

What are the opportunities for rural tourism from Europe?

Rural tourism perfectly suits the trend of European travellers seeking authentic, unique experiences and local lifestyles. European rural travellers want to experience natural, unspoiled landscapes and stay in authentic accommodation. Rural communities in developing countries often have great resources to offer such experiences. Cultural experiences and interaction with locals are increasingly popular, as well as agritourism and farm stays.

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1. Product description

Rural tourism has many definitions. In this study, rural tourism refers to trips where the main motive is to enjoy:

- rural areas
- rural communities
- rural experiences.

Rural tourism aims to include and benefit rural communities, while preserving their environmental and cultural assets. It brings economic development to rural areas by creating additional income and employment. Tourism development can also improve the social wellbeing in rural areas, for example by stimulating improvements in infrastructure, sanitation and electricity networks.

It is closely related to:

- [nature and eco tourism](#)
- [adventure tourism](#)
- [community-based tourism](#)
- [cultural and heritage tourism](#).

Rural travellers participate in activities, lifestyles and traditions of rural communities. This way they get a personalised experience of the countryside. They usually rent rural accommodation, which they can combine with (rural) activities and attractions, preferably using the local social, cultural and natural resources.

Examples of rural accommodation are a:

- campground or tent
- community lodge
- family-run guesthouse
- farm
- local family or homestay
- rural bed & breakfast or small hotel.

Common activities include:

- animal observation

- boat trips
- using cycling or walking trail
- horse riding
- tours (e.g. village, coffee, tea or wine tours)
- workshops (e.g. cooking or handicraft).

Popular attractions include:

- archaeological or heritage sites
- cultural centres or museums
- cultural, gastronomic, heritage and other routes/trails
- landscape sceneries or wildlife sanctuaries
- local agricultural or craft organisations
- markets.

Health and safety measures

Health and safety are important to European rural travellers. They often inquire about the safety of their destination. Vehicles and accommodation also have to be safe. Guides should have good local knowledge. They must know which places are safe to visit and which are not.

Tips:

Pay attention to safety measures. Tour operators should, for example, regularly check vehicles and equipment, as well as hire experienced guides that know the area. Accommodation establishments should have safety measures in place, such as smoke detectors, fire extinguishers, emergency exits, first-aid kits and 24-hour medical assistance.

Show the outcomes of safety checks and licences to your clients.

Political stability

Safety is important to European travellers, especially because some developing countries are politically unstable. Most commercial tour operators do not offer holidays to countries that their Ministry of Foreign Affairs has declared unsafe. This has previously led to a drop in tourism arrivals in countries such as Mali, Egypt and Kenya.

Tips:

Keep (potential) customers updated on changes in the safety situation in your area, for example via your website and staff. Be open and honest in your communication on which areas are safe, or where safety might be an issue. Your client has plenty of information sources, too.

Share safety experiences from customers on your website. Let them write about how safe they felt, because people value the experience of other travellers.

If your region is “unsafe”, commercial tour operators will probably not go there. In that case, focus on volunteer organisations and individual travellers. Check your country’s current safety status on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website of your target countries, such as [Ireland](#) and the [United Kingdom](#).

Rural experiences

Rural travellers are interested in authentic, rural experiences. They like places and activities that are entertaining as well as educational. These should reflect the unique character of the area, its rural qualities and its heritage.

Tips:

Use local experiences and produce in your product offering. For example, offer horse riding tours along rural paths, visits to farms or rural production/processing facilities, local handicrafts workshops, or (visits to) rural markets or events.

Serve traditional local food and offer travellers the opportunity to visit the farm, participate in the harvest and/or help prepare the food.

Include farmer organisations, rural producer organisations or cooperatives in your product development.

Unspoiled landscapes and sustainability

The main reason for a rural holiday is to enjoy the quality of natural, unspoiled landscapes. This is often more important to rural travellers than the level of facilities.

Tips:

Maintain the quality of your local environment. This is essential to the appeal of your destination, as well as for sustainability.

Give tourists information on how to behave responsibly towards the local environment and culture, for example by using less water, energy or paper towels. For inspiration, see wikiHow's [How to Create a Green Hotel](#) and Global Stewards' [tips for green accommodation](#).

Incorporate sustainable and environmentally friendly practices, for example by installing water-saving taps and showers, working with local products or using solar power and/or solar cookers.

For more information and best practices, see the [UNESCO World Heritage Sustainable Tourism Toolkit](#). In addition, see our study about [the need for sustainable suppliers](#).

Quality

European travellers are price-conscious. However, rural long-haul travellers are generally from higher socioeconomic groups. They are willing to pay more if they get a quality experience. Quality is generally more important to them than price. In this context, quality includes such things as authentic experiences, good organisation, hospitable staff, experienced guides and safety.

Tips:

Focus on offering high-quality services by investing in skills training, hiring experienced guides, offering additional services and working with reliable partners.

Include little extras, like local delicacies in your guests' bedrooms or a small local handicraft gift at the end of a tour.

