

SUSTAINABILITY MEASURES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUSINESSES AND POLICYMAKERS IN THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

GREEN MYSTERY GUEST

A comprehensive analysis of best practices and recommendations adapted to the Italian, Romanian and Spanish contexts to promote more sustainable and responsible tourism.

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Green Mystery Guest

Overview of the Green Mystery Guest project

The *Green Mystery Guest* project (2022-1-IT01-KA210-VET-000081020) is an Erasmus+ initiative designed to support the green transition of the hospitality industry in Romania, Italy, Spain, and other European countries. It aims to raise awareness among businesses and policymakers about the importance of sustainability and its impact on the quality and competitiveness of tourism services. The project provides practical tools, including a checklist of sustainability indicators, online training for hospitality professionals, and strategic recommendations tailored to policymakers.

The focus of this project is to guide businesses, policymakers, and other stakeholders toward adopting eco-friendly practices that align with Italy, Spain and Romania's commitments to sustainability, especially within the European Union (EU) framework. As the hospitality sector recovers from the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an opportunity to rebuild in a way that integrates sustainability into the core of business operations.

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Introduction

In recent years, sustainable tourism has gained increasing attention as a key component of achieving long-term environmental, social, and economic well-being. This document will begin by examining existing policies and guidelines related to sustainable tourism at the European, national, and regional levels, with a particular emphasis on how these frameworks are being implemented within the Italian context. This analysis will provide an overview of the current laws and policies that aim to promote sustainability within the tourism sector.

Subsequently, we will examine the scientific literature to explore the role and effectiveness of mystery guest evaluations as a tool for enhancing sustainability in the tourism industry. This section will analyze how mystery guest audits can contribute to improving the quality of services, ensuring compliance with sustainability standards, and identifying opportunities for improvement in hospitality establishments.

Following this, we will shift our focus to the specific Italian, Romanian, and Spanish context, identifying the key associations, regulations, and organizations that have already integrated the mystery guest strategy into their efforts to promote sustainable tourism practices. This part will highlight the existing structures and norms that support the use of mystery guest audits as a means to assess and improve sustainability performance in Italian hospitality businesses.

Finally, the document will culminate in the development of targeted policy recommendations that address how mystery guest evaluations can be more effectively integrated into sustainability strategies within the tourism sector. These recommendations will be tailored to support policymakers, tourism professionals, and stakeholders in enhancing the overall sustainability and quality of tourism experiences in Italy.

Chapter 1: European Context of Sustainable Tourism

1.1 Overview of European Policies on sustainable tourism

According to a study published in the *Science of The Total Environment*, unsustainable tourism practices can lead to adverse environmental impacts such as loss of biodiversity, increased carbon emissions, and depletion of natural resources (Pan et al., 2018). These effects not only degrade the natural beauty and resources that attract tourists but also threaten the long-term viability of tourism destinations. In this context, sustainable tourism helps mitigate these negative impacts by promoting practices that reduce energy consumption, waste production, and water usage, and by encouraging the preservation of ecosystems and wildlife. This is crucial for maintaining the environmental integrity of destinations.

Furthermore, the study highlights that sustainable tourism contributes to social and cultural preservation. It promotes the engagement of local communities, supports the protection of cultural heritage, and enhances the quality of life for residents by creating jobs and fostering local businesses.

Recognizing these multifaceted benefits, the European Union has emphasized the need for a sustainable approach to tourism. Specifically, the European Parliament, in its resolution of **25 March 2021 (2020/2038(INI))**, stressed the importance of transitioning to a more sustainable, resilient, and inclusive tourism ecosystem that balances economic growth with environmental and social considerations. The resolution emphasized that tourism should contribute to both economic growth and job creation while safeguarding the environment and respecting the needs and well-being of local communities.

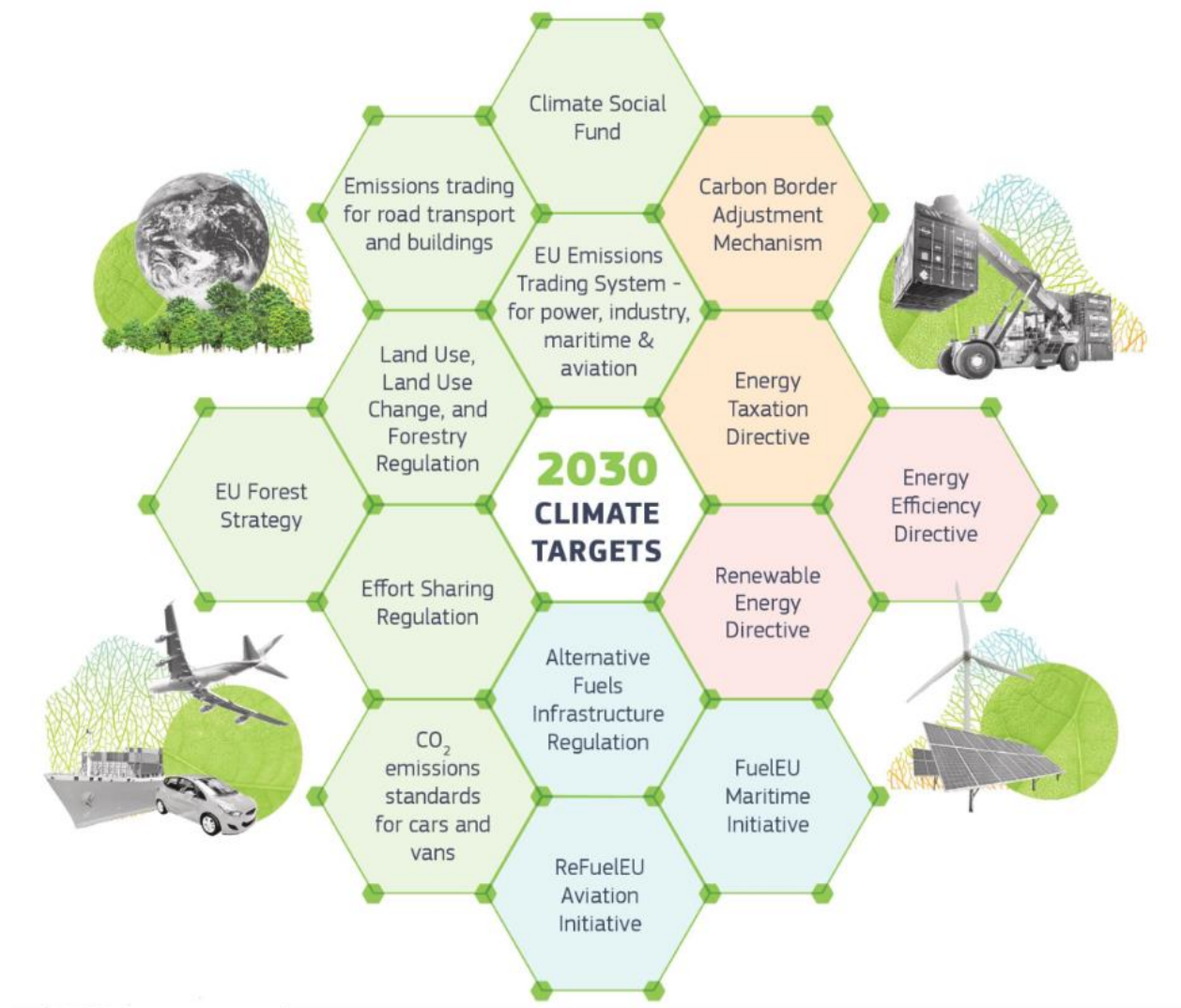
This vision for sustainable tourism aligns closely with the European Green Deal's overarching goals, which aim to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050 (European Commission, 2020). More specifically, the Green Deal represents a comprehensive strategy that encourages all sectors of the economy, including tourism, to adopt practices that reduce greenhouse gas emissions, promote resource efficiency, and ensure that development is sustainable in the long term.

Building on this momentum, the "**Transition Pathway for Tourism**," launched by the European Commission in 2022, serves as a further strategic document guiding the tourism sector's shift toward sustainability and resilience. This pathway was developed as part of the EU's broader industrial strategy to address the challenges faced by tourism, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which severely impacted the sector.



The **Transition Pathway for Tourism** places a strong emphasis on collaboration among various tourism stakeholders, such as governments, businesses, local communities, and tourists, across EU Member States to achieve several critical goals. These goals include reducing the environmental footprint of tourism activities, leveraging digital technologies to improve efficiency, and building resilience against future disruptions, such as pandemics or climate-related events.

A practical example of this is the "**Fit for 55**" package, a set of EU policy initiatives included in the Transition Pathway, which aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels. This target directly impacts the tourism sector by requiring hotels, restaurants, transportation services, and other tourism-related businesses to adopt measures that enhance energy efficiency, reduce waste, and minimize emissions. For instance, hotels might transition to renewable energy sources, implement water-saving technologies, or adopt sustainable waste management practices, such as composting organic waste or recycling plastics.



European Green Deal - Fit For 55 (European Union, 2021)

Another example is the digital component of the Transition Pathway for Tourism, as it offers numerous opportunities to enhance sustainability and efficiency within the tourism sector. The integration of digital tools allows tourism stakeholders to share data more efficiently, personalize travel experiences, and optimize resource management, leading to more sustainable tourism practices. One example of this is the **EU Data Strategy**, which aims to facilitate access to data and promote data sharing among tourism businesses, local authorities, and travelers. For instance, through the use of digital platforms, hotels and tourist destinations can collect real-time data on visitor preferences, energy consumption, and waste generation. This data can then be analyzed to implement more sustainable practices, such as adjusting heating or cooling based on occupancy, offering personalized recommendations that promote off-peak travel, or reducing food waste by aligning supply with actual demand.



Similarly, the **Digital Markets Act** establishes frameworks that ensure fair and transparent access to data, which is beneficial for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the tourism industry. Indeed, by having access to tourism-related data, SMEs can gain insights into traveler behaviors, optimizing their services. For example, a small bed and breakfast might use data from digital booking platforms to identify trends in guest preferences, enabling them to tailor their services to meet sustainability goals, such as promoting local experiences that align with sustainable tourism principles.

The digital transition also encourages the use of technologies like **smart destination management systems**. For example, popular tourist cities can implement digital tools to monitor visitor flows in real time, helping to prevent overcrowding at attractions and reducing the strain on infrastructure. This minimizes the environmental impact, as local

authorities can manage resources more effectively and direct visitors to less crowded, equally appealing sites.

The **Circular Economy Action Plan** and the **Zero Pollution Action Plan** are integral parts of the European Union's comprehensive strategy to transition towards a more sustainable tourism sector, and they align closely with the objectives outlined in the **Transition Pathway for Tourism**. Indeed, these plans emphasize the importance of moving away from traditional, linear models of production and consumption and instead adopting practices that prioritize resource efficiency, waste reduction, and pollution control.

The **Circular Economy Action Plan** specifically encourages tourism businesses to shift from the "take-make-dispose" approach to a circular model, where products and services are designed to minimize waste and maximize the reuse, repair, and recycling of materials. This initiative complements the goals of the Transition Pathway by promoting sustainable practices such as the use of refillable toiletry dispensers in hotels, reducing reliance on single-use plastics, and encouraging restaurants to minimize food waste through better inventory management and composting. By implementing these practices, the tourism sector can significantly reduce its environmental impact and contribute to broader sustainability goals.

Similarly, the **Zero Pollution Action Plan** focuses on reducing pollution in all forms—air, water, and soil—by implementing cleaner, more sustainable practices across the tourism industry. This could involve encouraging the adoption of eco-friendly transportation options like electric buses, bicycles, or scooters in tourist destinations to reduce air pollution. Additionally, resorts and hotels could implement more effective waste disposal and water treatment systems to protect local waterways and ecosystems from contamination.



These two action plans, although they may be parts of larger European strategies, are directly relevant to the goals of the **Transition Pathway for Tourism**. Together, they

ensure that the tourism sector reduces its environmental footprint and supports the EU's commitment to climate neutrality, sustainable resource management, and the protection of ecosystems.

To conclude and provide the last example, we have to mention the **New Consumer Agenda** and its relevance to tourism. The **New Consumer Agenda**, adopted by the European Commission on **13 November 2020**, provides a strategic framework for EU consumer policy. It aims to protect and empower consumers, especially in light of challenges from the **green and digital transitions**, the **COVID-19 pandemic**, and the post-pandemic recovery.

For the tourism sector, this agenda encourages businesses to provide **transparent information on sustainable practices**, ensuring tourists can make informed choices. It also emphasizes **international cooperation** to enforce consumer rights, crucial for global tourism. Also, it underlines the need for sustainable travel options and supports the integration of eco-friendly measures, aligning with broader EU goals like the European Green Deal and the Circular Economy Action Plan.

1.2. Funding and support mechanisms

The European Union offers a range of funding and support mechanisms to facilitate the transition towards sustainable tourism practices. One key instrument is the **EU Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS)**, which assists businesses in evaluating and enhancing their environmental performance. Specifically, the **EMAS** involves a structured approach, where companies conduct **regular environmental reviews, set goals, implement action plans, and engage in continual monitoring**. For instance, a hotel participating in EMAS might systematically monitor its water usage, waste management, and energy consumption, identifying areas where it can reduce its environmental impact. EMAS certification also requires external



verification, providing credibility to a company's sustainability efforts, which helps attract eco-conscious travelers.

Another significant tool is the **EU Ecolabel**, a certification awarded to tourist accommodations that adhere to high environmental standards. This label serves as a



mark of excellence, helping travelers identify sustainable lodging options that have been verified for their environmentally friendly practices. By achieving the EU Ecolabel, tourism establishments can differentiate themselves in a market that increasingly values sustainability, thus attracting eco-conscious tourists. For example, a hotel awarded the EU Ecolabel may have installed energy-efficient lighting, implemented recycling programs, and sourced food

locally.

In addition, **Horizon Europe**, the EU's key funding program for research and innovation, offers financial support for projects that advance sustainable tourism. This funding has a budget of **€95.5 billion for 2021-2027** and it enables researchers, innovators, and tourism stakeholders to develop innovative solutions, technologies, and practices that contribute to a greener and more sustainable tourism sector. For instance, a collaborative project might focus on creating smart systems to monitor energy use in hotels or develop an app that encourages tourists to engage in eco-friendly activities, ultimately contributing to the EU's sustainability goals in tourism. This project could be funded by **Horizon Europe**.

Chapter 2: Italian policies on sustainable tourism

Following the European framework, Italy has actively developed its own policies and initiatives to promote sustainable tourism at the national, regional, and local levels. These policies align with the broader European objectives of reducing environmental impacts, promoting social inclusion, and ensuring economic growth within the tourism sector, while addressing the specific needs and characteristics of Italy's diverse tourism destinations.

