



## BEST PRACTICE: AZORES, PORTUGAL



### Key Challenge

Lack of stakeholder management (multi-level, cross-sectoral).

### Type of Solution

Adoption of a tourism strategy and monitoring framework; Stakeholder participation and management; Certification; Capacity building.

### Case Classification

**Type of Destination** | Island

**Territorial Level** | NUTS 1

**Size of the Tourist Area** | 2,346 km<sup>2</sup> **Population** | 236,413 in 2021

**Type of Tourism** | Ecotourism; Rural; Coastal, maritime and inland water.

**Tourism organisation** | The Regional Government is responsible through several bodies, such as the Regional Directorate for Tourism (policies) and the Destination Management Organisation (DMO) Azores (promotion).

**Main Stakeholders Affected** | Local authorities/ government; ALL tourism service providers; Local businesses.

**Additional Challenges Covered** | Appropriate local tourism strategies and policies to accelerate the transition to sustainable tourism; Growth-oriented mindset of destination stakeholders.

### Context & Background

The Azores are an archipelago of nine autonomous volcanic islands in the North Atlantic, which makes the management of the destination very complex. Tourism is one of the islands' main economic sectors. When the Azores opened its airspace to low-cost airlines in 2015, the number of overnight stays increased strongly and continuously, reaching 3.8 million (1.2 million arrivals) in 2023.

### Key Challenge

The explosive increase in overnight stays and the aim to avoid negative impacts of tourism prompted the government to focus its tourism strategy on sustainability rather than quantitative growth. To achieve this, sufficient acceptance had to be achieved among the representatives of the nine autonomous islands.



**Implementation of Solutions:** To support the implementation of a sustainable tourism strategy and achieve broad acceptance, the Azores started a broad stakeholder collaboration and certification process in 2017.

## SOLUTION

- The Government of the Azores has adopted a collaborative and inclusive governance model. *Three working groups* were established to identify solutions for sustainable development. They included: (1) The regional community with tourism associations, the regional federation of fisheries, representatives of security services and others; (2) Sustainability teams of the public entities of the island governments (the so-called “green teams” of the islands); (3) Local companies. The public, private and NGO development projects mainly addressed raising awareness of changes in tourism demand and the opportunities of the twin transition for tourism. All these efforts were based on the criteria of [Earth Check](#) and [The Global Sustainable Tourism Council \(GSTC\)](#). To sustain these efforts, the Azores organise at least two annual *Sustainability Forums* that support networking and best practices.
- The *Destination Sustainability Action Plan 2030* was first launched in 2019 and is revised every year with all destination stakeholders to monitor the Action Plan, analyse which actions were implemented, and collect new commitments.
- To support the certification process and build capacity, the DMO coordinates the *Azores Sustainability Charter*, under which small and medium-sized enterprises from all sectors participate in training workshops on sustainability. They also receive support in the implementation of sustainability reports (reporting on ESG indicators). In addition, an interactive platform has been created where local SMEs can share sustainability reports, indicators and best practices and access specific tools, templates and news on sustainable development in the Azores. 200 tourism companies, mostly large or medium-sized, are participating voluntarily in this initiative. In 2019, the Azores became the first archipelago in the world to be certified by EarthCheck as a “Sustainable Destination” according to the GSTC criteria and are aiming for the Gold certification in 2024.

**Replicability potential:** High (requires strong political will, leadership, and collaboration).

**Cost & funding source:** 200,000 euros for the development of the sustainability charter and the certification process. The first two years were funded by the EU from the 2020 Operational Programme (85%). After that, it is funded by the government. The training workshops are included in the DMO budget.

## Success Factors & Barriers

Success factors: Alignment with the Earth Check guidelines; Collaboration of all entities that join and comply with the charter; Long-term perspective of the initiatives.

Barriers: Insufficient personnel resources in the DMO for this very complex approach.

### Results and Impacts

- Creating synergies between different tourism providers and empowering more than 350 people and companies (not only in the tourism sector).
- Systematic nature conservation (more than 30 Blue Flag beaches, 13 Ramsar sites for wetlands, and UNESCO Biosphere recognition of 3 islands).
- Increased awareness and knowledge of sustainability for all relevant sectors on the islands.
- Improvement of overall island management, as the indicators collected in the certification process, such as greenhouse gases, waste management and water management (annual measurement) can also be transferred to other industries.
- The Azores received several awards and recognitions, including “[Europe's Leading Adventure Tourism Destination](#)”.

## Recommendations by the Destinations

- The role of government's leadership was key in conceiving and implementing the Destination Sustainability Action Plan 2030.
- Despite the collaborative approach, it was of utmost importance to adhere to the plan and decisions taken by the government through a top-down approach.

## Useful Links

[Strategic Marketing Plan for the Azores – Horizon 2030](#) | [Sustainable Azores](#)

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