



MED-Routes

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MED-Routes

"Enhancing MED sustainable cultural tourism

through the creation of eco-itineraries inside European Cultural Routes"

**MED-Routes Package
for sustainable practices and eco-itineraries
in Mediterranean Cultural Routes**



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1. Introduction

MED-Routes is an ambitious initiative that aims to establish and promote a place-based, low-impact model of sustainable tourism across Cultural Routes in the Mediterranean (MED) region. At its core, the project seeks to shape a distinctive model of Mediterranean slow tourism, deeply rooted in shared cultural heritage and environmental responsibility. This model is being developed through the framework of four officially recognized Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe:

The Phoenicians' Route
The Routes of the Olive Tree
The European Route of Ceramics
Destination Napoleon

Cultural Routes are defined by networks of tangible and intangible heritage assets that are unified by a central theme. These assets, whether they are linear, scattered, or geographically dispersed are interpreted collectively, forming cohesive thematic itineraries. In this way, a Cultural Route is not only a cultural construct but also a destination in itself, composed of interconnected heritage nodes and experiences.

Cultural tourism in the Mediterranean faces two key challenges that hinder its sustainable development. Firstly, there is an over-concentration of tourism flows in mainstream destinations, especially during peak seasons, which places significant pressure on local environments, infrastructure, and communities, while also diminishing the quality of the visitor experience. Secondly, there is a noticeable lack of visibility, accessibility, and integration of sustainable, small scale eco-itineraries, routes that could attract environmentally conscious travellers in search of authentic, locally grounded experiences. Addressing these issues is essential for fostering a more balanced, resilient, and inclusive tourism model across the region.

To address these challenges, MED-Routes proposes a new model of eco-conscious, small-scale cultural tourism through the development and promotion of eco-itineraries—carefully curated travel experiences within the four Cultural Routes that highlight cultural heritage while aligning with the principles of the circular economy. These eco-itineraries go beyond showcasing key heritage attractions; they also incorporate supporting infrastructure and services that embody the values of reducing, rethinking, revaluing, regenerating, and innovating. The goal is to deliver tourism experiences that are not only environmentally sustainable but also culturally enriching, socially inclusive, and deeply rooted in local contexts.

For eco-itineraries to thrive, they must engage both local communities and international travellers by resonating with their values and interests. Achieving this requires well-crafted communication and targeted marketing strategies that highlight the uniqueness, sustainability, and cultural richness of each route. By effectively promoting these small-scale, heritage-focused

itineraries, MED-Routes can attract eco-conscious travellers, increase local participation, and cultivate a broader appreciation for the diverse and often overlooked cultural landscapes of the Mediterranean.

To this end, each of the four Cultural Routes involved in the MED-Routes project will develop a tailored promotional strategy. These strategies are designed to increase visibility, stimulate local engagement, and enhance the role of Cultural Routes in advancing sustainable tourism and circular economy practices across the Mediterranean.

The Mediterranean region, abundant in both cultural and natural heritage, presents significant potential for the advancement of sustainable tourism. Building on the achievements of the INCIRCLE project, a comprehensive toolkit has been developed to promote sustainability and circularity, with a focus on critical areas such as waste and water management, sustainable mobility, and renewable energy. This package offers a collection of tools and strategic approaches to support the effective implementation of eco-itineraries within the four EU Cultural Routes of the MED-Routes project, enhancing their sustainability while generating environmental, economic, and cultural value. Drawing from key resources, including the INCIRCLE and EMBLEMATIC output catalogues and the Transnational Working Group Toolkit for integrating circular economy principles into EU Cultural Routes, this initiative aims to scale up the INCIRCLE replication package. It outlines targeted measures for expanding sustainability across Mediterranean Cultural Routes through eco-itineraries and other innovative practices.

2. Objective of the document

This document provides a comprehensive methodological framework for Mediterranean destinations aiming to replicate sustainable practices and develop eco-itineraries within the context of the MED-Routes initiative. The primary goal is to promote circular and sustainable tourism by creating eco-itineraries along Mediterranean cultural routes, thereby enhancing the tourist experience while preserving the environment, supporting local communities, and safeguarding cultural heritage.

