EXPERT'S REPORT

UNITED NATIONS TOURISM

CHURKIN MOSCOW INTERNATIONAL MODEL UNITED NATIONS

ENSURING UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO CULTURAL HERITAGE AND CULTURAL TOURISM AS A FACTOR OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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1.INTRODUCTION

In 2015, the international community adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, establishing a global framework for addressing poverty, inequality and climate change[1]. The tourism sector is recognised as a powerful tool for development. As outlined in the UN Tourism report Tourism for Development, tourism can contribute to sustainable development across five key areas: sustainable economic growth; social inclusiveness, employment and poverty reduction; resource efficiency, environmental protection and climate change mitigation; cultural values, diversity and heritage; mutual understanding, peace and security[2].

Cultural tourism represents one of the largest and fastest-growing segments of the global tourism market. According to UN Tourism estimates, cultural tourism accounts for approximately 40 percent of all international travel[3]. This includes visits to cultural heritage sites, festivals, museums, theatres, gastronomic events and acquaintance with indigenous traditions.The significance of this segment is reflected in successive UNESCO declarations, including the Siem Reap Declaration on Tourism and Culture (2015)[4] and the Muscat Declaration (2017)[5], which recognise the interconnection between tourism and culture as a driver for the preservation of heritage, social and economic development.

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[1] United Nations. Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development [Electronic resource] : Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015. A/RES/70/1. – URL: https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/70/1 (Accessed: 06.09.2026).

[2] World Tourism Organization. "Tourism for Development – Volume I: Key Areas for Action." UNWTO, Madrid, 2018. DOI: 10.18111/9789284419722. URL: https://www.e-unwto.org/action/showBook?doi=10.18111%2F9789284419722 (Accessed: 6 September 2026).

[3] EXPERT OPINION: 'Cultural tourism could contribute to socio-economic development in SA' – UP professor [Electronic resource] / University of Pretoria. – 29 August 2024. – URL: https://www.up.ac.za/news/expert-opinion-cultural-tourism-could-contribute-socio-economic-development-sa-professor-0 (Accessed: 06.09.2026).

[4] UNESCO. *Siem Reap Declaration on Tourism and Culture – Building a New Partnership Model* [Electronic resource] : adopted at the UNWTO/UNESCO World Conference on Tourism and Culture, Siem Reap, Cambodia, 4-5 February 2015. – URL: https://whc.unesco.org/document/139482 (Accessed: 06.09.2026).

As cultural tourism continues to grow, its impact is increasingly felt in urban areas, where most cultural heritage sites are located and where visitor flows are concentrated. As highlighted in the UNESCO Global Report "Culture: Urban Future" (2016), culture lies at the heart of urban renewal and innovation[6]. By 2030, the world is projected to have 41 megacities, each home to more than 10 million people. Cultural diversity is becoming an integral part of most cities, creating both opportunities for creativity and challenges for coexistence. The cities of tomorrow must be human-centred and resilient, with culture at the heart of urban planning and redevelopment to ensure sustainability and improved quality of life for all.

Yet cultural tourism comes with a paradox. The forces driving it – more visitors, global travel, the search for authenticity – can also destroy what people come to see. Overtourism damages sites, erodes authenticity and displaces locals. Meanwhile, access is uneven. Disabled people, the elderly, rural residents and low-income groups still face barriers – physical, geographic and digital.

The report has three main objectives: to examine how universal access to cultural heritage can be achieved without compromising its preservation; to review which sustainability policies and management instruments have shown real results; to identify the remaining challenges and gaps.

The task of the Committee is to develop a final recommendation aligned with the priorities set out in the Conclusion: national strategies for sustainable cultural tourism based on the UNESCO Culture|2030 framework, support for culture as a stand-alone goal (SDG 18), interagency destination management councils, accessibility and sustainability indicators, community involvement in heritage management and investment in digital and physical accessibility.

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[5] UNESCO. Muscat Declaration on Tourism and Culture: Fostering Sustainable Development [Electronic resource] : adopted at the Second UNWTO/UNESCO World Conference on Tourism and Culture, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman, 11-12 December 2017. – URL: https://whc.unesco.org/document/167806 (Accessed: 06.09.2026).

[6] UNESCO. Culture: Urban Future – Global Report on Culture for Sustainable Urban Development [Electronic resource]. – Paris : UNESCO, 2016. – 303 p. – ISBN 978-92-3-100170-3. – URL: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245999 (Accessed: 06.09.2026).

1. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: CULTURAL TOURISM AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Defining Cultural Tourism

The understanding of cultural tourism has evolved considerably. Early definitions focused narrowly on tangible heritage – monuments, historic buildings and sites – and on tourists whose primary motivation was culture[7]. Over time, the concept has broadened to include intangible heritage, everyday culture, creative industries and living traditions[8]. The UN Tourism's 2017 definition marked this shift, describing cultural tourism as activity in which the visitor's essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions of a destination[9] .

In the updated Charter (2021/2022) of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), one of the most authoritative organisations in the field of cultural heritage conservation, the term "cultural tourism" is defined in the following way: "cultural heritage tourism refers to all tourism activities in heritage places and destinations, including the diversity and interdependence of their tangible, intangible, cultural, natural, past and contemporary dimensions[10]." Thus, based on the interconnection and interdependence of all aspects of cultural tourism, it can be concluded that a balanced approach to the development of cultural tourism is one of the tools that contributes to the achievement of the targets of several UN Sustainable Development Goals.

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[7] Šabanović, A. *Conceptual Evolution of Culture and Emergence of Cultural Tourism* [Electronic resource] / Spoznaja. – 2025. – P. 274–284. – URL: https://spoznaja.unze.ba/article/508/pdf (Accessed: 13.09.2026).
Richards, G. Cultural tourism: A review of recent research and trends [Electronic resource] / Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management. – 2018. – Vol. 36. – P. 12–21. – DOI: 10.1016/j.jhtm.2018.03.005. – URL: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1447677018300755 (Accessed: 13.09.2026).

[8] UN Tourism. *Workshop on Fashion and Cultural Tourism* [Electronic resource]. – Impactpool. – URL: https://www.impactpool.org/jobs/1232273 (Accessed: 13.09.2026).

[9] ICOMOS. *2022 ICOMOS International Cultural Heritage Tourism Charter* [Electronic resource] : adopted at the

[10] ICOMOS. 2022 ICOMOS International Cultural Heritage Tourism Charter [Electronic resource] : adopted at the ICOMOS Annual General Assembly (Bangkok, Thailand), November 2022. – URL: https://www.icomosictc.org/p/2022-icomos-international-cultural.html (Accessed: 11.09.2026).

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1.2 International Frameworks and Commitments

The protection of cultural heritage is ensured by a comprehensive system of international legal instruments.

Conventions establish obligations for states:

- **1972 World Heritage Convention** is the fundamental instrument for the protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage of outstanding universal value[11] .
- **2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage** extends protection to living traditions, oral expressions, performing arts, social practices, traditional crafts and knowledge[12] .
- **2005 Convention on Diversity of Cultural Expressions** recognises the dual nature of cultural goods and services as having both economic and cultural value[13] .
- **1954 Hague Convention** provides for the safeguarding of cultural heritage during armed conflicts[14] .
- **2001 Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage** extends protection to submerged heritage sites[15] .

