

## **Heritage as one of the keys to the tourism offer**

### **Concept Note 1**

#### **OBJECTIVE**

Heritage—cultural and natural, tangible and intangible—constitutes a strategic asset for the differentiation of destinations and the creation of value in the tourism offer. This paper proposes to discuss how to transform heritage into a sustainable competitive advantage: to conserve and transmit it while designing an authentic, inclusive, and economically viable tourism experience. It aims to identify conditions for good management (interpretation, carrying capacity, local benefits) and risks (commodification, degradation, gentrification), with special attention to the role of regional governments in heritage valorisation.

#### **CONCEPTUALIZATION**

The UNESCO argues that tourism can create “added value” for a place when it is based on heritage values and managed sustainably. To support this vision, the UNESCO World Heritage Centre has developed tools and guides (“toolkit”) aimed at managing heritage destinations, promoting coordination among stakeholders and a balance between conservation and tourism use.

Heritage stands as the backbone of the contemporary tourism offer, operating primarily through the construction of a strong territorial identity and narrative. By endowing destinations with their own history and a unique sense of place, cultural legacy makes it possible to structure diverse products ranging from routes and festivals to crafts and gastronomy. In this context, especially in heritage cities, interpretation and cultural mediation—supported by museums, advanced signage, and new technologies—are essential to transform mere static resources into memorable visitor experiences.

This value proposition is grounded in perceived quality and authenticity, decisive factors for tourist satisfaction and the destination's long-term reputation. However, it is imperative to understand that authenticity is not an immutable attribute, but a construction that requires rigorous governance to avoid processes of trivialization or simple "folklorization" of the territory. To preserve this essence, it is essential to ensure the active participation of local communities and cultural bearers, guaranteeing that the tourism narrative remains faithful to its roots.

Likewise, heritage management must confront the challenge of sustainability and acknowledge its own limits, given that it is an intrinsically fragile asset. Excessive tourism pressure can lead to physical deterioration of the environment, congestion problems, and deep social tensions, such as gentrification or excessive rent increases. Therefore, responsible planning must integrate flow-control tools, zoning, and the definition of carrying capacities, always ensuring that a portion of revenues is directly reinvested in conservation and continuous site monitoring.

Finally, when heritage tourism is managed from an inclusive development perspective, it has the potential to strengthen the socioeconomic fabric through job creation and the promotion of the creative economy. The key to success lies in ensuring that the value generated is captured locally through effective value chains, such as promoting community-based guiding, supporting designations of origin in crafts, and governance that guarantees the equitable distribution of benefits among the resident population.

The possibility of turning heritage into a development resource exists in all geographies. Every territory possesses attractions with latent tourism potential, whether the vastness of a desert or the exuberance of a jungle. This valorisation is not limited to natural heritage but equally embraces historical and artistic legacy and the unique features of each culture. In many regions, for example, religious tourism is not only an act of faith but also a remarkable way to valorise architectural heritage and living history. Thus, valuing heritage allows an American traveller to discover their roots in Europe, or a European to marvel at the pre-Columbian richness of the Americas or the cultural depth of Africa.

Similarly, the uniqueness of each territory is expressed through its most deeply rooted traditions, where even gastronomy—understood as an intangible heritage resource—becomes a vehicle of identity that allows one to taste the history of a people. Highlighting history through these resources helps build bridges of mutual understanding between continents, reaffirming that any cultural or natural element, if managed with authenticity and coherence, can be transformed into a driver of sustainable development and a unique experience for the visitor.

### QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS

- What principles should guide the transformation of heritage into a tourism product (priority conservation, authenticity, interpretation, inclusion)?
- How can carrying-capacity management and flow-control mechanisms be designed in historic centers and fragile sites without excluding residents or lower-income tourists?
- What financial and regulatory instruments guarantee reinvestment in conservation (fees, funds, public-private partnerships) and transparency in the use of resources?
- How can cultural commodification be avoided and how can communities and heritage bearers be ensured participation in decision-making and benefit from tourism?
- What models of interregional cooperation can strengthen heritage routes while maintaining conservation standards and high-quality experiences?