

Policy Brief on Cultural Routes in Europe



A policy brief from the Policy Learning Platform

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**Interreg
Europe**



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Summary

'European Cultural Routes' are transnational routes that help tourists discover how Europeans have lived since ancient times. The concept was launched by the Council of Europe in 1987. This policy brief presents the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes Programme, the EU's policies on Cultural Routes, as well as lessons from interregional learning and exchange on the topic. It discusses the obstacles to further development, maintenance and promotion of Cultural Routes. The brief also makes a number of recommendations and shares good practices from Interreg Europe projects.

Introduction: What are Cultural Routes?

Launched in 1987 with the Declaration of Santiago de Compostela, the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes Programme demonstrates how the heritage and cultures of European regions contribute to a shared cultural legacy and encourages European citizens to rediscover their heritage. The Programme's Routes preserve and enhance Europe's natural and cultural heritage in order to improve the living environment and support cultural, social and economic development. They promote a form of cultural tourism that supports sustainable development. Today, there are over 30 Council of Europe Cultural Routes on a range of different themes, from architecture and landscape to religious influences, from gastronomy and intangible heritage to the major figures of European art, music and literature.

Certified Cultural Routes ¹ :	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Atrium, Architecture of Totalitarian Regimes of the 20th century (2014)▪ Réseau Art Nouveau Network (2014)▪ Via Habsburg (2014)▪ Roman Emperors and Danube Wine Route (2015)▪ European Routes of Emperor Charles V (2015)▪ Destination Napoleon (2015)▪ In the Footsteps of Robert Louis Stevenson (2015)▪ Santiago de Compostela Pilgrim Routes (1987)▪ The Hansa (1991)▪ Viking Routes (1993)▪ Via Francigena (1994)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Saint Martin of Tours Route (2005)▪ Cluniac Sites in Europe (2005)▪ Routes of the Olive Tree (2005)▪ Via Regia (2005)▪ Transromanica (2007)▪ Iter Vitis (2009)▪ European Route of Cistercian abbeys (2010)▪ European Cemeteries Route (2010)▪ Prehistoric Rock Art Trails (2010)▪ European Route of Historical Thermal Towns (2010)▪ Route of Saint Olav Ways (2010)▪ European Route of Ceramics (2012)

¹ <https://rm.coe.int/16806f57ac>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Routes of El legado of Andalusí (1997) ▪ European Mozart Ways (2002) ▪ Phoenicians' Route (2003) ▪ Pyrenean Iron Route (2004) ▪ European Route of Jewish Heritage (2004) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ European Route of Megalithic Culture (2013) ▪ Huguenot and Waldensian trail (2013) ▪ Fortified Towns of the Grande Region (2016) ▪ Impressionisms route (2018) ▪ Via Charlemagne (2018)
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Cultural Routes encourage sustainable development and are managed by formal collaborative networks consisting of national, regional and local authorities, and a wide range of other stakeholders. They organise innovative activities and projects under five main priorities: *cooperation in research and development; enhancement of memory, history and European heritage; cultural and educational exchanges for young Europeans; contemporary cultural and artistic practice; cultural tourism and sustainable cultural development.*

The Programme's policy architecture is as follows:

- The **Council of Europe** defines the programme's policies. Set up in 1949, it is the oldest international organisation in Europe and covers the whole continent.
- The **Enlarged Partial Agreement (EPA) on Cultural Routes** established in 2010 follows the Council of Europe's policy guidelines, decides the programme strategy and awards "Council of Europe Cultural Route" certification. It is open to Member and non-Member states of the Council of Europe and helps national, regional and local initiatives to promote culture and tourism. As of September 2018, the EPA has 32 Member States.
- A **joint programme², Routes4U, between the Council of Europe and the European Union** establishes cooperation between the EPA on Cultural Routes and the European Commission for the generation of sustainable projects supporting cultural, social and environmental development in Europe.
- The **European Institute of Cultural Routes (EICR)** is a technical support agency set up in 1998 under an agreement between the Council of Europe and the government of Luxembourg. It advises existing certified Cultural Routes, provides assistance to new projects, organises training and visibility activities for route managers and coordinates a university network.

² Sometimes referred to as a 'project'.

