Sustainable tourism | Interreg Euro-MED | Co-funded by the European Union

Interreg Euro-MED

Policy Brief on Sustainable Tourism

Small Islands as Hubs for Climate Resilience and Sustainable Tourism in the Mediterranean

By Dialogue4Tourism
Institutional dialogue on Sustainable Tourism and Governance in the Euro-MED area

Sustainable Tourism Mission

Visit our website: https://sustainable-tourism.interreg-euro-med.eu/
dialogue4tourism@interreg-euro-med.eu

Follow us on our social media:

A project labelled by the UfM

Union for the Mediterranean
Union pour la Méditerranée
الاتحاد من أجل المتوسط

Credit

This Policy Brief is a **synthesis of the Interreg Euro-MED White Paper on "Small islands as hubs for climate resilience and sustainable tourism in the Mediterranean"**, developed by the Interreg Euro-MED Dialogue4Tourism Project in collaboration with the Community4Tourism Project. It highlights the **challenges and results** of Interreg Euro-MED thematic projects under the **Sustainable Tourism Mission**, exploring their **transferability** across Mediterranean islands and coastal destinations. Focusing on islands as **living laboratories for climate resilience and sustainable tourism transformation**, it draws on case studies, including nature-based and heritage-led initiatives—to propose **practical strategies and collaborative frameworks**. This brief serves as a valuable resource for **policymakers, local authorities, and tourism stakeholders** committed to advancing **low-impact, climate-adapted, and resilient tourism** in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

Author: Greening the Islands (Italy, partner of the Interreg Euro-MED Dialogue4Tourism Project), supported by the MED Cluster of Climate Change Adaptation of the Interreg Euro-MED Community4Tourism Project, the Islands Commission of the Conference of Peripheral and Maritime Regions CPMR France (partner of the Interreg Euro-MED Community4Tourism Project) and the Observatory on Tourism in European Islands (OTIE, Italy).

Proofreading, design and layout: El legado andalusí Andalusian Public Foundation (Regional Ministry of Culture and Sport of Andalusia, Spain) - LP of the Interreg Euro-MED Dialogue4Tourism Project.

Disclaimer: The content of this Policy Brief does not reflect the official opinion of the European Union. Responsibility for the information and views expressed in the document lies entirely with the authors.

Executive summary

The Mediterranean region is facing an unprecedented convergence of climate, environmental, and socio-economic challenges that increasingly threaten both natural and human systems, with small islands among the most exposed territories. These islands are particularly vulnerable to sea-level rise, coastal erosion, heatwaves, water scarcity, and biodiversity loss, while also confronting structural constraints such as limited resources, dependence on fossil fuels, seasonal economies, and pressure from mass tourism. At the same time, these constraints make islands ideal testing grounds for innovative sustainability solutions. The *Island Model* frames islands as living laboratories where integrated and holistic approaches can be piloted and later replicated elsewhere. It promotes solutions tailored to local needs, supported by multi-stakeholder collaboration among public authorities, businesses, academia, and citizens. Key elements include strategic roadmaps toward full renewable energy and decarbonization, cross-cutting nexus approaches linking water, energy, food, and ecosystems, and the adoption of circular economy practices adapted to island contexts. Capacity building, business model development, access to funding, and knowledge sharing are also central to ensuring scalability and local ownership.

Laveria Lamarmora, Sardinia

This White Paper positions small islands as hubs for climate resilience and sustainable tourism, aligned with the Interreg Euro-MED Programme and its Sustainable Tourism Mission. By drawing on best practices, transferable models from thematic projects, and policy recommendations—particularly from the Dialogue4Tourism Project—it supports policymakers, tourism stakeholders, and local authorities in scaling up climate-resilient, low-carbon tourism across the Mediterranean and beyond. As a complementary document to a previous White Paper, it deepens the strategic vision for ensuring a sustainable and resilient future for tourism in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

This paper presents a range of good practices implemented across several Mediterranean islands involved in the Thematic Projects of the Interreg Euro-MED Sustainable Tourism Mission. These islands are the following: Italy (**Sardinia, Ponza, Salina, Pantelleria, Sicily, Linosa, Lampedusa, Lipari, Capraia, Tavolara** and **Palmaria**), Greece (**Crete, Rhodes, Halki, Skiathos, Tilos, Milos, Mykonos** and **Koufonisi**), Malta (**Malta** and **Gozo**), Spain (**Formentera, Menorca** in the Balearic Islands, and **Tenerife, Gran Canaria** and **Fuerteventura** in the Canary Islands), France (**Porquerolles**, the Lérins Islands—**Saint Honorat** and **Sainte Marguerite**—**Corsica**, **Lavezzi**, **Port-Cros** and **Levant**), Tunisia (**Kerkennah**), Croatia (**Vis**) and **Cyprus**. Together, these island contexts illustrate a wide spectrum of challenges and good practices related to sustainable tourism development in Mediterranean island environments.

Table of contents

State of the art - Islands' challenges and ecosystem

Islands face persistent challenges due to physical disconnection from the mainland, relying on maritime and air transport, energy and water supply, and external regulations. While each island's situation is unique, common issues arise across four main categories worldwide.

Environmental vulnerability

Islands face severe environmental challenges from limited size, isolation, fragile ecosystems, climate change, disasters, unsustainable resource use, urbanization, and tourism impacts

Climate change

The Mediterranean warms 20% faster than the globe, threatening ecosystems, economies, and coasts with sea-level rise, water scarcity, and extreme weather.

Biodiversity loss

Mediterranean biodiversity declines due to human impacts—climate change, tourism, infrastructure, and overexploitation. Protecting islands requires enforcing legal frameworks and sustainably managing resources like fisheries, hunting, and agriculture.

Waste

Island waste management faces unique challenges—limited land, high transport costs, and seasonal visitor surges. Poor practices harm ecosystems, tourism, and livelihoods. Circular economy strategies, onsite recycling, waste valorization, and tailored infrastructure are essential to reduce environmental impact, support socio-economic resilience, and protect islands' natural and tourism assets.

Economic constraints

Islands' isolation, small markets, limited industries, and costly imports create economic constraints, seasonal tourism jobs, dependence on foreign investment, and vulnerability to market volatility.

Limited resources

Mediterranean islands face economic challenges from isolation, limited resources, and small populations. Dependence on imports and tourism heightens vulnerability to global crises, disasters, and market fluctuations, limiting local business growth.

Energy

Most islands depend on fossil fuels, leading to high energy costs, economic and supply risks, and environmental impacts. Transitioning to renewables—solar, wind, hydro, and bioenergy from organic waste—enhances energy security,

Renewable energy lowers costs, reduces emissions, supports decarbonization, and delivers socio-economic and environmental benefits for island communities.