2.1 Key Objectives

a) Expand Circular Tourism as a Strategic Pillar Across Mediterranean Cultural Routes.

The MED-Routes project seeks to establish and disseminate a locally based, low-impact model of sustainable tourism across Cultural Routes in the Mediterranean area. By focusing on the shared heritage of four Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe—Phoenicians' Route, Routes of the Olive Tree, European Route of Ceramics, and Destination Napoleon—the initiative

aims to promote a specific model of Mediterranean "slow tourism" rooted in common heritage.

b) Implement and Promote Certified Eco-Itineraries Through the Green Label Program

To encourage sustainability in services offered to tourists, the MED-Routes project introduces a Green Label certification for eco-itineraries. This certification aims to recognize and certify businesses that demonstrate a commitment to environmentally friendly practices and the preservation of cultural heritage. The Green Label serves as a quality mark, guiding tourists towards sustainable choices and encouraging businesses to adopt eco-friendly practices.

c) Integrate Transferable Models, Capacity-Building Tools, and Operational Frameworks from INCIRCLE & EMbleMatic

Building upon the experiences and tools developed in previous projects like INCIRCLE and EMbleMatic, MED-Routes aims to transfer and capitalize on successful practices. This includes adopting methodologies that apply circular economy principles to the tourism sector, with a focus on areas such as waste management, water management, sustainable mobility, and renewable energy sources.

d) Empower Local and Regional Stakeholders with Policy-Aligned, Participatory Planning and Digital Promotion Tools

The project emphasizes the importance of stakeholder engagement and participatory processes. By forming Stakeholder Working Groups (SWGs) and conducting consultation workshops, MED-Routes ensures inclusivity and local ownership in the development of eco-itineraries. Training and capacity-building initiatives are also integral, equipping stakeholders with the knowledge and tools to implement circular economy principles effectively.

e) Establish Measurable, Accountable Systems for Monitoring Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

To assess the impact and effectiveness of the implemented eco-itineraries, MED-Routes plans to establish monitoring systems aligned with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This includes developing indicators and evaluation tools to measure progress in areas such as environmental conservation, cultural heritage preservation, and community engagement.

3. The Framework for Sustainable Practices in Eco-Itineraries

3.1 The Key Pillars of Sustainability

The eco-itinerary development should adhere to the following core sustainability pillars

a) **Waste Management.**

Adopt zero-waste practices during events and tours and *Minimize waste production* along itineraries through recycling stations, eco-friendly products, compost stations, recycling points, reuse initiatives for renovation debris and educational campaigns for visitors on responsible waste disposal.

b) **Water Management.**

Promote water conservation methods along the route by installing water refill stations, supporting local water management initiatives, smart irrigation, low-flow installations, water-saving, educate and encourage visitors to avoid single-use plastic bottles.

c) **Sustainable Mobility.**

Encourage the use of eco-friendly transportation options such as bicycles, electric buses, and walking routes. Implement bicycle stations and car-sharing services within the routes to facilitate low-emission travel options for visitors. Design bike paths and walking trails that are fully integrated with cultural attractions and local infrastructure. Promote electric mobility by introducing electric vehicle (EV) charging points at strategic stops along the route.

d) **Renewable Energy.**

Use renewable energy sources (e.g., solar panels, wind power) to power visitor centers, eco-lodges, and infrastructure along the eco-itineraries. Ensure that energy consumption throughout the routes minimizes fossil fuel reliance and supports the EU Green Deal.