Criteria for obtaining the “Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe” certification³

Cultural Routes are certified and evaluated regularly by the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe. The certification “Cultural Route of the Council of Europe” is a guarantee of excellence. New Cultural Routes are certified based on compliance with several criteria. They should:

- Illustrate a theme representative of European values and common to at least three countries in Europe;
- Be the subject of transnational, multidisciplinary scientific research;
- Enhance European memory, history and heritage and contribute to interpretation of Europe’s present-day diversity;
- Support cultural and educational exchanges for young people;
- Develop exemplary and innovative projects in the field of cultural tourism and sustainable cultural development;
- Develop tourist products aimed at different groups.

The EU policy context

The European Commission actively cooperates with the [Council of Europe](#), the [European Travel Commission](#), the [UN World Tourism Organisation](#), and other international partners to contribute to the development of European Cultural Routes.⁴

As part of Europe’s support for cultural policies, the Council of Europe’s [Work Plan for Culture \(2015-2018\)](#) highlighted the need for synergies with all relevant EU programmes and funds, especially in the fields of culture, education, research, digitalisation, and regional and urban development. As part of this Plan, around 20 concrete actions have been pursued under the following priorities: accessible and inclusive culture; cultural heritage; cultural and creative sectors: creative economy and innovation; and promotion of cultural diversity, culture in EU external relations and mobility.

Building on the momentum created during the 2018 European Year of Cultural Heritage, on 7 December 2018 the European Commission presented the [European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage, which runs to 2022](#) featured also in an [article](#) prepared by the Policy Learning Platform. The Framework sets a common direction for heritage-related activities at European level, primarily in EU policies and programmes. Under its Pillar on cultural heritage the document envisages actions that promote the Council of Europe’s Cultural Routes. Another document that outlines how to build on the legacy of the European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018 is the [New European Agenda for Culture, and a Staff working document accompanying the Agenda](#). The Agenda describes how the EC will support EU Member

³ <https://rm.coe.int/prems-122618-gbr-2543-flyer-cultural-routes-3-volets-bat-10x21-2-/16808e3d3f>

⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/growth/sectors/tourism/offer/cultural_en

States by tapping into culture's potential to foster innovation, creativity, sustainable growth and jobs. The document acknowledges the role of Regional and European Territorial Cooperation in promoting Europe as a destination, including via macro-regional Cultural Routes and highlights that there is scope to build on these experiences to enhance the role of culture for territorial development. To mark the closure of the European Year of Cultural Heritage (EYCH) a [Closing Conference](#) was organised by the Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union. The main focus of the conference was the legacy of the EYCH 2018 and how ideas can be further developed and integrated into cultural policies. An article from Policy Learning Platform about this event is available [here](#).

[Routes4U](#), is an EU support programme for the Council of Europe's European Cultural Routes Programme covering the years 2018-2020. This 30-month programme was launched by the Council of Europe (Directorate General of Democracy) and the European Union (European Commission – DG REGIO). It seeks to strengthen the macro-regional dimension of Cultural Routes and to develop new Routes in macro-regions, of which there are four to date: the [Adriatic-Ionian](#), the [Alpine](#), the [Baltic Sea](#) and the [Danube Region](#). Specific activities include:

- support for the certification of new Cultural Routes in the EU macro-regions;
- the identification and drafting of guidelines for transnational regional policies on Cultural Routes for local authorities and operators;
- the development of new competencies and skills through e-learning modules;
- the development of tourism tools and products such as a Cultural Routes card and a trip planner.

The ["World Heritage Journey in the EU"](#) is an initiative of the European Commission in cooperation with UNESCO and in partnership with National Geographic. It aims to develop and promote four thematic trans-European Cultural Routes: Royal Europe, Ancient Europe, Underground Europe and Romantic Europe. These routes link 34 World Heritage sites across 19 EU countries. Cultural heritage, combining built heritage with historic and existing intangible cultural heritage, is the primary focus for this initiative, which encourages people to travel beyond the major tourist hubs and experience local culture. The project also aims to improve the governance of the four trans-European journeys by enabling heritage and destination management authorities, working with local communities, to develop shared objectives and implement common marketing strategies. A [web platform](#) has been developed showcasing the different itineraries.

