

## ***“Where Industry Meets Experience: From Local Practice to Future Visions of Industrial Tourism”***

An article by IndusTour consortium partners (Fund for European Affairs and Development of the APV Tønder Municipality).

### ***Shaping Industrial Tourism: Policy, Experience, and Future Trends***

As industrial tourism gains strategic relevance across Europe, there is an increasing need to better conceptualize its scope, evolution, and role within regional development policies. Within the framework of the IndusTour project, these aspects were addressed during a thematic workshop held in Lyon, where Ettore Ruggiero, external expert for industrial tourism, introduced the concept of the "four generations of industrial tourism." Building on these insights, the following interview provides expert reflections on how regions can translate this evolving concept into coherent strategies, develop engaging and experience-oriented offers, and leverage industrial tourism as a tool for sustainable, innovative, and diversified territorial development.

#### **1. During the workshop in Lyon, you described industrial tourism as an "umbrella" concept combining heritage, corporate memory, and active production. How can policymakers translate this broad definition into coherent and actionable strategies?**

Industrial tourism has progressively evolved into a multidimensional field that connects industrial and craft heritage, local production, and territorial development. It can be interpreted as an "umbrella" concept that brings together disused industrial sites, active industrial and craft enterprises, and corporate museums, all capable of offering experiences for a wide and diverse audience.

For policymakers and businesses, the challenge lies in translating this broad definition into coherent and operational strategies. This requires structuring industrial tourism around three fundamental pillars: enhancing disused industrial heritage, engaging active companies and corporate museum managers, and integrating them into a broader tourism ecosystem. Territories must develop coordinated strategic frameworks that include asset mapping, shared quality standards, incentives for businesses, and governance models involving public institutions, industry, and educational systems. Only through this systemic approach can industrial tourism become a segment of cultural tourism that enhances local traditions and the culture of "know-how."

**2. You explained that the four generations of industrial tourism are not mutually exclusive but often coexist. How should regions balance these different approaches?**

During the Lyon meeting, I outlined what I consider to be the four generations of industrial tourism. The first generation emerged with technical visits, mainly developed in educational and professional contexts—essentially tourism "for insiders." The second generation marked a shift toward a broader audience through the enhancement of industrial heritage: disused factories, mines, and historic plants restored as museums or exhibition spaces. The third generation saw active companies opening their doors, becoming experiential spaces where visitors could observe production in real time and discover brand values. The fourth generation represents the most advanced stage: industrial tourism becomes experiential and territorial, structured into networks and integrated products where visitors participate, create, and learn by doing. These four generations do not replace one another but often coexist within the same territory. Regions should integrate the different generations rather than choosing just one: enhancing heritage (past), opening active companies (present), and building territorial experiences (future), creating coordinated and complementary offers for different audiences.

**3. What are the key elements that make an industrial tourism experience truly engaging for today's visitors?**

A crucial change has been the shift from purely technical visits to approaches centered on experience and storytelling. Today's visitors seek meaningful, immersive, and engaging experiences. The most effective offers combine storytelling, interaction, and authenticity. Stories that connect products to people and places generate emotional engagement, while hands-on activities, simulations, and behind-the-scenes access transform passive visits into memorable experiences. Digital technologies, such as augmented and virtual reality, further enhance engagement by making complex processes accessible. Successful industrial tourism combines education and entertainment, creating true "edutainment" experiences rooted in real production contexts.

**4. What makes industrial tourism particularly effective in addressing challenges such as regional diversification and seasonality?**

Its effectiveness lies in its ability to address multiple challenges simultaneously. It allows destinations to go beyond traditional tourism models by enhancing industrial and craft heritage and involving local businesses, expanding the tourism offer while strengthening local economies and value chains. Regarding seasonality, industrial tourism offers year-round attractions less dependent on climate and seasonal peaks, making it particularly suitable for schools, professionals, and niche segments. It also improves public perception of industry, promotes transparency, and supports talent attraction, especially in technical and scientific sectors.

**5. Looking towards 2030, what do you see as the defining features of the next phase?**

A possible "fifth generation" of industrial tourism will be characterized by deep integration of digitalization, sustainability, and personalization. Key features include physical-digital hybridization (augmented reality, AI) to enrich visits and enable remote access; centrality of sustainability, showcasing responsible and circular production processes; highly personalized experiences tailored to visitors' interests; active involvement of local communities as co-protagonists; and integration into territorial development strategies. It will no longer be just about "visiting a company," but about living a connected, conscious, and customized experience where production, technology, and territory continuously interact.

## **6. What are the first concrete steps a region should take to develop industrial tourism?**

Regions should start with comprehensive mapping of industrial assets—both disused and active—to assess potential and readiness. This should be followed by stakeholder engagement and creation of an initial network of actors, motivating leading companies and public institutions as pioneers. Pilot projects should test formats and demonstrate feasibility, focusing on highly visible experiences. Common standards for safety, accessibility, and experience quality must be defined, along with training and support for participating companies. Finally, industrial tourism should be fully integrated into regional strategies, linking it to tourism, education, innovation, and sustainability policies.

### ***Where Industry Meets Experience: Tønder's New Vision for Tourism***

Through the EU project IndusTour, Tønder Municipality is exploring how industry, cultural heritage, and storytelling can come together to create new visitor experiences. With ECCO and Tønder Station as key inspirations, the municipality is shaping a broader and more contemporary vision for industrial tourism.

As part of this initiative, Tønder Municipality is working strategically to develop industrial tourism as a new focus area. The goal is to create experiences rooted in local history, business, and culture, while appealing to both residents and visitors seeking authentic and meaningful places.

A central element of this work is the dialogue with ECCO, a company that reflects many of the area's defining values: craftsmanship, quality, innovation, and strong local roots. Founded in Denmark in 1963, ECCO has grown into a global shoemaking brand. From initial design to finished products sold worldwide, the company has consistently emphasized detail, materials, and quality. This blend of craftsmanship and global reach makes ECCO an important part of Tønder Municipality's identity.

Locally, ECCO represents more than just a successful company. It is a source of pride and a key part of the area's business history. Its story illustrates how vision and dedication can grow into something far beyond the local community. ECCO was founded by Birte and Karl Toosbuy. Karl, a trained shoemaker, dreamed of owning his own factory. To pursue this vision, the family gave up financial security, sold their home, and moved to Bredebro, where they built the company from the ground up. What began as an ambitious idea has become an international business with deep local roots—something that continues to attract interest from visitors today. This strong connection between company and place highlights the potential of industrial tourism. ECCO offers more than the story of a product; it opens a broader narrative about people, place, and development. For this reason, it is a natural focal point in Tønder Municipality's efforts.

A recent meeting with ECCO explored how an existing exhibition could be developed further. A specific area between a café and a shop in the town square was identified as having potential for a more interactive and experience-based approach. By introducing sensory and hands-on elements, the exhibition could attract more visitors and create a stronger overall experience. Such initiatives could strengthen interest in ECCO's history while also bringing more life to the town centre and enhancing the connection between commerce, public space, and storytelling. In this way, industrial tourism is not only about preserving the past but also about activating it in meaningful ways today.

Together, ECCO and Tønder Station illustrate a broader understanding of industrial tourism in Tønder Municipality—one that connects past and present, industry and culture, and local stories with visitor curiosity. Through IndusTour, these strengths are being transformed into experiences that both build local pride and attract visitors from beyond the region.

References:

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