Water

Water supply is critical for islands, challenged by limited freshwater, growing local and tourist demand, and climate change impacts like droughts and unpredictable rainfall. Reliance on desalination and water transport increases costs and emissions. To ensure long-term security, islands must expand rainwater and wastewater harvesting, adopt renewable-powered desalination, upgrade infrastructure to reduce losses, improve efficiency in tourism facilities, and implement Integrated Water Resource Management with regional cooperation.

Lack of infrastructure

Many islands lack adequate infrastructure, limiting mobility, transport, healthcare, and education. Poor roads, limited public transport, and reliance on boats or small airports isolate communities. Insufficient healthcare and schools reduce access to services and skilled workers, hindering economic growth, increasing dependence on other regions, and perpetuating social and economic stagnation, highlighting the urgent need for infrastructure investment.

Tourism-based economy

Island economies largely depend on tourism, which consumes about 50% of total electricity and relies heavily on fossil fuels, causing economic losses and environmental harm. Many islands lack sufficient renewable energy, water, and waste infrastructure, requiring government action to meet 2030 targets for RES and single-use plastic reduction. Tourism supports jobs, infrastructure, heritage preservation, and cultural exchange, but also drives environmental damage, including pollution from transport, cruise ships, and marine activities. Overtourism strains popular destinations, highlighting the need to balance economic benefits with environmental protection and sustainable visitor management to safeguard islands' ecosystems and communities.

Dependence to the mainland

Island dependence on central governments varies with political status, economic ties, and strategic importance. In Europe, most islands remain politically linked to the mainland, limiting autonomy. Even partially autonomous islands are subject to central policies, often creating administrative delays due to distance or bureaucracy. This dependence exacerbates local challenges—resource access, tourism regulation, and conservation—and discourages investment. Centralized policies frequently overlook island realities, making administrative processes slow and burdensome, reinforcing isolation and reliance on the mainland, and hindering economic, social, and sustainable development.


Lokrum island, Dubrovnik (Croatia)

Social and cultural issues

Islands face social and cultural challenges from isolation, limited services, tourism pressures, and high living costs, risking inequality, emigration, and cultural loss.

Isolation

Geographic isolation significantly impacts island societies, creating social, economic, and technological challenges. Limited access to healthcare, education, and transportation forces residents to choose between staying with scarce opportunities or migrating for better living standards. Expensive, infrequent flights and ferry services exacerbate physical and social isolation, particularly among youth, limiting employment, leisure, and social engagement. Economically, islands rely heavily on imports, increasing costs for food, fuel, and medical supplies, while businesses face high transport costs and limited markets. Poor internet connectivity further restricts access to digital education, remote work, and global commerce, reinforcing isolation and limiting development opportunities.
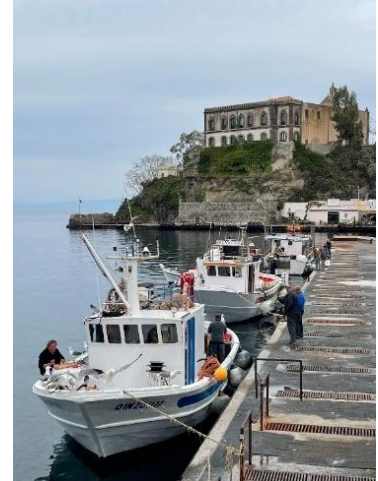
Fishing boats in Lipari.
Francesco Luise

Population declines

Youth migration in search of better jobs, education, and living conditions drives population decline on islands. Economies reliant on tourism, fishing, and subsistence agriculture offer limited opportunities, prompting young people to leave. This causes an aging population, labor shortages in critical sectors, reduced economic growth, lower tax income, and weakened public services, perpetuating social and economic challenges and limiting long-term development.

Cultural preservation

Islands possess rich, diverse cultures shaped by history, isolation, and indigenous customs. Globalization, tourism, and immigration threaten these identities, risking the loss of languages, traditions, and knowledge. Tourism can commodify culture, transforming authentic practices into performances for visitors. Island societies must balance modernization and economic opportunities with preserving heritage, ensuring cultural traditions remain living, meaningful practices rather than mere attractions.

Health and wellbeing

Islands face unique health and wellness challenges due to inadequate healthcare infrastructure, limited medical staff, and geographic isolation. Many small islands lack well-equipped hospitals and specialty centres, forcing residents to travel long distances for treatment, which is costly and time-consuming. Limited medical practitioners reduce the availability of regular and comprehensive care. Remoteness also hampers responses to health crises, pandemics, and natural disasters, delaying vaccine distribution and essential drug supply. Combined with economic, social, and environmental vulnerabilities—such as resource scarcity, fossil fuel dependence, overreliance on tourism, climate risks, and cultural erosion—these factors make investment in healthcare infrastructure, telemedicine, and emergency response systems essential for improving island wellbeing.

Contributions from the Thematic Projects of the Sustainable Tourism Mission of Interreg Euro-MED Program for addressing these challenges in MED islands. Best practices

1-Interreg Euro-MED COOL NOONS Project: Promoting climate change adaptation in urban settings while renewing the tourism offer in 5 pilot Mediterranean cities, during the hottest hours of the day

Challenges addressed on islands: **Environmental vulnerability** – improving urban resilience in Mediterranean cities by introducing green and water-cooled areas, mitigating the effects of extreme heat in urban environments, **Climate change** – addressing rising temperatures and heatwaves in cities, promoting adaptation strategies for both residents and tourists during the hottest hours of the day, **Tourism-based economy** – rethinking urban tourism routes and promoting shaded, cooled paths, enhancing the tourism offer while reducing climate-related risks for visitors, **Social and cultural issues** – engaging citizens through co-design workshops, fostering community involvement in urban planning and sustainable tourism solutions, **Health and wellbeing** – prioritizing thermal comfort, public health, and quality of life for residents and tourists by providing cooler, safer urban spaces during extreme heat events.

Developing of "cool paths" in islands in the area of the Budva riviera (Montenegro).

The Identification, mapping and promotion of COOL NOONS Paths Project brings together five Mediterranean pilot cities, Budva (Montenegro), Dubrovnik (Croatia), Imola (Italy), Lisbon (Portugal) and Marseille (France), to rethink urban tourism in the face of climate change by focusing on the hottest hours of the day. The cities are mapping and developing "cool paths": routes linking green, shaded or water-cooled areas and less-explored neighbourhoods, based on thermal-comfort data, design-thinking workshops and citizen co-design.