2.1 National Strategic Plan for Tourism 2023-2027 (Piano Strategico del Turismo - PST)

At the national level, the Italian government has established the **National Strategic Plan for Tourism 2023-2027 (Piano Strategico del Turismo - PST)**, which represents a policy framework designed to guide the development of the tourism sector in a sustainable manner. This plan was transmitted to the Italian Parliament on April 5, 2023, in accordance with **Article 34-quinquies of Decree-Law 179/2012**, which was later modified by **Law 17 of December 2012, No. 221**. This legal foundation mandates that, on the proposal of the Minister responsible for tourism (now the Ministry of Tourism), a strategic plan for tourism development must be adopted **every 5 years**, ensuring a **continuous update every 2 years**.

This plan emphasizes the importance of integrating sustainability principles into tourism practices, including environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and the promotion of local economies. The plan sets out key objectives, such as:

- Enhancing the quality and competitiveness of tourism services.
- Promoting sustainable tourism products that respect the environment and cultural heritage.
- Promoting inclusive growth by involving local communities in tourism development.

The plan prioritizes improving the **quality and competitiveness** of tourism services to elevate Italy's standing as a top tourist destination. It outlines the need to enhance service infrastructure, ensure consistent quality across various types of accommodations, and encourage the adoption of best practices in hospitality. For example, the PST promotes the creation of a **national classification system** called "*Italy Stars & Rating*" to standardize accommodation quality, ensuring uniformity and a clear quality benchmark for international tourists. This initiative helps travelers make informed choices and incentivizes accommodations to adopt more sustainable practices and invest in improving their services.

Furthermore, the PST emphasizes the development and promotion of **sustainable tourism products** that respect Italy's rich cultural and natural heritage. It encourages the diversification of tourism offerings, focusing on promoting lesser-known destinations, rural tourism, and cultural experiences that reduce pressure on crowded, popular areas and combat over-tourism. For instance, the plan advocates for the **development of sustainable travel routes**, such as cycling and walking paths, as well as the promotion of activities like agritourism and wine tourism, which not only preserve local traditions but also support the economy of rural areas. Of course,



beyond cultural tourism, another central theme of the PST is **environmental sustainability**, with a strong emphasis on adopting renewable energy sources and waste management strategies in the tourism sector. The plan supports eco-friendly accommodations, energy-efficient renovations, and the use of **sustainable mobility**

solutions, such as electric vehicle charging stations, bike rentals, and walking tours, all associated with the reduction of the overall carbon footprint of tourism activities.

A major element of the PST is to foster **inclusive growth** by involving local communities in the tourism development process. The plan emphasizes the importance of **community-based tourism**, ensuring that residents are engaged in decision-making and that tourism development reflects the needs and aspirations of local communities. For instance, the PST promotes training programs to enhance the skills of local workers, supporting them in tourism-related roles, and encourages partnerships between public and private sectors to create sustainable tourism initiatives that benefit all stakeholders.

Finally, the PST introduces **fiscal incentives** such as tax credits for restructuring accommodations and improving energy efficiency. It emphasizes updating the **national standards of quality for accommodations**, introducing a certification system to be managed by the Ministry of Tourism. Moreover, the plan outlines the establishment of a **permanent Ministerial-Regional Technical Table** and encourages collaborative governance across different sectors and regions.

2.2. The Italian Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR)

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Italy launched the **National Recovery and Resilience Plan (Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza - PNRR)**, the largest national plan under the EU's Next Generation EU (NGEU) instrument, to facilitate economic recovery and promote sustainable development. The PNRR is worth €194.4 billion, combining EU grants and loans, and is designed to support Italy's green transition, digital transformation, and long-term economic resilience.

The PNRR dedicates a significant portion of its resources to promoting sustainability in the tourism sector, emphasizing the **green transition** and **energy efficiency**. Specifically, the plan allocates funding to improve the energy performance of hotels, resorts, and other tourism-related structures. Investments focus on retrofitting existing

buildings with energy-efficient systems, such as better insulation, LED lighting, and solar panels, thus reducing carbon emissions and operating costs.

Moreover, recognizing that transportation is a significant contributor to tourism's carbon footprint, the PNRR includes initiatives to **electrify public transport systems**, such as buses and trams, in major tourist areas. It also promotes the development of **cycling and pedestrian routes**, encouraging tourists to use eco-friendly modes of transport. For example, plans for high-speed railway lines aim to reduce the reliance on cars, making it easier for tourists to travel between cities sustainably.

The plan also encourages the adoption of renewable energy in tourist facilities, supporting the installation of solar panels and other renewable technologies. It also focuses on developing circular economy practices, such as recycling programs in hotels and restaurants, reducing waste production in tourism hotspots.

Regarding digital transformation, the PNRR heavily emphasizes the **digital transformation** of the tourism sector. Indeed, a key initiative is the creation of digital platforms to monitor tourist flows and **manage overcrowding in popular destinations**. This allows authorities to implement real-time management strategies, such as redirecting visitors to less crowded sites, thereby minimizing environmental impact and enhancing the tourist experience. This is also in line with the European **Digital Markets Act**.

2.3. Fondo per il Turismo Sostenibile (Fund for Sustainable Tourism)

As part of Italy's national efforts to promote sustainable tourism, the **Fondo per il Turismo Sostenibile** (Fund for Sustainable Tourism) is a significant initiative launched by the Ministry of Tourism. The fund, established under the **Decree-Law No. 50 of May 17, 2022**, aims to support projects and investments that promote sustainability in the tourism sector, with a total budget allocation of **€25 million** over the years 2023, 2024, and 2025.

The fund is specifically designed to support actions that contribute to the sustainable development of tourism infrastructure and services across the country, and it focuses on the following areas:

- Funding is available for projects that enhance the energy efficiency of tourism facilities, such as the installation of solar panels, energy-efficient lighting, and the use of renewable energy sources. This helps reduce carbon emissions and operational costs for tourism businesses.
- The initiative supports the adoption of sustainable transportation solutions, including electric vehicle charging stations, bike-sharing systems, and the creation of pedestrian paths around tourist areas. These measures aim to reduce the environmental impact of travel and encourage eco-friendly mobility options.
- The fund promotes projects that implement waste reduction practices, recycling programs, and circular economy models within the tourism industry. This includes initiatives such as eliminating single-use plastics, composting organic waste, and encouraging the use of recyclable materials.
- The fund also provides support for digital projects that contribute to sustainability, such as the development of smart tourism apps, digital platforms for managing tourist flows, and tools that monitor and analyze the environmental impact of tourism activities.
- The creation, renovation, modernization, and improvement of hospitality facilities and tourism infrastructure. This includes, among others, cultural and hospitality sites, parks, recreational parks, sports facilities, mountain tourism structures, and mountain sports facilities.
- The advancement of digitalization in processes or offerings, as well as training and skill enhancement of personnel.
- Clean, sustainable, and connected mobility solutions for tourism.

Applications for funding are open to public and private entities, including local governments, tourism operators, associations, and non-profit organizations. Naturally,

projects must demonstrate a clear commitment to sustainability and align with national and European strategies for sustainable tourism. Specifically, the **Sustainable Tourism Fund** is intended to assist the following entities:

1. **Private tourism businesses**, as defined under Legislative Decree No. 79 of May 23, 2011.
2. **Private companies** that, in relation to specific projects or investments in the tourism sector, provide or intend to provide services or supplies, offer or plan to offer goods, or manage or intend to manage infrastructure related to tourism activities or that support tourism professions or tourism offerings.
3. **Private enterprises** falling within the above categories that operate on the basis of public concessions or within the framework of public-private partnerships (with a predominance of private participation).
4. **Non-profit tourism enterprises** are also eligible for support from the Fund but will be subject to a specific review of their financial and economic requirements.

The implementation area for the projects or investments is exclusively the territory of the Italian Republic. However, at least **40% of the available resources** from the Thematic Tourism Fund are reserved for projects located in the southern regions of Italy (Abruzzo, Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Molise, Puglia, Sardinia, and Sicily), in line with the cohesion priorities outlined in the PNRR (National Recovery and Resilience Plan). Eligible recipients may have their registered or operational headquarters anywhere within the national territory.

2.4. The Italian Budget Law 2023 (Legge di Bilancio 2023)

The **Italian Budget Law 2023 (Legge di Bilancio 2023)**, published in the Official Gazette on December 29, 2022, under **Law No. 197 of 2022**, includes specific provisions aimed at promoting sustainable tourism in Italy. This law strengthens the government's commitment to advancing sustainability in the tourism sector by providing financial

incentives, support mechanisms, and regulatory frameworks that encourage environmentally friendly practices, infrastructure improvements, and the enhancement of tourism services.

One of the key aspects of this legislation is the reinforcement of the **Fondo per il Turismo Sostenibile (Fund for Sustainable Tourism; above-mentioned)**, which has been allocated additional resources to ensure that sustainable tourism projects across the country receive adequate funding. The law emphasizes support for initiatives that focus on encouraging the adoption of energy-saving technologies and renewable energy sources in tourism establishments.

The Budget Law 2023 also aims to streamline the process for accessing funding, making it easier for public and private entities, such as hotels, local governments, and tourism operators, to apply for financial support for sustainable projects.

2.5. Regional and local initiatives

At the regional and local levels, Italy's diverse regions have tailored sustainable tourism strategies to their specific characteristics and assets, contributing to the country's overall commitment to sustainable development in the tourism sector. It would be impossible to cover all the regional and local initiatives across Italy within this context, as the country's diverse geography and cultural heritage have led to a wide variety of sustainable tourism practices being implemented in many areas. However, the three regions here presented—Trentino-Alto Adige, Tuscany, and Sardinia—have been selected because they represent some of the most innovative approaches to sustainable tourism.

Trentino-Alto Adige is an excellent example of sustainable practices in alpine tourism, with its emphasis on eco-friendly accommodations and renewable energy use. **Tuscany** showcases how rural and cultural tourism can be developed sustainably, particularly through agritourism and wine tourism that engage local communities and promote heritage preservation. And finally, **Sardinia** provides a model for sustainable coastal and

marine tourism, focusing on the protection of fragile ecosystems and the promotion of eco-friendly activities.

2.5.1. Trentino-Alto Adige: Eco-friendly tourism and renewable energy initiatives

The **Trentino-Alto Adige** region is renowned for its stunning mountain landscapes, attracting tourists interested in outdoor activities such as skiing, hiking, and cycling. To promote sustainable tourism, Trentino-Alto Adige has invested in the development and certification of **eco-friendly hotels and lodges** that meet strict sustainability criteria. Many accommodations in the region have obtained certifications such as the **EU Ecolabel** or **CasaClima** (a regional energy efficiency certification), which guarantee the use of renewable energy, efficient water management, waste reduction, and environmentally friendly construction materials (Agenzia CasaClima, 2023).



Also, to reduce the reliance on car travel and promote sustainable mobility, Trentino-Alto Adige has developed a network of **cycling and hiking trails** that connect **key tourist destinations**. This network encourages visitors to explore the region using eco-friendly means of transport (CPD, 2022). For example, the **Dolomiti Superski area** offers bike-sharing programs and electric bike rentals to explore the Dolomites in a more sustainable way, reducing emissions and traffic congestion.

To conclude, the region has been a pioneer in integrating **renewable energy sources** into tourism facilities, particularly solar and hydroelectric power. Many hotels and resorts in Trentino-Alto Adige use solar panels to generate electricity or heat water, minimizing their carbon footprint. Additionally, ski resorts have invested in energy-efficient snow-making machines that use less water and energy, thereby reducing the impact on the environment.



Lago di Braies in the Dolomites (Italy)

2.5.2. Tuscany: Destinazione Toscana 2020 Strategy and Sustainable Cultural Tourism

The region of **Tuscany** has a rich cultural heritage and breathtaking landscapes, making it one of Italy's most popular tourist destinations. Recognizing the challenges posed by over-tourism, Tuscany has implemented the “**Destinazione Toscana 2020**” strategy, focusing on sustainable practices that benefit both tourists and local communities.



First of all, the “**Destinazione Toscana 2020**” strategy encourages travelers to explore rural areas, in order to **distribute tourism flows more evenly**, reducing the pressure on heavily visited cities like Florence and Siena. This is possible because Tuscany is known for its **rural areas** and **agritourism**, which allows tourists to stay on working farms and participate in agricultural activities. Moreover, this approach supports local farmers and promotes the preservation of rural traditions.

Similarly, initiatives such as the “**Borghi più belli d’Italia**” (Most Beautiful Villages in Italy) campaign highlight charming, lesser-visited towns that offer rich cultural experiences, helping to alleviate the pressure on more popular destinations.

In addition, the strategy promotes sustainable wine tourism, where visitors can explore organic vineyards and participate in environmentally friendly wine production activities. The **Chianti region**, for instance, offers wine tours that emphasize sustainable viticulture practices, such as organic farming, reduced pesticide use, and water conservation techniques.



Valdichiana Valley (Italy)

2.5.3. Sardinia: coastal protection and eco-tourism development

Sardinia is renowned for its pristine beaches, crystal-clear waters, and diverse ecosystems. As tourism is concentrated along the coast, Sardinia has introduced several initiatives to protect its natural resources and promote eco-tourism:

For example, Sardinia has established several **Marine Protected Areas**, such as the **Tavolara – Punta Coda Cavallo MPA**, where strict regulations are enforced to protect

marine ecosystems (Great Sardinia, 2023). These MPAs offer ecotourism activities like snorkeling, diving, and birdwatching, allowing tourists to experience Sardinia's marine life in a way that minimizes environmental impact.



La Pelosa beach in Sardinia (Italy)

2.6. Legal framework for sustainable tourism

- **Law No. 97/1994 - Legge Quadro per la Montagna (Mountain Law):** the **Law No. 97/1994**, known as the "Mountain Law," aims to promote sustainable tourism development in Italy's mountainous regions. This law is crucial for fostering eco-friendly tourism in areas like the Italian Alps, Apennines, and Dolomites, because it encourages the sustainable use of natural resources, the preservation of traditional landscapes, and the conservation of biodiversity in mountain regions.

Also, it provides incentives for the development of sustainable tourism activities, such as eco-tourism, hiking, skiing with low environmental impact, and sustainable lodging options. The

law also supports local communities by encouraging the development of small-scale tourism enterprises, agrotourism, and the promotion of local products.

• **Law No. 221/2015 - Environmental provisions to promote green economy and sustainable development:** the **Law No. 221/2015**, also known as the **Green Economy Law**, is a piece of legislation aimed at integrating sustainability into various sectors, including tourism:

- Provides tax benefits and funding for tourism businesses that implement energy-efficient systems, renewable energy sources, and waste reduction practices.
- Mandates waste reduction and recycling initiatives for tourism establishments, promoting circular economy practices in the tourism sector.
- Encourages the use of sustainable transport options, such as electric vehicles, cycling, and public transportation, to reduce the carbon footprint of tourists.

This law has contributed significantly to promoting eco-friendly practices in tourism businesses and destinations across Italy.