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[11] UNESCO. Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage [Electronic resource] : adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO on 16 November 1972. – URL: https://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/ (Accessed: 06.09.2026).

[12] UNESCO. Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage [Electronic resource] : adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO on 17 October 2003. – URL: https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention (Accessed: 06.09.2026).

[13] UNESCO. Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions [Electronic resource] : adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO on 20 October 2005. – URL: https://en.unesco.org/creativity/convention (Accessed: 06.09.2026).

[14] UNESCO. *Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict* [Electronic resource] : adopted at The Hague on 14 May 1954. – URL: https://en.unesco.org/about-us/legal-affairs/convention-protection-cultural-property-event-armed-conflict (Accessed: 06.09.2026).

[15] UNESCO. Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage [Electronic resource] : adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO on 2 November 2001. – URL: https://en.unesco.org/about-us/legal-affairs/convention-protection-underwater-cultural-heritage (Accessed: 06.09.2026).

Declarations, unlike conventions, are not legally binding. They set out political commitments and reflect the consensus reached by the international community on a particular issue. While they do not create obligations for states, declarations often shape national policies and provide guidance for future action:

- **Siem Reap Declaration (2015)** was adopted at the first UNWTO/UNESCO World Conference. The Declaration sets out priorities for action in cultural tourism. It calls for new partnership models, recognising that culture and tourism often operate within disconnected government structures. The Declaration commits signatories to establishing integrated governance structures, promoting and protecting cultural heritage, fostering sustainable development paying special attention to culture and creating closer links between tourism, living culture and creative industries[16] .
- **Muscat Declaration (2017)** was adopted at the Second UNWTO/UNESCO World Conference on Tourism and Culture, held during the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development. This Declaration reaffirms the commitment to strengthening links between tourism and culture. It calls for cultural tourism policies that empower local communities and use innovative tourism models that advance sustainable development, host-guest interaction and cultural exchange[17] .

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[16] UNESCO. *Siem Reap Declaration on Tourism and Culture – Building a New Partnership Model* [Electronic resource] : adopted at the UNWTO/UNESCO World Conference on Tourism and Culture, Siem Reap, Cambodia, 4–5 February 2015. – URL: https://whc.unesco.org/document/139482 (Accessed: 06.09.2026).

[17] UNESCO. Muscat Declaration on Tourism and Culture: Fostering Sustainable Development [Electronic resource] : adopted at the Second UNWTO/UNESCO World Conference on Tourism and Culture, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman, 11–12 December 2017. – URL: https://whc.unesco.org/document/167806 (Accessed: 06.09.2026).

- **Hangzhou Declaration (2013)** was adopted at the UNESCO International Congress "Culture: Key to Sustainable Development" held in Hangzhou, China. It calls for the integration of culture into development policies and programmes, recognising it as a resource for achieving sustainable urban development, strengthening resilience to disasters, combating climate change and promoting environmental sustainability[18] .
- **The UNWTO Global Code of Ethics for Tourism** (1999, approved by the UN General Assembly in 2001) underlines that "tourism is a user of the cultural heritage of mankind and contributor to its enhancement[19]". This document presents a set of principles designed to guide sustainable and responsible tourism development.

Additionally, **The Guiding Principles for Sustainable Investment in Tourism**, jointly developed by UNCTAD and UN Tourism, align four dimensions of investment policymaking (governance, economic, socio-cultural and environmental) and acknowledge the vital role sustainable tourism can play in achieving the 2030 Agenda[20] .

Beyond these formal instruments, parallel efforts are being made to enhance the importance of culture within the global development framework. The #culture2030goal campaign, formed by global cultural networks including Culture Action Europe (CAE), the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) and the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) Committee on Culture, advocates for a more focused approach to integrating culture into policy planning.

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[18] UNESCO. *Hangzhou Declaration: Placing Culture at the Heart of Sustainable Development Policies* [Electronic resource] : adopted in Hangzhou, China, on 17 May 2013. – URL: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000221238 (Accessed: 06.09.2026).

[19] World Tourism Organization. *Global Code of Ethics for Tourism* [Electronic resource] : adopted by the UNWTO General Assembly in 1999, endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly in 2001. – URL: https://www.unwto.org/global-code-of-ethics-for-tourism (Accessed: 06.09.2026).

[20] UNCTAD and UN Tourism. *Guiding Principles for Sustainable Investment in Tourism* [Electronic resource]. – URL: https://unctad.org/publication/guiding-principles-sustainable-investment-tourism (Accessed: 06.09.2026).

A draft culture goal was presented at the MONDIACULT 2022 conference convened by UNESCO in Mexico City and further developed at the MONDIACULT 2025 conference in Barcelona[21] . This initiative reflects the growing recognition that culture deserves a distinct place alongside the existing 17 SDGs in the post-2030 development framework.

Finally, measuring progress requires tools. UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators provide a mechanism for measuring and monitoring the contribution of culture to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda[22] . The framework consists of 22 thematic indicators grouped into four dimensions corresponding to the three pillars of sustainable development, as well as the fourth dimension related to education, knowledge and skills in the cultural sphere. The framework aims to assess both the role of culture as a sector of activity and its contribution across different SDGs and policy areas.It has been implemented on a voluntary basis in countries and cities worldwide, including Jordan and the city of As-Salt, where a kick-off workshop was held in April 2025[23] . In Cabo Verde, the implementation was launched in March 2026 in Cidade Velha[24]. By 2026, 16 countries and 15 cities had committed to collecting data and measuring culture's contribution to sustainable development using this methodology. However, the framework remains voluntary.

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[21] UNESCO. MONDIACULT 2025 Declaration [Electronic resource] : adopted at the World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development, Barcelona, Spain, 2025. – URL: https://www.unesco.org/en/mondiacult2025 (Accessed: 06.09.2026).

[22] UNESCO. *UNESCO Thematic Indicators for Culture in the 2030 Agenda (Culture|2030 Indicators)* [Electronic resource]. – Paris : UNESCO, 2022. – 92 p. – URL: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381562 (Accessed: 06.09.2026).

[23] UNESCO. *Kick-Off workshop for the UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators in Jordan and the city of As-Salt* [Electronic resource]. – UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 28 March 2025. – URL: https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/2879 (Accessed: 13.09.2026).

[24] UNESCO. UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators launched in Cabo-Verde [Electronic resource]. – UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 23 April 2026. – URL: https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/2893 (Accessed: 13.09.2026).

Accessibility is treated there as just one dimension, without a standardised methodology[25] for measuring it across physical, digital, geographic and economic parameters. This limits its ability to track progress on universal access in a comparable way across countries.

2.CULTURAL TOURISM AS A FACTOR OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015, provides a comprehensive framework for action. The Agenda includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with 169 associated targets, which ensure balance between three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental[26]. Within this framework, the United Nations affirmed the mutual relationship between culture and sustainable development, acknowledging culture as one of the key dimensions of the SDGs. Since then, an increasing number of programmes and initiatives have emerged within the SDG framework, viewing culture and tourism as a means of achieving the global goals set by the international community for the period up to 2030. The following section examines this contribution in detail, focusing on the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable cultural tourism.