COOL NOONS Proiect website

The aim is to improve the experience for both visitors and residents, pilot a variety of solutions like vegetated surfaces, water installations and light-coloured pavements, and assess their potential for replication across the Mediterranean region.

Learn more on the COOL NOONS project website.

2-Interreg Euro-MED NaTour4CChange Project: Governing sustainable tourism in territories with high environmental value

Challenges addressed on islands: **Environmental vulnerability** – strengthening the resilience of Mediterranean coastal tourism areas with high environmental value by promoting nature-based solutions and sustainable land and resource management, **Climate change,** focusing on climate adaptation and mitigation, helping regions assess tourism-related climate risks and integrate them into actionable strategies, **Tourism-based economy** – addressing the pressures of tourism on vulnerable environments by aligning economic activities with sustainable and climate-resilient practices, **Social and cultural issues** – engaging public and private stakeholders, fostering cooperative governance, participatory decision-making, and locally adapted tourism climate action plans.

Engagement of policy level in Sardinia (Italy) and Crete (Greece) for the development of regional strategies and tourism climate action plans

The NaTour4CChange project "Governing sustainable tourism in territories with high environmental value: reconnecting tourism and nature for addressing the climate crisis with an eco-system-based approach" aims to strengthen climate adaptation and mitigation in Mediterranean coastal tourism destinations by building common methods, supporting regions to

NaTour4CChange Project website

assess tourism-related climate priorities and implementing cooperative governance to translate those priorities into action. Across six pilot destinations, the project will evaluate nature-based solutions (NbS), develop regional strategies and tourism climate action plans, and engage public and private stakeholders, such as authorities in Andalusia, **Sardinia, Crete** and Bosnia-Herzegovina, to ensure solutions are feasible, context-specific and scalable.

Learn more on the NaTour4CChange project website.

3-Interreg Euro-MED AQUAMAN AQUAtic systems' evaluation for the Mitigation of wAter scarcity in mediterranean islaNds and coastal tourist destinations under severe pressure Project: A Smart Response to Water Scarcity in the Mediterranean

Challenges addressed on islands: **Water** – targeting water scarcity by promoting non-conventional water sources (rainwater, stormwater, treated wastewater), reducing consumption in tourism, and optimizing distribution systems, **Environmental vulnerability**, addressing environmental pressures from climate change and overuse of freshwater, improving resilience of islands and coastal areas through sustainable water management and nature-based solutions, **Tourism-based economy** – mitigating the water demands of tourism-heavy destinations by implementing strategies to balance tourist needs with local water availability, **Limited resources** – maximizing the use of scarce freshwater

resources, integrating holistic resource management and cross-sectoral strategies for sustainable water use, **Social and cultural issues** – engaging local authorities, communities, and stakeholders through training, knowledge sharing, and policy advice, fostering local capacity for sustainable water management.

AQUAMAN Transferable Solutions catalogue

Water Scarcity Living Labs in Rhodes (Greece), Malta, Canary Islands (Spain), Porquerolles (Francia) and Ponza (Italy)

The Mediterranean faces severe water scarcity due to climate change and high demand from tourism and agriculture. The AQUAMAN project brings together partners from six countries to help island and coastal destinations adopt smarter water management, focusing on non-conventional sources like rainwater, stormwater and treated wastewater, and optimising usage during peak tourist seasons.

The AQUAMAN project tackles acute water-scarcity challenges in the Mediterranean's islands and coastal tourist destinations by promoting non-conventional water sources (such as rainwater, stormwater and treated wastewater), reducing usage especially in tourism—and optimizing distribution systems. Complementary policy recommendations from initiatives like HYDROUSA and ISOS+ help remove barriers to circular water systems in small-island contexts. Ultimately, the project seeks to balance the needs of tourism, agriculture and local populations, while conserving precious freshwater supplies and sustaining the Mediterranean's unique environment for future generations.

AQUAMAN also focuses on sharing knowledge, training, and policy advice so that communities can manage water better on their own. By connecting different regions around the Mediterranean, the project encourages cooperation, shared learning, and long-term water conservation for everyone.

"The Blue Horizons: Innovative water solutions for tourism and climate-resilient regions", a document produced by the Interreg Euro-MED AQUAMAN Project serves as a comprehensive and strategic repository designed to advance sustainable water management in Mediterranean regions, particularly in tourism-driven and climate-vulnerable territories. It consolidates a portfolio of "ready-to-use" and adaptable solutions comprising technical interventions, holistic resource management plans, and, with a strong focus on policy recommendations aimed at overcoming institutional, regulatory, and societal barriers.

Its primary purpose is to enable the valorization of non-conventional water sources, the reduction of water consumption, and the minimization of distribution losses through integrated, site-specific strategies. By aligning innovative technologies with supportive governance frameworks, the catalogue facilitates both immediate implementation and long-term policy transformation.

A key feature is its extensive section on nature-based and hybrid interventions, including constructed wetlands for wastewater treatment and reuse (from the projects HYDROUSA and CARDIMED, Horizon Programme), rainwater harvesting systems for agriculture and residential use (HYDROUSA and CARDIMED, Horizon Programme), and green roofs for stormwater management and urban

cooling (Interreg Italia-Malta). These solutions deliver technical efficiency and environmental co-benefits, such as biodiversity enhancement, carbon sequestration, and improved climate resilience.

The document contains another section devoted to the Holistic Resource Management Plans, which provide structured approaches to water scarcity mitigation and cross-sectoral resource governance based on the WEFE Nexus principles. These plans create a framework for local authorities and stakeholders to manage water resources in a balanced and sustainable manner.

However, what sets this catalogue apart is its strong policy dimension. It includes carefully crafted policy recommendations derived from tools such as the White Paper on Governance and Climate Adaptation by Dialogue4Tourism Project (Interreg Euro-MED Program) or towards a zero-impact island.

Learn more on the AQUAMAN project website, and read The Blue Horizons: Innovative water solutions for tourism and climate-resilient regions.

Good practice

Gozo (Malta): Data-driven island transition, public-private partnership for sustainability

Gozo has actively partnered with the Greening the Islands Foundation (partner of the Interreg Euro-MED Dialogue4Tourism Project and Associated Partner Interreg Euro-MED AQUAMAN Project) through its GTI Observatory (in collaboration with the Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories NSTO of Dialogue4Tourism Project), using the indexed assessments in energy, water, waste, mobility and the environment to inform its sustainability roadmap. This collaboration, formalized via a framework agreement in October 2022, ensures that GTI's monitoring data and multisectoral stakeholder findings feed directly into Gozo's regional development policies and investment priorities.

