while **Brussels'** app Floya integrates various transport modes for a seamless travel experience.
  Real-time data and monitoring systems are also prevalent, utilised in destinations like **Barcelona** and **Malta** to optimise tourism flows and resource management. These systems, such as the Smart Data platform in **Andalusia** and the Tourism Observatory in Barcelona, aggregate data to support sustainable tourism planning and decision-making. Additionally, digital tools for environmental monitoring, mobility solutions, and augmented reality (AR) are employed to assess and manage environmental impacts, promote sustainable transport, and enrich tourist experiences. AR tools offer immersive experiences by blending digital elements with real-world sights, enhancing cultural and historical engagement. Overall, these digital innovations play a crucial role in balancing tourism growth with sustainability and improving both visitor experiences and operational efficiency.
- **Capacity Building**: Capacity building initiatives have been implemented by 18 destinations, including Andalusia, Azores, Gothenburg, and Lower Saxony, among others. These destinations offer a variety of training programs and workshops for tourism stakeholders, focusing on sustainability and addressing specific challenges like resource management, climate change adaptation, resilient tourism development, and the integration of local products. Training also covers business principles, marketing, digitalisation, and new technologies.
  In addition to training, these programs are often supplemented by expert consultations, coaching, awareness-raising campaigns, and peer learning activities. Guidelines, manuals, and tools are provided to help companies adopt sustainable practices or achieve certifications. A unique example comes from **Middelfart**, where capacity building includes involving tourists in conservation activities like whale watching and waste picking, raising biodiversity awareness and engaging businesses through educational field trips on sustainability.
- **Infrastructure and Product Development**: Nearly half of the destinations have invested in sustainable infrastructure or product development focusing on transport, waste reduction, accessibility, cultural preservation, and energy efficiency, helping to reduce tourism's environmental impact and increase resilience.
- **Research and Innovation**: Research and innovation projects support 13 destinations, including Benidorm, Brussels, and Malta, in advancing sustainable and resilient tourism. These initiatives focus on smart technologies, sustainability, and social engagement. For instance, data-driven decision-making is crucial in

destinations like **Malta** and **Benidorm**, where AI and satellite data are used for monitoring environmental factors and tourist flows. Environmental monitoring and conservation efforts are evident in Lower Saxony, Malta, and Valencia, involving real-time tracking and climate adaptation. Cultural tourism is enhanced with VR and AR technologies in places like **Carbonia** and **Cork,** improving visitor experiences and heritage conservation. Additionally, Middelfart and Valongo involve tourists in research activities, such as biodiversity conservation and waste collection, contributing to environmental sustainability.

The analysis of case studies identified several **key success factors** for implementing sustainable tourism strategies. The most frequently cited factors were stakeholder engagement (48%) and funding opportunities (36%). Other important factors included stakeholder support and staff commitment (26%), a clear vision and strategy (24%), and continuous communication with stakeholders (24%).

Strong political will and public commitment were critical, especially for enacting unpopular but necessary changes. Destinations with an open and knowledgeable tourism ecosystem succeeded in fostering innovation. International guidelines helped build capacity and structure strategies, while a clear vision and regular strategy reviews ensured long-term success. A monitoring system for data management and sustainability metrics was essential for informed decision-making.

Perseverance was essential due to the long-term nature of sustainability transitions, alongside with broad stakeholder support, including collaboration with local authorities and companies. Early and continuous stakeholder dialogue helped gain acceptance for new measures. Peer learning, embracing new trends and technologies, and showing visible results also contributed to success. Other factors included creating independent innovation hubs and investing in training.

Across different solution approaches, **stakeholder involvement, funding, and community commitment** were consistently important for strategy adoption, infrastructure investments, and digital solutions.

The **funding** for sustainable and resilient tourism transformation projects in destinations often comes from external sources, with the scale and focus of the projects determining the type of funds used. Larger projects typically receive co-financing from EU and national funding sources, while smaller initiatives, such as stakeholder management or awareness campaigns, are usually funded by the destination management organisation's (DMO) own budget. EU funding programs play a major role, with 22 destinations using funds such as the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) for monitoring and digitisation projects, and the LEADER program for implementing sustainability measures. Other EU programs like INTEREG, LIFE, and COSME also provide financial support. National and regional funding programs are also significant, particularly for innovation and climate-related projects. Municipalities are a key source of funding for infrastructure investments, whilst private companies, tourism stakeholders, sponsors, and volunteer groups also contribute to the funding of sustainability measures. The regular budget of the DMO remains crucial for smaller or routine projects.