With the support of [COSME Programme](#), the European Commission promotes synergies between tourism and cultural and creative industries (CCI). Two calls for proposals on the synergies between tourism and CCI were launched in 2017 and 2018 and the six projects awarded will develop and promote transnational tourism products such as routes, itineraries and tourism offer, specifically related to Europe's cultural heritage.

Practical

For networking opportunities, you can visit the following sites:

- [The Network of European Regions for Competitive and Sustainable Tourism](#) (NECSTouR), a partner in [STAR Cities](#) project works with the EICR and the Council of Europe to share good practices on measuring the impact of cultural tourism and itineraries proposed by European Cultural Routes.
- The [European Cultural Tourism Network](#) (ECTN), a partner in [Cult-RInG](#) and [CHRISTA](#) projects, is a European network for cultural tourism development and promotion.

Cultural routes and interregional cooperation

The Council of Europe's Cultural Routes

The Interreg Europe programme is currently supporting a number of projects related to Cultural Routes under its Thematic Area on Environment and Resource Efficiency. Two of these, [Cult-RInG](#) and [STAR Cities](#), aim to improve the effectiveness of regional policies for Cultural Routes in the context of the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes Programme.

One of the objectives of the [Cult-RInG](#) project is to assess the benefits of existing Cultural Routes and opportunities for the development of new routes, and their certification under the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes Programme. The project partners are assessing the contribution of six existing Cultural Routes in achieving socio-economic objectives and are developing new routes. Examples of this ongoing work are presented below:

- The Lazio region, one of the partners in [Cult-RInG](#), is involved in the extension of Southern Via Francigena Cultural Route. Actions have included path maintenance; promoting cultural events; research activities; creating multimedia material; etc. Among other activities, the Lazio region's action plan is focused on extending the Cultural Route to become a "European Cultural Itinerary to Southern Italy".⁵
- Cult-RInG partners are working on the certification process for the "In the footsteps of St. Paul, the Apostle of the Nations" Cultural Route, initiated by the Region of Central Macedonia, Greece. [A Memorandum of Understanding](#) on certification was signed between the Region of Central Macedonia, the Lazio Region, the Pafos Tourism Board (Cyprus) and the ECTN. An application for certification will be submitted to the Council of Europe in September 2019. The application involves and will be supported by three European Regions: the Region of Central Macedonia in Greece, the Region of Paphos in Cyprus and the Lazio Region in Italy.⁶

⁵ Cult-RInG progress report 3

⁶ https://www.interregeurope.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/tx_tevprojects/library/file_1538340444.pdf

- Cult-RiNG partners are also working to upgrade the [EuroVelo 13](#) – Iron Curtain Trail – from a successful cycling route to a new cultural route. The route is also a candidate for Council of Europe certification. These activities are supported by Vidzeme Tourism Association (VTA), Latvia, a Cult-RiNG project partner, in its action plan.⁷ On 27 September 2018 VTA, together with European Cyclists' Federation (ECF) and Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences, submitted an application to the Council of Europe to certify the EuroVelo 13 (Iron Curtain Trail) as an official Council of Europe Cultural Route.⁸

The [STAR Cities](#) project is also considering an application for certification. This project focuses on riverside routes to ensure that the role of rivers in the emergence and the development of popular leisure activities in Europe is recognised. Some of project's partners are also members of the [Riverside Cities Network](#), which brings together local authorities and regions wishing to develop recreational activities along rivers or waterways in an urban environment.

Other Routes

Interreg Europe projects have not only promoted Cultural Routes and related activities, but have revealed new perspectives for regional development. Project partners have identified numerous good practices, including: developing religious-pilgrim routes ([SHARE](#), [Green Pilgrimage](#)), wine routes in Northern Greece ([Cult-RiNG](#)), thematic routes ([SHARE](#)) and transnational routes linked to natural assets and cultural heritage ([EPICAH](#) and [CRinMA](#)).

Partners from [Cult-RiNG](#) are also exploring opportunities for mythology-based and intangible heritage themed routes (e.g. Aphrodite in Cyprus, Greece and Italy; 'Argonautica' from ancient Iolkos, in present-day Volos in central Greece, to ancient Kolchis, in present-day Georgia, and back).