According to a report by Future Market Insights, an analytical and consulting company specializing in market research, the cultural tourism market is already valued at USD 1.30 trillion in 2026. It is projected to grow to USD 2.83 trillion by 2036[27]

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[26] United Nations. Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development [Electronic resource] : Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015. A/RES/70/1. – URL: https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/70/1 (Accessed: 06.09.2026).

[25] UNESCO. *Sixteen countries and fifteen cities are empowered to measure culture's contribution to sustainable development through the UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators* [Electronic resource]. – UNESCO,6 January 2026. – URL: https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/sixteen-countries-and-fifteen-cities-are-empowered-measure-cultures-contribution-sustainable (Accessed: 13.09.2026).

[27] Future Market Insights (FMI). Cultural Tourism Market Size, Market Forecast and Outlook By FMI [Electronic resource] : report. – URL: https://www.futuremarketinsights.com/reports/cultural-tourism-market (Accessed: 11.09.2026).

Official data from Choose Paris Region, the agency responsible for tourism development in Île-de-France, show that tourist revenues in the region reached a record high of nearly €24 billion in 2025[28] . Cultural tourism also brings significant financial inflows to the economies of Italy, Spain, China, the United States, and a number of other countries. The scale of these revenues opens up opportunities for large-scale projects, ranging from the restoration of historic monuments to the development of tourism infrastructure and the implementation of sustainable development programmes. Based on the data from reports on the significance of cultural tourism and the national revenues it generates, it can be concluded that cultural tourism is one of the fastest-growing markets, driving the economic development of culturally significant regions. Alongside these successful examples, there are regions that possess significant cultural tourism potential yet remain outside the mainstream tourist flows.

It should be noted that cultural tourism stimulates economic revitalization. A steady tourist flow contributes to the creation and maintenance of jobs in the service sector, encourages the development of small and medium-sized enterprises and increases tax and financial revenues to the budget, which in turn are channeled into the social and economic development of the region. Sustainable cultural tourism generates income and employment while ensuring a fair distribution of benefits. Tourism can contribute to poverty reduction directly through job creation and indirectly through taxes and fees aimed at combating poverty. The "Developing Local Communities through Sustainable Tourism Development Roadmap", jointly released by the World Tourism Alliance and UN Tourism in July 2025, emphasises that community-based tourism ensures alignment with local values, development needs and long-term plans[29] .

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[28] Choose Paris Region. *En 2025, l'Île-de-France établit un record historique avec près de 24 milliards d'euros de retombées touristiques* [Electronic resource] : communiqué de presse, 23 mars 2026. – URL: https://pro.visitparisregion.com/presse/presse/communiques-de-presse/communique-de-presse-bilan-annuel-2025-frequentation-touristique-a-paris-ile-de-france (Accessed: 11.09.2026).

[29] World Tourism Alliance and UN Tourism. Developing Local Communities through Sustainable Tourism Development Roadmap [Electronic resource]. – July 2025. – URL: https://www.wta-web.org/eng/news/news_545 (Accessed: 07.09.2026).

Sustainable cultural tourism strengthens local identity, promotes intercultural dialogue and social inclusion, in line with the principles set out in the Muscat[30] and Siem Reap Declarations[31]. It also minimises negative environmental impacts, including carbon emissions, waste and resource consumption. It promotes the reuse of historic buildings rather than new construction, supports sustainable transportation and integrates heritage protection with broader environmental goals.

The economic, social and environmental dimensions described above translate into direct and indirect contributions to a large part of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. In particular, SDG 8[32] calls for the promotion of sustainable tourism as a tool for job creation and support for local production. The latter, being an integral element of national culture, itself becomes an object of tourist interest, which creates additional incentives for the development of small and medium-sized enterprises. As for SDG 9[33], its targets of building resilient infrastructure and fostering innovation can be addressed, among other things, through the redistribution of cultural tourism flows. When tourist flows are directed to regions that previously remained outside the mainstream, these areas receive additional financial inflows that make it possible to modernise transport and social systems, which improves the quality of life of the population.

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[30] UNESCO. *Muscat Declaration on Tourism and Culture: Fostering Sustainable Development* [Electronic resource] : adopted at the Second UNWTO/UNESCO World Conference on Tourism and Culture, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman, 11–12 December 2017. – URL: https://whc.unesco.org/document/167806 (Accessed: 07.09.2026).

[31] UNESCO. *Siem Reap Declaration on Tourism and Culture – Building a New Partnership Model* [Electronic resource] : adopted at the UNWTO/UNESCO World Conference on Tourism and Culture, Siem Reap, Cambodia, 4–5 February 2015. – URL: https://whc.unesco.org/document/139482 (Accessed: 07.09.2026).

[32] United Nations. *Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for al*l [Electronic resource] : Sustainable Development Goal 8. – URL: https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal8 (Accessed: 11.09.2026).

[33] United Nations. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation [Electronic resource] : Sustainable Development Goal 9. – URL: https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal9 (Accessed: 11.09.2026).

Furthermore, SDG 11 [34] , which aims at upgrading housing conditions and ensuring access to safe public services, also benefits from sustainable tourism, as it provides the funds necessary for urban renewal and social development. Cultural tourism can also help achieve SDG 11.4[35] – the protection of the world's cultural and natural heritage. Alongside the financial returns from tourist flows, international interest in local culture and history reinforces local identity, which is itself a vital part of preserving global cultural heritage.

A striking example of cultural tourism as a driver of sustainable development is the World Bank's cultural tourism development project in Southern Albania (PIUTD)[36], which transformed a depressed region into a thriving tourist destination, stimulated private entrepreneurship, facilitated the return of former residents, and prevented further population outflows.
Moreover, the growth of the tourism sector has generated thousands of jobs with an inclusive character, which, among other things, directly relates to the targets of SDG 5[37](Gender Equality) and the expansion of economic opportunities for vulnerable groups. SDG 17[38] (Partnerships for the Goals) can be achieved, in part, by promoting intercultural dialogue, which itself is reinforced through engagement with local cultures during cultural tourism.

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[34] United Nations. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable [Electronic resource] : Sustainable Development Goal 11. – URL: https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal11 (Accessed: 11.09.2026).
[35] UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). *SDG 11.4.1 Indicators* [Electronic resource] : Monitoring progress toward safeguarding the world's cultural and natural heritage. – URL: https://www.uis.unesco.org/en/methods-and-tools/sdg114-indicators (Accessed: 11.09.2026).
[36] World Bank. *How Heritage Tourism Is Creating Jobs and Revitalizing Southern Albania* [Electronic resource] : 12 August 2025. – URL: https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2025/08/12/how-heritage-tourism-is-creating-jobs-and-revitalizing-southern-albania?cid=ECR_E_NewsletterWeekly_EN_EXT&deliveryName=DM260787 (Accessed: 11.09.2026).
[37] United Nations. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls [Electronic resource] : Sustainable Development Goal 5. – URL: https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5 (Accessed: 11.09.2026).
[38] United Nations. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development [Electronic resource] : Sustainable Development Goal 17. – URL: https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal17 (Accessed: 11.09.2026).

