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## HEALTHY AGEING IN THE EUROPEAN UNION – TOURISM IN THE FOCUS

Tourism is one successful strategy for active and healthy ageing. However a set of challenges needs to be considered, as well as numerous resources can be mobilised. From the European perspective it is relevant to share the outcomes of both policy and projects' results that will drive the implementation of national and local solutions for low-season and age-friendly tourism.

*Keywords:* ageing, health, European Union, seniors

### **Introduction**

The promotion of the senior tourism is one successful strategy for active and healthy ageing. In fact travelling provides life satisfaction and helps people stay active, avoids loneliness and lack of meaning in the later stages of life and tackle social exclusion, which are some of the main issues older people face today. Travelling can be an enriching experience for senior citizens as it provides a change in their daily routine and represents an inspiring challenge; it involves discovery, interaction with the environment, intercultural contact and social interaction.

Travelling nevertheless urges older people to face some challenges, from the physical accessibility of venues (hotels, restaurants ...) and of transports, to the availability of reliable and updated information on websites, passing through some language barriers, issues with e-payments and insurances (for instance, in some countries car rental services still propose different rates with respect to the age of the renter).

When focusing on the local context, some additional challenges can be highlighted, such as:

- How to mobilise the most marginalized ones, those who don't want or cannot travel?
- How to reach out to those distant from the centers of happenings and opportunities (such as big cities)?

The experience gathered via a set of European projects, such as EUROSEN, ESCAPE and Off to Spas, has shown how the local context itself can provide the solution to cope with those challenges. Although inhabitants in rural areas and remote villages could find difficult to travel, they are depository of local traditions,

and are usually very welcoming people. Allowing them to play an active role in the touristic offer of their regions means to empower them to get directly involved in preserving and promoting their territories and customs; this enables to divert some of the happenings from big cities to less known centers that can progressively attract more tourists. Furthermore, by the contact with incoming tourists, the most marginalized stakeholders can be encouraged to travel and explore, or they can learn about what happens elsewhere by the direct exchange with incoming tourists, which is also a different way to travel!

Finally, at local level real experiences are offered, normally at more affordable prices than in big cities. Needless to say, accessibility is often however still a problem, but it is definitely something that can be improved and services can be better organised indeed to accommodate the needs of a potentiated touristic flow.

### **AGE Platform Europe**

AGE Platform Europe is a European network of non-profit organisations of and for people aged 50+, which aims to voice and promote the interests of the 190 million citizens aged 50+ in the European Union and to raise awareness on the issues that concern them most. Since 2001, AGE works for *bringing older people's point of view in the European policies' debates*, regarding the most important dossiers for people aged 50+, such as social protection and pension reforms, anti-discrimination, employment, social inclusion, ICT, health, research, mobility and build environment, and senior tourism. Together with its *120 Members* from all over Europe and its experts, gathered in *12 Task Forces* (one of which is devoted to senior tourism), AGE raises *awareness on the users' needs and wishes*, on the principle and practice of users' involvement, in order to add value to the European research, to industrial production, to the service provision and policy-making. At project level via the involvement in EU projects, and at policy level via advocacy activities and campaigns (e.g. solidarity between generations, age-friendly environments) and the direct exchange with the European institutions (e.g. The European Parliament's Intergroup on Active Ageing, Intergenerational Solidarity and Family policies).

AGE Platform Europe does not of course work on a silos, but pools with other European NGOs and stakeholders: facing the challenges brought by the demographic change by working together and by sharing the rationale that nothing can be done without the involvement and consent of those the action is addressed to (*'nothing for us without us'* as expressed by the European Disability Forum).

### **Europe and senior tourism**

Acknowledging the challenges faced by our ageing societies, the European Union puts great emphasis on addressing them from both the policy perspective and the funding programmes. These programmes – among them the COSME Programme, which has co-financed the Off to Spas project – enhance the European cooperation across countries and stakeholders, allowing partners to exchange and discuss common tourism development issues to be implemented also at local level; this increases the co-operative and therefore more effective working and think-tank, while sharing solutions suitable to be adapted to different contexts.

Among the most tangible benefits of being involved in European projects and partnerships, it is possible to highlight the following added values:

- shared know-how between European countries and set up of professional contacts across borders;
- raise greater awareness of country and culture specific aspects;
- connect local cases and challenges faced by tourism developers and tourism enterprises to European and international cases, thanks to the access to good practices.

