EU Tourism Strategy

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Sustainable Mobility in the Context of the EU Tourism Strategy: A Forward-Looking Perspective

1. Introduction

As an association of major transport research organisations, ECTRI welcomes the European Commission's initiative to prepare a Sustainable Tourism Strategy. The European Union stands at a critical crossroads in shaping the future of tourism. With the sector recovering from the pandemic and grappling with mounting pressures, sustainability is no longer a niche concern — it is a structural necessity. Climate change, rising energy costs, uneven regional development, and growing tourism pressure in an increasing number of European destinations creating local resistance, are all disrupting long-standing travel patterns. At the same time, the EU is committed to reducing emissions by 55% by 2030 and achieving net-zero by 2050.

In this context, sustainable mobility must be understood as a vital component of a broader sustainable tourism framework. Transport is both an enabler and a stressor - supporting access and economic growth while contributing significantly to emissions and congestion. Without integrated mobility solutions, Europe risks undermining its climate, economic, and social objectives and weakening the tourism sector.

The new EU Sustainable Tourism Strategy provides an unique opportunity for the EU to comprehensively address the entangled challenges of overtourism and hypermobility, and to implement EU-level measures to encourage and support national, regional and local authorities to consider the implementation of demand measures to curb the sustained growth in long-distance mobility demand and to release the current pressure on certain destinations and their impact on housing markets and on the quality of life of local residents. Additional EU support to research on these sustainability challenges may provide the basis needed for evidence-based policy measures.

2. EU Tourism Strategy and Mobility

The emerging **EU Sustainable Tourism Strategy**, aligned with the European Tourism Agenda 2030 and the Transition Pathway for Tourism, aims to enhance sustainability, competitiveness, and resilience within the tourism ecosystem. It provides policy clarity, fosters cooperation among stakeholders, and promotes voluntary action in key areas such as green mobility, smart infrastructure, and digital transformation.

A core ambition of the strategy is to **position Europe as the world's leading sustainable tourism destination**. To achieve this, the EU intends to support Destination Management Organisations (DMOs), promote tourism in less-visited regions such as islands and rural areas, and encourage peer-learning across member states.

Transport plays a cross-cutting role across many of these objectives. Whether it's agritourism in rural France, eco-tourism in the Baltic, or cultural tourism in historic cities, **how tourists move matters.** Enhancing multimodal transport systems, expanding sustainable infrastructure, and reducing emissions from travel are all identified as priorities, all this with tourists as a target group. However, this also demands embedding structured co-planning mechanisms, inspired by Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (SUMPs), which emphasise evidence-based, participatory, and goal-oriented frameworks. By incorporating such practices, destinations can become more responsive and inclusive.

Mobility also underpins other key areas of the strategy:

- **Strengthening social and public infrastructure** through investments in sustainable transport nodes that serve both residents and visitors.
- Fostering **rural-urban linkages** by integrating tourism with broader regional development.
- Supporting **resilient destinations** through transport systems that can adapt to crises, disasters, and climate variability.

3. Sustainable Mobility in the Tourism Context

Sustainable mobility is not simply a technical challenge but a systemic one. It requires rethinking how travel flows are generated, shaped, and supported. Integrating the tourism and transport nexus via cross-sectoral cooperation is fundamental. Destination planning should involve all relevant stakeholders such as residents, DMOs, tourists, and businesses and academia, through structured engagement models to ensure balanced development. Currently, more than 75% of tourism in Europe relies on private cars or short-haul flights - both of which conflict with climate goals. Meanwhile, many high-potential regions lack adequate transport links that would allow visitors to arrive without contributing to pollution and congestion.

Key areas of focus for the integration of sustainable mobility within the EU's tourism agenda include:

- **Destination accessibility and intermodality**: Sustainable travel must start at the origin point. Investments in cross-border rail, ferry services, and long-distance cycling routes can shift demand away from aviation and cars. The EU should prioritise cross-border high-speed rail, night trains, and safe cycling networks to enable seamless travel ensuring also passenger rights align the intermodal chain. Equally, small-scale cross-border rail initiatives must be supported to serve regional tourism flows.
- **Support for rural and peri-urban areas**: Many such areas depend on tourism for income but remain disconnected from sustainable transport networks. Tailored mobility hubs and on-demand transit services are critical enablers. Support and capacity building for less-known DMOs should accompany infrastructure improvements.
- **Digital innovation and smart mobility**: Integrating apps, open data platforms, and dynamic pricing can optimise transport use and inform tourists about the most sustainable options in real time. European Digital Identity Wallets and interoperable booking platforms can simplify cross-border, multimodal journeys. These smart solutions should be aligned with resilience strategies and provide real-time data for adaptive planning.
- **Behavioural change and incentives**: Encouraging modal shift requires more than infrastructure. In this context, digitalisation plays a pivotal role. Tools such as destination cards, real-time mobility apps, and data-driven decision platforms have already demonstrated their effectiveness in encouraging low-emission and inclusive travel, especially when aligned with accessibility objectives like "Tourism for All" concept. Reward systems, carbon labelling, and storytelling campaigns can help visitors see sustainable mobility as an integral part of the travel experience.
- **Last-mile logistics**: Even in cities with strong public transport, the final leg from station to hotel is often car-based. Micro-mobility (e.g., e-scooters, bikes), pedestrian-friendly design, and low-emission zones can improve this weak link. Importantly, inclusivity must be non-negotiable in sustainable mobility planning. Transport systems must be designed for universal access, integrating physical accessibility, affordability, and real-time information to cater to tourists with disabilities, older people and families. Accessibility investments should include step-free access, tactile signage, quiet zones, and inclusive pricing models.
- **Safety for vulnerable groups**: Mobility infrastructure and public spaces must ensure safety for female travellers, ethnic minorities, and LGBTQ+ individuals. This requires targeted policy design, community involvement, and data-informed planning.
- **Crisis-resilient infrastructure**: Climate adaptation must be integrated into transport systems, particularly in coastal and mountainous destinations. Transport plans should include forecasting, emergency protocols, and climate-proof infrastructure that protect heritage and serve both tourism and emergency needs.