Thus, cultural tourism, despite its inherent negative consequences, can, under the condition of balanced management, serve as a powerful lever for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and for effectively lifting depressed and developing regions out of economic stagnation.

Beyond these, cultural tourism indirectly supports SDG 1[39] (poverty reduction), SDG 12[40] (responsible consumption and production), SDG 13[41] (climate action), and SDGs 14[42] and 15[43] (protection of aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems) through sustainable practices, community engagement, and environmental awareness.

The future of cultural tourism depends on a fundamental shift: moving beyond mass, standardized models towards people-centred approaches that safeguard heritage, empower communities and ensure long-term sustainability. This shift is reflected in the UN Tourism's commitment to advancing tourism as a direct and indirect contributor to each of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, with the sector serving as "a powerful tool for development, capable of addressing a wide range of global challenges including poverty, employment, climate change and environmental degradation"[44].

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[39] United Nations. End poverty in all its forms everywhere [Electronic resource] : Sustainable Development Goal 17. – URL: https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal1 (Accessed: 11.09.2026).

[40] United Nations. *Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns* [Electronic resource] : Sustainable Development Goal 12. – URL: https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal2 (Accessed: 11.09.2026).

[41] United Nations. *Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts* [Electronic resource] : Sustainable Development Goal 13. – URL: https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal3 (Accessed: 11.09.2026).

[42] United Nations. *Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development* [Electronic resource] : Sustainable Development Goal 14. – URL: https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4 (Accessed: 11.09.2026).

[43] United Nations. *Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels*
[Electronic resource] : Sustainable Development Goal 15. – URL: https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5 (Accessed: 11.09.2026).

[44]UN Tourism. Tourism in the 2030 Agenda [Electronic resource]. – URL: https://www.untourism.int/tourism-in-2030-agenda (Accessed: 07.09.2026).

3.KEY CHALLENGES AND SYSTEMIC GAPS IN CULTURAL TOURISM

3.1 Practical Challenges to Universal Access

The key challenge of cultural heritage management in the context of growing tourism is finding balance between openness and protection, between infrastructure and authenticity. As recognised in the Siem Reap Declaration, sustainable tourism can be a key factor in the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage, but if poorly managed, tourism can threaten this heritage. The Declaration calls for impact assessment procedures prior to the approval of tourism projects related to World Heritage Sites[45] .

This tension is particularly acute at sites inscribed on the World Heritage List[46]. World Heritage status attracts visitors and funding for conservation. However, it also exposes these sites to the risks of mass tourism. The Muscat Declaration recognises that uncontrolled tourism can harm the very heritage upon which it is based and calls for promoting sustainable tourism management within the principles of effective visitor management, rational use of resources and quality visitor experiences[47] .

Venice is a shining example of the tension between accessibility and preservation. The city has introduced entrance fees for visitors and restricted cruise ship access to the San Marco basin. These measures aim to manage tourist flows and mitigate the environmental and social impacts of overtourism while preserving the city's fragile heritage. At the same time, such fees can limit access to heritage for those unable to pay, illustrating the very tension between openness and protection that lies at the heart of this debate.

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[45] UNESCO. Siem Reap Declaration on Tourism and Culture – Building a New Partnership Model [Electronic resource] : adopted at the UNWTO/UNESCO World Conference on Tourism and Culture, Siem Reap, Cambodia, 4–5 February 2015. – URL: https://whc.unesco.org/document/139482 (Accessed: 07.09.2026).

[46] UNESCO. *World Heritage List* [Electronic resource] / UNESCO World Heritage Centre. – URL: https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/ (Accessed: 14.09.2026).

[47] UNESCO. *Muscat Declaration on Tourism and Culture: Fostering Sustainable Development* [Electronic resource] : adopted at the Second UNWTO/UNESCO World Conference on Tourism and Culture, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman, 11–12 December 2017. – URL: https://whc.unesco.org/document/167806 (Accessed: 07.09.2026).

A similar potential for such tensions exists in Saint Petersburg. The city is a major cultural tourism destination. In 2025, the city received 12.5 million tourists, which is 7% more than in 2024 and above the pre-pandemic level of 10.4 million in 2019. Tourism revenues exceeded 843 billion rubles, and the share of visitors travelling for a specific event grew from 3.7% to 5.4%[48] . Academic research on overtourism in Saint Petersburg identifies spatial and temporal factors that could generate acute pressures: most tourist infrastructure is concentrated in the historic centre, and visitor numbers during the high season (April-September) approximately three times exceed those during the low season[49]. This concentration of visitor activity, particularly during events such as the White Nights festival, creates conditions in which the risks associated with overtourism - overcrowding of infrastructure and pressure on heritage sites - could emerge if visitor flows are not carefully managed. At the same time, tourism revenues can also be used to preserve cultural heritage, for example, by funding measures to improve accessibility for people with disabilities and the elderly or by covering the costs of maintaining historic sites.

The World Bank's sustainable tourism projects demonstrate that investment in infrastructure, community development and heritage preservation can mitigate these challenges. The Indonesia Tourism Development Project improved access to water for 570,000 people, created over 540,000 square metres of non-motorised space and attracted over $870 million in private investment while preserving cultural and natural heritage[50] Seasonality is a structural feature of many tourist destinations. Visitor flows are concentrated during short peak periods, creating economic instability as infrastructure is used inefficiently during off-peak seasons, incomes fluctuate and local communities face uncertainty when planning their lives.

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[48] Safiullin, A. Waiting for the Foreign Guest [Electronic resource] / Russian Union of Tourism Industry — North-West. — 30 January 2026. — URL: https://rstnw.ru/v-ozhidanii-inostrannogo-gostya/4/ (Accessed: 26.09.2026).

[49] Overtourism in Megalopolises: The Case of St. Petersburg // IGI Global. – 2020. – Chapter 7. – URL: https://www.igi-global.com/viewtitlesample.aspx?id=250492 (Accessed: 26.09.2026).

[50] World Bank. Sustainable Tourism Projects: Indonesia Tourism Development Project [Electronic resource]. – URL: https://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2020/03/02/sustainable-tourism-in-indonesia (Accessed: 07.09.2026).

At the same time, peak loads on heritage sites during summer months increase significantly.

The Guiding Principles for Sustainable Investment in Tourism note that uncontrolled growth can create challenges such as environmental degradation and socio-cultural decline, and call for building a tourism sector based on sustainable development principles[51] . To ensure sustainability, seasonality must be addressed by diversifying the range of experiences available, developing year-round cultural programming and targeting marketing efforts to the off-season.

Another practical challenge is the inequality of access to cultural heritage. Access to cultural heritage is a fundamental aspect of the right to participate in cultural life, recognised in Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights[52] and Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights[53]. This right is also reflected in the 2030 Agenda, which envisages "a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity" where "the needs of the most vulnerable are met[54]". This commitment applies to all groups, including people with disabilities. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Article 30) affirms their right to participate in cultural life on an equal basis with others[55].

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[51] UNCTAD and UN Tourism. Guiding Principles for Sustainable Investment in Tourism [Electronic resource]. – URL: https://unctad.org/publication/guiding-principles-sustainable-investment-tourism (Accessed: 07.09.2026).

