

Contribution to the EU Strategy for Sustainable Tourism

Executive Summary

Europe's inland waterways are a strategic asset in the tourism sector. Rivers and canals link cities, towns, and natural landscapes, providing opportunities for sustainable travel and regional development. Incorporating waterways into the EU Sustainable Tourism Strategy can advance the green growth and sustainable prosperity while supporting regional development, safeguarding cultural heritage, and the natural assets of Europe's rivers and canals.

Waterway tourism—including river cruising, boating, kayaking, and waterside activities such as cycling, walking, gastronomy, and cultural experiences—offers an appealing tourism model where the journey itself is central. With the river tourism sector rebounding to pre-COVID levels and now growing, there is a timely opportunity to expand its role in sustainable tourism.

There are of course challenges to bear in mind alongside opportunities. We need to address climate change that affects navigability while invasive species and water quality threaten ecosystems. A concerted effort towards emissions reduction, electrification, and improved waste management are also needed. Digital tools are present but require further development, and standardised EU-wide data and safety information are essential to boost security, visibility, and resilience. Tackling these challenges to propel the sector forward requires strategic investment which is currently limited.

Through targeted investment, harmonised governance, and collaboration between waterway managers, operators, tourism organisations and local communities, the EU can utilise its multi-use waterways to develop a tourism model that is sustainable, competitive, and connected to Europe's cultural and natural heritage.



Sustainable tourism on and along inland waterways

Across the European Union, rivers and canals are an integral part of society, the economy, and the natural environment. Inland waterways bear historical significance as lifelines of civilian life and trade while modern day use extends far beyond this in both scope and potential. Inland waterways provide an opportunity for the tourism sector to support sustainable transportation of people and goods, boost local communities and SMEs, and help to restore ecosystems simultaneously. By proactively managing and investing in the resilience of waterway infrastructure, the mutual benefits multiply across sectors, including the immense potential for tourism to flourish.

Waterways are underutilised opportunities for sustainable tourism

Inland waterways carve pathways through landscapes in urban and rural areas, leading to massive opportunities for sustainable tourism in both large cities and small towns. The expansiveness of Europe's waterway network is ideal to spread tourism out across Europe while taking advantage of the varied ways that tourism can be promoted and experienced across the continent. By offering an alternative to mass tourism and over-crowded destinations that exceed carrying capacities, inland waterways can redirect tourism to lesser-known destinations and communities, resulting in regional development. This approach distributes economic benefits more evenly while taking stress off destinations that are at or above capacity.

Attractiveness of travel by water and the return of river tourism

River tourism has returned to pre-COVID levels and is growing. Travel by water is an attractive and unique means of travel for visitors looking for rich cultural experiences and slow travel that combines adventure, cultural heritage, gastronomy, and nature. With the right support, river and canal tourism can become a flagship of sustainable tourism in Europe, in alignment with sustainable growth and supporting the competitiveness of regions.



There are two categories of tourism involving waterways—that which is **on the waterway itself** and that which takes place **along the waterway**. The variety of activities offered on and along waterways are complementary to each other, resulting in a synthesis that makes tourism on and along waterways even more attractive to visitors.

On the waterway tourism activities include cruising, boating and kayaking. By offering immersive encounters with riverscapes and heritage sites, these activities enrich the visitor experience in ways that mass tourism cannot replicate. They open new revenue streams for small and medium-sized enterprises, particularly in rural or less-visited regions where alternative tourism opportunities are limited.

Along the waterway tourism activities include cycling, walking, fishing and gastronomy, as well as excursions to breathtaking wetland parks with rich fauna and flora, and visits to cultural heritage sites such as historical water tunnels, bridges, lock houses and boat lifts. Examples of cultural heritage include the Schengen Museum and the 'Princesse Marie-Astrid' cruise ship, where the agreement was signed. Towpaths supporting vessel access and safety management have become increasingly popular for cycling, and river routes such as the Danube, the Loire, the Meuse, the Po, the Rhine and the Seine are incorporated into the EuroVelo network.

River and canal tourism offers a complete experience where the journey is the destination.