Challenges at regional level

Cultural Routes are assets for sustainable regional development and specifically for promoting cultural tourism. They bring economic benefits to local communities and improve social cohesion.

In terms of territorial cooperation policy, Interreg Europe has recently been engaging with European regions on this theme. In June 2018 the Policy Learning Platform organised a [thematic workshop](#) on cultural heritage. The key takeaway from the workshop, regarding Cultural Routes, was that there is a need for joint action on the following challenges:

- How to involve stakeholders and catalyse interest in cultural heritage, in particular among young people, as well as among local and regional policymakers;
- How to diversify tourism offers – while reconciling protection and economic use;

⁷ https://www.interregeurope.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/tx_tevprojects/library/file_1538340444.pdf

⁸ <https://www.interregeurope.eu/cult-ring/news/news-article/4058/new-cultural-route-application-to-council-of-europe/>

- How to make the most of digital tools – and how to share data.

In February 2019, the Platform organised a [webinar](#) on cultural routes which gave participants insights into the challenges and opportunities of cultural and other routes and presented lessons from good practices from three European regions active in this area.

Among the most urgent issues highlighted by participants were a lack of appreciation of the potential of Cultural Routes for regional development, and a lack of funds for their maintenance and promotion. The '[Study on the Cultural Routes' Impact on SMEs Innovation, Competitiveness and Clustering](#)' mentions that low trans-national connectivity between Cultural Route networks is a major challenge, specifically with regards to:

- a lack of coordination at trans-national level in development of Cultural Routes and promotion strategies;
- a weak brand image and weak marketing strategies;
- a lack of expertise in network management and a lack of performance evaluation tools;
- a low degree of good practice exchange;
- an insufficient use of ICT.

Stakeholder involvement

Developing Cultural Routes requires both a vision and purposeful and sustained effort to build consensus between stakeholders (local and regional authorities, tourism boards/associations, businesses, academia, etc.). Engaging a broad range of stakeholders with diverse interests requires creativity and innovative techniques to identify and work with the appropriate people. Regions and cities are still facing problems in this regard.

Governance

A lack of coordination or dialogue between institutions often hampers the development and promotion of Cultural Routes, especially in the cross-border context. In this respect, overcoming differences in legal frameworks and policy mandates/powers at and between all levels of governance responsible for the territory(ies) concerned by the route, is a key challenge that authorities need to address. The [Portuguese Way to Saint James](#), as a cross-border 'pilgrim route' project, faced this challenge. This project, identified as a good practice by [Cult-RInG](#), established a network of ten municipalities, which have worked together on enhancing and promoting the route. The [Duero-Douro River Transnational Route](#) in Spain and Portugal, identified as a good practice by the [EPICAH](#) project, is a successful example of developing a transnational route based on solid collaboration between authorities between two countries.

Digitisation

Digital tools provide quality information about heritage sites and enhance the visitor experience. They can revolutionise the way people travel and experience Cultural Routes. However, digital tools require not only technical knowledge but also organisational capacity and an appreciation of their potential to enhance Cultural Routes. Where this potential is not well understood they are overlooked, to the detriment of the visitor experience, a problem also highlighted by the participants at the webinar organised by the Policy Learning Platform.

In a [study](#) on the digitisation of pilgrimage routes prepared as part of [Green Pilgrimage project](#), the 'digital maturity' of four selected trails was analysed. Project partners concluded that the development of more digital routes is hampered by: insufficient financing for software; a lack of collaborative platforms where different stakeholders can meet and discuss (digitally or physically); and poor connectivity on the trails. In a peer review process conducted as part of the study, all participants agreed that digitisation of the pilgrim trails would have benefits, including:

- Better visibility of the trails for pilgrims, accommodation providers and public stakeholders;
- Clearer communication regarding the trails;
- Facilitating the information search, booking and planning phases
- Creating feedback opportunities, interactions between different stakeholders and creating a community.⁹

Several certified Cultural Routes have already integrated ICT tools in their network management, marketing, and communication strategies using social media, mobile, GIS system, blogs, etc.¹⁰

Good Practices from Interreg Europe projects

Two examples of ongoing Interreg Europe projects/ good practices are detailed below:

Thematic objective: ENVIRONMENT & RESOURCE EFFICIENCY - Good Practice: [St Francis Way. development of pilgrim route to drive rural tourism](#) - [SHARE project](#)

This good practice is about developing the St. Francis Way route, which connects cultural heritage and sites from the life of Francis of Assisi, to create a 550 km route.