3.2 Target Audience

The MED-Routes initiative is designed to reach and engage a diverse range of stakeholders involved in cultural tourism, heritage preservation, and sustainable development. By tailoring communication, tools, and support to the specific needs of these groups, the project ensures meaningful participation, stronger impact, and long-term sustainability. The primary target audiences include, but are not limited to, the following:

a) **Regional Governments, Local Authorities, and Tourism Boards**

These public sector entities play a crucial role in policy-making, regional development, destination management, and infrastructure planning. MED-Routes aims to provide them with tools, policy recommendations, and practical models that support the integration of circular economy principles

into tourism strategies, promote balanced visitor distribution, and strengthen local economies through cultural heritage.

b) Council of Europe-Certified Cultural Route Managers

Route managers and coordinators of the four targeted Cultural Routes—Phoenicians' Route, Routes of the Olive Tree, European Route of Ceramics, and Destination Napoleon—are key partners in implementing and scaling eco-itineraries. MED-Routes supports them through capacity building, shared promotional strategies, sustainability guidelines, and collaboration platforms to enhance the overall coherence, visibility, and impact of their networks.

c) Local SMEs, Artisans, and Eco-Operators

Small and medium-sized enterprises, including traditional artisans, family-run businesses, tour operators, and providers of eco-friendly services, are central to creating authentic, community-based tourism offers. MED-Routes empowers these actors by promoting their services within eco-itineraries, providing guidance on sustainable practices, and fostering linkages with larger tourism and cultural networks.

d) Cultural Heritage Institutions and Educators

Museums, cultural centres, academic institutions, and educators have a critical role in preserving and interpreting cultural heritage. They are key collaborators in developing engaging, informative, and inclusive visitor experiences. MED-Routes encourages their involvement through educational initiatives, heritage interpretation strategies, and participatory workshops that highlight the intersection of culture, sustainability, and tourism.

e) Researchers, Influencers, Eco-Visitors, and Media

This group includes academic researchers, sustainability advocates, content creators, responsible travellers, and media professionals who contribute to knowledge dissemination, trend shaping, and public awareness. MED-Routes seeks to engage them through open-access resources, storytelling, social media campaigns, and experience-sharing platforms to amplify the visibility and relevance of eco-itineraries and sustainable cultural tourism in the Mediterranean.

3.3 Integrating Circular Economy Principles in Eco-Itineraries

To ensure the long-term sustainability and environmental responsibility of the MED-Routes eco-itineraries, the principles of the circular economy must be embedded at every stage of planning, development, and

implementation. These principles promote a regenerative model that minimizes waste, optimizes resource use, and creates value for local communities, visitors, and ecosystems alike. The following pillars outline how circular economy concepts can be applied within the eco-itinerary framework:

a) Resource Efficiency

Maximizing the efficient use of resources is fundamental to reducing the environmental footprint of tourism activities. Eco-itineraries should adopt measures that conserve energy, water, and raw materials while minimizing emissions and waste. Examples include energy-efficient lighting and appliances in accommodation facilities, water-saving technologies, low-impact mobility solutions, and smart resource monitoring systems.

b) Local Sourcing

Eco-itineraries must prioritize the use of locally sourced goods and services to foster economic resilience, preserve cultural identity, and reduce transportation-related emissions. This includes the promotion of local gastronomy and seasonal produce, artisan crafts, locally guided tours, and partnerships with nearby farms and cooperatives. Supporting local value chains not only enhances authenticity but also redistributes tourism benefits within the community.

c) Reuse and Recycling

Systems for the reuse and recycling of materials should be integral to all components of the eco-itinerary infrastructure. This involves establishing clear guidelines and practices for waste separation, composting of organic waste, upcycling of materials for signage or decor, and the use of refillable or reusable containers in hospitality and retail. Collaboration with local recycling initiatives and educational campaigns can further strengthen these practices.

d) Eco-Design and Green Infrastructure

All built elements and services within the eco-itineraries—such as visitor centers, signage, trails, and accommodations—should follow eco-design principles. This includes using sustainable and recycled materials, designing modular and flexible structures that adapt to environmental conditions, and minimizing land and resource consumption. Green infrastructure should also consider biodiversity, water conservation, accessibility, and cultural sensitivity.

e) Awareness and Education

To support long-term adoption of circular practices, eco-itineraries should include educational components aimed at both tourists and local stakeholders. Interpretive signage, guided tours, workshops, and digital content can help raise awareness about sustainability efforts, local heritage, and the value of circular economy principles in tourism and daily life.