Gozo Island. Francesco Luise

GTI has assessed Gozo across key sectors "Energy, Water, Waste, Environment and Mobility" and the monitoring data emerging from this assessment offers a solid foundation for local policy and sustainability action.

By generating measurable insights, GTI's index supports decision-makers in identifying priority areas for investment, shaping targeted campaigns (waste-reduction, water-conservation) that create new business opportunities and jobs, and crafting a clear roadmap rooted in both technical metrics and community feedback.

For instance, strengthening regulations for energy communities and self-consumption, advancing renewable-energy adoption with battery storage, expanding desalination and rainwater harvesting for water security, promoting the circular economy through the "three Rs" (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle) in waste, and upgrading mobility with micro-mobility, bike-sharing and green maritime links are all critical steps. Monitoring reveals where Gozo must intensify efforts; whether in infrastructure, policy or stakeholder engagement; and enables alignment of investments with the island's carrying capacity and sustainability goals. The resulting data-driven strategy helps transform Gozo from a traditional tourism destination into a resilient, inclusive and regenerative island model.

Learn more: https://greeningtheislands.org/greening-the-islands-unveils-the-global-index-report-for-gozo/

Good practice

Crete (Greece): When hotels on Mediterranean islands deploy smart-technology systems for monitoring and sustainability

The 5-star Euphoria Resort in Chania, Crete, implemented an advanced building automation system based on the KNX protocol (more than 8 000 KNX devices across 287 rooms and resort facilities) in 2017 in collaboration with system integrator Vlassakis Advanced Solution and visualization platform ComfortClick.

This system integrates lighting, sockets, blinds/shades, HVAC and occupancy sensors, enabling real-time monitoring of room status (occupancy, lights, temperature, sockets) and automatic power-down of non-essential systems when a room is empty.

Chania, Crete

In addition to the KNX automation, the resort's sustainability strategy incorporates solar-panel installation (400 kWh + per year) and A+ energy-class buildings, with a fully functional BMS (Building Management System) that tracks energy production and consumption daily.

Although a precise figure of 25 % reduction in power demand is not publicly confirmed in the case-study sources, the resort reports significant energy-efficiency gains from its automation and solar systems. By aligning hotel operations with smart building technology, guest comfort is maintained while resource consumption is optimized, offering a model that other tourism facilities on islands may replicate to reduce environmental impact, cut operational costs and support sustainable tourism.

Learn more: www.euphoriaresort.gr/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/SR-2023_EUPHORIA-RESORT-1.pdf

Good practice

Malta's water challenge: Semi-arid limits, tourism pressures and resilience through innovation

The Maltese Islands face significant water-scarcity challenges due to their semi-arid climate, very limited natural freshwater resources, and high population density; they have the lowest natural freshwater availability per capita in the EU.

Rainfall has been steadily declining, with the 2023-24 hydrological year officially classified as "arid," signalling deepening drought conditions.
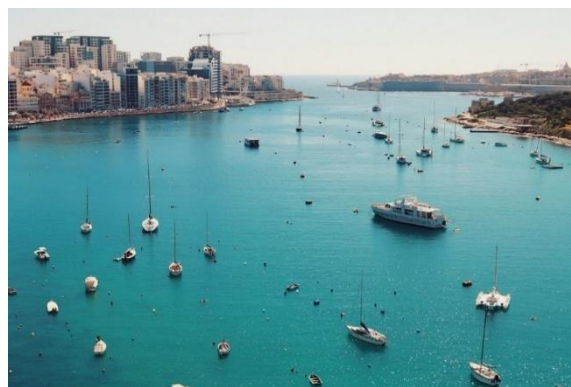
Malta

To address these issues, Malta is implementing a multifaceted strategy: enhancing water-supply resilience via seawater desalination and wastewater reuse, improving network efficiency (leakage reducing the Infrastructure Leakage Index to about 1.8), and rolling out policy and infrastructure investments through its €310 million 2023–2033 National Investment Plan for water and wastewater services.

Key solutions that may be replicated elsewhere include deploying non-conventional water sources (desalination, treated wastewater, rainwater harvesting), aggressive demand management and leakage control, and strong policy frameworks aligned with climate adaptation and efficient resource use.

Learn more: [Energy and Water Agency - EWA](#), partner of the Interreg Euro-MED AQUAMAN Project.

Good practice (collected in the transferable solution catalogue of AQUAMAN Project).

Kerkennah (Tunisia) "No More Plastic": From island innovation to global impact

The "No More Plastic in Kerkennah" initiative (2024-25) on Tunisia's Kerkennah Islands is a pilot project funded under the REMEDIES Horizon Europe programme, aiming to drastically reduce single-use plastics in the island community. By installing rainwater harvesting and reverse-osmosis purification systems in schools and public spaces, the project provides safe drinking water without relying on bottled plastic containers. It also replaces plastic bags with locally produced kraft-paper alternatives, revives traditional crafts to avoid plastic fishing gear, and builds community awareness around circular water and waste practices.

Kerkennah Islands

"No More Plastic in Kerkennah" exemplifies how a small island community can be the **testing ground and proof of concept** for integrated technical, behavioural and cultural interventions aimed at plastic-reduction, water-resilience and sustainable tourism and local development. If successful, it holds promise for replication to other Mediterranean islands and coastal zones facing similar environmental-tourism-infrastructure pressures.

Learn more:

https://smilo-program.org/wp content/uploads/2021/09/SMILO_RA_2019_GB_FINAL_2.pdf

Other good practices on capacity building in Greece - Rhodos: Creating the first holistic sustainable tourism destination

The initiative now known as **The Rhodes Co-Lab Sustainable Destination** (officially launched on 20 January 2022) represents a groundbreaking alliance between TUI Group, the TUI Care Foundation, the South Aegean Region and the Municipality of Rhodes, all collaborating to transform the island of Rhodes into the world's first truly holistic sustainable tourism destination. Embracing a three-pillar framework (Environment, Society & Heritage, Economy & Tourism) the project articulates bold, measurable ambitions: achieving climate neutrality by 2030; phasing out fossil fuels and drastically reducing the dependency on single-use plastics; increasing local agricultural and aquaculture production; boosting employment and skill-development within the hospitality sector; and making the island fully accessible for persons with disabilities by 2025.

With an investment envelope of approximately €250 million, the initiative is designed not only to deliver tangible benefits for visitors and the local community, by enhancing environmental resilience, preserving cultural heritage and expanding inclusive economic opportunities, but also to serve as a blueprint for sustainable tourism destinations worldwide.