• **Legislative Decree No. 79/2011 – Codice del Turismo (Tourism Code):** the **Legislative Decree No. 79/2011**, known as the **Tourism Code**, consolidates the legal framework for tourism activities in Italy and integrates sustainability principles into tourism management:

- Encourages regions and municipalities to develop tourism management plans that prioritize environmental conservation, cultural heritage preservation, and social inclusion.
- The code promotes the development of sustainable tourism offerings, such as eco-tourism, cultural tourism, and rural tourism, to diversify Italy's tourism products.
- Ensures that tourists are informed about the environmental and social impact of their travel choices, promoting responsible tourism behaviors.

The Tourism Code serves as a foundational legal document guiding the sustainable development of tourism across Italy (Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali e del Turismo, 2011).

Chapter 3: Romanian policies on sustainable tourism

3.1. Romania's Tourism Sector in the EU Context

Romania's tourism sector has grown steadily since its accession to the European Union in 2007. Its blend of natural landscapes, historical sites, and cultural heritage offers significant potential for tourism, making it an essential sector for economic development. However, like many EU member states, Romania faces the challenge of balancing tourism growth with environmental sustainability.

As part of the European Union, Romania is subject to EU-wide regulations and initiatives aimed at promoting sustainable development. These include the European Green Deal, which outlines the need for member states to take significant steps toward reducing their environmental impact and transitioning to greener, more resilient economies. In the context of tourism, this means adopting practices that minimize waste, conserve energy and water, and promote the use of sustainable resources across the hospitality sector.

Indeed, in Romania, many hotels and tourism businesses have started investing in **solar panels** and **wind turbines** to lower their reliance on fossil fuels. Moreover, EU funding mechanisms, such as grants from the **European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)**, help offset the initial investment costs, making renewable energy adoption more accessible for smaller tourism enterprises.

Another key aspect of Romania's alignment with EU sustainable tourism goals is the implementation of **smart energy management systems**. These systems enable hotels and resorts to optimize energy use by adjusting heating, cooling, and lighting based on

occupancy levels. For example, **motion sensors and smart thermostats** can significantly reduce energy waste when rooms are unoccupied, ensuring that energy consumption is minimized without compromising guest comfort. This approach aligns with EU sustainability objectives and demonstrates Romania's commitment to modernizing its tourism infrastructure through energy-efficient technologies.

To continue, replacing traditional lighting and appliances with **energy-efficient alternatives**, such as **LED lighting** and **energy-saving appliances**, can reduce electricity consumption by up to **50%**. Romania's alignment with **EU Directive 2012/27/EU** on energy efficiency promotes the adoption of these technologies across the tourism sector. This directive encourages the use of energy-efficient products and services, contributing to Romania's efforts to enhance sustainability within its tourism industry.

Waste generation is another one of the most visible environmental impacts of the hospitality industry, and even if Romania has made progress in improving waste management, further efforts are needed to reduce waste in the tourism sector and ensure compliance with EU directives such as the Waste Framework Directive (2008/98/EC).

Furthermore, Romania's tourism sector, like much of the world, was deeply affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The drastic reduction in international travel led to substantial losses in revenue and employment. However, this period of disruption also presents an opportunity to rebuild the industry in a way that prioritizes sustainability. The pandemic has highlighted the need for more resilient, eco-friendly tourism models, and Romania is well-positioned to take advantage of this shift, especially with the support of EU policies and funding.

While Romania has made strides toward embracing sustainability, several challenges remain in fully integrating green practices into the tourism sector:

1. Romania has adopted various EU regulations related to sustainability, enforcement at the local and regional levels can be inconsistent. Many hospitality businesses may lack the resources or expertise to comply with regulations related to energy efficiency, waste management, or sustainable procurement.

Strengthening regulatory frameworks and providing support to businesses in meeting these requirements is essential.

2. The hospitality sector in Romania is largely composed of SMEs, many of which operate on tight margins. The initial costs of adopting green technologies or sustainable practices can be prohibitive for some businesses. Without adequate financial support, many SMEs may prioritize short-term financial survival over long-term sustainability. Access to EU funding and incentives can help alleviate this pressure.
3. In many cases, both businesses and consumers may lack awareness of the benefits of sustainability. For businesses, there is often a need for training in areas such as energy efficiency, waste reduction, and sustainable supply chain management. Similarly, tourists may not always consider sustainability when making travel decisions, reducing the market incentive for businesses to adopt greener practices.
4. Romania's tourism infrastructure, particularly in rural and less-developed regions, is often outdated or inadequate to support sustainable tourism practices. Investments in green infrastructure, such as energy-efficient transportation, waste management systems, and eco-friendly accommodations, are crucial for reducing the sector's environmental impact.

Despite these challenges, Romania has significant opportunities to transform its tourism sector into a model of sustainability, particularly by leveraging its membership in the European Union:

1. The EU provides a variety of funding mechanisms aimed at supporting sustainability initiatives. For example, Romania can benefit from the EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility, which allocates funds to member states for green and digital transitions. Additionally, specific programs such as the European Regional Development Fund and the Cohesion Fund can be used to finance projects related to sustainable tourism, energy efficiency, and waste reduction.

2. Romania's alignment with key EU policies, such as the European Green Deal and the Farm to Fork Strategy, presents opportunities to attract international tourists who are increasingly seeking eco-friendly travel options. By adopting EU sustainability standards, Romania can enhance its tourism brand and position itself as a destination that prioritizes environmental responsibility.
3. There is a growing global trend toward sustainable and responsible travel. Tourists, particularly from Western Europe, are increasingly choosing destinations based on their environmental impact. Romania's natural landscapes, including the Carpathian Mountains, Transylvanian forests, and the Danube Delta, offer prime opportunities for eco-tourism. Promoting sustainable tourism experiences in these regions can attract a new demographic of environmentally conscious travelers.
4. As part of the EU's efforts to increase green skills, Romania has the opportunity to integrate sustainability into vocational education and training (VET) programs. This can help build a workforce that is well-equipped to meet the demands of a sustainable tourism industry. The Green Mystery Guest project, which includes online training for hospitality professionals on sustainability practices, is one example of how Romania can align with these EU priorities.
5. The Romanian government can facilitate collaborations between private businesses, local communities, and environmental organizations to promote sustainable tourism. Such partnerships can lead to innovative solutions for preserving Romania's natural heritage while boosting the economy.

Furthermore, Romania's commitment to the European Union's sustainability goals is evident in its participation in several key initiatives, including:

1. The National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP), which sets targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, improving energy efficiency, and increasing the use of renewable energy.
2. The Climate Action Plan, which outlines Romania's strategies for meeting the goals of the Paris Agreement and the EU's climate neutrality target by 2050.

3. The Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, which aims to protect 30% of Europe's land and sea by 2030. Romania's unique biodiversity, including protected areas such as the Danube Delta and Carpathian Mountains, makes it a key player in this initiative.

Moreover, Romania, as a member of the EU, is required to also align the policies and practices with the objectives of the European Green Deal. As mentioned before, the European Green Deal, launched by the European Commission in 2019, aims to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. The hospitality industry, as a significant contributor to Romania's economy and environmental footprint, is an essential sector for achieving these goals.



The Romanian government has expressed commitment to these goals through national strategies and action plans, including the National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP) and the Climate Action Plan. These plans emphasize reducing greenhouse gas emissions, improving energy efficiency, and promoting renewable energy sources—all of which are critical for the hospitality sector.

At the same time, the EU's Farm to Fork Strategy and Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 call for sustainable food systems and conservation of natural resources, which directly impact

tourism and hospitality operations. Romania's rich natural heritage, from the Carpathian Mountains to the Danube Delta, makes it essential for policymakers and businesses to adopt sustainable practices that protect these assets while promoting eco-friendly tourism.

3.2. National Strategy for Ecotourism Development in Romania (2019-2029)

The **National Strategy for Ecotourism Development in Romania (2019-2029)** is one of the primary frameworks guiding sustainable tourism practices in Romania. This strategy, developed by the Romanian Ministry of Tourism in partnership with the Romanian Ecotourism Association, aims to promote ecotourism as a key component of Romania's tourism offering.

The strategy emphasizes the development of eco-friendly tourist destinations, particularly in protected areas such as national parks, nature reserves, and rural regions. It promotes sustainable tourism activities that support the conservation of natural landscapes, wildlife, and cultural traditions, ensuring that tourism development does not compromise these assets.

Finally, it encourages community-based tourism, ensuring that local communities benefit economically from tourism activities, participate in decision-making processes, and play a role in preserving their cultural identity.

This strategy aligns with Romania's commitment to sustainable development goals (SDGs) and the European Union's policies on sustainable tourism (Ministerul Turismului, 2019).

3.3. Romania's National Strategy for the development of tourism (2023-2035)

Regarding the specific Romanian policies and strategies related to sustainable tourism, we have to mention the National Strategy for the Development of Tourism (2023-2035). This strategy has been launched by Romania's Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship, and Tourism is a plan to elevate the tourism sector and ensure its sustainability, competitiveness, and adaptability in the coming years (RHN, 2023). The strategy encourages collaboration between the private and public sectors to improve the quality and management of tourist destinations. This aims to engage all stakeholders, including local communities, businesses, and government authorities, to enhance the overall tourism experience and ensure that the growth of tourism benefits all actors involved.



One of the main goals is to increase Romania's visibility as a high-quality tourist destination in the international market. This involves efforts to promote the cultural, historical, and natural attractions of Romania, making the country more recognizable and appealing to foreign tourists.

Moreover, the strategy emphasizes the digitalization of public services offered by the central tourism authority to simplify and improve the experience for both tourists and tourism businesses. This includes developing digital platforms and tools that support tourists in planning and experiencing their trips, thereby enhancing efficiency and accessibility within the tourism sector.

The strategy also aims to attract investments in tourism infrastructure and services that promote sustainable practices, such as eco-friendly accommodations and transport options. Moreover, it focuses on reducing seasonality by encouraging year-round tourism, increasing tourists' average length of stay, and improving tourist loyalty. This helps to distribute tourism benefits more evenly throughout the year, reducing pressure on popular destinations during peak seasons and ensuring more stable income for tourism businesses.

The last important aspect of the strategy is to protect both tourists and tourism operators in the event of a crisis, such as a health emergency or natural disaster. This ensures that the tourism sector is resilient and can adapt quickly to unforeseen challenges.

3.4. Sustainable Tourism Actions in Romania (STAR)

The **Sustainable Tourism Actions in Romania (STAR)** project led by the Association of Ecotourism in Romania (AER) had several achievements and objectives between **May 2018 and February 2021**.

Specifically, the STAR project focused on raising awareness and understanding of sustainable practices among SMEs, and destination management organizations (DMOs) within the ecotourism sector in Romania (Association of Ecotourism in Romania, 2022). Indeed, in the context of this project, a total of **22 evaluators** were trained under the Eco-Romania certification system to assess ecotourism practices, enhancing the capacity to monitor and evaluate sustainable tourism practices across the country. Also, a mentoring program assisted **28 guesthouses** in improving their sustainability performance, with **20 guesthouses** achieving the Eco-Romania certification. This certification signifies adherence to good practices in ecotourism.

Collaborating with international experts, the STAR project identified suitable certification systems such as **Green Destinations** and **TourCert** for larger destinations and accommodation facilities. As a result, **Sibiu and Oradea** tourism destinations completed self-assessment processes based on the Green Destinations certification, and **6 hotels** from these destinations followed the TourCert system.

The project made significant efforts to promote Romania as a green destination, and this included the creation of a **new visual identity** for the Discover Eco-Romania campaign, redesigning their website, and increasing visibility through participation in **9 national and international promotion events** between 2018 and 2020, such as fairs in London, Amsterdam, Vienna, Oslo, Bucharest, and other cities.

3.5. Regional and local initiatives

To inspire Romanian businesses and policymakers in the hospitality sector to adopt more sustainable practices, it is helpful to highlight successful examples of sustainable tourism from Romania and other EU countries. These case studies demonstrate the tangible benefits of incorporating sustainability into operations, from cost savings to increased guest satisfaction, and show how businesses of different sizes can lead the way in the green transition.

3.5.1. Green Village Resort, Danube Delta

The **Green Village Resort** is a pioneering eco-resort located in Romania's UNESCO-protected Danube Delta, one of the country's most biodiverse regions (European Commission, 2023). The resort integrates sustainability into every aspect of its operations, from energy conservation to water management and waste reduction. In fact, the resort utilizes solar panels for heating water and electricity generation, reducing its reliance on traditional energy sources. It also uses energy-efficient lighting and appliances throughout its facilities.

Given the resort's location in a sensitive ecological area, water conservation is a top priority. Green Village Resort has installed greywater recycling systems that treat wastewater from sinks and showers for use in irrigation.

The resort has also implemented a waste management program that includes recycling, composting organic waste, and minimizing the use of single-use plastics. It also collaborates with local suppliers to reduce packaging waste.

And finally, the resort actively engages guests in its sustainability efforts, providing them with information on local biodiversity and encouraging responsible behavior during their stay. Guests are also encouraged to participate in nature conservation activities, such as birdwatching and eco-tours.



The Danube Delta (Romania)

3.5.2. Orizont Hotel, Predeal

The Orizont Hotel in Predeal, a popular Romanian mountain resort, is another example of how urban hotels can incorporate sustainability into their operations. The hotel has implemented several green initiatives that have reduced its environmental impact and enhanced its appeal to guests. The hotel has invested in a smart energy management system that adjusts heating, cooling, and lighting based on occupancy, reducing energy consumption during off-peak periods. It also uses energy-efficient appliances and LED lighting throughout the property. Moreover, the hotel's restaurant sources local, organic ingredients for its menu, supporting regional farmers and reducing transportation-related emissions. It also offers vegetarian and vegan options to cater to guests seeking eco-friendly dining choices. Finally, Orizont Hotel has eliminated single-use plastics from its operations, replacing them with biodegradable or reusable alternatives. The hotel also recycles paper, glass, and plastic waste, and has set up composting facilities for food waste.



3.5.3. UNESCO Global Geopark – Buzău Land

In 2022, **Buzău Land** achieved the designation of a **UNESCO Global Geopark**, signifying its rich geological, historical, and cultural significance (UNESCO, 2022). This designation has fostered sustainable tourism by promoting **educational activities**, local heritage, and **eco-friendly tourism practices**. The Geopark offers guided tours, geological trails, and workshops that educate visitors about the region's unique landscape, including its mud volcanoes and salt mountains.

Thanks to the support of **local craftspeople** and traditional products, the Geopark has created additional income streams for residents, thereby diversifying the economy. It emphasizes using local resources sustainably, encouraging tourists to experience **authentic cultural practices**, and reinforcing environmental conservation. This model integrates tourism with sustainability, serving as an example of how natural and cultural heritage can be leveraged to promote responsible tourism.