[52] United Nations. Universal Declaration of Human Rights [Electronic resource] : adopted by the General Assembly on 10 December 1948. A/RES/217A(III). – Art. 27. – URL: https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights (Accessed: 13.09.2026).

[53] United Nations. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights [Electronic resource] : adopted by the General Assembly on 16 December 1966. – Art. 15(1)(a). – URL: https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights (Accessed: 13.09.2026).

[54] United Nations. Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development [Electronic resource] : Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015. A/RES/70/1. – URL: https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/70/1 (Accessed: 07.09.2026).

[55] United Nations. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [Electronic resource] : adopted by the General Assembly on 13 December 2006. A/RES/61/106. – URL: https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html (Accessed: 07.09.2026).

The 2030 Agenda recognises that "people who are vulnerable must be empowered" and that "there are enormous disparities of opportunity, wealth and power[56]". In the context of cultural heritage, these disparities manifest themselves in three forms:

- **Physical accessibility.** Many heritage sites remain inaccessible to people with disabilities, the elderly and other groups. In Bukhara, Uzbekistan, the Ark Fortress and the Kalyan Minaret are accessible only by steep stairs. Hotels located in historic buildings often lack elevators and ramps. The UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators framework considers accessibility as a key dimension for assessing inclusion and participation in cultural life[57].
- **Geographic distribution of tourist flows.** Tourist flows are concentrated in a limited number of popular destinations, while numerous cultural heritage sites remain little-visited and under-resourced. This deepens regional disparities and underestimates the potential of lesser-known destinations. The SPOT project, funded by the EU's Horizon 2020 program, found that rural and remote areas can turn their remoteness into an advantage through cultural heritage preservation[58]. Because these areas were often bypassed by industrial development and mass tourism, their traditional architecture, local crafts and lifestyles have survived in their original forms. This preserved heritage becomes the very asset that attracts visitors seeking authentic experiences away from overcrowded cities. The SPOT project also developed the SPOT-IT decision-support tool, which helps local authorities, site managers and community organisations assess the potential of such areas by mapping cultural sites, infrastructure and environmental vulnerabilities.

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[56] United Nations. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* [Electronic resource] : Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015. A/RES/70/1. – URL: https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/70/1 (Accessed: 07.09.2026).

[57] UNESCO. UNESCO Thematic Indicators for Culture in the 2030 Agenda (Culture|2030 Indicators) [Electronic resource]. – Paris : UNESCO, 2022. – 92 p. – URL: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381562 (Accessed: 07.09.2026).

[58] European Commission. SPOT Project – Social and innovative Platform On cultural Tourism and its potential towards deepening Europeanisation [Electronic resource] : Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Action, Grant Agreement No. 870644. – CORDIS. – URL: https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/870644 (Accessed: 07.09.2026).

- **Digital divide.** Unequal access to information and technology widens gaps between regions and population groups. While digital tools can improve accessibility, their benefits are unevenly distributed, particularly in developing countries and rural areas.

3.2 Systemic Gaps in Ensuring Universal Access

Despite the recognition of cultural tourism as a factor of sustainable development, the implementation of the principle of universal access to heritage faces a number of systemic problems. Four key gaps can be identified.

The first gap concerns the lack of a unified system of accessibility and inclusiveness indicators. There is currently no universal set of indicators that could measure how accessible cultural heritage and tourism are for all groups of the population. The UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators[59] framework does not resolve this issue. Accessibility is treated there as just one dimension, without a standardised methodology for measuring it across physical, digital, geographic and economic parameters.

The second gap is the lack of long-term research on the social and environmental impacts of tourism. Any form of tourism leaves its mark on the host region. Tourist flows have both positive and negative effects. In particular, tourism can lead to rising prices for housing and goods, the displacement of local residents from historic centres, the commercialisation of culture, and increased pressure on ecosystems. At the same time, research in these areas requires long-term observation and long-term study. Today, academic research is dominated by studies of short-term effects[60], which is due to the difficulty of organising multi-year observations, the high cost of such research, and the lack of sustainable funding.

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[59] UNESCO. *Culture|2030 Indicators* [Electronic resource]. – 19 November 2019. – URL: https://whc.unesco.org/en/culture2030indicators/ (Accessed: 11.09.2026).

[60] López-Vera, B. M., & Pelegrín-Entenza, N. Methodological Reflection on Sustainable Tourism in Protected Natural Areas [Electronic resource] // Sustainability. – 2025. – Vol. 17, No. 14. – Art. 6558. – URL: https://doi.org/10.3390/su17146558 (Accessed: 11.09.2026).

[61] UNESCO. *Urban Tourism: Policies and Governance for More Sustainable, Inclusive, Creative, and Resilient Cities* [Electronic resource] – URL: https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/urban-tourism-policies-and-governance-more-sustainable-inclusive-creative-and-resilient-cities (Accessed: 11.09.2026).

The third gap relates to poor interagency cooperation in cultural tourism management. The implementation of cultural tourism requires interagency coordination, yet in practice it is managed on a sectoral basis. This creates gaps. For example, accessibility projects do not take transport connectivity into account, digitalisation ignores digital illiteracy and the lack of infrastructure among vulnerable groups, and urban planning decisions can block familiar approaches to heritage sites. Such coordination is critical for inclusiveness and for achieving SDG 10 (reduced inequalities) and SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities). Without it, even well-designed departmental measures do not ensure genuine universal access to heritage[61]. One of the most illustrative examples of how a lack of coordination between different agencies leads to serious problems is Mamallapuram, India. The growth of tourism has caused traffic congestion, parking shortages, and waste accumulation around UNESCO monuments, since transport, heritage preservation, and municipal services are managed by different agencies, between which there is no coordination. In particular, the rising tourist flow has led to rubbish accumulation around key monuments and a shortage of essential urban services, such as parking, restrooms and waste collection[62]. Another example related to digitalisation is the Taxila Museum in Pakistan (UNESCO cultural heritage site), where the digitisation of the collections was held up because the federal and provincial authorities had never formally transferred the assets. As a result, provincial staff lacked the legal authority to open the storage rooms without a federal representative present[63].

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[62] UrbanPost. *Mamallapuram Heritage Mobility Plan Targets Traffic Relief* [Electronic resource] : news article. – 24 July 2026. – URL: https://urbanacres.in/mamallapuram-heritage-mobility-plan-targets-traffic-relief/ (Accessed: 11.09.2026).

[63] Dawn. *Digitising a national heritage* [Electronic resource] // Dawn. – 2026. – 19 July. – URL: https://www.dawn.com/news/2016343/digitising-a-national-heritage (accessed: 11.09.2026).

The fourth gap concerns legal and institutional barriers to access to world cultural heritage. Along with internal restrictions, access to cultural heritage can also be blocked at the international level. Visa regimes, entry restrictions, political instability and sanctions create barriers, making the principle of universal access difficult to achieve in practice. Even with sufficient financial resources, citizens of certain countries may find access to World Cultural Heritage sites, which formally belong to all humanity (World Heritage Convention[64]), blocked due to geopolitical tensions. For instance, within the framework of EU sanctions policy, the simplified visa regime was suspended[65], which resulted in higher costs, longer processing times and a greater proportion of refusals for applicants (Russian citizens, in particular). This has created new barriers to access to cultural heritage.

