



## Sustainable tourism



### Editorial

In the nineteenth century, the boom of leisure travel drew itineraries that the transport revolutions of the

twentieth century transformed into mass tourism destinations.

Today, Europe is the world's leading international tourist destination, with 500 million arrivals a year, or 53% of the world's total. Regions have benefited hugely from this cash flow, but in recent years many have started to note the negative aspects of mass tourism – litter, transport pollution and damage to historical sites and areas of natural beauty, among others. These problems have been compounded by the increasing evidence of climate change and the need for the tourist industry – like all businesses – to tackle this problem.

The Assembly of European Regions has become a leading voice in the call for a move towards sustainable tourism to enable regions to implement policies that bring social and environmental, as well as economic, development to their communities. This shift in direction means that regions need to think more creatively about how they can encourage cultural tourism without causing undue harm to local people or their environment. This challenge has been taken up by many AER regions that are only too keen to share their examples of good practice with their colleagues across Europe. <

**Michèle Sabban,**  
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## Europe tops holiday charts

EUROPE MAY BE THE WORLD'S FAVOURITE HOLIDAY DESTINATION, BUT TOURISM MUST BE SUSTAINABLE IF IT IS TO CONTINUE TO BENEFIT OUR REGIONS



It is up to all of us to preserve these European landscapes, which are among the most visited in the world.

**Not only** is Europe the world's most popular tourist destination, but six EU countries are in the world's top ten destinations for holiday-makers. It is therefore no surprise that the sector is very important to regional economies in terms of financial turnover and employment. Mainly dominated by SMEs, the tourism sector accounts for 4% of the EU's GDP and approximately 8 million jobs. When the links to other sectors are taken into account, the contribution of tourism to GDP is estimated to be around 11%, providing employment to more than 12% of the European labour force, the equivalent of 24 million jobs.

Besides growth and job creation, tourism plays an important role in the development of the vast majority of European regions. Infrastructure created for tourism purposes contributes to local development, and jobs are frequently created or maintained even in areas beset by industrial or rural decline, or undergoing urban regeneration.

In 2006, the European Commission recognised that a new policy approach was needed to stimulate the sector's competitiveness and growth, while meeting the challenges it faced in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – not least the need to develop more sustainable and environmentally-friendly practices. As Commission Vice-President Günter Verheugen, responsible for enterprise and industry policy,

said: *"the success and growth potential of Europe as a tourist destination of the future will depend on our capacity to preserve and reinforce the assets of Europe through a combination of reasonable development and innovation of the tourism product"*.

He believes Europe is better equipped to face this challenge since the Commission approved its "agenda for a sustainable and competitive European tourism" in October 2007. This new policy approach underlines the need to *"find the right balance between an autonomous development of the destinations and the protection of their environment on the one side and the development of a competitive economic activity on the other"*.

To support this laudable agenda, the Commission has also helped launch EDEN, the European Destinations of Excellence project, which promotes sustainable tourism development models across the EU through annual national competitions. These events result in the selection of a tourist "destination of excellence" for each participating country and, according to the Commission, *"enhance the visibility of emerging European destinations, create a platform for sharing good practices across Europe and promote networking between awarded destinations"*. <

## Making tourism sustainable

AER LEADS ON ENSURING TOURISM BOOSTS REGIONAL ECONOMIES WITHOUT SHORTCHANGING THE PLANET

**AER's** involvement in sustainable tourism began as far back as the mid-1990s with the creation of a working group aimed at agreeing "Environmental Quality Standards in Tourism". One of the regions that helped launch this initiative was Västerbotten (S), and its current tourism manager, Thomas Carlsson, now chairs AER's working group on tourism. He explains that at the outset the group was tasked with "mapping out different kinds of quality standards within the tourism sector, putting forward recommendations on how the regions might work with quality standards and presenting examples of how regions have dealt with these standards". Today, however, the role and main objectives of the group have evolved and sustainable tourism is now at the heart of its actions, says Carlsson.

One of the first real sustainable tourism projects under the auspices of AER was the creation of the Village+ label in 2005, says Carlsson. "This initiative was the response to strong demand from citizens to give the environment the same weight as economic and social policies at regional, national and European level", he says. The Village+ label was awarded to territories in Europe which had adopted a proactive strategy in favour of environmentally-friendly tourism. "To obtain the label at least one hundred members of the community had to sign a charter agreeing to act in an environmentally-friendly way everyday, especially in terms of waste segregation, energy and water-saving, and use of organic cleaning products", explains Carlsson.

