

Case Study - 'Donostia Green Destination'; San Sebastián (Spain)

Introduction

'San Sebastian Tourism' has recently launched the **"Donostia Green Destination"** brand, where the city has collaborated with local enterprises to offer visitors an opportunity to experience the city in an eco-friendly way.

This initiative promotes sustainable accommodation, dining, transport, and leisure options, helping tourists engage with the city while contributing to its preservation. By showcasing its commitment to sustainability, Donostia aims to preserve its cultural and natural heritage for future generations.

Now, we recommend you see the "Feel Like a Donostiarra" video (automatic subtitles on Youtube):
https://youtu.be/v9lbq3wMQ_0



Image 19

Donostia / San Sebastián is in the Basque Country, a region in northern Spain and is recognized as one of the most culturally rich cities in the country.

- The city's tourism industry has been a key driver of its economy, attracting millions of visitors annually due to its natural beauty, beaches, cuisine, and cultural heritage. Recently, the city has focused on establishing

<h3>Context</h3>	<p>itself as a sustainable destination, emphasizing responsible tourism practices.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Donostia's market environment is shaped by a strong local identity, a commitment to cultural preservation, and a desire to preserve its natural resources, which attract not only tourists but also businesses, institutions, and local organizations committed to sustainable practices.- Over the years, San Sebastián has built a reputation for its gourmet food scene and cultural festivals. However, growing tourism has brought challenges such as overcrowding and environmental degradation. Recognizing these issues, the local tourism authority, "San Sebastian Tourism", launched the Donostia Green Destination initiative to address these challenges while enhancing the quality of tourism.
<h3>Challenge</h3>	<p>The main challenge facing San Sebastián was the growing demand for tourism, which placed pressure on the city's resources, including waste management, water supply, transportation, and green spaces.</p> <p>Despite its natural beauty and sustainable initiatives, the city needed to find ways to accommodate an increasing number of tourists without compromising its environmental goals or the quality of life for residents.</p> <p>Challenges for the city included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Managing increased waste generation and pollution, particularly related to tourism activities.- Balancing the influx of visitors with the city's environmental and social sustainability goals.- Promoting responsible consumption and waste reduction among tourists, hospitality businesses, and residents.- Ensuring that tourism practices align with local sustainability regulations and global environmental standards.

Actions taken

As explained above, the initiative aimed to promote a more sustainable city and tourism and to encourage visitors to experience the city sustainably and respectfully, providing them with all kinds of plans, activities, initiatives and practical advice.

This initiative also includes good practices, environmental programmes and internationally recognised certifications.

The city expanded its network of over 80 km of bike lanes, enhancing bike accessibility and making it easier for both locals and tourists to travel sustainably. The city also worked on making the public transportation system, including the **Dbus** city bus network, more environmentally friendly and accessible.

Local businesses, including hotels and restaurants, were encouraged to adopt waste reduction practices, such as the [Zero Plastik](#) and [Zero-Waste programs](#). Indeed, efforts were made to increase the urban waste selective collection rate, reaching 41%.

Donostia focused on optimizing its water usage by promoting water-saving initiatives and ensuring high water quality.

To enhance credibility and attract eco-conscious travellers, many of the city's hospitality providers pursued internationally recognized environmental certifications, including the [EU Ecolabel](#), [Biosphere Certification](#), or EMAS Regulation and ISO14001. These certifications were used to promote local businesses that met strict environmental standards.

The city launched campaigns and educational programs to promote responsible tourism.

On their webpage <https://www.sansebastianturismoa.eus/es/>, you will find sustainable plans, initiatives, accommodations and restaurants. They also propose and offer a [Local Guide](#) and a [Committed Donostia Decalogue](#) to foster sustainable quality tourism experiences for foreigners.

	
<h3>Results</h3>	<p>The results of the <i>Donostia Green Destination</i> initiative have been positive, with measurable improvements in sustainability practices and tourist satisfaction:</p> <p>R1: The <i>Donostia Green Destination</i> brand gained recognition both nationally and internationally as a leading sustainable tourism initiative. It was included in the 2024 collection of best practices submitted to the European Capital of Smart Tourism competition.</p> <p>R2: The selective collection rate increased to 41%, with more than 5000 tons of organic waste being collected annually to create compost. This was an important step in reducing the city's landfill waste and promoting circular economy practices.</p> <p>R3: Over 20% of the urban area is made up of green spaces, which has been a critical factor in maintaining the city's quality of life while accommodating more visitors. The city's 25 parks and 250,000 trees have contributed to improving air quality and providing recreational spaces for both locals and visitors.</p> <p>R4: The city's investment in over 80 km of bike lanes and improved public transport has led to a significant reduction in traffic congestion and pollution, making San Sebastián one of the best cities in Spain for cycling.</p> <p>R5: Tourist feedback indicated a growing appreciation for the city's efforts to promote sustainable tourism. Many visitors reported feeling more connected to the local community and environment, making responsible tourism an integral part of their travel experience.</p>

Lesson learned

One of the most successful aspects of the initiative was the involvement of local businesses and residents in promoting sustainability. The city was able to create a sense of responsibility among locals.

Encourage and involve more hotels, restaurants, and transport companies to adopt ecological certifications to create a broader impact across the tourism sector and further invest in renewable energy infrastructure, not only in the city but also on the regional level.

Donostia successfully demonstrated that it is possible to grow tourism while maintaining a commitment to sustainability. The key was creating infrastructure that supported both increased visitor numbers and environmental responsibility.

References/ Visuals

<https://www.sansebastianturismoa.eus/es/venir/destino-sostenible/green-destination>

<https://www.donostia.eus/ataria/es/web/ingurumena/residuos/actividades-economicas/hoteles-zero-plastic>

https://smart-tourism-capital.ec.europa.eu/best-practices/european-capital-smart-tourism-best-practices_en

<https://press.sansebastianturismoa.eus/es/documentacion/campanas>

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