Among the numerous projects addressed to older people at European level, the ESCAPE and the EUROSEN ones are especially dedicated to tourism and local tourism, and are therefore worth being described to provide valuable insights regarding this sector.

#### **Overview of feedback from the ESCAPE and EUROSEN projects**

The *'European Senior Citizens' Actions to Promote Exchange in tourism'* (ESCAPE)<sup>1</sup> project brought together 8 partners from 6 different countries to work on the enhancement of the existing tourist infrastructure and staff in the low season, facilitating as such transnational exchanges off-season by concentrating on the senior citizen market, those falling in the 55+ age range. The project covered the geographical areas of Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, France, Italy and Portugal, and designed and offered innovative and sustainable thematic tourism packages, tailor made for 55+, with special attention on quality and safety, while available during the low season.

AGE worked on a combined and all-inclusive report on the characteristics of the seniors market in the tourism/travel sector, on which basis the partnership developed

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.escape2europe.eu/>

- the *ESCAPE Charter*: a ‘promise’ that a tourism company/attraction is sensitive to the needs, expectations and demands of 55+ travelers. In essence it is a user friendly list of requirements upon which a tourism company and a historical/cultural attraction must comply with in order to be considered senior-friendly;
- The *ESCAPE Club*: a group of senior-friendly establishments ranging from accommodation providers, to restaurants-cafes-bars, transport companies, as well as cultural and historical attractions;
- Promote the ESCAPE tourism packages and improve the image of Europe as a continent of attractive, quality, and safe destinations for seniors using the:
  - *iESCAPE app*: a mobile phone and tablet application, downloadable on AppStore and GooglePlay free-of-charge, whereby both the ESCAPE packages as well as the ESCAPE Club members are promoted and located on the map;
  - *ESCAPE Club* on-line platform: a platform through which interested tourists of 55+ age are able to identify their ideal ESCAPE destination based on their interests, as well as search for a senior-friendly establishment.

AGE Platform Europe has moreover being partner of the *Europe for Seniors – EUROSEN*<sup>2</sup> project that pursues an economic objective (the strengthening of the European tourism industry with a specific focus on the micro, small and medium enterprises) and add to it a social goal: fostering the active life of the senior citizens, by involving them in the touristic initiatives both as travelers and as hosts of the visiting guests. The project is currently designing senior-oriented travel packages, a new and effective organizational and business model for the senior tourism and setting up a ‘Senior Tourism Quality Certification’ programme.

The project is based on a cooperative approach on a public-private partnership extended to the whole community (4P: public-private-people partnership), involving institutions (at local, regional and national levels), the tourism-related business sector with a focus on micro and small/medium enterprises (SMEs), Senior Associations, groups of interest and no-profit organizations (e.g. cultural associations), as well as the whole local community all together establishing an ad hoc entity called *Cluster of Local Culture (CLC)*.

Senior Associations are key players in the project: their members act – on a voluntary basis – as local hosts to give the foreign peers a warm welcome and to allow them a full immersion in the local culture settling the basis for reciprocation.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://eurosen.eu/en>

And seniors, and their associations, have been the target of two EU-wide surveys, one carried out for the ESCAPE project at the end of 2014 (900 respondents aged 55+) and the other carried out for the EUROSEN project during the summer of 2015 (780 replies from people aged 55+).

Hereby follows a short overview of the results, focusing on the most recent ones deriving from the EUROSEN survey, which gathered replies especially from Italian, Slovenian, Belgian, Romanian, Austrian, Irish respondents.

*Seasonality still matters.* With respect to what highlighted in the ESCAPE questionnaire,<sup>3</sup> where summer time was the favourite season, *autumn and spring* have been listed among the preferred seasons for travelling by the majority of the respondents, with the exception of the Italian respondents, who opted for summer time in majority (66%).

The interviewed sample prefers to organise their holidays individually, but travel agencies and organisations, such as parish organisations, senior associations, or others are also considered as a reliable sources of information and help in planning. The fact that people aged 55+ prefer to organise autonomously their holidays is confirmed also by the *preference for tailored holidays*, rather than standard tourist packages, and this transversally across countries.