4.Key Actions and Methodological Steps for Implementing Eco-Itineraries

The successful design and implementation of sustainable eco-itineraries within the MED-Routes framework require a structured, inclusive, and evidence-based approach. This section outlines the key methodological steps and tools necessary for embedding circular economy principles and fostering collaboration among all stakeholders.

4.1 Stakeholder Engagement and Participatory Processes

Strong stakeholder engagement is fundamental to creating meaningful, place-based eco-itineraries that reflect the needs, aspirations, and knowledge of local communities. The process must ensure inclusivity, transparency, and co-ownership across sectors and levels of governance.

a) Formation of Stakeholder Working Groups (SWGs)

Establish Stakeholder Working Groups composed of key actors involved in or impacted by tourism development. This includes representatives from

- Regional and local governments
- Tourism boards and destination management organizations
- Cultural heritage institutions and site managers
- Local SMEs, tourism operators, and artisan networks
- NGOs and environmental organizations
- Community associations and resident groups

The SWGs serve as a forum for dialogue, co-creation, and collaborative decision-making, ensuring that all voices are heard and local ownership is fostered throughout the development of the eco-itineraries.

b) Consultation Workshops and Public Meetings

Organize participatory workshops, focus groups, and public consultations to

- Collect input on existing tourism challenges and opportunities
- Validate sustainability and circularity objectives
- Identify local assets, stories, and values for inclusion in eco-itineraries
- Encourage active engagement and trust-building across diverse stakeholders

These activities should be held in accessible, inclusive formats and locations, and be facilitated by trained moderators to ensure productive, representative discussions.

c) Training and Capacity Building

Deliver targeted training sessions and capacity building programs to equip stakeholders, particularly local businesses and community members with

the knowledge and tools to integrate circular economy principles into their practices. Key focus areas include

- Sustainable tourism business models
- Waste reduction and resource efficiency
- Eco-certification and responsible hospitality
- Heritage preservation and interpretation
- Digital tools and marketing for eco-tourism

d) Participatory Governance and the TWG Framework

To guide the stakeholder engagement process, MED-Routes adopts the Transnational Working Group (TWG) model developed under the INCIRCLE project. This model provides a structured framework for inclusive, strategic governance and decision-making, consisting of the following steps:

Contextual Analysis

Conduct in-depth SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) and CAME (Corrective, Adaptive, Mitigating, Exploitative) analyses to assess local contexts, tourism potential, and challenges related to sustainability and circularity.

Establishment of Inclusive Working Groups

Form transdisciplinary TWGs composed of experts and stakeholders from the fields of heritage, tourism, governance, civil society, and environmental protection, ensuring a balanced and holistic approach.

Application of INCIRCLE Participatory Toolkit

Utilize the participatory tools and strategic templates developed by INCIRCLE to structure consultations, map stakeholder inputs, and align local actions with regional sustainability objectives.

Shared Vision and Goal-Setting

Co-develop a shared vision and define common goals with all participants, ensuring alignment with the MED-Routes sustainability framework, local development plans, and the principles of the circular economy.

4.2 Design of Eco-Itineraries

Sustainable Route Planning: Ensure that eco-itineraries are planned to minimize environmental impact and maximize cultural and historical significance. Routes should be designed to connect cultural heritage sites, natural landscapes, and local communities.

a) **Mapping and Signage:** Update local maps to reflect sustainable and eco-friendly routes. Create clear signage to direct tourists to bicycle stations,

charging stations, and public transport options, ensuring a seamless travel experience.

b) **Eco-Friendly Accommodation:** Promote eco-lodges, green hotels, and sustainable accommodation along the itineraries. Encourage local businesses to obtain eco-certifications and adopt green practices.

c) **Digital Integration:** Develop a mobile app or digital platform where visitors can easily access information about the eco-itinerary, book tickets, and track sustainability efforts (e.g., carbon footprint calculators, route maps, and eco-friendly services).

