What are the opportunities for nature and eco tourism from Europe?

Nature tourism accounts for about a fifth of all international travel, making it a key segment. European nature and ecotourists have a passion for nature. They are interested in new and authentic experiences, increasingly at non-traditional, long-haul destinations. Developing countries have rich natural and cultural resources for such experiences. European nature and ecotourists look for natural landscapes, interaction with locals and active experiences. Safety and sustainability are important.

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1. Product description

Nature tourism is based on experiences directly related to nature. Enjoying nature is the primary motive for travelling. According to the Rainforest Alliance, nature-based tourism accounts for about 20% of international travel. It focuses on:

- natural landscapes
- flora and fauna
- lifestyles of people living in natural environments

Nature-based tourism includes a wide range of ‘soft’ activities, for example:

- camping
- staying in a rainforest lodge
- boat trips
- walking
- hiking
• visiting a national park or wildlife observation

Nature tourism is closely related to:

• rural tourism
• wildlife tourism
• adventure tourism
• community-based tourism

Ecotourism is a specific type of nature tourism. It aims to conserve the environment and improve the well-being of local people. To attract eco-travellers, you will need to specialise your products to meet these needs.

Health and safety measures

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

Tips:

• Pay attention to safety measures. For example, tour operators should check vehicles and equipment regularly and hire experienced guides who know the area well. 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 customers.

Political stability

Safety is important to European nature and ecotourists, especially because some developing countries are politically unstable. Most commercial tour operators don’t 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 Venezuela.

Tips:

• Keep potential customers updated on changes in the safety situation in your area. You can do so through your website and your staff, for example. Be open and honest in your communication: explain 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 tourists value the experience of other travellers.

• If your region is ‘unsafe’, commercial tour operators will most probably not go there. In this case, focus on volunteer organisations and individual travellers. Check your country’s current safety status on the website of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs in your target countries (Ireland, the United Kingdom etc.).

Natural, unspoiled landscapes

European tourists mainly choose a nature holiday to enjoy the quality of natural, unspoiled
landscapes. This is often more important than the level of facilities. They like natural attractions such as waterfalls, natural parks and game reserves.

**Tips:**
- Emphasise your area’s different and unique natural attractions in your marketing. Also highlight any great natural biodiversity.
- 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 sticking to the marked tracks and trails.

**Sustainability and animal welfare**

Nature tourists are generally concerned with the impact of tourism on the environment. This is especially true for ecotourists. They prefer tourism to have minimal environmental and social impact at their destinations. They want the money they spend to directly benefit the local environment and communities. This fits in well with the United Nations declaring 2017 the **International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development**.

As nature and ecotourists are bound to come across wildlife (attractions), animal welfare is also a key issue. Many of Europe’s main tour operators no longer offer animal attractions and are committed to the [Global Welfare Guidance for Animals in Tourism](https://www.globawelfare.net/). TripAdvisor has banned ticket sales to wildlife attractions, and World Animal Protection’s [Wildlife Selfie Code](https://www.worldanimalprotection.org/wildlife-selfie-code) helps ensure cruelty-free wildlife selfies. Instagram warns users searching for hashtags like #slothselfie or #elephantride.

**Tips:**
- Show nature and ecotourists what your community does with the money it earns from tourism. For example, investing in conservation projects and education or creating jobs for the community.
- 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](https://whc.unesco.org/en/toolkit/). In addition, see our study on the [need for sustainable suppliers](https://www.iwmi.org/)
- Accommodation providers can encourage their guests to act responsibly, for example by using less water and energy or fewer paper towels. For more information, see wikiHow’s [How to Create a Green Hotel](https://www.wikihow.com/Create-a-Green-Hotel) and Global Stewards’ [tips for green accommodation](https://www.globestewards.org/)
- Instruct your guests on how to behave towards wildlife. For example, no touching or feeding and no flash photography.
- Study the [Global Welfare Guidance for Animals in Tourism](https://www.globawelfare.net/) and commit to it.
Active tourism

European nature and ecotourists are generally very active outdoor people. They are adventurous and like to enjoy nature and culture actively, for example by going on walking or cycling tours.