4.SOLUTIONS AND WAYS FORWARD

In 2015, the United Nations affirmed the mutual relationship between culture and sustainable development, acknowledging culture as one of key dimensions of the Sustainable Development Goals[66]. Since then, an increasing number of programmes and initiatives have emerged within the SDG framework, viewing culture and tourism as a means of achieving the global goals set by the international community for the period up to 2030.

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[64] UNESCO. Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage [Electronic resource] : adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO at its seventeenth session, Paris, 16 November 1972. – URL: https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-concerning-protection-world-cultural-and-natural-heritage (Accessed: 11.09.2026).

[65] РИА Новости. *Соглашение об упрощенном визовом режиме ЕС и России прекратило действовать* [Electronic resource] : news article – 2022. – URL: https://ria.ru/20220912/vizy-1816069268.html (Accessed: 11.09.2026).

[66] United Nations. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 22 December 2015: 70/214. Culture and sustainable development [Electronic resource]. – A/RES/70/214, 26 February 2016. – URL: https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/70/214 (Accessed: 11.09.2026).

4.1 "Urban Solutions" programme

"Urban Solutions"[67] is a programme, launched in August 2025 by UNESCO, UN Tourism and UN-Habitat to promote culture-driven sustainable urban tourism. The programme offers seven practical solutions for local governments, communities and visitors, aimed at managing cultural tourism as a tool for sustainable urban development and ensuring the sustainable, inclusive and balanced development of cities[68]. They include: cultural heritage preservation and promotion (safeguarding tangible and intangible heritage while balancing development and conservation); community-centred tourism development (empowering local communities to participate in decision-making and manage tourism initiatives); creative urban spaces and regeneration (integrating public art and cultural spaces into urban planning); a sustainable cultural economy (supporting cultural and creative industries and promoting local products); environmental and cultural synergy (integrating environmental sustainability into tourism planning and avoiding greenwashing); cultural education and exchange (establishing cultural centres and educational programmes); and digital cultural innovation (investing in digital infrastructure and inclusive platforms to expand access to cultural content)[69].

In the joint report by these organizations, examples of successful implementation of the proposed solutions in practice are provided. For example, in 2023, the local authorities of Cebu City in the Philippines launched the Cebu City Heritage District initiative, aimed at preserving the historical and cultural heritage of central Cebu, as well as its sustainable development and promotion as a tourist destination.

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[67] UNESCO. *UNESCO, UN Tourism and UN-Habitat launch Urban Solutions on Culture-Driven Sustainable Urban Tourism* [Electronic resource] : article, 25 August 2025. – URL: https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-un-tourism-and-un-habitat-launch-urban-solutions-culture-driven-sustainable-urban-tourism (Accessed: 11.09.2026).

[68] UNESCO, UN Tourism and UN-Habitat. *Urban Solutions: Culture-Driven Sustainable Urban Tourism* [Electronic resource] : joint report. – August 2025. – URL: https://www.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2025/08/Urban%20Solutions_Culture-driven%20Sustainable%20Urban%20Tourism_EN.pdf (Accessed: 11.09.2026)

[69] Ibid.

Within the framework of this initiative, the goals are the preservation and restoration of cultural heritage, economic development and support for small and medium-sized businesses, and increasing the interest of local residents and visiting tourists in the historical component of the city. To manage the goals, the Cebu City Heritage District Council was created, which oversees the implementation of the noted goals. The Cebu City Heritage District is a comprehensive programme that includes thematic areas. For example, a network of 50 creative hubs, including makerspaces, coworking spaces, bakeries, and cafes, designed to develop experimental tourism (The Creative Cebu Loop) is being implemented within its framework[70]. The Cebu Heritage Awards[71] (2023) was also established to encourage the preservation of cultural heritage. All this has led to a comprehensive renewal of the urban environment: a project for underground cable laying has been initiated in the historic centre to eliminate visual pollution and plans for pedestrianization of streets are being developed. The implementation of these measures is intended not only to preserve the historical appearance but also to stimulate local commerce and make the area convenient for everyday life.

The third recommendation (Creative Urban Spaces and Regeneration) finds confirmation in Wuhan, China, where the greenway project has brought positive changes into tourism. The Greenway is a continuous network of pedestrian and cycling routes around the large urban East Lake (Donghu). According to the joint report, since its opening, the greenway has helped lower local temperatures, ease traffic congestion, improve cultural tourism, and reconnect city residents with nature, which directly aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and SDG 13 (Climate Action).

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[70] UNESCO Creative Cities Network. Reporting Exercise 2024: Cebu City [Electronic resource] : membership monitoring report. – 2024. – URL: https://www.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2025/04/Cebu%20City_Monitoring_Report_2024.pdf (Accessed: 11.09.2026).

[71] Cebu Insights. *City Government Readies for the 2025 Cebu Heritage Awards* [Electronic resource] : news article. – 25 April 2025. – URL: https://cebuinsights.com/news/2025-cebu-heritage-awards/ (Accessed: 11.09.2026).

The seventh recommendation (Digital Cultural Innovation) is illustrated by the Dubai example, UAE, where the city has transferred a significant part of its museum experience into digital format, providing open access to virtual tours of museums and heritage sites. As part of the digital transformation of the cultural sector, online initiatives were also launched, including e-learning courses. This meets the objectives of SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and also indirectly contributes to the achievement of SDG 5 (Gender Equality), as it expands access to educational and cultural resources for all population groups, including women.

The report also cites other successful cases of urban tourism. In Africa (Cape Town, South Africa), the city's tourism office launched an online platform that directs visitors to eco-hotels, restaurants, and local artisans whose activities reduce environmental impact. In Italy (Bergamo), a 1,000-hour course for young professionals on the valorisation of local dairy products is being implemented; this strengthens gastronomic tourism and helps preserve the quality of the local cuisine. In Japan (Kanazawa), the city's sustainable tourism plan combines the promotion of traditional crafts and local food with measures to address the problem of overcrowded tourist flows.

4.2 The Role of Marketing in the Development of Cultural Tourism

State support and a well-designed advertising campaign play a major role in the development of cultural tourism and the revitalisation of depressed regions. A vivid example of this is the town of Plyos, Russia. Plyos is a small town on the banks of the Volga River, located in the Ivanovo Region, which has long been considered a depressed region. Since 2005, active marketing of the town has been underway: the "Hidden Russia" project was launched to preserve and revive the historical appearance of Plyos, a reserve town with 19th-century architectural monuments, merchants' mansions and carved houses.

Today, Plyos hosts annual festivals and exhibitions, including the International Fashion Festival "Plyos on the Volga. Linen Palette", the Chaliapin Dacha Festival, and the town also serves as a venue for the "Choral Ring of Russia" project. Plyos is also home to the IKRA Gastronomic Theatre, which offers dinner in the chef's table format, turning it into a gastronomic performance based on the culinary traditions of the Volga region.