4.3 Promotion and Marketing of Eco-Itineraries

Effectively promoting eco-itineraries is crucial to attracting environmentally conscious travellers and fostering sustainable tourism practices. The following strategies outline key actions to enhance the visibility and appeal of eco-itineraries within the MED-Routes framework.

a) Leverage Regional Tourism Campaigns to Highlight Eco-Friendly Aspects

Integrate eco-itineraries into regional tourism marketing efforts by emphasizing their sustainable features. Highlight activities such as bicycle tours, walking routes, electric vehicle options, and immersive local cultural experiences. Utilizing visually appealing content—such as high-quality photographs and engaging videos—can showcase these eco-friendly offerings and inspire potential travellers. Social media platforms serve as powerful tools to share this content, connect with eco-conscious audiences, and encourage user-generated content through relevant hashtags.

b) Establish and Promote Eco-Certification for Local Businesses

Implement eco-certification programs for businesses along the eco-itineraries to encourage and recognize sustainable practices. Certifications like Green Key and EarthCheck provide internationally recognized standards for environmental responsibility in the hospitality and tourism sectors. By achieving such certifications, hotels, restaurants, and shops can demonstrate their commitment to sustainability, thereby enhancing their appeal to eco-conscious travellers. Promoting these certifications within marketing materials and on digital platforms can further reinforce the eco-friendly image of the itineraries.

c) Collaborate with Sustainability Influencers and Eco-Tourism Bloggers

Partner with influencers and bloggers who specialize in sustainability and eco-tourism to amplify the reach of eco-itineraries. These collaborations can involve sponsored content, press trips, and social media takeovers that showcase the unique experiences offered by the itineraries. Influencers can

provide authentic narratives and endorsements that resonate with their followers, thereby increasing awareness and interest in sustainable travel options.

d) Develop Educational Campaigns to Raise Awareness

Launch comprehensive educational campaigns aimed at informing both tourists and local communities about the benefits of sustainable tourism and the specific eco-friendly practices incorporated into the itineraries. These campaigns can include workshops, informational brochures, and interactive digital content that highlight topics such as waste reduction, conservation efforts, and cultural preservation. Engaging storytelling and clear messaging can foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of the eco-itineraries' objectives.

e) Utilize Digital Platforms and Technology for Enhanced Engagement

Employ digital tools and platforms to enhance the visibility and accessibility of eco-itineraries. Develop user-friendly websites and mobile applications that provide detailed information, interactive maps, and booking options for eco-friendly activities. Incorporate features that allow users to track their environmental impact, share experiences, and provide feedback. Leveraging technology can create a more engaging and informative experience for travellers, encouraging participation and repeat visitation.

4.4 Monitoring, Evaluation, and Continuous Improvement

a) Impact Assessment.

Use the Strategy Evaluation Toolkit and Circular Tourism Indicators to monitor the impact of the eco-itinerary on the local economy, environment, and society. Key indicators include visitor satisfaction, emission reduction, and economic benefit for local businesses.

b) Feedback Loops.

Collect feedback from visitors, stakeholders, and residents to assess the success of the eco-itinerary. Implement a continuous improvement plan to refine and optimize the itinerary based on real-world data.

c) Regular Audits.

Conduct regular environmental and sustainability audits to ensure that the principles of circular economy are being upheld and to identify areas for further improvement.

5.Key Indicators and Success Metrics

To effectively evaluate the impact and success of eco-itineraries, a robust set of indicators is essential. These metrics should encompass environmental,

economic, social, and experiential dimensions, aligning with global standards. The following indicators are proposed to monitor and assess the performance of eco-itineraries.

5.1 Visitor Adoption and Behaviour

a) Utilization of Sustainable Transportation.

Measure the percentage of visitors using eco-friendly transportation modes, such as bicycles, electric vehicles, and public transit, within the eco-itineraries. Promoting sustainable transportation reduces carbon emissions and enhances the visitor experience by minimizing traffic congestion and pollution.

b) Tours Engagement with Sustainable Services.

Track the adoption rates of sustainable tourism services, including stays at eco-certified accommodations, participation in local cultural experiences, and consumption of locally sourced products. This reflects the effectiveness of marketing strategies and the appeal of sustainable options to tourists.

5.2 Environmental Impact

a) Carbon Emission Reduction.