Despite very widespread stereotypes, internet is also very well used by the respondents to search for information and planning the trips. Relatives and friends are mostly appreciated as source of information, but the web competes well with them, ranking then travel agencies, guidebooks and specialized magazines below in the ladder (especially in Slovenia). *If internet is an appreciated tool, on the contrary social networks are not very well exploited as a source of information.*

With respect to the activities that people appreciate to carry out while on holidays, across countries it emerged that there is great willingness to enjoy the local landscape and get to know the local culture. In particular, people seem to like *visiting a local farm or a shop or exhibitions, and going around with local people.* The cooking lesson and the experience of local dishes was however average welcome, alongside with the direct interaction in local dances or singing experience, which are very important elements for EUROSEN to be taken into account.

The conclusions provided by the EUROSEN survey must be coupled with the results of the ESCAPE survey, conducted at the end of 2014. Its results and trends, available on-line<sup>4</sup> in the *'Report on Senior Tourists' needs and demands'*, have been confirmed by this current work. In particular it showed that no matter of their

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.age-platform.eu/policy-work/news/escape-project-publishes-first-results-older-travellers-preferences> and <http://www.escape2europe.eu/documents>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.age-platform.eu/policy-work/news/escape-project-publishes-first-results-older-travellers-preferences> and <http://www.escape2europe.eu/documents>

countries of origin or residence, or their education, the majority of the interviewed *older tourists like to travel with a partner, with relatives or family members, as well as in groups with people they know*. Besides, older tourists also appreciate to enjoy holidays with a budget up to 100€ a day, and prefer to take 4–7 nights breaks when possible, and also to extend the length up to 13 nights.

With respect to seasonality, the ESCAPE survey showed a preference to travel in summer and spring, which has been modified by the EUROSEN results, more inclined to travel in autumn and spring. ESCAPE confirmed that travellers 55+ tend to be quite autonomous in planning and managing their travels, opting less frequently for all-inclusive packages, preferring to organise their holidays individually.

When asked to rate the importance of themes, topics and activities, ‘nature and culture’ are the preferred touristic themes, and the ESCAPE sample considered very important to have clean and easy accessible natural and cultural heritage sites, as well as affordable ones. The natural environment is indeed very important, alongside with the local culture. Security and comfortable and clean accommodations are also relevant general factors having an impact in the choices of senior travellers.

Tourists aged 55+ have undoubtedly different expectations when travelling: the personal preferences and tastes also matters. Nevertheless it is possible to state that seniors appreciate and require security, clean and reliable sites and services, and better value for money, as well as they would like also to be ensured that toilets, pharmacies and supermarkets are available infrastructures in their tourist destinations.

For more insights on the country-specific highlights, covering Bulgaria, France, Greece and Portugal, as well as on additional patterns and studies on senior tourism, the EUROSEN team invites to read the *ESCAPE Report on Senior Tourists’ needs and expectations and its main findings*.

### **EULSTIB work and conclusions**

In 2014 the European Commission set up an informal ad-hoc group called ‘*European Union Low Season Tourism Initiative Board*’ (EULSTIB) on the basis of a call for expression of interest and with a mandate for the period 2015–2016. The group gathered together experts from governments, the private sector, European industry, academia and the civil society. It provided guidance and expertise to the Commission on various aspects related to low season tourism. The group also participated to the production of informal report gathering knowledge, best practices and policy/business recommendations at EU level in order to increase the tourism demand in off-peak season and thereby contribute to improving tourism competitiveness.

In the group's conclusions, data shows that there is great potential in attracting the 55+'s as one solution for increasing tourism during low and mid seasons. There is wide consensus on this idea, however there are varying views on the best way to attract this market segment. Nonetheless, recognising diversity within the segment and not targeting seniors as a homogenous group is essential for success.