Outcomes

- The initiative has established **concrete targets**: climate-neutrality by 2030, the elimination of single-use plastics by 2027, full accessibility for persons with disabilities by 2025, and a 50 % increase in local agricultural production.
- Early pilot actions are already underway: for example, the reduction of service-cars for tour-guides in favour of e-bikes on Rhodes (reducing the number of cars from over 100 to 60).


Island of Rhodes

- The programme has strong institutional support, with a defined budget of approximately **€250 million**, supported by public-private partnership among the TUI Group, the TUI Care Foundation, the region, and local government.

Lessons learned

- **Holistic and multi-pillar approach is crucial**:

- Addressing environment, society/heritage, and economy/tourism simultaneously creates a more resilient, inclusive transformation rather than isolated interventions.
- **Early pilot projects help build momentum and credibility**: The e-bike transition illustrates how relatively small operational changes can signal commitment and demonstrate progress in sustainability.
- **Public-private partnership and clear governance matter**: The success of the initiative depends on integrating tourism industry actors, local authorities, and community stakeholders under shared targets, backed by funding and clear timelines.

Learn more: [The Rhodes Co-Lab Sustainable Destination](#)

4-Interreg Euro-MED Recircle MED: Promote sustainable tourism in Mediterranean coastal areas by integrating blue and circular economy principles
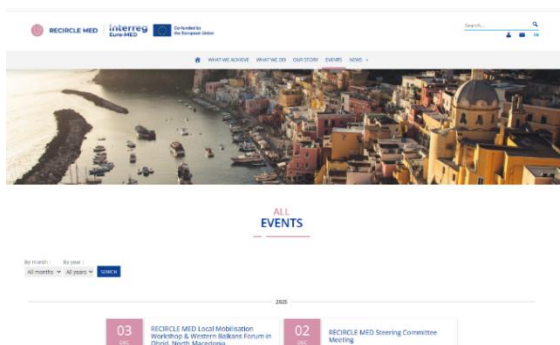
Recircle MED Project website

Challenges addressed on Islands: **Waste** – waste management in Mediterranean coastal areas by implementing circular economy strategies to reduce, reuse, and recover resources in tourism-heavy destinations, **Tourism-based economy** – addressing pressures from tourism on local resources, promoting sustainable tourism practices and resource-efficient business models, **Economic constraint** – transferring tested circular economy methodologies, the project

helps local SMEs and municipalities create economic opportunities and reduce costs, **limited resources** – optimizes the use of scarce local resources, including materials and energy, through circular economy practices, **Water** – incorporating sustainable water management solutions, improving efficiency in water use for both tourism and local communities, **Social and cultural issues** – engaging stakeholders, municipalities, and communities, supporting local involvement, knowledge transfer, and policy integration for sustainable tourism.

Receiving destination: Cefalu island together with coastal areas from Bulgaria, North Macedonia and Montenegro

The Recircle MED project targets Mediterranean coastal-tourism destinations that lack the capacity to independently make the transition to circular and blue-economy models.

It builds on prior initiatives such as INCIRCLE (Interreg VB Mediterranean 2014-2020) and REBOOT MED (EMFAF program) to transfer tested methodologies and tools into local action plans focusing on issues like waste, water management and tourism-resource efficiency.

Structured around three core work packages —Design (developing the blueprint and transfer methodology), Transfer (local implementation and stakeholder training) and Offset (visibility, policy integration and scaling)—the project emphasizes cross-border cooperation and stakeholder engagement (including municipalities, universities, chambers of commerce and SMEs).

Ultimately, Recircle MED aims to embed circular-blue tourism practices into regional policy frameworks, increase destination resilience and foster sustainable growth in sensitive Mediterranean coastal zones.
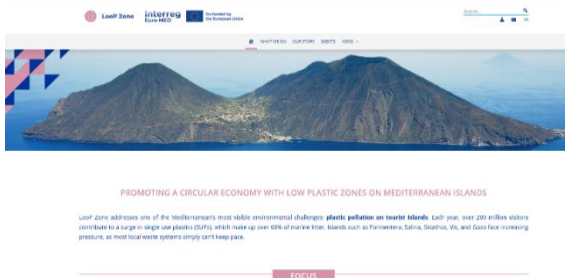
Learn more on the Recircle MED project website.

5-Interreg Euro-MED LooP Zone Project

Challenges addressed on islands: **Waste** – targets the plastic waste crisis on small Mediterranean tourist islands, implementing strategies to reduce and phase out single-use plastics in the HORECA sector, **Tourism-based economy** – addresses tourism-related pressures on waste management by integrating hotels, restaurants, and catering businesses into sustainable practices, **Economic constraint** – promoting circular business models and innovation labs, the project creates new value chains and economic opportunities around SUP-free products, **Social and cultural issues** – engages local communities, businesses, and municipalities, raising awareness, providing tools for behavior change, and strengthening policy frameworks to support sustainable practices, **Isolation** – creating a regional island network and sharing digital platforms and best practices, the project reduces the isolation of small islands and facilitates transnational collaboration.

The **LooP Zone project** addresses one of the Mediterranean region's most pressing environmental challenges: the plastic waste crisis affecting small tourist islands. Formentera (Spain), Salina (Italy), Skiathos (Greece), Vis (Croatia) and Gozo (Malta) are experiencing increasing pressure from tourism-related waste generation, while local waste management systems often struggle to cope effectively.

The project aims to establish **"Low Plastic Zones"** in which municipalities, tourism businesses, and local innovators collaborate to prevent and phase out single-use plastic (SUP) products in the HORECA sector (Hotels, Restaurants, and Catering). Participating stakeholders will receive tools to assess their plastic footprint, implement sustainable and reusable alternatives and supports the creation of new value chains for SUP-free products through

LooP Zone project website

innovation labs and circular business models, while strengthening local policy frameworks to align with national and EU-level regulations.

The **LooP Zone model**, built on a three-pillar approach encompassing **policy, business support, and innovation**, will be tested at local level, made accessible through a digital platform, and scaled up across the Mediterranean via a regional island network.

Learn more: https://loopzone.interreg-euro-med.eu/

6-Interreg Euro-MED Waterise Project

Challenges addressed on islands: **Water** – sustainable water management through natural wastewater treatment, rainwater harvesting and atmospheric water production, **Tourism-based economy** – targets islands affected by overtourism, ensuring that water use in tourist areas is sustainable and does not compromise local communities or ecosystems, **Environmental vulnerability** – implementing low-impact, eco-innovative solutions, the project reduces stress on fragile island ecosystems and preserves natural resources, **climate change** – promoting climate change adaptation and disaster risk prevention, fostering resilience in water management and tourism supply chains, **Social and cultural issues** – community engagement, local knowledge integration, and the Water-House Label protocol, the project encourages local participation, awareness, and sustainable practices in island tourism.