Since 2006, AER has been developing and applying peer review methodology for various projects as the most cost-effective way for regions to share experiences and get input from their peers on different policies. The peer review methodology has been adapted to sustainable tourism and a pilot initiative was carried out in February 2008 in the region of Tatarstan (RUS). Regional experts from Carinthia (A), Flevoland (NL), Pays d'Aubagne et de l'Étoile (F) and the Tourism Academy of Russia carried out numerous interviews and round table discussions to understand the potential for tourism in Tatarstan and to evaluate its needs. They also visited key tourism facilities and drafted a report with concrete recommendations for the region to use while developing its long-term tourism strategy. Tatarstan has strong potential for tourism – offering, for example, the opportunity to take a cruise along the Volga and Kama rivers, and pilgrimages to Muslim and Russian orthodox sites. But to make the most of this potential, according to the peer review, the region needed to raise awareness of sustainable tourism among the local population, increase its involvement in projects and promote the exchange of infor-



Lake Kultsjön in the Swedish County of Västerbotten.

mation between governments and all interested parties on best practices in sustainable tourism.

Carlsson believes his region of northern Sweden is a good example of sustainable tourism at work. "From my point of view, we are living in a very sustainable society compared to others and of course we are using all these elements and arguments in our promotion of our tourism offer", he says. "We have supported on several occasions a Swedish Eco-label system called Nature's Best and we help enter-

prises that have joined the label in a variety of ways. This is a very strong label on the Swedish market, and I believe that international tour operators have the same opinion", he adds.

More of the work being carried out by the regions on sustainable tourism can be seen on AER committee 1's webpage:

[www.aer.eu/main-issues/tourism.html](http://www.aer.eu/main-issues/tourism.html)

Access to AER's Tourism Network webportal: [www.aertourismnetwork.org](http://www.aertourismnetwork.org) <



### Interview

## Eszter Balázs

**Eszter Balázs, head of the international affairs unit for the Észak-Alföld Regional Development Agency, Hungary.**

**AER: Why is your region interested in sustainable tourism?**

**Eszter Balázs:** Sustainable tourism is a huge challenge for every destination worldwide. One of our greatest regional attractions is our thermal waters, where visitors follow wellness and spa programmes. The water source, of course, will not last forever, so we have to think about the future and create plans to extend its longevity.

**AER: How are you tackling this problem?**

**EB:** We are encouraging tourists to follow other activities when they visit the spas and wellness centres by widening the range of products that we can sell as a package

with the thermal treatments. Many of these centres have recently launched programmes where not just individual travellers, but also families and pensioners, can enjoy the specialties of Hungarian hospitality.

**AER: What sorts of activities do these programmes include?**

**EB:** After revitalising their bodies with the thermal baths and spas we encourage the tourists to go and visit towns with historical and cultural sights, to experience well-preserved village life and folk art and to taste tempting gastronomic offerings. Many small villages now organise summer festivals to showcase authentic cultural heritage to visitors.

# Sustainable preservation

PRESERVE PROJECT AIMS TO BOOST TOURISM WHILE PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT

**“There is a red thread in AER work on tourism where the key-words are sustainability and preservation of cultural heritage”,** says Håkan Sandgren, county councillor in Jönköping (S) and president of AER Committee 1. *“The challenges for the future are to stick to this nature-oriented path and increase focus on eco-tourism”.* This sentiment is at the heart of AER’s initiative PRESERVE (Peer reviews for sustainable eco-regions via Europe). Launched officially in November, the project is co-financed by INTERREG IVC, part of the European Territorial Cooperation Objective, the EU programme that helps regions share their knowledge and experience and provides a platform for the exchange and transfer of good practices.

The PRESERVE initiative groups AER and 13 member regions from 11 countries and enables them to share experiences as they attempt to make the tourism policies in their regions more sustainable through peer reviews and their resultant policy recommendations.

The project will manage six peer reviews over two years and regions hosting a peer review will also organise regional seminars with relevant partners to bring together the experiences and effects of the peer reviews and other lessons learned during the project. These groups will also engage in an action plan and a self-evaluation workshop to further ensure the sustainability of the project.

The 13 regions involved in the project are all very different, bringing a wide variety of experiences to the table and hoping to take away



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different skills. Each region is featured on the PRESERVE.aer.eu website.

The region of Sterea Ellada (GR), for instance, is aware that it could boost its tourism industry as it hosts many cultural sites – including important archaeological Byzantine monuments – *“the majority of which remain unknown, inaccessible and not included in any tourist package”.* But the region also wants to ensure that any growth is sustainable and that *“in this spirit, tourism can be used as a vehicle for promoting renewable energy sources or low energy consumption technologies or energy saving schemes... the sites can also monitor their impact on the environment including on biodiversity. Tourism activities can also take drastic measures to reduce*

*and control waste management procedures and ensure that an ecological system is in place for waste disposal”.*

South Denmark is clear that it is already doing pretty well acknowledging that *“sustainable tourism is very important”* for the region and that a holiday there offers *“a lot of opportunities to explore nature and enjoy the simple things in life... there are plenty of opportunities to enjoy world class cuisine or buy good local organic grown products”.* But the region admits *“there is space for improvement”* and suggests that *“one way to become a world class tourism destination is by participating in the PRESERVE project”* and learning through peer reviews and knowledge sharing. <



## Interview

### Gunn-Viol Kattilakoski

**Gunn-Viol Kattilakoski, sales manager for the tourist information office in Örebro (S)**

#### **AER: Why is your region involved in PRESERVE?**

**Gunn-Viol Kattilakoski:** Our region, Örebro, is not very well known outside Sweden and so two years ago we decided to rename it the “Heart of Sweden” to help us market it to international tourists. We are putting a lot of money into this project and we need to think in a different, sustainable way, to market our region to a global audience. We have joined the PRESERVE project to see how other regions

in the EU market themselves sustainably. We do not need to reinvent the wheel, but we can learn from regions in Italy or Spain where they have been doing this for a long time and they already have a lot of tourists.

