

7th EUROPEAN TOURISM FORUM BORDEAUX, FRANCE 17-19 September 2008

The European tourism offer: quality and sustainability vis-à-vis demand trends

The French Presidency and the European Commission, with the active involvement of stakeholders within the tourism sector, organised the 7th European Tourism Forum on September 17th to 19th 2008 in Bordeaux, France.

The Forum focused on the European tourism offer, considering how it can be more competitive while also meeting the important requirements of sustainability, in the face of changing patterns of demand.

The Forum was held at a time of considerable turbulence in world financial markets, with concerns about the effect on tourism of a significant downturn in the global economy. This uncertain situation, coupled with a decline in Europe's market share of world tourism arrivals in recent years, calls for a flexible, dynamic and creative approach to product formulation and promotion. It is also a time to look to the long term future of tourism in Europe, ensuring that it enhances the wellbeing of the environments and communities on which its success depends.

The following topics were selected for debate during the forum:

1) Europe's adaptability to world tourism demand trends

A first priority in any policy of sharpening Europe's approach to global competition must be to obtain and disseminate the best possible knowledge of current trends and requirements in both new and established markets. The European Travel Commission presented data to the Forum on a range key source markets.

Domestic and intra-European travel will continue to be the overwhelming generators of tourism revenue. Yet to maintain and stimulate spending from these markets will require close attention to their changing profiles and tastes. The Forum discussed the need to deliver creative experiences and themed products to carefully targeted market segments. There is a need to satisfy consumers that are ever more critical and well informed in their decision making, using the internet to compare offers and weigh up reports from previous travellers. There is a need for more sophistication in the communication process as well as in the product itself.

Some of these characteristics can also be seen in the large emerging markets such as China, India, Russia and Brazil. Yet each one of these has its own particular profile and requirements, which must be understood if they are to be exploited to the full. As an example, the Forum was presented with a detailed insight of Indian tourists and what drives their decision making. Some practical steps could be taken to remove barriers here, such as addressing visa problems, meeting particular transport needs and providing reassuring information for families.

A key to our competitiveness is to focus on those aspects of the offer in which Europe has comparative advantage. A number of speakers emphasised that new travellers from emerging markets are looking to visit a range of countries and experience a variety of cultures and environments during one trip. This provides

special opportunities for initiatives across Europe. The quality and diversity of our heritage and culture, both historic and contemporary, is Europe's trump card.

In addressing these challenges, key words used by delegates were creativity, innovation and cooperation. Indeed, there was a clear call for individual destinations in Europe to see each other as collaborators rather than as competitors

2) Integrating competitiveness and sustainability criteria in the adaptation of the European tourism offer

Sustainability and competitiveness are interwoven. In the long term, one relies on the other. This is now becoming increasingly true in the short term as well, with enterprises and destinations seeing more clearly the commercial benefits of an operation and a tourism offer that is based on sustainability principles. A number of speakers in the Forum referred to a much greater consumer awareness and questioning of environmental and social impact in the last two to three years, whilst others demonstrated direct links between cost savings and environmental gains.

The Forum heard about the potential for considerable energy, water and waste savings in the hotel sector from the adoption of best practice from the building industry at the time of construction. Pioneering work in France in introducing better environmental management amongst hotels has been secured partly through engagement with the main hotel companies, but also by working with local networks of independent proprietors, assisted by the application of appropriate standards and eco-labels.

The issue of rapidly growing greenhouse gas emissions from flying is a high profile challenge in the relationship between competitiveness and sustainability. However, the Forum heard evidence from one low-cost carrier of how its flights were more carbon efficient than those of conventional airlines and how investment in technologically advanced aeroplanes was significantly increasing both financial and environmental performance. The EU Emissions Trading Scheme was also seen as an important step forward.

Although presentations by the panel focussed on environmental issues, the intervention of delegates strongly underlined their concerns about social impacts, such as addressing the needs of people with disabilities and the role of young people in the tourism sector. Clearly, full attention must be paid to social sustainability in policies to adapt the European tourism offer.

3) Quality tourism-sector employment in the EU

The Forum underlined the critical importance of the provision of quality tourism jobs for both the competitiveness and the sustainability of tourism. People are all-important to this industry.

There is overall concern that the nature of jobs in the industry is changing more quickly than the training available. In many situations there is poor correlation between supply and demand. Increasingly, jobs and skill requirements in the hospitality sector are becoming more specialised. Recruitment is for specific functions rather than for an overall career. There is also an increasing emphasis on marketing and financial management skills. However, the continuing need for training in the field of welcome and service delivery was stressed. A good way of delivering training is through increasing the availability of apprenticeships.

In some countries, tourism related education and training may be well organised at a primary, secondary and tertiary level. However, a challenge is to deliver further and ongoing vocational training in a structured way. In Austria, the success of a model based on networks of enterprises working together at a local level and supported by external funding has been most encouraging.

A clear message from the Forum was the need for stronger social dialogue in the tourism sector, bearing in mind that the interests of employers and employees are often the same, in terms of growth, competitiveness, working conditions and quality of service.

In many parts of Europe there are labour supply problems in the sector. The Forum emphasised the need to project the benefits of a career in tourism more positively to young people. However, the opportunity to attract older people, who may be returning to employment, was also identified. Labour shortages in tourism also point to a need for enhanced labour mobility within Europe.

Points raised in discussion linked together the issues of quality of jobs and quality of service, recognising that both are central to tourism's economic and social sustainability and competitiveness.