Berca mud volcanoes (Romania)

3.6. Legal framework for sustainable tourism

• **Romanian Tourism Law No. 275/2018:** The **Tourism Law No. 275/2018** serves as a legal framework for regulating tourism activities in Romania. This law encompasses several provisions that relate to sustainable tourism:

- The law encourages the development of sustainable tourism products and experiences, such as rural tourism, cultural tourism, and ecotourism, to diversify Romania's tourism offerings and reduce pressure on highly visited areas.
- It mandates that tourism development projects adhere to sustainable land-use planning principles, ensuring that they do not adversely impact the environment or local communities.
- Establishes a certification system for tourism businesses, encouraging the adoption of sustainability standards, such as energy efficiency, waste reduction, and the use of local products.

This law provides a regulatory basis for promoting sustainability in Romania's tourism sector, ensuring that tourism practices contribute to the country's overall sustainable development goals (Parlamentul României, 2018).

• **Romanian Law on Protected Natural Areas No. 49/2011 (Amended in 2020):** the **Law on Protected Natural Areas No. 49/2011**, amended in 2020, is a crucial legal instrument for regulating tourism activities in protected areas. Specifically, the law strictly regulates tourism activities in national parks, nature reserves, and Natura 2000 sites, ensuring that they do not harm biodiversity or natural habitats. It requires tourism operators to obtain permits for activities conducted within these areas. It promotes ecotourism as a sustainable alternative to mass tourism, encouraging responsible travel practices that support conservation efforts and local communities.

Finally, it mandates the development of visitor management plans for protected areas to control tourist numbers, reduce environmental impact, and protect sensitive ecosystems.

This law is instrumental in ensuring that tourism development in Romania's most ecologically sensitive areas is managed sustainably and responsibly (Camera Deputaților, 2020).

• **Ordinance No. 58/1998 on the Organization and Development of Tourism Activities in Romania:** the **Ordinance No. 58/1998**, which governs the organization and development of tourism activities, includes several amendments to incorporate sustainable tourism principles:

- Establishes mandatory quality and sustainability standards for tourism operators, such as hotels, travel agencies, and tour guides, ensuring that they adopt environmentally friendly practices.
- Encourages the use of eco-friendly materials and technologies in developing tourism infrastructure, such as accommodations, restaurants, and leisure facilities.
- The ordinance emphasizes the role of local authorities in planning and managing tourism activities, ensuring that tourism development aligns with local sustainable development goals.

This ordinance is fundamental in regulating tourism activities across Romania, ensuring that they are developed and managed in an environmentally and socially responsible manner (Guvernul României, 1998).

Moreover, as a member of the European Union, Romania is required to comply with various EU directives and regulations that promote sustainable tourism. These include:

- **Directive 2009/147/EC on the Conservation of Wild Birds:** it ensures that tourism activities do not negatively impact bird species and their habitats, particularly in areas designated as Special Protection Areas (SPAs) under the Natura 2000 network.
- **Directive 92/43/EEC on the Conservation of Natural Habitats and Wild Fauna and Flora:** this directive, known as the Habitats Directive, protects endangered species and habitats, ensuring that tourism development does not degrade these sensitive ecosystems.

Chapter 4: Spanish policies on sustainable tourism

4.1. The Spanish tourism sector in the EU Context

Tourism is one of the fundamental pillars of the Spanish economy, contributing to more than 12% of GDP and employing millions of people throughout the country (banco de España, 2019). The diversity of landscapes, from Mediterranean beaches to rural and mountainous enclaves, makes Spain a preferred destination for international tourists. However, the accelerated growth of the tourism industry has also raised challenges in terms of environmental sustainability, especially in a context of increasing pressure on natural resources and infrastructure in the most popular destinations.

Spain's alignment with the **European Green Deal** requires the implementation of tourism policies that emphasize **reducing greenhouse gas emissions**, **promoting energy efficiency**, and ensuring sustainable resource management to achieve **climate neutrality by 2050**. This commitment is crucial for a country that heavily relies on tourism but faces challenges such as **overexploitation of resources** and **ecosystem degradation**, especially in mass tourism destinations like the **Balearic Islands**, **Costa del Sol**, and the **Canary Islands**.

Conversely, less developed tourist areas, such as **inland Andalusia** and **Castilla-La Mancha**, offer opportunities for more responsible and sustainable tourism, presenting a potential for **economic growth without compromising the environment**. The challenge is to balance tourism growth with sustainability, leveraging Spain's status as a leading tourist destination while integrating practices that **reduce the industry's environmental footprint**.

While larger cities and established tourist hotspots have made strides in implementing sustainable practices, rural and coastal areas often **lack the infrastructure** needed to support such initiatives. There is a pressing need for **investments in waste management, green transportation, and energy-efficient systems** in these regions, given their heavy dependence on tourism.

Moreover, **SMEs** in the tourism sector, which operate with **tight profit margins**, struggle to adopt green technologies due to the **high upfront costs** of sustainability initiatives, like **solar panel installation** or **water management systems**. This economic challenge hampers the broader adoption of sustainable practices, even though they are vital for long-term survival.

Spain has made efforts to adopt national and European regulations related to sustainability; however, the implementation and enforcement of these policies vary across its autonomous regions. Each region has different priorities and capacities, resulting in inconsistent adoption of sustainable practices nationwide.

To ensure sustainability is ingrained in the tourism sector, **education and awareness** play a critical role. While businesses need training in **energy efficiency, waste reduction, and sustainable supply chain management**, tourists should be encouraged to prioritize **sustainable travel options** when choosing their destinations. By integrating education, investment, and consistent policy enforcement, Spain can successfully balance tourism growth with sustainability goals, ensuring the long-term viability of this crucial sector.

4.1.1. Opportunities for Spain in the EU Green Transition

Spain has a number of key opportunities to lead the green transition in the tourism sector, thanks to its access to European funds and its alignment with EU sustainable policies. The growing demand for responsible tourism, together with the objectives set by the European Green Deal, place the country in a privileged position to innovate and transform its tourism offer.

1. The EU, through programmes such as **Next Generation EU** and the **Recovery and Resilience Facility**, offers significant financial resources for the green transition of key sectors, including tourism. Spain can take advantage of these funds to modernise its tourism infrastructure, encourage the adoption of renewable

energy in hotels and restaurants, and improve water and waste management in popular tourist destinations.

A group of Greater flamingos in a marsh in Coto Doñana National Park. *WWF-Spain*

2. European sustainability policies, combined with the growing environmental awareness of travellers, are driving the creation of more responsible tourism



products. Spain can take advantage of **its vast natural and cultural wealth** to diversify its offer, promoting rural, nature-based and low-impact tourism. Areas such as the **Pyrenees**, the **Doñana National Park** or the historic routes of the **Camino de Santiago** have enormous potential to become benchmarks for sustainable tourism in Europe.

3. The green transition not only involves changes in environmental management, but also greater digitalisation of tourism services. Spain can be a leader in the adoption of smart technologies that optimise the use of resources, such as **IoT (Internet of Things)**-based energy and water management systems in hotels, and digital tools that improve the tourist experience while reducing environmental impact.
4. With the rise of **ecotourism and responsible tourism**, Spain has the opportunity to attract a more conscious traveller profile, who seeks authentic and environmentally friendly experiences. This type of tourist tends to spend more on

local services, which generates a positive impact on the host communities, as well as reducing the pressure on overcrowded destinations.

Beside these points, Spain has shown a concrete and strong commitment to the sustainability goals of the European Union, through the adoption of national policies and strategies that align the country with ambitious European environmental plans. Among the main instruments and documents that guide Spain's ecological transition, the following stand out:

- **National Integrated Energy and Climate Plan (PNIEC) 2021-2030:** This plan is Spain's main strategic framework to meet the EU's climate and energy goals. The PNIEC



sets out a clear path to decarbonisation, with specific targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 23% by 2030 (compared to 1990 levels), increase the use of renewable energy to 42% of final energy consumption and

improve energy efficiency by 39.5%. These measures are essential for the tourism sector in Spain, one of the largest energy consumers, to be able to align itself with European objectives.

- **Climate Change and Energy Transition Act (2021):** With this law, Spain formalized its commitment to achieve climate neutrality by 2050, aligning itself with the European Green Deal. The law establishes binding objectives for reducing emissions, promoting renewable energy and adapting to climate change, aspects that directly affect the operations of the hotel and restaurant sector, by promoting energy efficiency and sustainability measures.

4.2. Sustainable Tourism Strategy of Spain 2030

The "**Sustainable Tourism Strategy of Spain 2030**" ("Estrategia de Turismo Sostenible de España 2030") is a national policy framework aimed at promoting sustainability across the tourism sector. This strategy focuses on the following objectives:

- Encouraging the development of lesser-known destinations to reduce the pressure on over-touristed areas such as Barcelona, Ibiza, and the Canary Islands.
- Aiming to achieve carbon neutrality by promoting the use of renewable energy, energy efficiency in tourism infrastructure, and sustainable transport options.
- Promoting sustainable management of cultural and natural assets, ensuring that tourism activities do not degrade these resources.
- Involving local communities in tourism planning and decision-making processes to ensure that tourism contributes to their well-being.

This strategy aims to transform Spanish tourism into a model of sustained and sustainable growth, maintaining Spain's position as a world leader while promoting competitiveness, profitability, and natural and cultural values of destinations. The strategy also emphasizes equitable distribution of tourism benefits across regions, and it aligns with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030 Agenda. This long-term vision recognizes tourism's vital role in Spain's economy, contributing approximately 11.7% of GDP and 12.2% of employment.

Finally, the strategy emphasizes a multi-stakeholder approach, recognizing the need for collaboration between government, private sector, civil society, and academia (Ministerio de Industria, Comercio y Turismo, 2019).

4.3. Spanish Tourism Sustainability Plans in Destinations

The Spanish government launched the **Tourism Sustainability Plans in Destinations** in 2020, aiming to promote sustainable practices in specific tourist areas. These plans

are part of the government's strategy to transform the tourism sector and are co-funded by the Spanish government, autonomous communities, and local entities.

The objective is to improve tourism infrastructure, preserve cultural and natural heritage, and support local economies by encouraging sustainable tourism models.

The program provides funding to municipalities, allowing them to develop sustainable tourism initiatives, such as waste management systems, energy-efficient infrastructure, and sustainable mobility solutions.

Projects under this plan cover various themes, including reducing the environmental impact of tourism, promoting off-peak tourism, fostering cultural heritage, and improving accessibility for all tourists.

This plan has funded numerous projects across Spain, enhancing sustainability in destinations like Galicia, Extremadura, and the Canary Islands (Ministerio de Industria, Comercio y Turismo, 2021).

4.4. Spanish Climate Change and Energy Transition Law – 2021

The **Climate Change and Energy Transition Law** passed in 2021 sets ambitious goals for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and promoting renewable energy. Although not exclusively a tourism policy, it has significant implications for the tourism sector:

- The law aims to achieve a carbon-neutral economy by 2050, with intermediate targets of reducing emissions by 23% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels. Tourism businesses, especially those related to transportation, accommodation, and leisure activities, are encouraged to adopt energy-efficient practices and use renewable energy sources.
- The law promotes sustainable transportation options, such as electric vehicles and improved public transportation, which are crucial for reducing the carbon footprint of tourists traveling within Spain.

- The tourism sector is required to integrate climate adaptation measures, particularly in coastal and rural areas, to enhance resilience against climate change impacts such as rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and biodiversity loss.

4.5. Circular Economy Strategy Spain 2030

The **España Circular 2030** strategy, launched in 2020, establishes a framework for transitioning Spain towards a circular economy, which emphasizes resource efficiency, waste reduction, and sustainable consumption. This strategy has direct implications for the tourism industry:

- The strategy encourages tourism businesses, such as hotels and restaurants, to adopt waste reduction practices, including recycling, composting, and reducing single-use plastics. Tourist destinations are also urged to implement waste management systems that cater to high visitor numbers.
- Encourages the use of eco-friendly products and services in the tourism sector, such as sustainable packaging, local food sourcing, and environmentally friendly souvenirs.



The Circular Economy Strategy Spain 2030 supports sustainable tourism by ensuring that tourism operations align with resource efficiency and environmental sustainability (Ministerio para la Transición Ecológica y el Reto Demográfico, 2020).

4.6. National Strategy for Green Infrastructure and Ecological Connectivity and Restoration – 2021

This strategy, approved in 2021, focuses on preserving and restoring Spain's natural landscapes and biodiversity. Although it covers various sectors, it has direct implications for sustainable tourism:

- The strategy promotes sustainable tourism practices in natural areas, such as national parks, rural regions, and protected landscapes, ensuring that tourism does not degrade ecosystems.
- Encourages the development of ecotourism and responsible tourism activities that are compatible with the conservation of biodiversity and natural habitats.
- Supports the implementation of visitor management plans in natural areas to avoid overuse, reduce environmental impact, and protect wildlife.

The strategy contributes to sustainable tourism by safeguarding Spain's rich biodiversity and ensuring that tourism activities respect ecological integrity (Ministerio para la Transición Ecológica y el Reto Demográfico, 2021).

4.7. Spain Digital 2025

The **Spain Digital 2025** strategy, launched in 2020, aims to accelerate the digital transformation of the Spanish economy, including the tourism sector. Digitalization is a critical component of sustainable tourism as it enhances efficiency, reduces resource consumption, and improves visitor experiences.

- The strategy encourages the development of smart tourism destinations that use digital technologies (such as big data, AI, and IoT) to optimize resource use, manage tourist flows, and improve energy efficiency.

- Promotes the use of digital platforms for booking, marketing, and managing tourism services, reducing paper consumption and enhancing the sustainability of tourism operations.
- Digital technologies enable personalized and sustainable tourism experiences by providing real-time information on lesser-known destinations, sustainable transport options, and eco-friendly activities.

The Spain Digital 2025 strategy contributes to sustainable tourism by fostering digital innovations that minimize environmental impact and promote responsible travel behaviors (Ministerio de Asuntos Económicos y Transformación Digital, 2020).

4.8. Regional and local initiatives

Spain's Autonomous Communities enjoy considerable autonomy in implementing sustainable tourism policies, allowing them to tailor measures to their local needs and particularities. This capacity enables them to address specific challenges and maximise benefits according to their natural, cultural and socio-economic resources. Thanks to this autonomy, regions such as Catalonia, Canary Islands or the Balearic Islands can establish unique initiatives and regulations that promote responsible tourism growth, boosting both environmental conservation and local development.

4.8.1. Balearic Islands' "Sustainable Tourism Tax" (2016)

The Balearic Islands' "Sustainable Tourism Tax", established in 2016, has become a key mechanism for financing projects that promote responsible and sustainable tourism. This tax, levied on tourists staying in accommodation such as hotels, hostels and tourist flats, raises funds for environmental protection, the conservation of cultural heritage and the development of sustainable infrastructures on the islands. Since its implementation, the tax has raised millions of euros, contributing to more than 400 projects ranging from the

restoration of natural spaces to the improvement of public services and the promotion of renewable energies. The Agència d'Estratègia Turística de les Illes Balears, in its 2020 report, highlights the positive impact of this measure on the sustainability of the archipelago, demonstrating how strategic fiscal management can become an effective tool to face the challenges of mass tourism and preserve the local environment for future generations.