The **key barriers** to implementing sustainable tourism projects, as identified by destinations, include scepticism and resistance from local communities, authorities, and businesses. This resistance, particularly to shifting away from traditional growth models, was a significant obstacle in several cases. Convincing stakeholders required extensive discussions and persuasion efforts. Another major challenge was the lack of resources, including financial, human, and time resources, which made it difficult to carry out sustainability projects. This issue was exacerbated by insufficient national or European co-financing.

Additionally, some destinations faced a lack of support, especially in terms of political or stakeholder backing, which slowed progress in areas like stakeholder participation, capacity building, and infrastructure development. A lack of cooperation between stakeholders, such as local authorities and businesses was also problematic, with complex administrative processes consuming both time and resources.

Other obstacles included conflicts of interest between short-term political goals and the long-term nature of sustainable tourism, conservative mindsets resistant to change, and the instability caused by political election cycles. Laws and regulations sometimes prevented the realisation of new sustainable initiatives, and challenges in data management and communication with stakeholders further complicated the efforts. The lack of technological skills and the waning engagement of stakeholders over time were also highlighted as significant issues.

Destinations emphasised the importance of a clear, well-defined strategy for sustainable and resilient development. This includes understanding the destination's current status, engaging local stakeholders, and aligning with long-term goals. Such strategic approaches help prevent overtourism and promote alternatives while addressing both social and environmental sustainability.

From the destinations' perspective, there are some **lessons learned** and **takeaways** from implementing measures for sustainable and resilient tourism development, which are summarised below.

Comprehensive, long-term planning is essential, especially for infrastructure development. Successful projects require adaptation to global trends and collaboration between tourism organisations at various levels. Pre-established networks and partnerships can significantly enhance planning outcomes.

The sustainable tourism transition is a time-consuming process that demands patience and coordination. Collaboration and innovation can produce replicable solutions, but it's also important to communicate the benefits of sustainability to the local population and stakeholders. Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) should focus on innovation and sustainability management, going beyond traditional marketing roles. They may need to establish independent organisations like innovation labs that remain free from daily operations.

Engaging small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in sustainability efforts can be difficult due to bureaucratic hurdles, but this can be overcome by simplifying certification processes and improving communication. Effective project implementation requires clear communication, stakeholder involvement, and collaborative approaches. Both top-down and bottom-up methods are necessary, and independent teams with long-term commitments are crucial for maintaining project momentum.

Stakeholder engagement and collaboration are vital, requiring regular communication and network building. Motivating stakeholders involves clear communication of the benefits of sustainability efforts, sharing examples of best practices, and demonstrating economic advantages. Transparent communication is also key to increasing local tourism acceptance, especially regarding investments from tourism tax and sustainability initiatives.

Monitoring and data management play a critical role in managing tourism and ensuring sustainable practices. However, it is crucial to clearly communicate monitoring results to all stakeholders. Destinations are encouraged to embrace digital transformation, including tools like pre-booking systems and immersive technologies, which enhance both tourism experiences and operational efficiency.

Peer learning, where destinations exchange experiences and adopt best practices from others, has been a significant success factor. In terms of product and infrastructure development, destinations should focus on inclusivity and accessibility to cater to various market segments. Securing long-term funding is essential for successful tourism projects, with smaller destinations often needing external funding to support their initiatives.

Other important recommendations include protecting culture and heritage, ensuring safety in crisis situations, and making accessibility a standard practice in tourism destinations.

The 50 best practice cases are a valuable resource of information and advice for destinations facing similar challenges and provide a proven framework to address environmental, social, economic and governmental challenges. They act as a guide to ensuring that tourism is not just profitable but also responsible, helping destinations align with global sustainability goals while delivering meaningful, authentic experiences for visitors.

By learning from other successful destinations, stakeholders can implement strategies that have already demonstrated positive results. They can be the starting point for a deeper exchange and for establishing twinning partnerships in sustainable tourism, providing a clear starting point for collaboration between destinations. By first identifying the challenges and respective best practices, a destination can gain valuable insights into what strategies have worked effectively elsewhere, creating a knowledge base that can be deepened through twinning. These practices offer a common ground for dialogue and cooperation, allowing destinations to approach potential twinning partners with concrete examples of their sustainability efforts. Twinning activities allow for deeper exchange, where both parties can refine and expand upon these practices, jointly solving challenges and co-developing innovative solutions. In this way, best practices not only guide initial improvements but also act as catalysts for broader, long-term collaboration through twinning.

For more details on key challenges and success stories, the project's best practice factsheets presents shared issues and solutions destinations faced and adopted to advance in their path towards sustainable and resilient tourism.