Hereby follows some conclusions from the experts:

- *Improve the offer* – To remain competitive, continuous progress and skills development is needed, primarily for product suppliers but also for operators along the entire tourism distribution chain. Shifting or increasing demands from the consumer require flexibility as well as a range of individually targeted solutions to satisfy guests. Action is needed at all levels including market studies, monitoring of trends, and use of customer (guest) surveys as critical tools to support the best way of working. Work may be most beneficial if carried out by co-owned groups of companies as the knowledge gained is often more valuable to clusters of companies that can take advantage of it together;
- *Skills development* – There is a need for accessible and tailored skills development, primarily for tourism SME's. This can have a significant impact on continued growth in the tourism industry, in particular during low and mid seasons. Irrespective of geography, target group or market, satisfying the needs of SME's to improve their competencies creates long-term positive results that are not limited to any specific field;
- *Facilitate cooperation mechanisms* – In order to establish proper governance that enables growth, all initiatives need to be coordinated to a greater extent in the future. This way lessons can be shared between the initiatives and mistakes made in one initiative are not repeated in others. One crucial piece of work is to raise awareness of the various growth initiatives and come to a common agreement on prioritised growth areas, such as age-friendly tourism. However, businesses tend to manage all themes or prioritised target groups simultaneously, as this generates revenues in all seasons. It is therefore important that the various initiatives are not run in isolation but coordinated, and that priorities are shared and agreed.

### **Covenant on Demographic Change**

Age-friendliness matters and AGE Platform Europe has been conducting a wide campaign on its promotion, which ended up in 2015 with a new milestone: the Covenant on Demographic Change. Such organisation, legally established in Brussels, has been the greater achievement of AGE efforts on the promotion of the concept and practices of age-friendly environments and came at the end of a long process.

Since 2016 the Covenant is up and running and gathers European public authorities, at local, regional and national level, businesses, academics, associations and other relevant stakeholders, committed to develop environments that support active and healthy ageing, enhance independent living and well-being of older persons, and create a society for all ages. It creates a formal structure for implementing solutions for active and healthy ageing (based on the World Health Organisation – WHO model – 8 domains, Fig. 1). It fosters synergies with relevant stakeholders while connecting with existing initiatives such as the WHO Global Network on Age-Friendly Cities and Communities, the WHO-Europe Healthy City Network and the European Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing (EIP AHA).<sup>5</sup> Already 148 organisations from all over Europe already joined voluntarily the Covenant. The Covenant repository<sup>6</sup> displays notable examples of innovative solutions for age-friendly environments in Europe.

The figure below shows the eight domains covering age-friendly environments and it can easily be detected how (health) tourism has a role to play on different petals of this special flower, in particular acting on the community and health services, the outdoor environments, as well as transport and mobility.

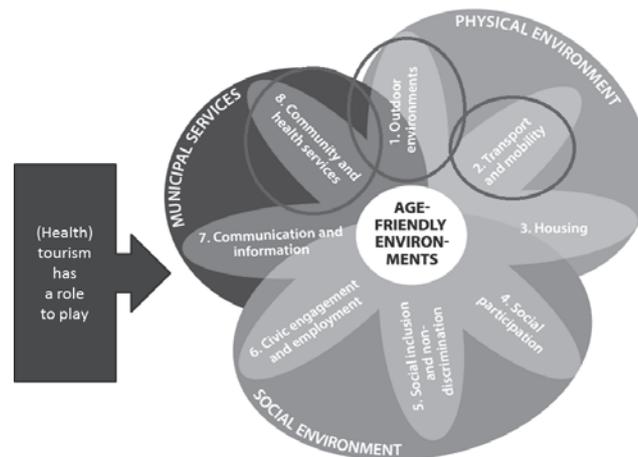


Figure 1: Solutions for active and healthy ageing, links to tourism (Source: WHO)

<sup>5</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/research/innovation-union/index\\_en.cfm?section=active-healthy-ageing](http://ec.europa.eu/research/innovation-union/index_en.cfm?section=active-healthy-ageing)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.afeinnovnet.eu/repository>

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**AGE Platform Europe** is a European network of non-profit associations of and for people aged 50+ promoting the interests of the 190 million inhabitants aged 50+ in the European Union and raising awareness of the issues that concern them most. AGE voices older and retired people in the EU policy debates through the active participation of their representative organisations at EU, national, regional and local levels, thus informing EU policy development. AGE works on a wide range of policy areas, such as anti-discrimination, active ageing, social protection, pension reform, social inclusion, health, research, accessibility of public transport and of the build environment, and new technologies. Besides, AGE is also involved in several EU funded research projects on healthy ageing, ICT and ageing, transport, age-friendly environments, and senior tourism. AGE participation in projects allows the projects' consortium to be fed in with fresh information and initiatives coming from the European spheres, while enabling AGE members and experts to contribute directly to the development of products, services and solutions targeted to our ageing societies.