Turqueta Cove in Menorca (Spain)

4.8.2. Catalonia's Sustainable Tourism Certification

Catalonia has implemented a certification scheme for tourism businesses and destinations that meet sustainability criteria, known as 'Biosphere Responsible Tourism.' This certification, promoted by the Catalan Tourism Agency, encourages businesses and destinations to adopt responsible practices in energy use, waste management and community involvement. Through this programme, establishments must demonstrate

their commitment to sustainability by implementing concrete measures, such as reducing carbon emissions and promoting circular economy practices. Since its introduction, the certification has significantly increased awareness of sustainability among tourism stakeholders, helping to position Catalonia as a destination that prioritises respect for the environment and the well-being of local communities (Font & McCabe, 2017).



National Art Museum of Catalonia, Barcelona (Spain)

4.8.3. Barcelona's Sustainable Tourism Plan (2017-2020)

Barcelona's Sustainable Tourism Plan (2017-2020) introduced a range of measures aimed at managing tourism flows to mitigate the impact on the city's infrastructure and residents. Key initiatives include limiting the construction of new hotels in overcrowded areas, promoting tourism during the off-season, and fostering responsible behavior among visitors. Central to this plan is the "Special Urban Plan for Tourist Accommodation"

(PEUAT), which seeks to regulate the growth of tourist accommodations in a way that respects local communities and prioritizes the quality of life for residents. By controlling accommodation expansion, Barcelona aims to create a balanced tourism model that supports both sustainable urban development and positive visitor experiences (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2017).



View of Barcelona (Spain)

4.8.4. Tenerife's Eco-Tourism Strategy

Tenerife's Eco-Tourism Strategy focuses on promoting environmentally friendly practices within the tourism sector, including waste reduction, water conservation, and the adoption of renewable energy in tourist establishments. The strategy also includes initiatives such as preserving hiking trails and promoting agrotourism, which have encouraged sustainable practices that support both the local community and the natural environment. By prioritizing these areas, Tenerife aims to enhance the quality of its tourist offerings

while protecting its unique landscapes and biodiversity, positioning itself as a leader in sustainable tourism within the Canary Islands (García et al., 2019).



Playas del Duque, Marbella (Spain)

4.9. Legal Frameworks for sustainable tourism

- ❖ **Law 42/2007 on Natural Heritage and Biodiversity:** this law establishes guidelines for the conservation of natural areas and species, integrating sustainable tourism practices in protected areas. It emphasizes that tourism activities within these areas should minimize environmental impact, maintain biodiversity, and contribute to local economies (Gobierno de España, 2007).
- ❖ **Law 2/2013 on the Protection and Sustainable Use of Coastal Areas:** this law regulates activities in coastal zones, emphasizing the sustainable use of resources and preventing overdevelopment. It includes provisions that limit construction in

coastal areas, ensuring that tourism infrastructure does not harm marine ecosystems (BOE, 2013).

- ❖ **Royal Decree 713/2021 on Sustainable Tourism Destinations:** this recent legal instrument encourages municipalities to develop sustainable tourism management plans. It provides funding and technical assistance for implementing sustainable practices in tourist destinations, such as waste management, energy efficiency, and sustainable mobility (Ministerio de Industria, Comercio y Turismo, 2021).
- ❖ **Spanish National Parks Law (Ley de Parques Nacionales) – Law 30/2014:** the **National Parks Law** regulates tourism activities within Spain's 15 national parks, ensuring that tourism is compatible with the protection of these natural areas. This law limits the number of visitors allowed in national parks to prevent overcrowding and minimize environmental damage. It promotes eco-friendly tourism activities, such as guided tours, hiking, and birdwatching, which have low environmental impact. This law requires tourism operators to provide environmental education to visitors, fostering awareness of the importance of conservation. Finally, this law ensures that tourism within national parks adheres to sustainability principles, contributing to the long-term preservation of Spain's natural heritage (BOE, 2014).

Chapter 5: Mystery Guest Concept

Having explored the policies for sustainable tourism at the European, national, and regional levels in Italy, it is now important to examine how quality assessment practices, specifically through the use of "mystery guests," contribute to achieving sustainability goals within the tourism sector. **Mystery guests** are trained professionals who visit hotels, restaurants, and other tourism-related businesses incognito, acting as regular customers to evaluate the quality of services, customer experience, and adherence to sustainability standards. The purpose of mystery guest evaluations is to provide an unbiased, authentic view of how a business operates in real-life scenarios, which helps to identify areas of excellence as well as those requiring improvement. The **concept of anonymity** is central to the effectiveness of mystery guest assessments. Indeed, by remaining anonymous, mystery guests ensure that staff members are unaware they are being evaluated, which leads to more genuine interactions and observations.



In this context, Mystery guest policies could play a significant role in verifying compliance with sustainability certifications, such as the **EU Ecolabel**, ensuring that establishments meet environmental and social responsibility criteria. At the same time, these evaluations would support businesses in aligning with broader sustainability strategies, allowing them to adapt to best practices in energy efficiency, waste management, and customer engagement.

In this section, we will explore how mystery guest policies are applied in the real-world, drawing on scientific research and literature to understand why they are effective in promoting a culture of quality and sustainability in the tourism and hospitality industry. Subsequently, we will have the opportunity to create our own policy recommendations and policies for companies based on what we have analyzed and presented so far.

5.1. Analyzing the effectiveness of Mystery Guests: Insights from scientific research

Scientific research highlights that mystery guest evaluations are effective because they provide **objective and unbiased feedback** that is difficult to achieve through internal assessments alone. Unlike traditional quality audits, mystery guests offer a real-time, customer-centric perspective, which makes their evaluations more reflective of the actual experiences of visitors. However, according to Erstad (1998) and Atef (2012), the success of mystery guest evaluations heavily depends on the personality and approach of the mystery shopper. Indeed, it is crucial that the mystery guest adopts a **neutral, non-confrontational demeanor** during service encounters, allowing them to blend in and experience the service as any other guest would.

To gain a deeper understanding of how the **mystery guest process** operates, we will now examine a **practical example** provided by Atef (2012) of how such an evaluation is conducted within a hotel setting. This example will illustrate the step-by-step approach used by a mystery guest to assess service quality and adherence to sustainability practices, providing a real-world perspective on how this tool can be applied effectively. By analyzing this process in detail, we will be better equipped to develop policies that are

not only aligned with the broader European framework of sustainability but are also grounded in the practical realities and insights gained from the mystery guest experience.

Atef (2012)'s experiment involved a mystery guest inspector evaluating the quality of service at a hotel by acting as a regular guest. The evaluation process was conducted over several days, covering various aspects of the hotel's services, including **reservations, bell service, check-in, check-out, telephone operations, hotel room, housekeeping, and laundry service**. The inspector followed a structured approach, starting with making reservations and then experiencing each service as a typical guest would. The inspector interacted with different hotel staff members, taking note of their responsiveness, attentiveness, and adherence to hotel policies and standards. Each aspect of the service was carefully observed, recorded in real-time, and later analyzed using a **standardized checklist** that covered key service criteria:

1. **Reservations:** the mystery guest made two reservation attempts, evaluating the responsiveness, professionalism, and accuracy of information provided by the reservationists. The inspector noted issues such as a lack of alternative date suggestions and incomplete communication about hotel facilities.
2. **Bell service:** upon arriving, the inspector observed whether bell staff offered help with luggage and provided information about the room and hotel amenities. The inspector noted that although the bellman was friendly, there were missed opportunities, such as not explaining how to use certain room features.
3. **Front desk check-in/check-out:** during check-in, the inspector assessed the efficiency of the process, whether special requests were accommodated, and if the receptionist provided relevant information about the hotel. At check-out, the inspector evaluated the speed and thoroughness of the process and whether the receptionist asked for feedback or offered future assistance.
4. **Telephone operator:** the inspector made several calls to different departments, assessing response times, politeness, and accuracy of information. For example, a delay in fulfilling a housekeeping request was observed, and the inspector noted how the issue was resolved.

5. **Hotel room inspection:** the mystery guest thoroughly inspected the room's cleanliness, amenities, and maintenance, documenting issues such as stains on furniture, missing items, and outdated information about hotel services.
6. **Housekeeping and laundry service:** the inspector tested the efficiency and thoroughness of housekeeping and laundry services by making specific requests and noting how staff members responded to them.

The inspector used a detailed checklist to evaluate each service area, ensuring a consistent and comprehensive assessment. The checklist covered criteria such as:

- **Standards and procedures** (e.g., Was the phone answered promptly? Was the room cleaned within 20 minutes?).
- **Intuition and interaction** (e.g., Did the staff greet the guest with a friendly tone? Did they offer assistance without being prompted?).
- **Initiative** (e.g., Did the bellman offer additional services like explaining emergency exits or hotel facilities?).

The inspector recorded scores based on each criterion, providing both quantitative and qualitative feedback. This structured approach, supported by detailed checklists and real-life observations, provided insights into how the hotel could enhance both service quality and guest satisfaction.

In this regard, following a well-established method in scientific literature, our Green Mystery Guest project has developed a new and structured checklist specifically designed for this purpose, based on policies and scientific research, which is available on our website (<https://www.greenmysteryguest.eu/>). The Green Mystery Guest Checklist is a tool that can be used by Quality Inspectors, Mystery Guests, and Quality Managers within the tourism and hospitality sector to evaluate or self-assess sustainability indicators across various areas of the hospitality ecosystem, including food, service, supplies, transportation, events, external communication, and methods for encouraging sustainable attitudes and behaviors among guests.



Figure 1. Our website (<https://www.greenmysteryguest.eu/>)

Specifically, our **The Green Mystery Guest Checklist** consists of a series of 100 sustainability elements relevant to all areas of hospitality establishments, which may be either present or absent and are to be assessed by the Mystery Guest. Given its user-friendly design, this tool can also serve as an internal reference for monitoring all aspects related to sustainability within a hospitality facility and identifying potential areas for improvement.

Chapter 6: Recommendations for companies and policymakers

Based on our analysis of different European countries' policies, as well as the practical insights gained from the scientific research on mystery guest approach, we propose the following policy recommendations to enhance sustainable tourism in Europe.

6.1. Recommendations for policymakers

1. Integrate Mystery Guest evaluations into existing funding programs

To ensure that sustainability funding is allocated to businesses that are genuinely committed to sustainable practices, mystery guest evaluations should be integrated as a mandatory criterion for tourism businesses applying for financial support through programs like the **Fondo per il Turismo Sostenibile** and grants outlined in the **Italian Budget Law 2023**.

For instance, when a hotel applies for funding to upgrade its energy efficiency, a mystery guest could conduct an unannounced evaluation focusing on whether the hotel is already implementing basic sustainable practices. This might include checking if the hotel uses energy-saving lighting, has recycling bins in guest rooms, encourages towel reuse, offers locally sourced food options, and provides guests with information about sustainable travel options.

The evaluation would result in a score or report that indicates the hotel's current sustainability level. Funding could then be granted on a **sliding scale**, where businesses that score higher on their mystery guest evaluations receive a larger percentage of funding or additional incentives.

In addition, the mystery guest evaluation could identify specific areas for improvement. Businesses receiving funding would be required to address these recommendations within a set timeframe, ensuring that the funding is used effectively to enhance sustainable practices. Follow-up evaluations could then be conducted to ensure compliance and progress, with the possibility of additional funding or certification for businesses that demonstrate consistent improvement.

2. Implement a national Mystery Guest sustainability audit program with evaluation criteria

A National Mystery Guest sustainability audit program would be a useful initiative to ensure that hospitality businesses across Italy meet sustainability standards. This program would involve the deployment of trained and certified mystery guests to evaluate hotels, restaurants, and other tourism-related establishments regularly.

The program should provide an impartial and comprehensive assessment of each business's sustainability practices (for instance, using our checklist, available at <https://www.greenmysteryguest.eu/>). Certified mystery guests would conduct evaluations anonymously, ensuring that their observations reflect the genuine customer experience. For example, a mystery guest might check whether a hotel actively reduces energy consumption by using motion-sensor lighting, offers vegan or vegetarian options in its restaurant to reduce its carbon footprint, or has implemented waste separation systems in guest areas.

As already said, the mystery guest program would be based on a **standardized checklist of sustainability criteria**, covering areas such as energy efficiency, waste management, water conservation, the sourcing of local and organic products, and the promotion of

sustainable guest behaviors. For example, criteria include checking if the establishment has eliminated single-use plastics, encourages the reuse of towels and linens, or provides information to guests on how to minimize their environmental impact during their stay. This standardized approach ensures consistency across evaluations and allows for accurate benchmarking of sustainability performance across different businesses.

To support this program, the government could also establish training programs to certify mystery guests, ensuring they have the skills necessary to assess sustainability practices effectively (see: **Policy n. 3**). This training could be offered in collaboration with environmental organizations and tourism associations, creating a pool of qualified professionals capable of conducting thorough and accurate evaluations.

Naturally, this program would align with the broader European sustainability goals and serve as a model for other countries, showcasing how mystery guest evaluations can be used as a powerful tool to drive sustainable tourism practices across an entire nation.

3. Create a sustainability certification and implement a national ranking system in tourism sustainability

Businesses that perform well in these audits could be awarded a **Sustainability Certification**, similar to the **EU Ecolabel**, which recognizes excellence in environmental performance. This certification would serve as a prestigious mark of sustainability, distinguishing businesses that are committed to eco-friendly practices. For instance, a hotel that achieves a high score in the mystery guest evaluation could display a "Green Hospitality" certification badge, signaling to eco-conscious travelers that they are choosing an environmentally responsible accommodation option.

National system could include a **national ranking system** that publicly recognizes the most sustainable businesses in different categories, such as "Best green hotel," "Top sustainable restaurant," or "Eco-friendly tourist attraction." These rankings could be published on official tourism websites, national systems related to tourism, and promoted through social media, offering free marketing and increased visibility for businesses that

excel in sustainability. This recognition would encourage other businesses to improve their practices to gain similar recognition.

4. Offer tax incentives for businesses scoring high on sustainability audits to drive green investments

Introducing tax incentives for tourism businesses that score highly on mystery guest sustainability audits/checklists would be a powerful motivator for companies to adopt eco-friendly practices and invest in sustainable infrastructure. This approach directly links financial benefits to sustainability performance, creating a **win-win situation** where businesses are rewarded for their efforts to reduce their environmental impact, while the government accelerates progress toward its sustainability goals.

For instance, a hotel that demonstrates exceptional energy efficiency, waste management, and sustainable sourcing could receive a 20% reduction in its annual property tax rate. This reduction would lower the operating costs of the business and provide ongoing financial incentives for maintaining and improving sustainability practices over time.

Furthermore, businesses scoring above a certain threshold on sustainability audits could be eligible for **income tax credits** for their investments in green infrastructure and technology. For example, if a hotel invests in solar panels, energy-efficient HVAC systems, or a water recycling system, it could receive a tax credit equivalent to a percentage of the investment.

