

Industrial tourism in Europe: when authenticity meets sustainability and innovation

An article by IndusTour consortium partners (Nicosia Tourism Board and Auvergne-Rhone-Alps Region).

Industrial tourism in Europe: context and opportunities

Tourism has long been a cornerstone of Europe's economy and cultural identity. With its rich history, diverse landscapes, and vibrant cities, the continent attracts millions of visitors each year. However, the sector is facing several challenges: overtourism in iconic destinations, seasonal concentration, and the urgency of a double green and digital transition. At the same time, travellers are increasingly seeking authentic, meaningful experiences that connect them with local culture and heritage (European Parliament, 2013).

Industrial tourism as an innovative response:

In this context, industrial tourism emerges as an innovative response with strong growth potential. Far from the traditional sun-and-sand model, industrial tourism invites visitors to explore the past, present, and future of industry. It encompasses visits to operational factories, decommissioned industrial sites, and even futuristic innovation hubs. These experiences offer a unique window into the economic and social fabric of regions, showcasing craftsmanship, technological progress, and the stories of working communities. Research shows that industrial tourism can provide environmental, social, and economic benefits for both firms and territories (Martínez-Román et al., 2023).

Benefits for territories and regional development:

Regarding territories, industrial tourism contributes to diversifying tourism offers by spotlighting lesser-known destinations. It also helps extend the tourist season, as many industrial sites are not weather-dependent. Importantly, it aligns with sustainable travel principles by promoting local economies, reducing travel distances, and encouraging educational and cultural engagement. The *SMart Industrial Tourism in the Mediterranean* project highlights industrial tourism to reduce overtourism and seasonality while fostering inclusive regional growth (Interreg MED, 2020). Furthermore, the European Parliament has noted that industrial heritage tourism supports regeneration and sustainable regional development (European Parliament, 2013).

Opportunities for industry and businesses:

For industry, this form of tourism offers a unique opportunity to enhance image, reputation, and brand, while generating additional revenue. Factory tours and site visits help preserve and transmit valuable skills, inspiring younger generations and fostering appreciation for industrial and artisanal

professions. Moreover, industrial tourism can serve as a marketing tool that promotes innovation and community engagement (Nunes et al., 2023). In this way, companies become both cultural stewards and active contributors to their local ecosystems.

Experiences for visitors:

For visitors, industrial tourism provides authentic insights into regional identities and satisfies the growing demand for unique, immersive experiences. In a European context where travellers increasingly prefer “special interest” tourism over generic mass tourism, industrial tourism directly responds to this evolving trend (European Parliament, 2013).

In conclusion, industrial tourism presents a compelling model for the future of European tourism — one that is more diversified, less seasonal, culturally rooted, and aligned with sustainability goals. By fostering stronger connections among territories, industries, and travellers, it supports more resilient and meaningful tourism ecosystems across Europe.

The IndusTour project: from policy changes to global impact

Collaborative effort across Europe:

Recognizing the transformative potential of industrial tourism, six regional and local authorities from Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Poland, and Serbia have joined forces through the IndusTour project. This ambitious initiative aims to enhance public policies related to industrial tourism by promoting innovation, diversification, and competitiveness in the sector.

A three-year interregional learning process:

At its core, IndusTour is a three-year interregional learning process. It brings together policymakers, tourism professionals, industry stakeholders, and local communities to exchange good practices, build capacity, and co-create solutions tailored to regional contexts. Through workshops, study visits, and experts’ contributions, the project fosters a shared understanding of how industrial tourism can be leveraged to meet contemporary challenges.

Strategic and practical objectives:

The objectives of IndusTour are both strategic and practical. On the policy level, the project seeks to influence and improve existing instruments such as tourism strategies, regional development plans, and European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) programmes.

Tangible impacts on the ground:

On the ground, IndusTour is expected to raise awareness on industrial tourism in Europe and deliver tangible improvements in the visibility and attractiveness of industrial tourism sites. This includes better signage, digital storytelling, enhanced visitor services, and stronger branding. The project also promotes collaboration between public authorities, private stakeholders, and civil society, recognising that industrial tourism development requires a collective effort.

Looking ahead: a model for sustainable tourism:

Looking ahead, IndusTour aspires to serve as a model for integrating industrial tourism into Europe’s sustainable tourism future. Its emphasis on innovation, authenticity, and sustainability aligns with

broader EU priorities. By showcasing how industrial tourism can contribute to regional resilience and cultural vitality, the project paves the way for more inclusive and diversified tourism landscapes.

In conclusion, industrial tourism offers a powerful antidote to the challenges facing European tourism today. It invites travellers to discover the continent's industrial soul, while supporting local economies and promoting sustainable practices. Through initiatives like IndusTour, Europe is not only preserving its industrial heritage but also reimagining it as a driver of innovation, identity, and inclusive growth.

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