**Tips:**
- Develop active nature tourism products, such as walking or cycling heritage trails and themed routes. Also consider horse-riding or canoeing trails and routes. For more information, see our studies about [trekking tourism](#) and [cycling tourism](#).
- Provide trails and routes of different lengths and difficulty levels to meet the needs of a wide range of nature and ecotourists. Make sure these trails don’t endanger the local nature / ecosystem.

Authentic accommodation

For most European nature tourists, authenticity is more important than luxury. They like unique, small-scale accommodation that is run by local people and preferably reflects the local nature and culture. However, they are becoming more demanding in terms of standards of facilities and comfort. For example, they require clean rooms, good meals and comfortable beds.

Ecotourists prefer accommodation with a minimum impact on their destination. This can range from budget-conscious eco-lodges to luxurious eco-hotels.

**Tips:**
- Give accommodation establishments the look and feel of your area.
- Emphasise the authentic elements of your accommodation in your marketing.
- To attract ecotourists, emphasise the sustainable elements of your accommodation.
- For more information on eco-lodges, see [The International Ecotourism Society](#).

2. Traveller profile

European nature and ecotourists are generally:

- well-educated
- well-travelled
- from higher socio-economic backgrounds

What motivates these tourists is the natural environment of the places they visit. They like to learn about the local communities that live there. There are three important types of natural and ecotourists:

**Older generation**

Nature tourism is especially popular with older Europeans, which are its largest target group. Tourists in this segment are between 50-70 years of age and their children have left home. Many are experienced travellers who enjoy natural, quiet environments and look for new experiences. They expect high value for money and are willing to pay more for authentic experiences. They
generally seek higher standards of comfort than younger age groups.

Tips:
- Focus on older tourists, as this is the largest segment for nature and ecotourism.
- Emphasise the unique, authentic features of your product in your marketing.
- Engage good and knowledgeable guides, as this segment is very interested in interpretation and education.
- Use both the Internet and traditional media for promotion.
- For more information on this segment, see our study on senior travel.

Younger tourists
18 to 44-year-olds are the second largest segment for nature and ecotourism. Most of them have travelled a lot and/or worked or studied abroad. They are increasingly interested in exploring new destinations further away. There are two groups of younger tourist:

High income, little time
These are young professionals with high incomes but limited time to travel. They are mostly between 31-44 years old. They often travel in couples, although there is also a singles market within this age group. The people in this group are looking for unusual ‘once-in-a-lifetime’ experiences. They want to fit as much into their holiday as possible. Comfort is important to them.

Smaller daily budgets, much more time
This group is mostly between 18-30 years old. Think of backpackers and gap year travellers. Their daily budgets are small but they travel over longer periods of time, anywhere between a month and a year. They choose cheaper accommodation, are keen to engage with local communities and experience local activities and products.

Giving back to the local community is especially important to ecotourists. They often combine their travel with volunteering activities on community or conservation projects. However, this so-called volun-tourism also poses risks, for example to local children and wildlife.

Tips:
- Develop a unique mix of accommodation and experiences, together with other local nature and ecotourism providers.
- Emphasise the unique, ‘once-in-a-lifetime‘ experiences in your promotion.
- Offer different options for accommodation and activities that young nature and ecotourists can combine. This way, they can create a personal travel package that meets their budget.
- Be careful when offering volun-tourism 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 has included additional criteria for tourism products with volunteer offerings.
Families with children
This is also an important, growing segment. Families are becoming more quality and price conscious. They seek high-quality facilities and the right balance of safety and fun. Their holidays should combine fun with cultural enrichment and higher-end experiences. All-inclusive holidays are especially popular among families, due to the convenience and control over expenditure. Eco-awareness already starts in school, making children very interested in ecotourism.

Tips:
- If you want to target families, offer family-friendly accommodation. For example, adjoining room options, a children’s programme, a playground 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 on families with older children, see our study on explorative tourism for families with children aged 12-18.

3. Which European markets offer opportunities for nature and ecotourism?
For statistics on European source markets, see our study on European demand for tourism in developing countries.