Another incentive could be the **reduction of Value-Added Tax (VAT) rates** on specific services or products offered by businesses with high sustainability scores. For instance, restaurants that source at least 80% of their ingredients locally or use organic produce could benefit from a reduced VAT rate on their sales. This would make sustainable options more affordable for consumers.

Tax incentives provide a tangible financial reward for businesses, encouraging them to make long-term investments in sustainability. For example, a hotel might be hesitant to install an expensive solar panel system due to the initial cost. These incentives also encourage **ongoing maintenance** and **improvement of sustainable practices**, ensuring that businesses do not simply make one-time changes but continue to innovate and enhance their green initiatives.

5. Promote education on sustainable tourism among tourists and engage them as Green Mystery Guests

Promoting awareness about sustainable tourism among tourists is essential for creating a culture that values eco-friendly practices and encourages responsible behavior during travel. To achieve this, it is important to develop campaigns that inform tourists about the benefits of sustainable tourism and actively involve them in the process.

The government, in collaboration with tourism businesses and environmental organizations, should develop campaigns that educate tourists on the importance of sustainability in travel. These campaigns could highlight simple actions, such as conserving water, reducing waste, using reusable products, or choosing eco-friendly transportation options. For example, posters, brochures, and digital ads can be displayed in airports, train stations, hotels, and tourist attractions, providing tips on how travelers can minimize their environmental impact.

But beside this, an innovative way to promote sustainability is to allow tourists themselves to become **Green Mystery Guests**. Tourists can apply to participate in the program and, if selected, would be given the opportunity to visit tourism establishments and evaluate their sustainability practices. However, they would **not** get to choose where they go; instead, they would be assigned to specific destinations, ensuring an unbiased coverage of different types of accommodations and restaurants.

For example, a tourist selected as a Green Mystery Guest might be sent to a rural bed and breakfast to evaluate how they handle waste management or to an urban hotel to

assess energy-saving measures. In return for their participation, these tourists could receive travel vouchers, discounts, free stay, or even a small stipend, making it an attractive opportunity for eco-conscious travelers who want to make a difference.

6. Launch a mystery guest internship program for tourism students

The government could establish a **Mystery Guest internship program** that allows tourism and hospitality students to gain practical experience as mystery guests. This initiative would be government-sponsored and designed to bridge the gap between academic learning and real-world application, ensuring that students develop a deep understanding of sustainability practices within the tourism sector.

The program would involve **partnerships between universities, vocational schools, and the Ministry of Tourism** to provide students with internship placements at various tourism establishments, such as hotels, restaurants, and tourist attractions.

Before starting their role as mystery guests, students would undergo training that covers sustainability evaluation techniques, customer service standards, and quality assurance methods. This training would ensure that students are well-prepared to assess sustainability practices accurately and provide constructive feedback. Once trained, students would be assigned to tourism businesses across different regions, where they would conduct evaluations based on a structured sustainability checklist, similar to the Green Mystery Guest framework. After each evaluation, students would compile detailed reports on their findings, providing feedback to the establishments and offering suggestions for improvement. This data would also be submitted to the Ministry of Tourism for analysis, contributing to a national database on sustainability performance in the tourism sector.

Over time, the Mystery Guest internship program would enhance the quality of sustainability assessments within the tourism sector and help create a **pipeline of professionals** who are well-versed in sustainable tourism practices.

7. Encourage public-private partnerships for sustainability training

To effectively promote sustainable practices within the tourism industry, the government should facilitate **public-private partnerships** that bring together government agencies, industry associations, and tourism businesses to provide comprehensive training programs for staff. These training programs would be informed by feedback from mystery guest evaluations, ensuring that they address the most relevant areas for improvement and foster a culture of sustainability across the sector.

In this context, the government could collaborate with tourism associations, hospitality training institutes, environmental organizations, and private companies to develop and deliver training modules that focus on key sustainability practices. Mystery guest evaluations conducted at various tourism establishments would serve as the foundation for identifying areas where training is most needed, such as energy management, waste reduction, sustainable sourcing, and eco-friendly customer service.

The Ministry of Tourism, in partnership with private sector players, such as hotel chains, tour operators, and restaurant associations, would establish a framework for joint training initiatives. For instance, a hotel chain with a strong track record in sustainability could partner with a government agency to develop training materials or offer workshops for other businesses looking to improve their practices.

In general, public-private partnerships would organize regular workshops, webinars, and on-site training sessions. These programs would be tailored to different levels of staff, from front-line employees to management, ensuring that everyone understands their role in achieving sustainability goals. These sessions would teach hotel maintenance staff how to optimize heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems or how to install energy-efficient lighting, directly reducing energy consumption and costs.

Upon completion, participants could receive certifications in sustainable tourism practices, adding value to their professional skills and reinforcing the importance of sustainability. This could be particularly useful, because one of the most significant

barriers to implementing sustainable practices in the tourism sector is a lack of awareness and skills among employees.

8. Establish a government-sponsored Mystery Guest subsidy program for SMEs

To ensure that smaller tourism businesses, such as family-owned hotels, B&Bs, and independent restaurants, have the opportunity to benefit from sustainability evaluations, the government should introduce a **subsidy program** that supports **small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)** in undergoing regular mystery guest evaluations. This would make it more feasible for small businesses to access the expertise required to improve their sustainability practices.

The government could cover a significant portion (e.g., 70-80%) of the costs associated with the mystery guest evaluations for SMEs, making it more affordable for these businesses to participate. This subsidy could be granted to businesses that apply and demonstrate a genuine interest in improving their sustainability.

The program would be open to SMEs that operate within the tourism sector and have fewer than a certain number of employees (e.g., 50). Priority could be given to those located in rural areas, regions with a high environmental impact, or areas with significant potential for sustainable tourism growth.

The government would partner with certified mystery guest agencies to provide the evaluations, ensuring that the process is conducted by trained professionals who can accurately assess sustainability practices and offer constructive feedback.

Example: a small family-run guesthouse in Calabria might not have the resources to hire a professional mystery guest to evaluate its sustainability practices. Through the subsidy program, the government could fund an evaluation, allowing the guesthouse to receive valuable insights into how it can reduce waste, improve energy efficiency, and engage guests in eco-friendly practices.

This program would help SMEs compete with larger tourism businesses that have more resources to invest in sustainability, ensuring that even smaller establishments can access expert guidance on improving their practices. In other words, by making mystery guest evaluations accessible to a wider range of businesses, the program would help drive the adoption of sustainable practices across the entire tourism sector, not just among larger, more established companies or hotels.

9. Establish a National sustainable tourism observatory

A **National sustainable tourism observatory** should be established to monitor, evaluate, and report on the sustainability performance of the tourism sector across Italy, Romania, Spain, and also other European countries. This observatory would collect data on key sustainability indicators such as energy consumption, waste management, water usage, biodiversity impact, and carbon emissions from tourism businesses.

The observatory would use data from sources like the mystery guest evaluations, surveys, satellite monitoring, and industry reports to assess the sustainability practices of tourism businesses and destinations.

Also, the observatory should publish annual reports highlighting the progress and challenges of sustainable tourism practices in Italy. These reports would serve as a valuable resource for policymakers, industry stakeholders, and tourists interested in eco-friendly travel options.

And finally, it would be good to create a publicly accessible digital platform where tourists and businesses can view sustainability ratings of destinations, accommodations, and attractions. This transparency would incentivize businesses to improve their sustainability practices and allow tourists to make informed, eco-conscious choices.

The establishment of the National Sustainable Tourism Observatory would align with similar initiatives, such as the **UNWTO's Global Observatory on Sustainable Tourism**, and would enable Italy to take a data-driven approach to achieving its sustainability goals.

Specifically, the **Global Observatory on Sustainable Tourism (GOST)** is an initiative established by the **United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)** to monitor, measure, and promote sustainable tourism practices worldwide. GOST serves as a network of observatories that collect, analyze, and share data on tourism's environmental, social, and economic impacts at the local, regional, and national levels. The primary goal is to provide evidence-based insights that guide policymakers, tourism businesses, and communities in making informed decisions that contribute to sustainable tourism development.

10. Incentivize sustainable transportation for tourists

To reduce the carbon footprint associated with tourist travel, European countries should implement policies that incentivize the use of sustainable transportation options:

- Introduce subsidies or discounted travel passes for tourists using public transportation, such as buses, trams, and trains. These subsidies could be provided through partnerships between the government and public transportation companies.
- Establish a network of electric vehicle (EV) charging stations at tourist hotspots, hotels, and attractions. Offer incentives like discounted parking rates or priority parking for tourists driving electric or hybrid vehicles.
- Develop a "Green travel pass" that provides discounts on entrance fees to attractions, accommodations, and dining options for tourists who use eco-friendly transportation methods, such as cycling, walking, or electric scooters.

This policy would encourage tourists to opt for more sustainable travel options, significantly reducing the environmental impact of transportation, which is one of the largest contributors to greenhouse gas emissions in the tourism sector.

11. Develop sustainable tourism zones with special regulations

The European countries' governments should identify and designate specific **Sustainable Tourism Zones (STZs)** in regions that are most vulnerable to overtourism, environmental degradation, or cultural erosion. These zones would have stricter regulations and guidelines to ensure that tourism development aligns with sustainability goals.

It would be useful to establish clear limits on the number of visitors allowed within STZs at any given time to prevent overcrowding and reduce the environmental impact on sensitive ecosystems. This could involve implementing a digital booking system for entry to certain areas, such as popular national parks or UNESCO heritage sites.

Also, they could enforce guidelines on the construction and renovation of tourism infrastructure within these zones, ensuring that new developments adhere to sustainable building standards, use renewable energy, and minimize waste and water consumption.

Finally, it would be useful to involve local communities in the management and decision-making processes of the STZs, ensuring that tourism development respects local cultures, traditions, and livelihoods. Revenue generated from tourism could be reinvested into community development projects, such as improving infrastructure, healthcare, and education.

The establishment of Sustainable Tourism Zones would help preserve most fragile destinations while promoting sustainable tourism practices.

12. Establish a time-bank system for local community engagement

Implement a **Time-Bank System** where tourists can exchange volunteer hours for tourism experiences, services, or products, encouraging meaningful engagement with local communities.

Specifically, tourists can volunteer their time to participate in community projects, such as environmental clean-ups, teaching English, helping with organic farming, or assisting in local craft workshops. In return, they receive **credits** that can be used to pay for meals, accommodation, guided tours, or entry to attractions.

Local businesses can sign up for the Time-Bank system and offer their services in exchange for tourists' volunteer time, allowing them to benefit from skilled labor and support for community initiatives.

The Time-Bank System fosters a deeper connection between tourists and local communities, encourages responsible tourism behavior, and provides direct benefits to host communities, making tourism a more mutually beneficial experience.

13. Rural and mountain connectivity enhancement program

Governments should implement a **rural and mountain connectivity enhancement program** that focuses on improving public transportation links to less-connected, non-touristy but culturally rich or ecologically significant areas. This program would invest in establishing and upgrading bus and train services, financing railway tracks, and developing transportation infrastructure to make these areas more accessible to both domestic and international tourists.

It is necessary to allocate government funding to build new railway lines, repair existing tracks, and create bus routes that connect rural and mountainous areas to major cities and tourist hubs. Prioritize regions with high potential for sustainable tourism development but which currently lack efficient public transportation options.

Also, they could provide subsidies for electric or low-emission buses and trains to serve these routes, ensuring that the expansion of connectivity is also environmentally sustainable. These services could include seasonal routes tailored to peak tourist seasons, as well as year-round connections to support local communities.

They should create transportation hubs in strategic locations where different modes of transport (trains, buses, bike rentals, etc.) converge, allowing tourists to seamlessly transfer between different forms of transport. For example, a train station could have an adjacent electric bus terminal or e-bike rental station, making it easier for tourists to explore nearby attractions sustainably.

Example: A mountain village that is rich in history but difficult to reach due to poor public transport connections could receive investment in a new train line, connecting it to a nearby city or a major tourist destination. The train line could also include scenic stops along the way, offering a unique travel experience. Additionally, an electric bus service could be introduced to shuttle tourists from the train station to local attractions, such as hiking trails, cultural sites, or traditional craft workshops.

14. Develop a Rural mobility, accommodations, and attractions app

Create a Rural Mobility and Attractions App that provides real-time information on public transportation schedules (trains, buses, and shuttles), route maps, and detailed insights into attractions, activities, and **accommodations** in rural and newly connected areas. This app would address the gaps often left by mainstream mapping services, which frequently lack up-to-date information for rural destinations and new transportation routes, making it difficult for tourists to plan trips to these lesser-known areas. Features of the app should include:

A) Real-time transportation information:

- The app would provide accurate, real-time schedules for trains, buses, and local shuttles serving rural and remote areas, ensuring that tourists can plan their journeys with confidence. It would notify users of any changes, delays, or cancellations, making travel more predictable and stress-free.
- Offer clear route maps that show how to reach rural destinations from major cities, with details on transfers between different modes of transport (e.g., train to bus

connections). This feature is particularly valuable for routes that are newly established or less commonly used, which are often missing from traditional navigation apps.

- Provide offline access to maps and schedules, essential for areas with limited mobile network coverage, ensuring travelers can navigate rural destinations without relying on a stable internet connection.

B) Detailed information on attractions and activities

- Include comprehensive listings of local attractions, natural landmarks, cultural sites, hiking trails, and outdoor activities in rural areas, complete with descriptions, photos, and historical or ecological background information. This allows tourists to discover lesser-known gems that are often overlooked by mainstream travel guides.
- Highlight sustainable and eco-friendly activities, such as guided nature walks, organic farms, agritourism experiences, or workshops with local artisans. This encourages responsible tourism practices and supports rural communities.
- Enable users to leave reviews, ratings, and travel tips, helping others plan their visit and gain insight into the best experiences in each destination.

C) Accessibility and inclusivity features

- Provide details on the accessibility of transportation options (e.g., wheelchair-friendly buses or train stations), attractions, accommodations, and activities, making it easier for travelers with disabilities to plan their trips.
- Offer multilingual support to cater to both domestic and international tourists, ensuring that language is not a barrier when exploring rural destinations.

Example: if a traveler is planning a trip to a rural mountain village that recently became accessible via a new train route, they could use the app to check the train schedule, find

out which bus connection will take them to the village center, and discover nearby attractions such as hiking trails, waterfalls, or local craft shops. The app would also inform them of any delays on the train route and suggest eco-friendly activities like a tour of an organic vineyard or a pottery-making workshop hosted by a local artisan.

6.2. Recommendations for companies

1. Adopt renewable energy sources

Businesses should invest in renewable energy technologies, such as solar panels, wind turbines, and geothermal systems, to reduce reliance on fossil fuels. This transition can be facilitated through partnerships with energy providers and the use of EU funding mechanisms like the *European Regional Development Fund* (ERDF).