Good practice

Pantelleria: Remote island, sustainable vision

Pantelleria is a volcanic island located between Sicily and Tunisia, with approximately 80 % of its territory designated as the protected **Parco Nazionale Isola di Pantelleria**, which safeguards its unique natural and cultural heritage. On the island, community-driven sustainable practices are central to the tourism model: traditional water-harvesting systems in "dammusi" houses, low-impact viticulture and agriculture, and coordinated beach and seabed clean-ups by residents and visitors help preserve the fragile environment. A modern waste-management system featuring kerb-side collection, Radio-Frequency Identification (RFID) bins and high-quality recycling has been introduced since 2015, significantly reducing landfill dependency.

Pantelleria

Educational campaigns in schools and a "plastic-free" initiative have helped minimize single-use plastics, while the island's participation in the Clean Energy for EU Islands and the WIMBY Project reflect a strong commitment to community-based decision-making in renewable-energy development. Together, these efforts illustrate how residents, local businesses and public authorities can align environmental stewardship, cultural heritage and tourism-based economic benefits to build a resilient and sustainable island destination.

Learn more: [Parco Nazionale Isola di Pantelleria](#)

7-Interreg Euro-MED LIBECCIO Project

Challenges addressed on islands: **Tourism-based economy** – improving destination management and sustainable tourism by supporting policymakers with data-driven tools to optimize tourism flows and reduce pressures on destinations, **Economic constraints** enhancing governance and decision-making, helping increase efficiency and resilience of the tourism sector, indirectly supporting economic sustainability, **Social and cultural issues** –promoting multi-faceted sustainability, addressing social and environmental aspects of tourism, and aims to reduce negative impacts on local communities, **Lack of infrastructure** – strengthening digital infrastructure through the development of advanced decision-support systems (DMSS), enabling timely, informed decisions for tourism management.
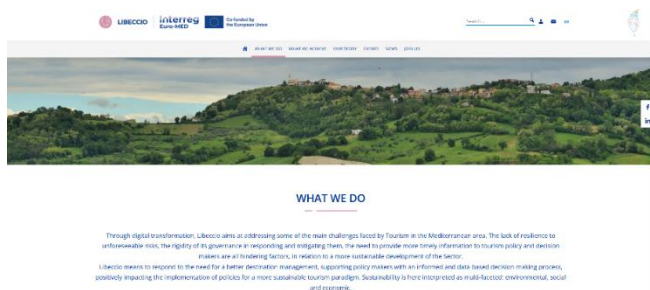
LIBECCIO Project webpage.

Through digital transformation, Libeccio aims at addressing some of the main challenges faced by Tourism in the Mediterranean area. The lack of resilience to unforeseeable risks, the rigidity of its governance in responding and mitigating them, the need to provide more timely information to tourism policy and decision makers are all hindering factors, in relation to a more sustainable development of the sector Libeccio means to respond to the need for a better destination management, supporting policy makers

with an informed and data-based decision-making process, positively impacting the implementation of policies for a more sustainable tourism paradigm. Sustainability is here interpreted as multi-faceted: environmental, social and economic.

Libeccio capitalizes on a series of previous project experiences, in particular the Innoxenia project, in turn followed up by Innoxenia Plus (Adrion Programme 2014-2020 and 2021-2027).
Innoxenia developed a web platform called TIDDS (Tourism Innovation Decision Support System), which can be seen as a less sophisticated version of the DMSS.

To know more: LIBECCIO website

8-Interreg Euro-MED EcoSeaRoutes Project

Challenges addressed on islands: **tourism-based economy** (by addressing mass tourism and seasonal pressure), **environmental vulnerability / biodiversity loss** (by protecting natural coastal sites), **over-tourism** (by redistributing tourism flows to less crowded areas), **limited resources / infrastructure** (implicitly, by improving management and interconnections of MED ports), **cultural preservation** (through Community Heritage Hubs and local itineraries)

The project *ECOSEAROUTES – Eco-nautical sea routes* aims to promote sustainable routes to reduce pressure on Mediterranean coastal areas. It develops new solutions to reduce pressure of mass tourism and re-distribute tourism flows on natural coastal areas, improving the management and interconnections of MED touristic ports and their neighboring.

The main outputs of the project are:

1. Setup of a MED-wide eco-nautical route connecting touristic ports committed to a shared sustainability standard
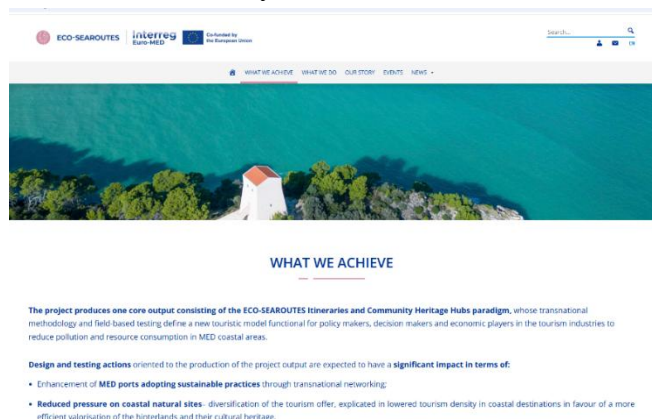
2. Establishment of local tourist itineraries aimed to encourage visits to the hinterland of coastal destinations, co-designed through participative methodologies
3. Valorization of the developed itineraries through the collaborative setup of one Community Heritage Hub for each targeted territory.

ECO-SEAROUTES Project Website

The project involves as partners the islands on different scales: an archipelago of small islands

(Ionian Islands) and three big islands (Corse, Cyprus and Balearic) linked by a common challenge of touristic pressure that they are already addressing with different strategies and methods and that, thanks to the project, will address testing some common strategies, specifically involving the ports and marinas.

Islands' challenges in tourism sector transformation

Islands have finite land, limited resources, high exposure (to climate, external shocks) and often economies heavily dependent on tourism. So, the challenges are amplified. The need to transform tourism into something more resilient, sustainable and community-driven is especially critical in island contexts, not just business as usual.

Environmental & resource management

Islands face strict environmental limits, with scarce land, water, and fragile ecosystems under pressure from seasonal tourism. Visitor peaks increase water use, waste, energy demand, and pollution, often exceeding infrastructure capacity. As environmental quality is central to island tourism, its degradation directly threatens long-term sustainability.