Quality management is an important tool to understand and meet travellers' needs and requirements. Develop a quality management system to check your customers' expectations and satisfaction levels. To improve the quality of your tourism offering, you could use visitor surveys and feedback from employees, tour operators and journalists, as well as a suggestion book or a guestbook.

Authentic accommodation

Rural travellers are looking for a wide variety of accommodation types within a broad price range, from campsites to rural hotels. They like authentic, small-scale accommodation run by local people, preferably reflecting the authentic rural heritage of the area. Freedom and flexibility are also important, especially for families.

Tips:

Offer a wide range of accommodation types, at various prices.

Deliver quality in each accommodation type and price range.

Emphasise the uniqueness and authenticity of your accommodation with good-quality photos and videos.

Recreational and soft adventure activities

Rural travellers like to participate in recreational activities such as walking and cycling. Other soft adventure activities are also becoming popular, such as horse riding or canoeing. Sleeping in a safari tent, for example, offers an authentic experience for families with children.

Tips:

Offer recreational and soft adventure activities in a rural setting, such as walking or cycling heritage trails and themed routes. For more information, see our studies about [adventure tourism](#), [trekking tourism](#) and [cycling tourism](#).

Provide trails and routes of different lengths and difficulty to meet the needs of a wide range of rural travellers.

Improve local sports and leisure facilities for joint use by tourists and locals.

Accessibility

In rural areas, accessibility can be a challenge. There is often a lack of good roads and public transport. Unclear and inadequate signs are a common complaint from rural travellers. You need clear signposting at the start of a trail or route, as well as regular road signs, including a plan for checking and maintenance.

Tips:

Invest in road networks and the accessibility of your destination by public transport. Consider, for example, offering long-distance bus services, especially in the tourist season.

Make sure that the transport is safe and comfortable, the routes are well planned and timetables are being kept.

Involve local authorities in the development of accessible trails and better signposting. Maintain a logical and consistent signposting system for visitors throughout the whole area.

Local facilities must meet the needs of tourists as well as local people. Provide information on the nearest location of important facilities, such as where to find a supermarket, bank, bus stop, police station, doctor and/or hospital.

Traveller profile

Rural travellers are generally:

- highly educated
- well-travelled
- from higher socioeconomic groups.

They can roughly be divided into three main segments:

Older generations

Rural tourism is especially popular among Europe's relatively large older age group of 50–70. They have more free time and money than other groups. Often their children have moved out, or they are entering retirement. These are usually experienced travellers that enjoy rural, quiet environments and look for new experiences. They want high value for money and are willing to pay more for authentic experiences. Older travellers generally seek higher levels of comfort than younger groups.

Tips:

Focus on this segment, as this is the largest segment for rural tourism.

Provide a good standard of comfort in your products.

Use both the internet and traditional media for promotion.

For more information, see our study on [senior travel](#).

Younger travellers

Younger rural travellers are the second largest segment. They have often travelled as children and/or studied abroad. This group is interested in exploring new destinations further away. There are two groups of younger travellers.

High income, little time

These are young professionals with high incomes but limited time to travel. They are mostly between 31–44 years old and often travel in couples, although there is also a singles market in this age group. These travellers are looking for unusual “once in a lifetime” experiences and want to fit as much into their holiday as possible. Comfort is important to them.

Smaller daily budgets, extensive time

This group is mostly between 18–30 years old and includes, for example, backpackers and gap year travellers. Their daily budgets are small but they travel over extended periods of time. These travellers choose cheaper accommodation. They want to engage with local communities and experience local life. Some are interested in volunteer work on community or conservation projects. However this so-called [voluntourism also poses risks, for example to local children](#) and wildlife.

Tips:

Develop a unique mix of accommodation and experiences, together with other local rural tourism providers.

Emphasise the unique, “once in a lifetime” experiences in your promotion.

Offer different options for accommodation and activities that young rural travellers can combine. This way, they can create a personal travel package that meets their budget.

Be careful when offering voluntourism experiences and make sure they actually benefit your local community, environment and/or wildlife. Work with trusted volunteer organisations.

If you are in Africa, consider [Fair Trade Tourism](#) certification. Since 2016, this certification standard includes additional criteria for tourism products with volunteer offerings.

Families

Family travel is a large, growing segment. It includes parents and grandparents with children or grandchildren, or sometimes several generations travelling together. Rural tourism is popular among families. In Germany, for example, families are one of the largest market segments for rural tourism. Families are becoming more quality-conscious and price-conscious. They want good facilities and wish to balance safety and fun. Families like rural holidays to combine fun and excitement with cultural enrichment and higher-end experiences.

Tips:

If you want to target families, offer family-friendly accommodation, for example adjoining room options, a children’s programme, a playground and/or a pool.

Package your product with family-friendly, memorable experiences. Include fun, educational, unique and safe activities.

Offer special discounts and all-inclusive prices for families. This appeals to more budget-conscious families as well.

The family tourism market is very broad. Work with specialised family travel tour operators.

For more information about families with older children, see our study on [explorative tourism for families with children aged 12–18](#).

2. Which European markets offer opportunities for rural tourism?

For statistics on European source markets, see our study about [European demand for tourism in developing countries](#).