Assess the decrease in carbon emissions resulting from the use of alternative transportation methods and energy-efficient practices within the eco-itineraries. Tourism contributes approximately 8% of global carbon emissions; thus, mitigating this impact is crucial.

b) Waste Management Efficiency.

Evaluate waste diversion rates, including recycling and composting efforts, to determine the effectiveness of waste management systems implemented along the eco-itineraries. Efficient waste management reduces environmental degradation and promotes sustainability.

5.3 Economic Impact

a) Local Economic Growth.

Monitor the increase in revenue for local businesses, particularly SMEs, artisans, and service providers, resulting from tourist spending in off-the-beaten-path locations. This indicates the success of eco-itineraries in stimulating local economies and distributing tourism benefits more equitably.

c) **Employment Opportunities.**

Track the number of jobs created or sustained in the tourism sector due to the development and promotion of eco-itineraries. Employment growth reflects the positive socio-economic impact of sustainable tourism initiatives.

5.4 Stakeholder Satisfaction

a) **Community Feedback.**

Collect qualitative and quantitative data from local stakeholders, including residents, business owners, and authorities, to gauge satisfaction with the eco-itineraries' impact on the community. High satisfaction levels indicate successful integration of tourism initiatives with community needs and values.

b) **Visitors Satisfaction.**

Measure visitor satisfaction through surveys and feedback mechanisms, focusing on their experiences with sustainability practices, cultural authenticity, and overall enjoyment. Positive tourist experiences contribute to repeat visitation and word-of-mouth promotion.

6. Replication Toolkit for Other Destinations

The Replication Toolkit, developed through the INCIRCLE and EMbleMatic projects, provides a comprehensive framework for Mediterranean destinations aiming to adopt and adapt sustainable tourism practices. This toolkit facilitates the replication of successful eco-itinerary models, promoting circular economy principles and fostering regional collaboration.

6.1 Adaptation - Tailoring Eco-Itineraries to Local Contexts.

The toolkit emphasizes the importance of customizing eco-itineraries to align with local cultural, environmental, and economic **contexts. Key components include.**

Operational Model Toolkit.

Guides policymakers in integrating sustainability and circularity throughout all phases of tourism planning and implementation.

Participatory Process Toolkit.

Encourages stakeholder engagement through the establishment of Stakeholder Working Groups (SWGs), ensuring inclusive decision-making.

Strategy Evaluation Toolkit.

Provides methodologies for assessing the effectiveness of implemented strategies, allowing for continuous improvement.

6.2 Collaboration - Building Interconnected Sustainable Tourism Networks

The toolkit promotes collaboration among neighboring regions to create interconnected sustainable tourism routes, fostering cross-border cultural exchange and sustainability. This approach aligns with the objectives of the Interreg Euro-MED Sustainable Tourism Mission, which focuses on enhancing coordination and institutional capacity to make tourism greener, smarter, and more resilient. **Sharing best practices and resources**, regions can collectively enhance the quality and appeal of their tourism offerings, contributing to **a more cohesive and sustainable** Mediterranean tourism landscape.

6.3 Scaling - Expanding Successful Pilot Projects

The toolkit provides guidance on scaling successful pilot projects to include additional routes, integrating new attractions and sustainability initiatives. This involves:

a) **Utilizing Circular Tourism Indicators.**

Assessing the sustainability performance of tourism destinations and industries to inform expansion strategies.

b) **Implementing Capacity-Building Programs.**

Offering training and resources to stakeholders to support the adoption of circular economy principles.

c) **Developing Integrated Strategies.**

Creating comprehensive plans that encompass various aspects of sustainable tourism, including waste management, water conservation, and renewable energy usage.

7. Conclusion

The **MED-Routes INCIRCLE & EMbleMatIC Replicating Package** provides a clear, actionable framework for Mediterranean destinations to adopt sustainable practices and develop eco-itineraries that align with circular tourism principles. By integrating sustainability into cultural routes, destinations can offer richer, more eco-conscious experiences for tourists while preserving the environment, supporting local communities, and promoting cultural heritage. This package encourages a holistic approach to sustainable tourism development that is both scalable and replicable across the Mediterranean region.