Popular nature and ecotourism destinations
According to industry experts, popular nature and ecotourism destinations include:

- Indonesia
- Thailand
- Costa Rica
- Ecuador
- Botswana
- Cabo Verde

Costa Rica, for example, has been very successful in nature tourism country branding. It is now an established nature tourism destination for many European travellers. Its main success factors were:

- a professional country website on Costa Rica with elaborate country information
- tourist guides, maps and multimedia
- increased online services, such as online booking tools
- a strong focus on sustainability
- active and continuous trade event promotion
- articles in flight magazines
- TV documentaries

Tips:
- Use Costa Rica’s approach as a good example to create a brand image for your destination.
Develop an interesting tour package through the region by linking various nature and eco-related tourism projects. This could include villages, accommodations, transport, attractions and activities. Look at Eco Benin, Botswana Tourism Organisation or Guyana Tourism for examples of such initiatives.

If you have a high-quality specialised nature tourism product, focus your promotion on this specific market. For example bird watching.

4. High-potential trends on the European market for nature and ecotourism

Authentic experiences
European tourists are increasingly interested in new, authentic experiences – also at non-traditional, long-haul destinations. In recent years, authenticity has become a major factor in tourism. This is not expected to change anytime soon. European tourists seek unique, meaningful experiences that they have not tried before. Many developing countries have great natural and cultural resources to offer such experiences.

Tip:
- Focus on the authenticity of your destination. Develop unique experiences that European tourists cannot find at home.

Interaction with local people and culture
European nature and ecotourists also like to discover the local culture and its people. To that end, they are keen to interact with locals. This trend is expected to continue in the coming years.

Some examples of activities they are interested in:
- visits to cultural heritage sites or local communities
- staying in an accommodation run by local people
- participating in workshops with locals
- educational activities

Tips:
- Include interaction with locals in your nature and ecotourism experiences.
- Also include local cultural elements in your nature and ecotourism offering. Traditional local food is a nice touch.

Increasing use of online research
European tourists 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 the 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 alive. 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, see our study on European tourism market trends.

5. What requirements should your nature and ecotourism product comply with to be allowed on the European market?

For information on requirements, see our study on what requirements your services should comply with to attract European tourists.

In addition, there are some voluntary safety standards for packages where nature and ecotourism meets adventure tourism.

Voluntary adventure tourism safety standards

Nature and ecotourism is closely related to adventure tourism. For more adventurous nature and ecotourism experiences, three ISO standards support safe adventure practices: 21101, 21102 and 21103. Additionally, some countries have their own voluntary standards. For instance, 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.

6. What competition will you face on the European market?

Competition in the nature and ecotourism market does not differ from the tourism market in general. For more information, see our study on what competition you will face on the European outbound tourism market.
7. Through what channels can you get your nature and ecotourism products on the European market?

Selecting smaller specialised tour operators

Smaller European tour operators specialised in nature, eco, adventure or community-based tourism offer the best opportunities, as well as tour operators specialised in your destination. You can identify them via trade associations, events and databases.

Some examples:

- **Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA)** - global trade organisation for the adventure travel industry. Organises the Adventure Travel World Summit. [Search for members.](#)
- **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. Organises the Ecotourism and Sustainable Tourism Conference. [Search for members.](#)
- **World Travel Market** - annual tourism trade event, November, London.

Generating direct sales

European nature and ecotourists increasingly book their holidays directly with service providers at the destination. To increase your chances of direct sales, you can promote your product on nature and ecotourism websites/portals such as the [International Ecotourism Club](#) and [Tourism Concern](#).

Also consider developing your own national or regional nature and ecotourism portal. Examples include:

- **ECOCV Cabo Verde**
- **Indecon Indonesia**

For an overview of the trade structure for tourism, see our study on [the channels and segments of the European tourism market](#).

8. What are the end market prices for nature and ecotourism products?

Tourists 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 is determined by three factors:

1. The exchange rate between the currency of the country of origin and that of the destination country.
2. The costs of transport to and from the destination country.
3. The price of goods and services the tourist 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% and 25%. Prices of holiday packages vary widely as they depend on a lot of factors, such as:

- availability
- destination
- modes of transport
- travel period
- number of travellers
- length of stay
- type of accommodation
- activities included
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 nature and ecotourism products via portals like Lonely Planet Nature & Wildlife.

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

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