Hotels and resorts should upgrade to energy-efficient appliances, lighting, and heating/cooling systems. Installing smart energy management systems that adjust energy use based on occupancy can significantly reduce energy consumption and costs.

Regular energy audits can help businesses identify inefficiencies and areas for improvement. These audits should be conducted in line with EU energy performance standards, and businesses should act on audit findings to continually improve their energy efficiency.

2. Promote water-saving technologies and educate staff and guests on water conservation

Businesses should prioritize the installation of water-saving technologies, such as low-flow faucets, showerheads, and toilets. Implementing greywater recycling systems to

reuse water for non-potable purposes, such as irrigation, can further reduce water consumption.

Moreover, businesses should engage both staff and guests in water conservation efforts by raising awareness about the importance of saving water and providing information on how they can contribute. For example, hotels can encourage guests to reuse towels and linens, while staff can be trained on water-efficient cleaning methods.

3. Promote waste-reducing technologies and educate staff and guests on waste reduction

Naturally, hospitality businesses should phase out single-use plastics in favor of biodegradable or reusable alternatives. For example, replacing plastic straws, cutlery, and packaging with eco-friendly options can reduce waste and environmental harm.

To conclude, businesses must establish clear recycling systems, ensuring that both staff and guests are aware of how to properly sort waste. Hotels should also collaborate with waste management companies to ensure that recyclables are properly processed and do not end up in landfills.

Moreover, also reducing food waste should be a priority for restaurants, hotels, and resorts. Businesses can use smart inventory systems to avoid over-purchasing, implement portion control to reduce leftovers, and **donate surplus food to local charities**.

4. Training program that educates staff on the principles of sustainable tourism

Hotels, restaurants, and business companies should implement a structured training program that educates staff on the principles of sustainable tourism, ensuring they understand and can actively contribute to the company's sustainability goals.

It could be useful to develop mandatory training covering topics like waste reduction, energy conservation, local sourcing, and guest engagement in sustainable practices. Also, they should include hands-on workshops where staff learn about eco-friendly practices, such as proper recycling techniques or efficient energy use.

Another important step is to offer ongoing education through e-learning platforms, seminars, and sustainability updates, ensuring that staff stay informed about the latest sustainable tourism trends and practices.

For example, our Green Mystery Guest project offers an innovative solution for training hospitality professionals in sustainability (<https://www.greenmysteryguest.eu/>). The project's online course, which includes three modules, is designed to equip mystery guests, quality inspectors, and hospitality managers with the skills needed to assess sustainability in hospitality venues (available at <https://www.greenmysteryguest.eu/>). The course is designed to be flexible and accessible, allowing participants to complete the modules at their own pace. It also aligns with the European Union's goals of increasing the accessibility of training programs through digital platforms and micro-credentialing. Upon completing the course, participants receive a certificate that recognizes their expertise in sustainability, helping to enhance their professional qualifications.

5. Engage guests in green initiatives

Hospitality businesses can enhance their sustainability efforts by engaging guests in their green initiatives. Providing guests with information on how to reduce their environmental impact, such as using energy and water efficiently and participating in recycling programs, can foster responsible tourism behavior.

To encourage guests to participate in sustainability efforts, businesses can offer incentives such as discounts for guests who opt out of daily housekeeping services or reward programs for those who use eco-friendly transport options.

6. Establish a carbon offset program

Tourism companies should develop **Carbon offset programs** to neutralize the carbon emissions generated by their operations:

- **Carbon Footprint Assessment:** conduct a detailed assessment of the company's carbon footprint, including emissions from transportation, energy use, waste management, and guest activities. This assessment would identify areas where emissions can be reduced.
- **Offset initiatives:** invest in carbon offset projects such as reforestation, renewable energy projects, or community-based environmental conservation initiatives to compensate for emissions. For instance, a hotel chain might plant trees in a nearby forest or fund solar panel installations in rural communities.
- **Guest engagement:** offer guests the option to offset their travel emissions when booking accommodations, tours, or activities. Provide clear information on how these contributions will be used to support sustainability projects.

7. Integrate circular economy principles

Tourism businesses should incorporate **Circular Economy Principles** to minimize waste and resource consumption. They should adopt practices that maximize the use of resources, such as refurbishing furniture, recycling materials, and repurposing waste. For example, a restaurant could compost organic waste and use it in a rooftop garden to grow herbs and vegetables.

Also, they should extend the lifespan of products and equipment by investing in high-quality, durable goods, repairing items when possible, and encouraging the reuse of products. For instance, hotels can implement towel and linen reuse programs to reduce water and energy consumption.

Partner with suppliers that offer take-back programs for packaging, electronics, and other materials, ensuring that these items are recycled or reused instead of ending up in landfills.

8. Create a dynamic energy management system with guest interaction

It could be innovative and sustainable to implement a **dynamic energy management system (DEMS)** that adjusts energy usage based on real-time occupancy and guest preferences.

For example, it would be excellent to equip rooms with smart sensors that monitor occupancy and automatically adjust lighting, heating, air conditioning, and water usage. For instance, when guests leave their rooms, lights and air conditioning automatically switch off or enter energy-saving mode.

Also, it would be possible to offer guests a mobile app that allows them to control room settings, monitor their energy and water consumption during their stay, and receive suggestions for reducing their impact. Reward guests who actively engage in energy-saving behaviors with discounts, loyalty points, or vouchers.

Finally, hotels could display an energy dashboard in the hotel lobby **showing real-time energy consumption**, renewable energy generation, and water usage. This transparency raises awareness and encourages both guests and staff to contribute to energy-saving efforts.

9. On-site biodigesters for waste management and energy generation

Hotels and other business touristic companies could install an **on-site biodigester** to convert organic waste from the hotel's kitchen and landscaping into biogas, which can be used for cooking, heating water, or generating electricity.

They could use the organic waste generated by the hotel's restaurant and garden maintenance as input for the biodigester, creating a circular system that reduces waste and provides a renewable energy source.

Finally, they could offer guided tours for guests to learn about the waste-to-energy process, helping them understand the hotel's commitment to sustainability.

10. Establish a Zero-waste menu concept

Develop a **Zero-Waste Menu** that utilizes all parts of the ingredients, ensuring that nothing goes to waste.

Specifically, it would be necessary to train chefs to use every part of fruits, vegetables, and meats. For instance, vegetable peels can be used for stocks or chips, and meat bones can be turned into broths.

Also, they can create a daily special using surplus ingredients that might otherwise be wasted. This practice encourages flexibility and creativity in the kitchen while reducing food waste.

Moreover, partner with local farms or community gardens to donate any unavoidable food scraps for composting, closing the loop on waste.

11. Plant-based and local sourcing collaboration

Collaborate with local farmers and food producers to create a **plant-based menu** that minimizes carbon footprint and supports local economies. Establish direct relationships with nearby farms to source seasonal, organic produce, reducing transportation emissions and ensuring fresher ingredients. Finally, offer cooking classes that teach guests how to prepare delicious plant-based meals using local ingredients. This not only educates customers but also promotes plant-based eating.

12. Establish a “Green currency loyalty” program

Introduce a **Green Currency Loyalty Program** where customers earn "green points" for participating in sustainable activities during their stay or dining experience.

Guests earn points by engaging in actions like bringing their reusable water bottles, opting out of daily housekeeping, choosing plant-based menu options, or participating in sustainability workshops.

Points can be redeemed for perks such as free drinks, discounts on meals, complimentary room upgrades, or even eco-friendly products like reusable bags or water bottles.

This program encourages customers to adopt sustainable behaviors.

13. Sustainable storytelling and QR Code information points

Sustainable storytelling is a tool that allows hotels and restaurants to communicate their sustainability practices and achievements to guests in an engaging and interactive way. By using QR code information points strategically placed throughout the property, businesses can provide detailed insights into their eco-friendly initiatives, making sustainability an integral part of the guest experience. This approach educates guests

about sustainability but also encourages them to participate in these efforts, creating a more meaningful and memorable stay or dining experience.

QR codes can be placed in multiple areas within the hotel or restaurant, such as:

- **On menus:** include QR codes next to menu items that highlight their sustainability story, such as information about locally sourced ingredients, organic farming methods, or details on how the dish supports fair trade.
- **In guest rooms:** place QR codes on room cards, brochures, or bedside tables that detail the hotel's sustainability initiatives, such as energy-saving technologies, water conservation programs, or waste reduction strategies.
- **At Key Property Locations:** position QR codes in public areas such as lobbies, near recycling bins, at the spa, poolside, or in conference rooms, explaining specific sustainability features like water-saving systems, solar energy usage, or green cleaning products.

Example: a restaurant could place a QR code next to a dish description, and when scanned, it provides information about how the fish was sustainably caught, the farm where vegetables were grown, or the wine's carbon-neutral production process. A hotel might place a QR code in the bathroom, explaining how the biodegradable toiletries used are part of their plastic reduction initiative.

The information provided when guests scan the QR code can cover various sustainability topics, such as:

- Showcase the source of key ingredients, detailing their local sourcing, organic farming practices, or fair-trade certification. For instance, if a restaurant offers a dish with local honey, the QR code could tell the story of the nearby beekeeper, emphasizing how supporting local producers reduces carbon emissions from transportation.

- Explain how energy-saving technologies (such as LED lighting, motion sensors, or solar panels) or water-saving systems (such as low-flow faucets or rainwater harvesting) contribute to reducing the property's environmental impact. For example, a QR code near the shower could inform guests about how the hotel saves thousands of liters of water each month through its greywater recycling system.
- Describe recycling programs, composting initiatives, or how food waste is minimized. For example, a hotel could share how leftover food from the breakfast buffet is donated to a local charity or turned into compost for the property's garden.
- Provide data on how much CO₂ the business has offset through renewable energy projects or how guests can participate in carbon-neutral activities during their stay.



14. Accessible sustainable tourism program for hotels and agritourism

Provide accessible shuttle services, electric golf carts, or bicycles adapted for guests with mobility impairments to navigate eco-tourism sites or farms, making it easier for them to participate in outdoor activities such as nature walks or guided farm tours.

Ensure that eco-friendly facilities, such as solar-heated swimming pools, rainwater showers, and organic gardens, are designed with accessibility in mind. For instance, raised garden beds can be installed so that wheelchair users can participate in gardening activities, and tactile paving can guide visually impaired guests around the property.

Offer adaptive farming experiences where guests with disabilities can participate in organic farming, harvesting, or planting activities using specialized tools and equipment. For example, guests with limited hand mobility can use ergonomic gardening tools designed to be easy to grip, while raised garden beds allow wheelchair users to participate in planting.

Develop guided sensory tours that allow visually impaired guests to explore gardens, vineyards, or olive groves using touch, smell, and sound. Guides could describe the sustainable farming methods used, and guests can feel different plant textures, listen to birds, or smell herbs to fully engage with the experience.

And finally, host accessible cooking workshops that use fresh, organic ingredients grown on-site, ensuring that workstations are adapted for wheelchair users and that instructions are available in braille or sign language interpretation.

Example: an agritourism farm could create a series of wheelchair-accessible paths through its vineyards, allowing guests to participate in grape harvesting. The farm could also install handrails and provide adapted scissors or clippers for easier use. Workshops on making traditional wine or olive oil could be conducted in accessible kitchens, where guests with disabilities can fully participate in the process.

Of course, it would be necessary to offer training programs to staff on how to assist guests with disabilities, focusing on both accessibility needs and creating a welcoming and inclusive environment. This training should cover communication skills (such as basic sign language), handling adaptive equipment, and understanding different types of disabilities.

Or even better, designate a staff member as an "Accessibility and Sustainability professional" who is responsible for ensuring that all guests can participate in sustainable activities and experiences and who can provide personalized assistance when needed.

6.3. Action plan

An **action plan** serves as a structured guide to achieving sustainability goals in the tourism industry, providing both companies and policymakers with a clear, step-by-step roadmap to implement effective and practical strategies.

The action plan offers a clear sequence of actions, from conducting audits to engaging guests, which helps companies systematically implement sustainable practices. This prevents overwhelm and ensures that each aspect of sustainability is addressed. By following the plan, policy makers and companies can efficiently allocate resources (time, money, and staff) towards the most impactful sustainability initiatives, such as reducing energy consumption or waste.

6.3.1. Action plan for policymakers: Promoting sustainable tourism

This is useful to implement policies that encourage sustainable tourism practices across the country, focusing on environmental conservation, social inclusivity, economic growth, and accessibility. This action plan aims to create a supportive framework that motivates tourism businesses to adopt sustainable practices and facilitates responsible tourism among travelers.

Phase 1: Establishing the policy framework

Step 1: Develop a national sustainable tourism strategy

- **1.1 Create a multi-stakeholder task force:** form a task force consisting of government representatives, tourism industry stakeholders, environmental organizations, local communities, and accessibility advocates to develop a cohesive national sustainable tourism strategy.
- **1.2 Set clear sustainability goals:** define specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) goals, such as reducing tourism-related carbon emissions by 30% over the next five years, increasing the number of accessible accommodations by 20%, and ensuring that 50% of tourism businesses have sustainability certifications.

Step 2: Implement sustainable tourism legislation

- **2.1 Draft legislation for Sustainable Tourism practices:** introduce laws that mandate waste reduction, water conservation, energy efficiency, and the use of local products in the tourism sector.
 - **2.2 Introduce accessibility standards:** enforce national guidelines requiring that all new tourism infrastructure is designed with universal accessibility in mind, ensuring that tourism destinations are accessible to people with disabilities.
-

Phase 2: Financial incentives and support

Step 3: Establish funding and incentive programs

- **3.1 Launch a green tourism grant program:** create a grant program to support tourism businesses in adopting sustainable practices, such as installing renewable energy systems, developing accessible facilities, or introducing waste management systems.
- **3.2 Provide tax incentives for sustainable businesses:** offer tax reductions or rebates for businesses that achieve sustainability certifications or meet certain accessibility standards. For example, a hotel that installs solar panels or offers accessible rooms could receive a reduction in property taxes.

- **3.3 introduce a rural connectivity fund:** allocate funding for improving transportation infrastructure in rural and mountainous areas, including building railway tracks, upgrading bus routes, and installing electric vehicle charging stations.

Step 4: Support training and capacity building

- **4.1 Develop sustainable tourism training programs:** collaborate with tourism associations, universities, and NGOs to create training programs for tourism professionals on sustainable practices, accessibility, and inclusive customer service.
 - **4.2 Launch a Mystery Guest internship program:** partner with educational institutions to create internships where students act as mystery guests, evaluating the sustainability and accessibility of tourism businesses. This feedback can be used to improve industry standards and practices.
-

Phase 3: Monitoring, evaluation, and reporting

Step 5: Implement a National mystery guest sustainability audit program

- **5.1 Deploy trained mystery guests:** regularly conduct mystery guest evaluations at hotels, restaurants, and tourist attractions to assess their sustainability and accessibility practices. Use this data to monitor compliance with national standards.
- **5.2 Create a National Ranking System:** establish a public ranking system that rates businesses based on their sustainability and accessibility efforts. Recognize top performers with awards or special promotions to encourage industry-wide adoption.