Important considerations for sustainable tourism within inland waterways

1. **Environmental sustainability and resilience.** Climate change is already reshaping the sector, highlighting the importance of mitigation, preparedness, adaptation, and integrated water management. Droughts reduce navigation capacity and shorten the tourism season while floods can cause damage to infrastructure. Loss of biodiversity threatens both the health and attractiveness of the natural environment.
2. **Emission reduction.** The absence of harmonised EU standards is slowing the transition to cleaner fuels and electrified fleets, leaving operators without the clarity or incentives needed to invest. Establishing a consistent regulatory framework alongside financial support, is essential to create a level playing field across Europe.
3. **Waste management.** Isolated incidents of non-compliance with legislation can cause damage to the entire sector. Enforcement must therefore be strengthened, and digital tools such as an EU-wide app showing the location of waste reception facilities could improve transparency and compliance.
4. **Financial capacity.** Although there are plenty of opportunities to develop sustainable waterway tourism, a shortage of resources means that tough choices must be made. Increased investment is required to strengthen and develop physical assets and infrastructure as well as the workforce, to support training and capacity building. A key advantage of specifically investing in rivers and canals is the multiplier effect—strengthening the diverse functions and long-term resilience of our waterways and waterfronts.



Framework for sustainable tourism in the context of inland waterways

1. **Addressing climate change resilience and adaptation is key to ensuring navigation capacity and future security of waterway function for all sectors.** Climate change threatens navigation capacity and water use across Europe. Investment in adaptive capacity safeguards not only tourism but also water supply, biodiversity, flood mitigation, transport and logistics and energy generation. Strategic investing in the de-doubling of locks and in resilient infrastructure create value across multiple sectors. In that context, policy coherence between the Water Resilience

Strategy, the forthcoming Climate Resilience Action Plan and the new Sustainable Tourism Strategy will be essential.

2. **Coordination and support is required for sustainable mobility and decarbonisation.** The sector is well-positioned to showcase Europe's leadership in the green transition. Electrification of fleets, Onshore Power Supply (OPS) deployment, and incentives for clean fuels are critical. Public investment is needed to de-risk private sector transitions, and legal certainty around the phase-out of fossil fuels would give operators a level playing field.
3. **Competitiveness can be boosted through promotion and awareness.** River tourism is growing but remains underrepresented in EU tourism campaigns. Stronger visibility would help differentiate inland cruising from maritime cruises, highlight the benefits of culturally-rich experiences, and promote smaller-scale boating and waterfront tourism. Effective branding supports regional development, sustains local businesses, and provides resources to protect infrastructure, landscapes and heritage, while creating jobs at the same time.
4. **Destination development and cooperation requires multi-actor dialogue.** Waterway managers, Destination Management Organisations (DMOs), local communities, and other sectors need to cooperate for the benefit of all on joint branding and innovation. Cross-sector collaboration is essential to address gaps, needs and opportunities for the tourism sector to thrive. It is equally important to recognize the multi-use and regional variation of our waterscapes. Their safe and inclusive management is an example of how users can effectively share space and resources. There is also an opportunity for visitors to learn about the multifunctional role of these waterways, so that tourism can develop in harmony with other uses and further support sustainability.
5. **Digitalisation requires standardisation, development, and data collection to improve visibility and user access.** Digital best practices exist, such as in areas where AI supported towpath management is taking place, while other digitalisation tools are still in development. One such technology is pleasure craft visualisation on waterway networks for safer and improved management of passenger and cargo traffic, and data collection. The path towards digitalisation is promising, but there is more work to do in this area. Increased collaboration and networking with other destinations presents new opportunities to innovate. These digital improvements will further enhance the attractiveness, safety, and utilisation of waterways for tourism purposes and link them to other tourism activities.
6. **Easy access to EU funding and finance remains crucial for small public and private entities.** The new Multiannual Financial Framework unlocks opportunities through key programmes such as the European Competitiveness Fund, Horizon Europe, and the National and Regional Partnership Programmes. The updated Sustainable Tourism Strategy should actively promote the full utilisation of these resources. To maximise impact, more targeted, low-threshold, and tailor-made guidance should be delivered via the EU Tourism Platform and Project Advisory services. This support will empower small entities to invest in skills development, cross-border collaboration, and both physical and smart infrastructure—ensuring that no region is left behind in the transition toward sustainable and inclusive tourism.

Inland Navigation Europe (INE) is the European platform of national & regional waterway authorities and organisations promoting waterway transport, established in 2000 with the support of the European Commission, and a neutral platform without commercial interests.