3. What trends offer opportunities on the European market for rural tourism?

Cultural experiences and interaction with locals

European travellers increasingly include elements from the local culture in their holidays. They are looking for experiences, rather than going sightseeing. During these experiences, they like to interact with local people. Many developing countries have interesting rural areas with their own cultures and traditions. This offers opportunities for rural tourism providers.

Tip:

Include cultural elements and interaction with locals in your rural tourism experiences, such as a visit to a local community or cultural heritage site. Or include something more active, such as activities at a local craft workshop or helping with the harvest.

Agritourism or farm stays

Agritourism and/or farm stays are increasingly popular. This is a good way for European travellers to experience and participate in local culture. They often combine their agritourism or farm stays with volunteering on and around the farm.

Tips:

If the terms “agritourism” and/or “farm stay” apply to your business, use them in your marketing message. European travellers search for holidays with these words more than “rural tourism”.

Offer opportunities to participate in the work at your agritourism destination

Increasing use of online research

European rural travellers increasingly research and plan their trip online. To gather information and share experiences they use:

- peer review sites, like [TripAdvisor](#) and [Zoover](#)
- travel forums, like Lonely Planet’s [Thorn Tree forum](#)
- social media, like [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [YouTube](#).

Online research is a trend that has increased exponentially over the past years. Although growth has peaked, the use of internet to research tourism will continue to increase. It is predicted to remain the most important

research channel for years to come.

Tips:

Maintain a strong internet presence and online marketing strategy, including social media.

Use photos and videos to bring your story to life. For more information, watch this [webinar series on visual communication in adventure travel](#) by the Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA) and Libris.

Use current customers as ambassadors for your company and area. Encourage them to share their experiences and visuals on social media, to write blogs and to review your company.

For more information, see our [10 tips for online success with your tourism company](#).

For more information about trends, see our study about [European tourism market trends](#).

4. What requirements should your rural travel product comply with to be allowed on the European market?

For general tourism requirements, see our study on [what requirements your services should comply with to attract European tourists](#).

There are some voluntary safety standards for where rural tourism meets adventure tourism.

Voluntary adventure tourism safety standards

For more adventurous rural experiences, three ISO (International Organization for Standardization) standards support safe adventure practices: [21101](#), [21102](#) and [21103](#). Additionally, some countries have their own voluntary standards, such as [BS 8848](#) in the United Kingdom.

Tips:

Study the ISO standards on adventure tourism. Use them to enhance your safety performance.

Check for possible voluntary standards in your target markets.

5. What competition do you face on the European market?

According to industry experts, popular rural tourism destinations include:

- Bolivia
- Cabo Verde
- Indonesia
- Laos
- South Africa
- Tanzania.

Tip:

Develop an interesting tour package through the region by linking various rural tourism projects, such as villages, accommodations, transport, attractions and activities. Look at [Eco Benin](#) or [Guyana Tourism](#) for examples of such initiatives.

6. Which channels can you use to market your rural tourism products in Europe?

Selecting smaller specialised tour operators

Smaller European tour operators specialised in your destination or in rural, nature, eco or community-based tourism offer the best opportunities.

You can identify relevant tour operators via trade associations, events and databases, such as:

- [Agriterra](#) – supports farmer organisations in developing countries, for instance in developing rural tourism
- [ECTAA](#) – national associations of travel agents and tour operators per European country
- [European Alliance for Responsible Tourism and Hospitality](#) (EARTH) – European network of member and partner organisations in responsible tourism
- [ITB](#) – annual tourism trade event, March, Berlin
- [The International Ecotourism Society](#) (TIES) – global network of ecotourism professionals and travellers that organises the Ecotourism and Sustainable Tourism Conference ([search for members](#))
- [World Travel Market](#) – annual tourism trade event, November, London.

Generating direct sales

European rural travellers increasingly book their holidays directly with service providers at the destination. To increase your chances of direct sales you can promote your product on rural tourism websites/portals, such as [All Rural](#) and [Responsible Travel](#). Also consider developing your own national or regional rural tourism portal.

7. What are the end-market prices for rural tourism products?

Travellers have many destinations and types of holiday to choose from. This makes tourism a relatively price-sensitive and competitive industry. The price of a long-haul trip consists of three dimensions:

1. The exchange rate between the currencies of the country of origin and the destination country.
2. The costs of transport to and from the destination country.
3. The price of goods and services the traveller consumes in the destination country.

European tour operators are not open about the purchasing prices of their tourism products. According to industry experts, their margins vary between 10–25%. Prices of holiday packages vary widely as they depend on a lot of factors, such as:

- availability
- destination
- modes of transport
- period of travel
- number of travellers
- length of stay
- type of accommodation
- included activities.

Tips:


Check which countries have cheap (direct) flights to your destination, for instance at [Skyscanner](#). This gives you a competitive advantage in those countries.

You can compare prices for rural travel products via portals like [Travel Rural](#).


Tourism Council WA has some useful [online tools for pricing tours and accommodation](#). These can help you determine the break-even point and ideal retail price of your tourism product.

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