

TOURISM

Malta's role in Europe's greener tourism strategy: Cutting carbon for the future

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In recent years, Europe's tourism industry has faced challenges to its sustainability and competitiveness. The EU's commitment to a decarbonised economy by 2050 and the energy crisis, worsened by geopolitical instability and supply chain disruptions, have driven up energy prices. In response, the EU is taking bold steps to align its climate goals with immediate energy security needs.

At the heart of these efforts is the Interreg Europe DETOCS Project - a collaborative initiative aimed at decarbonising Europe's tourism sector while addressing the dual challenges of pandemic recovery and energy security.

A significant aspect of DETOCS is the involvement of key partners, namely the University of Malta and the Ministry responsible for Tourism in Malta, which play crucial roles in advancing the project's objectives in Malta.

The tourism sector contributes to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions through transportation, accommodation, and energy-intensive activities. It is both a contributor to and victim of climate change as extreme weather events threaten Europe's tourism hotspots, from Mediterranean beaches to Alpine ski resorts.

Energy-intensive infrastructure, such as hotels and transportation systems, is struggling with operational costs. For many businesses, especially small and medium enterprises (SMEs), this threatens profitability and even survival.

Up to a few years ago, businesses survived through maximising of tourists' occupancy and services. But when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, this strategy failed, and many touristic establishments had to close their doors across Europe. In this context, increasing energy efficiency, energy security, self-sufficiency, and competitiveness are critical for the tourism sector's resilience.

The Interreg Europe DETOCS Project - DEcarbonising the Tourism Industry Post Covid-19 Support - is an ambitious initiative that aims to turn these challenges into opportunities. By having sustainable practices and promoting low-carbon policies, DETOCS seeks to revitalise Europe's tourism infrastructure while ensuring alignment with the EU's long-term decarbonisation objectives.

Key elements of the project include exchange of Good Practices. The project involves partner regions from Slovenia, Greece, Malta, Finland, Italy, Bulgaria, Hungary, and the Netherlands. Through collaboration, these regions share successful strategies for



sustainable tourism, from renewable energy integration in hospitality to eco-friendly transportation systems.

DETOCS aims to enhance regional policies supporting tourism decarbonisation. By adopting proven practices from other regions, policymakers can tailor solutions to local contexts, ensuring effective implementation.

A crucial aspect of DETOCS is equipping stakeholders with the knowledge and skills needed to drive the transition to low-carbon tourism. This includes facilitating extensive discussions among policymakers, business owners, and community leaders on energy efficiency, renewable energy, and sustainable tourism management.

By decarbonising tourism infrastructure, the project contributes to the EU's climate goals while also enhancing energy efficiency and reducing costs for businesses. At the same time, it supports economic recovery by revitalising infrastructure, creating jobs, and attracting eco-conscious tourists.

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For instance, a hotel that invests in solar panels and energy-efficient appliances not only reduces its carbon footprint but also lowers its energy bills, improving profitability and resilience to market shocks.

Similarly, regions that develop eco-tourism initiatives—such as nature trails, cultural heritage preservation, and carbon-neutral resorts—can attract a growing segment of environmentally conscious travellers.

So far, the project has succeeded in engaging over 29 different Tourism stakeholders and together with policy makers succeeded in identifying a total of 91 strengths, opportunities, weaknesses and threats of decarbonising the tourism sector.

A hierarchy of the most urgent and most important issues to be addressed have also been identified and compared to other regions of similar climates such as Crete, Italy and Bulgaria.

At this stage, research is being carried out to identify good practice energy efficiency examples from all regions. These will support the next step in finding optimum solutions to the identified challenges. The final stage of the project is to recommend and possibly adopt some policy changes and support measures to accelerate the decarbonisation of the tourism sector.

The role of regional cooperation

The diversity of the DETOCS partner regions emphasises the importance of tailored approaches to decarbonisation. Southern European countries like Greece and Malta, with their sun-rich climates, can focus on solar energy solutions, while colder regions like Fin-

land might prioritise energy-efficient heating systems. By exchanging knowledge and experiences, regions can accelerate progress and avoid duplicating efforts.

DETOCS is firmly aligned with EU policies, including the European Green Deal and the Fit for 55 package which aims to reduce the greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 55% by 2030.

The project's focus on decarbonisation ensures that tourism contributes to these goals rather than undermining them. DETOCS enhances the competitiveness of Europe's tourism sector in a global market, increasingly focused on sustainability.

The challenges facing Europe's tourism sector present an opportunity to rethink and rebuild in a way that is resilient, sustainable, and future proof. The DETOCS project offers a blueprint for achieving this transformation by integrating climate, energy, and economic goals.

As Europe moves towards a decarbonised economy by 2050, tourism must be part of the solution. By embracing low-carbon technologies, fostering regional cooperation, and prioritising sustainability, the sector can emerge stronger from the current crises. More importantly, it can serve as a model for other industries working towards the complex interplay of climate action, energy security, and post-pandemic recovery.

The path ahead is challenging, but with initiatives like DETOCS, Europe's tourism industry can turn its greatest challenges into a foundation for long-term success.

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