What is a European Capital of Culture?

European Capitals of Culture are one of the most recognised EU projects. They started in 1985 on the initiative of the then Greek Minister of Culture Melina Mercouri.

The idea is to put cities at the heart of cultural life across Europe. Through culture and art, European Capitals of Culture improve the quality of life in these cities and strengthen their sense of community. Citizens can take part in the year-long activities and play a bigger role in their city’s development and cultural expression.

Being a European Capital of Culture brings fresh life to these cities, boosting their cultural, social and economic development. Many of them, like Lille, Glasgow and Essen, have demonstrated that the title can be a great opportunity to regenerate their urban centres, bringing creativity, visitors and international recognition.

But there is also something for all Europeans: Capitals of Culture highlight the richness of Europe’s cultural diversity and take a fresh look at its shared history and heritage. They promote mutual understanding and show how the universal language of creativity opens Europe to cultures from across the world.

All EU Member States, candidate countries and European Free Trade Association/European Economic Area countries participating in the Creative Europe programme can host a European Capital of Culture.

The 2018 Capitals

With the concept of iepen mienskip (open community) at the centre of its programme, Leeuwarden 2018 (The Netherlands) aims to strengthen and connect communities from the town itself, the Friesland region and Europe by enticing audiences to come together and participate in projects. An exhibition by Dutch graphic artist M.C. Escher, a Mata Hari Opera, an event with Frisian horse-breeders, grassroots projects such as “European sports for all” are just a few of the many projects that will contribute to raising awareness and increasing understanding of cultural differences.

The cultural programme for Valletta 2018 (Malta) is inspired by the traditional Maltese festa (village feast) and encourages artists and audiences to rethink the traditional view of culture. Due to Malta’s specific location between Europe and North Africa, Valletta will aspire to bring together different points of view from the various shores of the Mediterranean. More than 140 projects and 400 events will be organised around three main themes: “Island stories”, “Future Baroque” and “Voyages”. Several iconic buildings in Valletta will be restored, and the city will also encourage everyone who wants to make a contribution to participate in the programme.

In line with the aims of the 2018 European Year of Cultural Heritage, both Capitals will work on projects promoting cultural heritage.
Being a European Capital of Culture brings real and lasting benefits. It has helped to...

Create Economic Growth
Each euro of public money invested in Mons 2015 (Belgium) is estimated to have generated between EUR 5.5 and 6 for the local economy.

Marseille-Provence 2013 (France) attracted a record number of 11 million individual visits.

During Wroclaw 2016 (Poland), more than 40% of the city’s cultural and creative industries reported an increase in turnover. Out of the 5.2 million tourists who visited Wroclaw in 2016, 1.6 million came from other countries, marking a substantial increase in international tourist stays during the year.

Build a Sense of Community
Through the “Foster the City” programme, inhabitants of Pilsen 2015 (Czech Republic) identified public spaces that were in need of improvement, developed an action plan for each, chose which projects they wanted to fund and helped implement the improvements themselves, supported by expertise and funding from the team running the European Capital of Culture programme.

Liverpool 2008 (UK) had nearly 10 000 registered volunteers; all schoolchildren in the city participated in at least one activity during the year.

In Donostia-San Sebastián 2018 (Spain) about 60% of the projects involved local people. This solid and substantial local participation helped achieve the aim of culture for co-existence, encouraging the value of respectful tolerance within diversity.

Regenerate Cities
Marseille-Provence 2013 (France) transformed itself physically with additions such as the Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilisations. The European Capital of Culture was part of an investment project in new cultural infrastructure of more than EUR 600 million - which was in turn integrated into a multi-billion euro effort to revitalise the city that spanned several decades. Marseille 2013 raised EUR 16.5 million in private sponsorship from 207 companies.

In Košice 2013 (Slovakia), the private sector and local universities worked together to transform an industrial city to highlight creative potential, new cultural infrastructure and establish Košice as a tourist hub for the Carpathian Region.

Did you know that...
... when Brussels was European Capital of Culture in 2000, the city hosted its first Zinneke Parade which – since then – has taken possession of the city streets every two years?

... when Stavanger (Norway) was European Capital of Culture in 2008, cultural collaborations, co-productions and exchanges took place with more than 50 countries?

... Pilsen has opened its first incubator for cultural and creative industries “DEPO2015” in a former tram and bus depot?

58 CITIES
European Capitals of Culture from Athens in 1985 to Leeuwarden (The Netherlands) & Valletta (Malta) in 2018

2019
- Plovdiv (Bulgaria) and Matera (Italy)

2020
- Galway (Ireland) and Rijeka (Croatia)

2021
- Timisoara (Romania) and Elefsina (Greece) and Novi Sad (Serbia)

2022
- Esch (Luxembourg) and Kaunas (Lithuania)

6 YEARS
Competition for the title starts at least 6 years in advance, to give bidding cities enough time to:
- ENGAGE with their citizens as well as their cultural, economic and social stakeholders,
- DEVELOP an ambitious programme, fully integrated into their overall development strategy and
- HAVE all new cultural infrastructure projects READY for the start of the year.