Emilia-Romagna tests new models for a more balanced and sustainable tourism future

Managing tourism flows is becoming one of the key challenges for destinations seeking to balance visitor growth with the protection of cultural heritage, natural landscapes and the quality of life of local communities.

Across Emilia-Romagna, different destinations are testing complementary approaches: using visitor feedback to improve services, adopting internationally recognised sustainability standards and encouraging travellers to discover smaller towns and less crowded areas.

Ravenna: visitors become part of the solutionRavenna: visitors become part of the solution

Ravenna is experimenting with a participatory model designed to improve visitor experiences while reducing the risks linked to overcrowding.

Through **Footprints**, a project funded by the European Urban Initiative – Innovative Actions, the city is developing tools to make Ravenna a "sustainable destination by default", where responsible choices are also the easiest choices for visitors.

One of the project's most distinctive initiatives is its call for **Explorers**. After welcoming 50 participants in 2026, Ravenna will host **100 Explorers in 2027**, each invited to spend five days in the destination testing services, experiences and sustainable travel options.

Their role goes beyond that of traditional tourists. Participants will explore different parts of Ravenna and its surrounding area, from mosaics and cultural heritage to birdwatching, cycling, nature and the Adriatic coast, while evaluating every stage of the visitor journey: orientation on arrival, mobility, access to information, cultural activities and outdoor experiences. The goal is to create a continuous listening system capable of connecting visitor (treated not simply as consumers but as **temporary citizens)** and their needs with the expertise of tourism operators and the priorities of the local community.

Footprints also aims to distribute visitors more evenly across Ravenna's cultural, coastal and natural attractions and throughout different times of the year, reducing concentration in the most visited sites.

Planned actions include three welcome hubs for visitor information and sustainable mobility, more accessible urban routes, a catalogue of sustainable and inclusive experiences and a digital platform using reward mechanisms to encourage responsible behaviour.

Visit Emilia: sustainability becomes a destination management modelVisit Emilia: sustainability becomes a destination management model

Visit Emilia destination, covering the areas of Parma, Piacenza and Reggio Emilia, has taken a different but complementary approach by embedding sustainability into the governance of the destination itself.

In 2026, Visit Emilia obtained certification from the **Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC)**, becoming the largest and most varied certified destination in the world in terms of geographical area and composition.

The territory stretches from the Po River and the Po Valley to hills, historic villages and the Apennines, encompassing three cities of art and a wide range of rural and natural landscapes. This diversity makes visitor management particularly important.

The GSTC certification process required the destination to assess its performance across four main areas: governance, cultural sustainability, economic and social sustainability and environmental sustainability. This is a model in which tourism growth is not measured only in visitor numbers, but also in terms of impact on local communities, heritage and the environment.

The certification therefore becomes a framework for coordinating different stakeholders, monitoring projects and improving the quality of tourism over time.

For visitors, the effect is a destination that encourages exploration beyond the main urban centres: cycling along the Po, discovering castles and villages in the hills or walking through the Apennines.

Dozza: small villages as part of the tourism mapDozza: small villages as part of the tourism map

Redistributing visitor flows also means creating stronger reasons to travel beyond the best-known destinations.

In September 2027, **Dozza**, in the hills near Bologna, will host the **19th National Festival of Italy's Most Beautiful Villages**, bringing national attention to one of Emilia-Romagna's most distinctive small towns.

Dozza is known for its open-air gallery of murals painted directly onto the façades of buildings during the Biennale del Muro Dipinto, as well as for the Rocca Sforzesca, its surrounding vineyards and its wine traditions.

Beyond its cultural programme, the event is designed to highlight the role of small towns as places of sustainable development, innovation and quality of life.

For Emilia-Romagna, hosting the festival also reflects a broader tourism strategy: strengthening the visibility of smaller destinations can help distribute visitors more evenly, create new reasons to travel outside traditional tourism hubs and support local economies.

From managing numbers to managing destinationsFrom managing numbers to managing destinations

These three projects show different sides of the same challenge. Together, they point towards a broader shift in tourism management: **from simply attracting visitors to understanding where, when and how they travel, and using that knowledge to create a better balance between tourism, local communities and the places they share.**

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How to get there:

Emilia Romagna Region is in the North of Italy, just over the Appenines Mountains from Tuscany, with a number of airlines connecting Bologna, Parma, Forlì and Rimini to the UK and the rest of the world, including British Airways to London **Heathrow**, Easyjet to London **Gatwick** (TBC), Ryanair to London **Stansted and Luton**, **Edinburgh**, and **Manchester**.

For further information on Emilia Romagna, visit www.emiliaromagnaturismo.it/en

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