This boosts interest in Russian cuisine and attracts tourists from all over the country. Thus, a well-executed promotion campaign has become a tool for attracting cultural tourism. According to experts from the Russian Union of Travel Industry (RUTI), Plyos has entered the top 10 most popular small towns in Russia among tourists[72]. Moreover, according to the index compiled by the Ministry of Construction of Russia, Plyos is among the top 10 most comfortable small towns in Russia[73]. The town is actively developing a comfortable urban environment: children's and sports grounds, walking areas and beaches are being created. The Plyos case study demonstrates the contribution of cultural tourism to achieving several United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. In particular, the development of tourism in Plyos directly contributes to Target 8.9 ("Develop and implement strategies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products") and Target 11.4 ("Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage"). The modernisation of supporting infrastructure (gas pipelines, water supply and sewage networks, and the construction of a pier for cruise ships) within the Plyos tourist and recreational cluster[74] illustrates the implementation of Target 9.1 ("Develop quality, reliable, sustainable and resilient infrastructure). The creation of jobs and support for local producers indirectly contribute to SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by helping to develop a depressed territory.

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[72] Министерство культуры Российской Федерации. Плес возглавил рейтинг малых городов России, популярных у туристов [Electronic resource] : новость. – 6 октября 2017. – URL: https://culture.gov.ru/press/news/ples-vozglavil-reyting-malykh-gorodov-rossii-popul20171006162701/ (дата обращения: 11.09.2026).

[73] Министерство строительства и жилищно-коммунального хозяйства Российской Федерации. *Индекс качества городской среды 2024* [Electronic resource] : отчет. – 2024. – URL: https://www.minstroyrf.gov.ru/upload/iblock/f08/fnhjn9abu904fi33hffykyal93qoyua5/250331_INDEX_A4.pdf (дата обращения: 11.09.2026).

[74] Правительство Ивановской области. Постановление от 06.12.2017 № 455-п «Об утверждении государственной программы Ивановской области "Развитие культуры и туризма в Ивановской области"» [Electronic resource] : (ред., утратившая силу 02.04.2019). – URL: https://www.glavbukh.ru/npd/edoc/81_8811050 (дата обращения: 11.09.2026).

Another example of successful marketing for a depressed region is the municipality of Stigliano, Italy. According to the data from the Interreg Europe website[75], a European Union programme for interregional cooperation, the municipality was experiencing severe depopulation, along with the decline of its historic centre and the loss of territorial identity. To address these problems, the International Public Art Festival AppARTEngo was launched in 2017, with the aim of revitalising the area through art and halting the outflow of young people from small settlements. The joint efforts of local residents made it possible to implement a whole range of urban projects, including the restoration of abandoned areas, the revival of neglected green spaces, the creation of thematic cultural parks, the completion of routes dedicated to history and art, and the restoration of public and private buildings. Creativity here serves as a mechanism for restoring historical memory, strengthening social ties, and activating citizen participation. Currently, Stigliano has around 72 murals and artistic installations, turning the commune into an open-air exhibition and revitalising cultural tourism[76]. Thus, Stigliano's revitalisation through public art contributes to SDG 8 (Economic growth), SDG 11 (Sustainable cities), and SDG 17 (Partnerships).

There are still quite a few examples of successful marketing campaigns that have led to an improvement in the life of a region. Among them is the Finnish community of Puolanka in the Kainuu region, which attracted interest in its area through the idea of “the most pessimistic town in the world”[77]. Belogradchik in Bulgaria works through event tourism marketing: the town hosts a hot air balloon festival.

Thus, an advertising campaign based on the advantages, cultural and national characteristics of a region can help bring a depressed region onto a positive trajectory of economic development, enhance its cultural significance, and also contribute to the preservation and restoration of historical and natural wealth.

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[75] Ibid.

[76] Culture for Resilience. *The most pessimistic town in the world* [Electronic resource]. – Published 25 April 2025. – URL: https://www.cultureforresilience.eu/tools_and_methods/the-most-pessimistic-town-in-the-world/ (Accessed: 11.09.2026).

4.3 Community-based tourism

Community-based tourism is a form of tourism in which local communities, represented by ethnic minorities or residents of remote rural areas, are actively involved in the organisation and provision of tourism services. The essence of this type of tourism lies in immersing travellers in the traditional way of life, culture, daily routines and crafts of a particular community. In this case, tourism is oriented towards the benefit of the host community: it supports its development, the preservation of cultural identity, and sustainable coexistence with nature.

Community-based tourism is especially developed in Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In Latin America, community-based tourism is developing in southeastern Mexico, in the Maya region. The project is implemented with the support of UNESCO and five state governments, and is based on the principles of inclusiveness, heritage preservation, and direct distribution of economic benefits among local communities[78]. Tourism products and routes are sold through local communities, which reduces the role of large tour operators. This allows a larger share of the profits to remain in the hands of the host community, thereby improving the well-being of local communities. Community-based tourism here is actively supported at the state level. In particular, in March 2026, Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum signed the Declaration on Public Interest in Community Tourism, which enshrined the principles of sustainability, community management, and fair distribution of benefits.

In Southeast Asia, elements of ethnic tourism were included in the UNESCO programme implemented in Vietnam in 2021-2025 – “Trang An – a living heritage”.

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[78] UNESCO. Mexican Maya communities strengthen sustainable, cultural, and community-based tourism with UNESCO [Electronic resource] : news article, 30 April 2025. – URL: https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/mexican-maya-communities-strengthen-sustainable-cultural-and-community-based-tourism-unesco (Accessed: 11.09.2026)

This is a programme aimed at preserving the UNESCO World Heritage site, with a particular emphasis on introducing visitors to the culture of the local population and providing economic assistance after the drop in tourist flows caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The project's goal was to promote sustainable tourism fully aligned with heritage preservation and its values, as well as to build local capacities in heritage-friendly business. The final report[79] records the following results: over 180 people completed training programmes; 52 small and medium-sized enterprises received support and developed 20 heritage-related products; digital tools for promoting the area were created. Direct beneficiaries numbered 5,432 people, of whom 48% were women and 8% were youth under 24. The project's events attracted more than 5,000 visitors.

Community-based tourism programmes also exist in China, Costa Rica, Bolivia, and a number of other countries. The development of this type of tourism also aligns with the goals and targets of the SDGs. Ethnic tourism projects are consistent with sustainable tourism strategies in various countries and make a direct contribution to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in particular contributing to SDGs 8, 11 and 12.

4.4 Tools for Ensuring Universal Access to Cultural Heritage and Tourism

Digital technologies offer powerful tools for expanding access to cultural heritage. Mobile applications, augmented and virtual reality (AR/VR), QR codes with multilingual information and GIS platforms can significantly improve visitor experience and reduce the burden on on-site staff. Greece has developed a digital ecosystem, "Hellenic Heritage", linking over more than 100 cultural heritage sites across the country. Virtual tours and 3D models provide access for those unable to visit in person, including people with disabilities and those living in remote areas. The SPOT-IT tool, developed as part of the EU-funded SPOT project, analyses the potential for cultural tourism in different regions, helping stakeholders assess social, ethnic, political and environmental challenges[80] .