- **Continuous monitoring and evaluation**: Data driven approaches should accompany tourism strategy implementation. Cross-sector indicators linking mobility, emissions, and visitor patterns, as well as alignment with NetZeroCities and the EU Mission for Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities, will help measure impact and adjust policies dynamically. Strategic foresight tools must integrate global tourism trends and anticipate long-term shifts.

These strategies contribute directly to EU climate targets while enhancing tourist experience, reducing noise and air pollution, and relieving pressure on overburdened destinations. Moreover, they reinforce social cohesion and inclusivity by ensuring that green travel is accessible to all, regardless of income or physical ability.

4. Ideas for Research Topics

Additional research themes should include new governance and business models for sustainable EU tourism mobility. To further explore how sustainable mobility can be embedded in EU tourism policy, the following ideas can be helpful:

1. **"Greening the Gap: Designing Mobility Hubs for Europe's Rural Tourism Corridors"**

   This project could prototype multimodal hubs (rail-bus-bike) tailored for remote tourism regions and assess their economic, social, and climate impacts

2. **"Measuring Carbon Equity in European Tourist Journeys"**

   A comparative analysis of transport-related emissions across tourist demographics - highlighting who pays, who benefits, and who is excluded from low-carbon travel options

3. **"From Branding to Behaviour: How Destination Narratives Influence Mobility Choices"**

   Investigating how tourism campaigns and storytelling (e.g., "slow travel," "green routes") affect tourists' willingness to use sustainable modes of transport

4. **"The Digital Tourist: AI-Driven Mobility Recommendations for Sustainable City Breaks"**

   - Exploring how recommender systems could personalise and optimise green transport choices based on real-time data, preferences, and carbon goals
   - Offering some experiences as emerging AI tools - so that the physical trip actually does not have to take place

5. **"Climate Resilient Tourism: Integrating Mobility and Risk Planning in Coastal Destinations"**

   Developing a framework for combining sustainable transport with disaster risk reduction strategies in climate-vulnerable tourism zones (infrastructure that can be used for tourist mobility)

6. **"Cross-border Synergies in Green Tourism Corridors"**

   Mapping opportunities for coordinated infrastructure and policy between neighbouring countries to create seamless low-emission travel experiences

7. **"Tourism SMEs and the Green Transition: Barriers and Boosters to Sustainable Mobility Adoption"**

   A qualitative study of how small tourism businesses perceive and respond to EU mobility policies, including funding access, skills needs, and innovation uptake

8. **"Participatory Co-Planning Models for Sustainable Tourism Mobility"**

   A comparative analysis of how SUMPs-inspired stakeholder engagement processes can improve tourism mobility planning, manage seasonality, and foster greater social cohesion

9. **"Inclusive Mobility as a Pillar of Tourism for All' concept"**

   Investigating how integrated transport systems, transport–tourism services, digital solutions, and policy alignment can remove access barriers for vulnerable groups, ensuring equity in tourism development

10. **"Immersive Travel Alternatives: Tourism without Movement"**

    Exploring how emerging virtual and augmented reality technologies can provide meaningful, immersive experiences that allow potential travellers to preview destinations. These tools help users identify their points of interest in advance, enabling more informed, sustainable, and well-organised travel planning. Additionally, they offer the opportunity to highlight and promote lesser-known attractions, encouraging a more balanced distribution of tourism

11. **"Promote the use of loyalty cards linked to sustainable mobility"** by implementing a rewards program for tourists who choose eco-friendly transportation to reach their destinations. This initiative will encourage responsible tourism in rural and economically disadvantaged areas, helping to boost visibility and development of lesser-known destinations

12. **'Incentives against overtourism'**: Exploring how new transport schemes and qualitative sustainable modes of transport could help steer tourism flows to less known destination promoting the green and environmentally friendly tourism and give incentives against overtourism

13. **'Last mile and local transport'**: Conducting a feasibility analysis of a universally valid local transport tickets, based on the Deutschlandticket and Klimaticket models, would be particularly useful for ensuring sustainable last-mile trips at the final destination.