Socio economic impacts & community wellbeing

Tourism can boost island economies but often strains small communities through overcrowding, housing pressure, seasonal jobs, and loss of local identity. Sustainable tourism requires fair benefit sharing, strong local participation, stable employment, locally owned businesses, and protecting residents' quality of life, services, and cultural integrity.

Governance, planning & diversification of tourism models

Due to limited space and infrastructure, islands need proactive tourism governance to manage visitor flows, protect sensitive areas, and diversify beyond mass sun-and-sea tourism. Integrated planning, effective policy tools, and inclusive multi-stakeholder governance are essential to balance environmental, social, and economic goals and ensure long-term sustainability.

Adaptation to climate change & resilience

Coastal erosion

Mediterranean islands are increasingly exposed to climate change impacts such as sea-level rise, heatwaves, droughts, and storms. Building tourism resilience requires adapting infrastructure, protecting natural assets, strengthening resource systems, improving risk management, and diversifying away from climate-sensitive sun-and-sea tourism models.

Value chains & local enterprise integration

To ensure tourism benefits island communities, more economic value must remain locally through local ownership, sourcing, and services. Strengthening local value chains and applying circular economy practices—such as waste reduction, resource efficiency, and local products—enhances resilience, supports communities, and reduces tourism's environmental footprint.

Governance and policy recommendations

Mediterranean island tourism faces growing risks from climate change, including heat, water scarcity, and coastal erosion. To remain resilient, strong governance and forward-looking policies are essential.

This section offers stakeholder-focused recommendations, based on Euro-Med research and case studies, aligned with the European Green Deal and the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development.

Local and regional authorities

Local and regional authorities on Mediterranean islands play a crucial role in adapting tourism to climate change, leveraging their knowledge of ecosystems and communities to implement targeted measures. Success depends on funding, technical capacity, and multi-level cooperation. Tilos exemplifies community-led sustainable tourism, with zero-waste initiatives and renewable energy reducing environmental impacts. Recommendations include integrating climate risk and cross-sector targets into spatial planning through Local Climate Adaptation Plans.

Livadia, Tilos

National governments

National governments are key to integrating tourism with climate objectives, providing legislation, funding, and interregional coordination to scale local initiatives. Greece's GR eco Islands Initiative exemplifies this, supporting remote islands in energy, water, waste, tourism infrastructure, and digitalisation with over €150 million in public funds. Recommendations include creating enabling regulatory frameworks, de-risking investments with fiscal incentives and blended finance, and strengthening international cooperation for regional climate-aligned tourism transitions.

Destination Management Organizations (DMOs)

Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) are evolving from marketing bodies to strategic actors coordinating governance, stakeholder engagement, and sustainability. Under Greece's Recovery & Resilience Plan, €18.45 million supports local/regional DMOs and Sustainable Tourism Observatories. The initiative strengthens governance, data systems, and modern, green tourism products. Recommendations include mandating sustainability KPIs and demand-management tools to guide promotion, certification, and equitable, low-impact tourism development.

SMEs and tourism businesses

SMEs and tourism businesses are central to island economies, providing jobs, preserving culture, and delivering authentic experiences. In Cyprus, a fiscal incentive scheme under the Recovery & Resilience Plan supported investment in innovative SMEs, offering tax relief up to 30 % of capital invested, capped annually and over five years. The initiative aimed to develop the country's venture capital market responsibly. Recommendations include introducing green performance incentives—such as tax credits, reduced fees, or fast-track permits—for businesses achieving targets

Cyprus

in water efficiency, waste reduction, energy self-consumption, participation in energy communities, and prioritizing local supply chains to enhance sustainability and resilience.

Cross-border initiatives

Mediterranean islands face financing gaps for climate adaptation and sustainable tourism due to limited local resources and mainland dependence. The MedFund, established in 2015, mobilizes public and private funding for marine protected areas, supporting ecosystem resilience and conservation-based tourism. Recommendations include dedicated financing mechanisms combining grants and concessional support to catalyze private investment.

Private sector investors

Private investment is vital for Mediterranean islands, providing capital, expertise, and innovation to develop essential infrastructure. On Milos, a €6 million desalination plant powered by wind ensures year-round water supply and reduces carbon footprint. Recommendations include treating islands as pilot sites and applying Multi-Benefit Analysis to prioritize social, environmental, and resilience gains.

Milos Island, Greece

Researchers and data-driven policies

Research is essential for effective tourism policy on Mediterranean islands, revealing risks from extreme seasonality, such as infrastructure overload, employment instability, and off-season underutilization. Studies in Sardinia and Sicily highlight the need to diversify tourism, improve infrastructure, and strengthen local governance. Recommendations include formal science-policy interfaces and standardized data platforms for real-time, evidence-based decision-making.

Coast of Sardinia

Regional Management Authorities (RMAs)

Regional Management Authorities (RMAs) bridge national tourism strategies and local implementation, translating broad objectives into region-specific sustainable policies. They coordinate funding, infrastructure, innovation, and crisis responses, while harmonizing Destination Management Organizations' (DMOs) local actions with regional strategies. RMAs also support data-driven planning, capacity building, and alignment with EU and global frameworks, fostering international collaboration, climate-aligned governance, and resilient, long-term sustainable tourism across Mediterranean islands.

Coast in Cabo de Gata, Almería

Local task forces and regional coordination units (RCUs)

The NaTour4CChange project demonstrates how Mediterranean regions and islands can become catalysts for climate resilience and sustainable tourism by combining coordinated governance with Nature-based Solutions (NbS). The project involves five partner regions—Andalusia, Zadar County, Neretva Canton, Crete, and Sardinia—ranging from larger islands to smaller island destinations and coastal protected areas. Central to the approach are formally mandated Regional Coordination Units (RCUs), cross-sectoral bodies that integrate tourism, environment, climate, agriculture, transport, and other key sectors while actively involving private stakeholders, academia, protected area managers, and civil society organizations.

Agriculture in Crete

RCUs are tasked with developing comprehensive Regional Tourism Climate Strategies and Plans, overseeing NbS pilot sites, and ensuring policy alignment across multiple governance levels, consistent with EU and national frameworks. They employ shared methodologies, co-creation approaches, and standardized tools to facilitate stakeholder engagement and ensure that lessons and best practices are transferable and scalable. Participating territories test innovative approaches to integrate climate adaptation and tourism development, promote ecosystem-based management, and foster inclusive, multi-level decision-making. By harmonizing climate, tourism, and territorial agendas, the project provides a replicable model for building resilient, sustainable, and ecosystem-sensitive tourism systems that can endure beyond the lifetime of the project, supporting long-term adaptation and community engagement.