Step 6: Establish a sustainable tourism observatory

- **6.1 Monitor tourism impact:** create a National Sustainable Tourism Observatory to collect and analyze data on tourism's environmental, social, and economic impacts, such as waste generation, water use, energy consumption, and visitor behavior.
 - **6.2 Publish annual sustainability reports:** release annual reports that highlight the progress made towards sustainability goals, challenges encountered, and areas for improvement. Use this data to adjust policies and strategies as needed.
-

Phase 4: Promoting sustainable and accessible tourism

Step 7: Develop a rural mobility and attractions app

- **7.1 Launch the app:** develop a government-supported app that provides real-time information on public transportation schedules, route maps, and details about attractions in rural and less-connected areas, making travel planning easier for tourists.
- **7.2 Include accessibility information:** ensure the app provides detailed information about the accessibility features of attractions, transportation options, and accommodations, enabling travelers with disabilities to plan their trips confidently.

Step 8: Implement public awareness campaigns

- **8.1 Promote sustainable travel choices:** create awareness campaigns encouraging tourists to choose eco-friendly accommodations, use public transportation, reduce waste, and support local businesses. Use social media, travel websites, and airports as platforms for these campaigns.
- **8.2 Showcase success stories:** highlight businesses and destinations that have successfully adopted sustainable and accessible practices to inspire others. Share these stories through government tourism websites, brochures, and media campaigns.

Phase 5: Engaging local communities and businesses

Step 9: Community-based tourism initiatives

- **9.1 Support local entrepreneurs:** provide funding, training, and marketing support for community-based tourism projects that promote cultural heritage, traditional crafts, and eco-friendly practices.
- **9.2 Establish rural tourism hubs:** create regional tourism hubs that serve as central points for information, transportation, and activities, ensuring that rural communities are directly involved in and benefit from tourism development.

Step 10: Encourage public-private partnerships

- **10.1 Collaborate with tourism associations:** work with private sector tourism associations to develop sustainability standards, training programs, and marketing campaigns.
- **10.2 Partner with technology firms:** collaborate with technology companies to develop digital tools, such as the rural mobility app or interactive sustainability dashboards, that facilitate sustainable tourism practices.

Timeline and implementation

Action Steps	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
Develop policy framework	✓				
Launch funding programs		✓			

Action Steps	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
Implement monitoring programs		✓	✓		
App development and launch		✓			
Conduct Training and awareness campaigns	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Public-Private partnerships	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Evaluate and adjust policies			✓	✓	✓

6.3.2. Action plan for companies: Implementing sustainable tourism practices

Phase 1: Assessment and planning

Step 1: Conduct a sustainability audit

- **1.1 Evaluate current practices:** use a sustainability checklist (such as the Green Mystery Guest checklist) to assess current practices in energy use, waste management, water conservation, sourcing, accessibility, and community engagement.
- **1.2 Identify improvement areas:** identify key areas where sustainable and accessible practices can be implemented or enhanced, such as reducing plastic waste, improving energy efficiency, or making facilities more accessible to people with disabilities.

- **1.3 Set sustainability goals:** establish SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) sustainability goals, such as reducing energy consumption by 20% within two years, achieving a waste recycling rate of 80%, or increasing the use of locally sourced products by 30%.

Step 2: develop a sustainable business action plan

- **2.1 Create an action plan document:** outline a detailed action plan that includes timelines, budget, responsibilities, and resources needed for implementing sustainable practices.
 - **2.2 Assign a sustainability champion:** appoint a staff member or form a sustainability team responsible for overseeing the implementation of the action plan and ensuring progress towards sustainability goals.
-

Phase 2: Implementing sustainable practices

Step 3: Adopt energy and water efficiency measures

- **3.1 Invest in renewable energy:** install solar panels, wind turbines, or other renewable energy sources to power operations. Consider switching to a green energy provider for electricity.
- **3.2 Upgrade to energy-efficient equipment:** replace outdated lighting with LED bulbs, use energy-efficient kitchen appliances, and install smart thermostats to reduce energy consumption.
- **3.3 Implement water-saving initiatives:** install low-flow faucets, showerheads, and toilets, and introduce greywater recycling systems for landscaping or cleaning purposes.

Step 4: Establish waste reduction and recycling programs

- **4.1 Eliminate single-use plastics:** replace plastic straws, cutlery, and packaging with biodegradable or reusable alternatives.
- **4.2 Implement recycling stations:** set up clearly labeled recycling stations for guests and staff to separate waste materials such as paper, plastic, glass, and organic waste.
- **4.3 Create a food waste reduction program:** Introduce a system for composting food waste or donating surplus food to local charities.

Step 5: Promote local and sustainable sourcing

- **5.1 Partner with local producers:** Source ingredients, products, and services from local farmers, artisans, and businesses, prioritizing organic, fair-trade, and sustainably produced options.
- **5.2 Offer sustainable menus:** Design menus that highlight seasonal, plant-based, and locally sourced options, reducing the carbon footprint of food transportation.

Step 6: Enhance accessibility and inclusivity

- **6.1 Improve accessibility infrastructure:** ensure that your premises are wheelchair-accessible, with ramps, elevators, wide doorways, and accessible restrooms. Install tactile signage and braille menus for visually impaired guests.
- **6.2 Provide staff training on accessibility:** train employees on how to assist guests with disabilities, ensuring that they understand how to provide an inclusive and welcoming environment.
- **6.3 Offer accessible activities and experiences:** adapt activities such as cooking classes, gardening, or guided tours to be accessible to guests with physical, visual, or hearing impairments.

Phase 3: Engaging customers and promoting sustainability

Step 7: Create a Green Guest engagement program

- **7.1 Launch a Green Loyalty program:** reward guests with discounts, freebies, or loyalty points for participating in sustainable activities, such as opting out of daily housekeeping, using public transport, or choosing plant-based menu options.
 - **7.2 Educate guests through storytelling:** use QR codes, informational brochures, or digital screens to share your sustainability journey, including real-time data on energy savings, waste reduction, and community impact.
 - **7.3 Offer interactive sustainability experiences:** organize workshops, farm tours, or cooking classes that allow guests to learn about and participate in sustainable practices, such as organic farming, composting, or eco-friendly cooking techniques.
-

Phase 4: Monitoring, evaluation, and reporting

Step 8: Regularly monitor sustainability performance

- **8.1 Use mystery guest evaluations:** partner with organizations like the Green Mystery Guest project to conduct mystery guest evaluations and receive feedback on your sustainability and accessibility practices.
- **8.2 Track progress against goals:** monitor key performance indicators (KPIs) such as energy usage, waste generated, water consumption, and guest participation in sustainable activities. Use this data to measure progress toward your sustainability goals.

Step 9: Report on sustainability efforts

- **9.1 Publish an annual sustainability report:** create a report detailing your sustainability achievements, challenges, and future plans, sharing it with stakeholders, guests, and the local community.
 - **9.2 Share success stories:** use your website, social media, newsletters, and other marketing channels to highlight success stories, guest testimonials, and positive impacts resulting from your sustainability efforts.
-

Phase 5: Continuous improvement and innovation

Step 10: Innovate and expand sustainable practices

- **10.1 Invest in new technologies:** explore innovative solutions such as smart energy management systems, green building materials, or waste-to-energy technologies to further reduce your environmental footprint.
- **10.2 Participate in certification programs:** aim to achieve recognized sustainability certifications (e.g., EU Ecolabel, Green Key, or Accessible Tourism certification) to demonstrate your commitment to sustainability and inclusivity.

Step 11: Collaborate and share best practices

- **11.1 Join industry associations and networks:** become an active member of sustainable tourism associations to share best practices, learn from others, and stay updated on the latest sustainability trends.
- **11.2 Partner with local communities:** work closely with local communities to support sustainable tourism development, cultural preservation, and social inclusion.

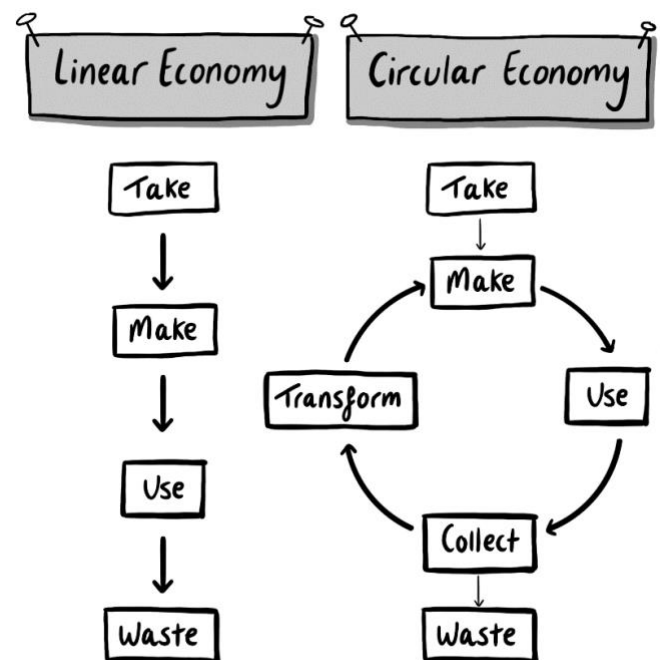
Timeline and implementation

Action Steps	Month 1-3	Month 4-6	Month 7-9	Month 10-12	Year 2+
Conduct Sustainability Audit	✓				
Develop Action Plan	✓				
Implement Energy/Water Efficiency		✓	✓		Ongoing
Establish Waste Management Systems		✓			Ongoing
Improve Accessibility		✓	✓		
Launch Green Guest Engagement Program			✓		Ongoing
Monitoring and Evaluation			✓	✓	Ongoing
Publish Annual Report				✓	Annually
Innovate and Expand Practices					Ongoing

Both our action plans align with the EU's sustainability objectives by incorporating tangible actions that resonate with various European Union initiatives, directives, and strategies. Here's how this alignment takes shape with specific EU examples:

First of all, our plans support the **EU Green Deal**. The EU Green Deal sets the goal for the continent to achieve climate neutrality by 2050, with a significant reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030. Our action plans contribute to these targets by advocating for renewable energy adoption and energy efficiency within tourism businesses. For example, the installation of solar panels on hotel roofs or switching to LED lighting in line with the EU's Energy Efficiency Directive reduces energy consumption, contributing to the EU's aim to improve energy efficiency by 32.5% by 2030.

Additionally, the emphasis on waste reduction and recycling within the action plan supports the **EU Circular Economy Action Plan**. This directive encourages a more sustainable product life cycle and seeks to halve residual municipal waste by 2030. For instance, by eliminating single-use plastics in hotels and replacing them with biodegradable or reusable alternatives, companies align with the Single-Use Plastics Directive, which aims to significantly reduce the consumption of single-use plastic items across Europe.



Furthermore, the action plan's focus on inclusivity, ensuring that tourism facilities are accessible to people with disabilities, aligns with the **European Accessibility Act (EAA)**, which sets out requirements for making products and services accessible across the EU. For example, by incorporating ramps, braille signage, and tactile pathways in hotels, restaurants, and attractions, tourism businesses are not only making their premises more welcoming but also ensuring compliance with the EAA, which becomes fully applicable across member states by 2025.

To continue, the **EU's Biodiversity Strategy for 2030** aims to protect 30% of the EU's land and marine areas and restore ecosystems. The action plan's encouragement for

tourism companies to participate in sustainable agriculture practices, like sourcing ingredients from organic, local farms or engaging guests in eco-friendly activities such as reforestation projects, aligns with this strategy. For instance, an agritourism business planting native trees on its property contributes to the EU's reforestation and biodiversity restoration efforts, helping achieve the goal of planting 3 billion trees across Europe by 2030.

Finally, the action plan's recommendation to develop a rural mobility app and improve access to less-connected areas by investing in bus and train routes aligns with the **EU Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy**, which aims to make transport greener, smarter, and more inclusive. For example, promoting electric buses to connect rural tourist destinations supports the EU's goal of having at least 30 million zero-emission vehicles on the road by 2030 and encourages tourists to choose environmentally friendly transport options.

Conclusions

The integration of sustainable practices in tourism is crucial for ensuring the long-term viability and quality of travel experiences while protecting natural and cultural heritage. Both the European and Italian policies highlight the importance of transitioning toward more sustainable, resilient, and inclusive tourism models. The use of **mystery guest evaluations** offers a practical tool for assessing and enhancing sustainability practices in tourism businesses.

By implementing the policy recommendations suggested in this document, including integrating mystery guest evaluations into funding programs, establishing audit programs, and promoting public-private partnerships, European countries can increase the sustainable practices implemented by companies and hotels.

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PODERIO
Training & Research



Poderío Training & Research is an organization dedicated to empowering individuals, communities, and organizations through training, research, and development programs focused on sustainability, environmental stewardship, and social inclusion. Their approach integrates practical training, scientific research, and innovative methodologies to foster sustainable practices across various sectors. By offering workshops, consulting services, and tailored training programs, Poderío Training & Research aims to equip people with the skills and knowledge necessary to implement sustainable solutions, enhance community development, and contribute to a more resilient and inclusive society. Their work encompasses a wide range of themes, including eco-friendly practices, sustainable tourism, community engagement, and capacity-building, making them a valuable resource for those committed to fostering sustainability and social impact.

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The **Igor Vitale International srl (IVI)** is an Italian organization specializing in applied psychology services across various fields, including clinical, social, forensic, work & organization, environmental sustainability, neuroscience, and school psychology. Based in Foggia, Puglia, IVI operates as a small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) with a network of around 100 experts in psychology and human sciences. This organization is involved in numerous initiatives to promote social inclusion, education, and sustainability through applied psychology.

IVI actively participates in European projects, particularly through the Erasmus+ program, contributing expertise in psychology, training, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability.

The organization is also deeply involved in research activities, producing articles, e-books, and resources on psychology-related topics. These publications are aimed at disseminating knowledge, promoting best practices, and advancing the application of psychology in everyday life and professional settings.

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Travel Hospitality Events Management (THEM) is a Bucharest-based consultancy firm with over 30 years of experience in the hospitality and restaurant industry. Specializing in hotel, restaurant, and catering management, THEM brings together an international team of experts to deliver tailored solutions in operational optimization and quality assessment, including the unique use of mystery guest evaluations to enhance service standards.

Currently, THEM focuses on sustainable food practices, advising businesses on healthy, eco-friendly menu design and sustainable choices within the hospitality sector. They also play an active role in the European educational landscape, particularly through Erasmus+ projects, where they have contributed to initiatives that promote stress management, effective communication, and sustainable tourism marketing for rural hospitality businesses. THEM's work is grounded in enhancing service quality, fostering sustainable practices, and ensuring that hospitality establishments are equipped to adapt to modern challenges.

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