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[80] European Commission. SPOT Project – Social and innovative Platform On cultural Tourism and its potential towards deepening Europeanisation [Electronic resource] : Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Action, Grant Agreement No. 870644. – CORDIS. – URL: https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/870644 (Accessed: 07.09.2026).

However, a key principle is that technology should remove barriers, not create new ones. Applications designed for persons with disabilities should include features such as route planning for wheelchair users, audio descriptions for visually impaired visitors and simplified interfaces for older adults.

Removing physical barriers to accessing heritage sites requires a comprehensive approach to infrastructure design and investment. Universal design should become a mandatory standard for new and renovated tourism infrastructure. This includes ramps, lifts, tactile flooring, accessible restrooms and audiovisual aids. Where physical changes to authentic structures are impossible, temporary solutions such as removable ramps and lifts should be used. Where physical access is completely unachievable, virtual alternatives should be provided. Transportation infrastructure is equally important: low-floor buses, accessible parking spaces and bus stops are critical for enabling access to heritage sites. The World Bank's research on Kyoto demonstrates how the city has aligned tourism, culture and community development, creating a model that has been widely promoted across the world[81] .

The involvement of local communities is fundamental to both heritage preservation and the long-term sustainability of tourism. UNESCO emphasises that communities are the creators, keepers and transmitters of heritage and should be at the centre of conservation policies. The Siem Reap Declaration stresses the need to consider the aspirations of host communities in determining and managing the use of tangible and intangible culture[82] .

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[81] World Bank Group. *Tokyo Development Learning Center: Kyoto* [Electronic resource]. – URL: https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/tokyo-development-learning-center/partnership/kyoto (Accessed: 07.09.2026).

[82] UNESCO. Siem Reap Declaration on Tourism and Culture – Building a New Partnership Model [Electronic resource] : adopted at the UNWTO/UNESCO World Conference on Tourism and Culture, Siem Reap, Cambodia, 4–5 February 2015. – URL: https://whc.unesco.org/document/139482 (Accessed: 07.09.2026).

Community participation takes multiple forms: decision-making (residents should have a voice in how heritage is managed, presented and promoted), economic participation (local residents can benefit directly from tourism through employment as guides, artisans, hospitality staff and suppliers) and protection of culture (communities are the authentic custodians of living heritage). The "Developing Local Communities through Sustainable Tourism Development Roadmap", jointly released by UN Tourism and the World Tourism Alliance in July 2025, provides a practical framework for community-based tourism. It emphasises that involving local communities in tourism ensures that development reflects their values, meets their needs and supports their long-term goals, while also making the industry more resilient and advancing the 2030 Agenda[83] .

CONCLUSION

This analysis shows that universal access to cultural tourism is not only a matter of heritage preservation but also a necessity for countries, since the development of cultural tourism programmes enables host countries to stimulate economic growth, diversify the economy and provide funding and resources for heritage preservation. In addition, cultural tourism also contributes to strengthening national and local identity through the preservation of intangible culture (in particular, traditions, crafts and language), which may be lost under the pressure of globalisation. The development of such projects is especially important for developing countries. Here, cultural tourism can become a tool for poverty reduction, empowerment of local communities, including women and youth, as well as an incentive for modernising transport, digital, and social infrastructure.

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[83] World Tourism Alliance and UN Tourism. *Developing Local Communities through Sustainable Tourism Development Roadmap* [Electronic resource]. – July 2025. – URL: https://www.wta-web.org/eng/news/news_545 (Accessed: 07.09.2026).

Access to cultural tourism also contributes to the formation of strong international and cultural ties, which are necessary for achieving SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). That is why ensuring universal access to cultural heritage and cultural tourism should be considered one of the key factors in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

Yet ensuring universal access to cultural heritage and cultural tourism remains one of the unresolved challenges of sustainable development. There is still no unified system that would make access universal and tourism sustainable. The growth of cultural tourism does not by itself guarantee sustainability. Sustainable models emerge when economic benefits are combined with heritage preservation, community engagement and environmental limits. This is what distinguishes sustainable models from mass tourism, which over time destroys its own foundation, which is heritage and authenticity.

Closing this gap requires a set of measures. At the policy level, countries need to develop national strategies for sustainable cultural tourism based on the UNESCO Culture|2030 framework and support the initiative to include culture as a stand-alone goal (SDG 18) in the post-2030 agenda. The effectiveness of such strategies, however, depends on coordinated governance, which means creating interagency destination management councils with representatives from culture, tourism, transport, urban planning, and social protection. Infrastructure should aim to develop digital and physical accessibility of heritage sites and create year-round offerings that help reduce seasonal fluctuations. A key condition for sustainability is the involvement of local communities in heritage management and revenue sharing. Finally, real progress can be assessed through a system of accessibility and sustainability indicators at the local, national, and international levels.

According to the UN General Assembly resolution A/RES/78/260[84], 2027 has been proclaimed the International Year of Sustainable and Resilient Tourism.

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[84] United Nations. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 26 February 2024: 78/260. International Year of Sustainable and Resilient Tourism, 2027 [Electronic resource]. – A/RES/78/260, 6 March 2024. – URL: https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/78/260 (Accessed: 11.09.2026).

This gives additional momentum to the development of cultural tourism within the 2030 Agenda, helping to draw attention to existing problems, mobilise resources, and launch systemic changes. To benefit from it, decisions on coordination, metrics, and community participation ought to be made now. Cultural tourism can contribute to sustainable development, but only if access to heritage is viewed as a right rather than a privilege.

GLOSSARY

Accessibility – the extent to which cultural heritage sites, information and services are available to all people, including people with disabilities, older persons and other groups. In the context of this report, accessibility has physical, digital, geographic and economic dimensions.

Agenda-2030 – a global action plan adopted by UN member states in 2015, which includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Community-based tourism – a form of tourism in which local communities, represented by ethnic minorities or residents of remote rural areas, are actively involved in the organisation and provision of tourism services.

Cultural heritage – the legacy of physical artefacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations. It includes tangible heritage (monuments, buildings, sites) and intangible heritage (traditions, oral expressions, performing arts, social practices, traditional crafts and knowledge).

Cultural heritage tourism – all tourism activities in heritage places and destinations, including the diversity and interdependence of their tangible, intangible, cultural, natural, past and contemporary dimensions. (Definition given by ICOMOS, 2021/2022).

Overtourism – excessive tourism that damages heritage sites, erodes authenticity and degrades the quality of life of local residents.

Sustainable cultural tourism – the integrated management of heritage and tourism in cooperation with the local community, creating social, environmental and economic benefits for all stakeholders.

Sustainable development – development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – a set of 17 interrelated objectives adopted in 2015 by the United Nations General Assembly, aimed at achieving sustainable development by 2030.

UN Tourism (UNWTO) – the United Nations specialized agency responsible for the promotion of responsible, sustainable and universally accessible tourism. It promotes tourism as a driver of economic growth, inclusive development and environmental sustainability and offers leadership and support to the sector in advancing knowledge and tourism policies worldwide.

UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators – a framework of 22 thematic indicators developed by UNESCO to measure and monitor the contribution of culture to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

World Heritage – cultural and natural heritage of outstanding universal value, inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.