Implementation roadmap for sustainable island's model

The NaTour4CChange project exemplifies how Mediterranean islands and regions can serve as leaders in climate-resilient and sustainable tourism through the strategic integration of Nature-based Solutions (NbS) and coordinated governance. The project engages five partner regions—Andalusia, Zadar County, Neretva Canton, Crete, and Sardinia—spanning a diverse range of territorial contexts, from large islands to small island destinations and coastal protected areas. These territories provide an ideal testing ground for demonstrating scalable approaches to harmonize tourism development with climate adaptation and ecosystem protection.

At the heart of the project are Regional Coordination Units (RCUs), formally mandated, cross-sectoral governance bodies that bring together key public sectors such as tourism, environment, climate change, civil protection, agriculture, and transport. RCUs also ensure active participation from private stakeholders, academia, protected area managers, and civil society organizations, creating a multi-level and inclusive governance framework. This collaborative structure allows RCUs to translate high-level national and

EU strategies into locally adapted actions while fostering cross-sectoral collaboration, ensuring that tourism, environmental, and climate agendas are aligned.

RCUs are responsible for developing Regional Tourism Climate Strategies and Plans, coordinating the implementation of NbS pilot sites, and facilitating multi-level policy coherence. NbS interventions tested across pilot sites include ecosystem-based measures that simultaneously address climate adaptation, tourism resilience, and biodiversity conservation, demonstrating how integrated approaches can produce multiple benefits for local communities, economies, and natural systems.

The project emphasizes the use of shared methodologies, co-creation approaches, and standardized tools for stakeholder engagement and project implementation. By doing so, NaTour4CChange ensures that lessons learned and best practices are transferable across regions, creating replicable models for sustainable tourism governance and climate adaptation. Participating regions have been able to pilot innovative strategies that manage peak tourism pressure, enhance ecosystem resilience, and integrate local communities into decision-making, thereby reinforcing both social and environmental sustainability.

In addition to supporting practical interventions, the project strengthens the capacity of local authorities, DMOs, and other stakeholders to incorporate climate considerations into tourism planning and infrastructure development. By combining science, policy, and community engagement, NaTour4CChange bridges the gap between high-level climate and tourism objectives and actionable, context-specific strategies that can be scaled up over time.

Ultimately, the project demonstrates that Mediterranean islands and coastal regions can act as living laboratories for sustainable tourism and climate resilience. By harmonizing climate, tourism, and territorial agendas through multi-level, inclusive governance, and by leveraging NbS for ecosystem-based adaptation, NaTour4CChange provides a replicable, long-term framework for creating resilient, sustainable, and climate-adaptive tourism systems. Its outcomes support both immediate adaptation needs and ongoing capacity building, ensuring that these regions continue to serve as models for integrated, ecosystem-sensitive tourism development across the Mediterranean and beyond.

Advocacy & communication strategies for tourism-climate adaptation in Mediterranean Islands

 Islands' beauty, economy, and culture depend on climate-resilient nature, infrastructure, and communities. Protecting beaches, local livelihoods, and visitor experiences is both an adaptation necessity and an opportunity for shared benefit. Every choice—from water use to tours and accommodations—affects island resilience. Early successes and local champions demonstrate practical pathways toward sustainable tourism.

Effective engagement requires diverse stakeholders: residents, youth, tourism workers, businesses, DMOs, municipalities, tourists, media, influencers, and policymakers. Inclusive participation ensures decisions align with local needs, infrastructure capacity, and sustainable development goals while mobilizing resources, partnerships, and behavioural change.
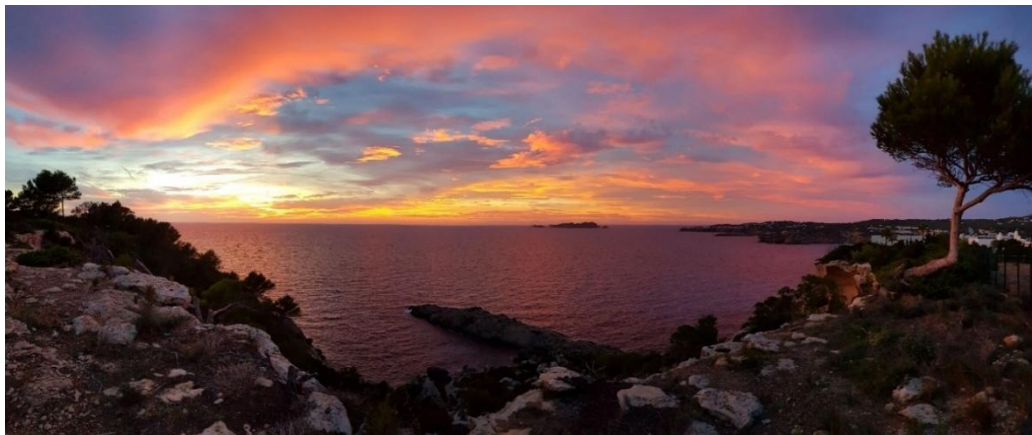
Island of Lipari. Francesco Luise

Practical tools include on-site info-panels, visitor apps, guided tours, certification schemes for sustainable businesses, educational workshops, and storytelling to showcase adaptation projects. Sharing monitoring data and resource-use metrics builds trust and transparency. Digital platforms and social media amplify success stories, raise awareness, and inspire responsible visitor behaviour.

A tailored communication plan, aligned with seasonal tourism cycles, can unify local partners under initiatives like "Resilient Island 2030." Training staff to embed adaptation messages, highlighting visible projects like dune restoration or smart water systems, and monitoring engagement ensures dynamic, impactful campaigns. Combining hands-on actions, education, and storytelling empowers communities, visitors, and businesses to participate actively in building resilient, sustainable Mediterranean islands.

Conclusion

Mediterranean small islands are emerging as resilient, innovative hubs for sustainable tourism and climate adaptation. Using the "Island Model," they transition to renewable energy, circular economies, and proactive, community-driven governance. Supported by European and global frameworks—such as the Clean Energy for EU Islands initiative, UNEP programmes, and EU SIDS strategies—these islands act as living laboratories, demonstrating scalable, replicable pathways. Collaboration among stakeholders, governments, tourism operators, and communities, combined with measurable goals, funding, and strong governance, can position Mediterranean islands as exemplar destinations where heritage, nature, and resilience coexist, inspiring sustainable tourism worldwide.

Ibiza. Balearic Islands. Francesco Luise

Visit our website: https://sustainable-tourism.interreg-euro-med.eu/
dialogue4tourism@interreg-euro-med.eu

Follow us on our social media:

A project labelled by the UfM

Union for the Mediterranean
Union pour la Méditerranée
الاتحاد من أجل المتوسط