#### **AER: What have you learnt from the project?**

**G-V K:** We have just started and so it is too soon to say, but we will be peer reviewed at the end of June. We hope this will give us the

tools to work on our strategy – we have a sustainable tourism project for the city of Örebro, but not for the region. For example, we need to learn how best to educate our entrepreneurs to deal with international tourists – what information they need and how to give them this information via a website in English.

#### **AER: What kind of sustainable tourism projects can your region offer tourists?**

**G-V K:** We have a very tranquil region with lots of nice things to do – we are really at the heart of Sweden and have highlands and lowlands, lake Hjälmaren, Sweden’s fourth largest lake, and forests, plus we are only a couple of hours from Stockholm or even Oslo. We do have lots of tourists, but we need a stronger package and hope we will learn how to create it from the peer review.

## Cultural partnerships

REGIONS NEED TO GRASP THE NETTLE TO ENSURE THAT TOURISTS SEE THEIR HERITAGE THROUGH LOCAL RATHER THAN NATIONAL EYES



Local people are best equipped to show tourists the richness of their territories.

**Regions** have to deliver a distinct offer – if they are advertised to tourists by national bodies then the regions will be represented by what these people think of them; the regions must put something into the decision-making”, urges regional tourism expert Alan Clarke, professor at the University of Pannonia (H).

Clarke is adamant about the importance of the role regions should play in cultural tourism to ensure that visitors experience a region through the eyes of its inhabitants rather than from a capital city perspective. He says this is particularly important because “tourism culture” is a packaged version of a country’s cultural heritage. “We travel with our own ideas and belief systems which shape our experience of a destination”, he says. “Our cultural experience as a tourist is almost entirely packaging. Tourists want a sense, feel and taste of a place and if the package is right they will think they’ve had a great time”, he explains. Clarke admits this process raises certain questions. “To create this package we have to put cultural heritage on a pedestal and dress it up, and this will change [the culture] slightly and so we have to decide the limits of acceptable change by getting local people to take control”, he asserts.

To get this package right, Clarke believes it is important that all local people are involved – that the package is the result of a “partnership between those working in heritage, who want to protect, those working in culture, who want to put on a display, and those working in tourism, who want their clients to be able to relate to what is on display”. It is also impor-

tant, in his mind, “to have people from the public, private and voluntary sector involved”.

In order to find out which regions are successfully managing to market their cultural heritage in this way, he plans later this year to send out a benchmarking survey to AER members asking them, in particular, “about partnership developments and the key success factors for cultural tourism projects”. The idea for the project was born during an AER seminar in Ustron (PL) in May 2008. Clarke says he expects the survey to show that tourist boards “look inwards and see what richness there is in the regions rather than trying to conform to an external stereotype”. He wants to use the results of the benchmarking project “not to produce a single model, but best practice guidance that offers difference and diversity”.

Devon (UK) is a leading example of setting up partnerships to make the most of its cultural tourism, as county councillor Saxon Spence explains. “Devon county council agreed on a strategic plan under which five target areas were established to support our aim to celebrate Devon’s culture”, she says. “One of these was the need to improve public understanding of the cultural opportunities Devon has to offer and to boost growth in cultural tourism”, she adds. From these target areas, a range of cultural projects have emerged and they seem to conform comfortably to Clarke’s ideas of successful cultural heritage. The council is, for instance, working with a range of partners including South West Food and Drink, Taste of the West and Food and Drink Devon to deliver activities that promote the food and drink culture and heritage of Devon in restaurants,

at food events – such as the month-long Devon Celebration of Food 2009 – and in farm shops.

The region has also created various networks, such as the Tourism and Creative Skills for Success project, which brought together the tourism and creative sectors to benefit from training and skills support and to explore joint working opportunities. It is now rolling out a Tourism and Creative skills tool kit through a series of collaborative events to encourage business to develop cultural tourism packages and improve their competitiveness.

And the region is not shy of jumping on the back of national, or even international events, and using them to showcase Devon’s cultural heritage. This is best illustrated by Team Devon – “the new partnership for coordinating work in Devon, Plymouth and Torbay to ensure that advantage is taken of opportunities presented by the 2012 Olympics”, says Spence. Team Devon is chaired by the Devon and Cornwall Business Council with representatives from the media and from the voluntary sectors and “among the cultural projects under consideration include a focus on dance in Devon and support for the regional Quest project which links arts, literature, and other activities to the Devon landscape”, she explains. <



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