Using a bottom-up approach, the initiative focuses on developing a sustainable offer in 'slow tourism', by promoting overlooked villages and cultural heritage sites, and by providing a source of revenue and employment for rural and mountain communities. Its activities include:

⁹ https://www.interregeurope.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/tx_tevprojects/library/file_1542879273.pdf

¹⁰ https://www.interregeurope.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/tx_tevprojects/library/file_1522859189.pdf

- defining, mapping and signposting a single route;
- producing promotional materials (multilingual maps, guidebooks and brochures);
- organising press tours; joint marketing activities, working with public transport networks (including electric vehicles, bike sharing) and monitoring and analysing traffic.

This practice has also established strategic partnerships with stakeholders (e.g. a tourism board, hiking, cycling and horse-riding clubs, etc.). In cooperation with hospitality and tourism service providers, minimum standards for walkers, cyclists and horse riders have been developed.

The main stakeholders include the Umbria Region (Departments of agriculture, environment, tourism, commerce, and infrastructure), religious institutions, municipalities, SMEs, and the Ministry of Cultural Heritage.

The development of St. Francis Way offers lessons to other regions in Europe on how to effectively involve stakeholders, who bring not only opinions, but also the specific skill-sets needed to implement, manage and promote a pilgrimage route – on, for example, how communications channels were opened with stakeholders (experts, religious and civil associations) through calls for proposals with funding. The proactive role of the regional development agency [Sviluppumbria](#) was also essential as a driver of the process. To ensure a high-quality walking and route experience, stakeholders spent days in the field walking together and sharing the needs of the pilgrim. By experiencing the tourism product themselves, they have been able to work together to improve it.

The enhancement of the St. Francis Way route has resulted in an increase of 35% in the number of hikers using the route in the period 2015-2017. The St. Francis Way also won best European 'Destination of Sustainable Cultural Tourism' in 2018, an accolade awarded by the European Cultural Tourism Network and Europa Nostra.

Thematic objective: ENVIRONMENT & RESOURCE EFFICIENCY - Good Practice: [Sea, Nature, Sicily – underwater and nautical itineraries](#) - [Cult-RInG project](#)

This good practice has focused on planning and setting up new eco-tourism itineraries, including interregional ones, in Sicily, and specifically on the theme of marine eco-tourism. The specific tourist activities are designed so as to ensure that underwater archaeological sites and landscapes are safeguarded. The total cost of the project is 226,000 EUR and is funded by the region of Sicily.

The new tourist activities have resulted in an increase in national and international visitors with an interest in natural heritage and the sea. These activities have been important for reducing the

seasonality of tourism. The project has also improved the quality of the tourism offer and has resulted in the design and introduction of targeted tourism proposals, such as underwater itineraries. Stakeholders from the public sector, business and academia, as well as representatives of the Phoenicians Cultural Route, have been working jointly in this project.

[Cult-RInG](#) will share lessons learned with other regions along the 'Phoenicians Route', such as Tuscany and Sardinia in Italy and the Balearic Islands & Andalusia in Spain, etc. In addition, a [website](#) and a Multimedia App named “Sea, Nature, Sicily” promoting marine eco-tourism in Sicily, have been developed. These multimedia products are designed as digital guides and provide users with information on cultural and natural heritage.

This initiative received the 1st Prize in the 2018 ECTN Awards for 'Transnational Thematic Tourism'.

What could regions do next?

Cultural Routes play an important role in achieving sustainable and inclusive growth. Regions and cities are in a position to help develop, maintain and promote them in various ways. Below are several examples of what they can do:

- The Council of Europe’s Cultural Routes offers significant potential for collaboration at all levels – European, national, regional and local. Regional and local authorities can play an active role in strengthening the cooperation between the Council of Europe Cultural Routes, the Routes created with European Union funds, the UNESCO labelled European sites, and other international initiatives. The opportunities for support under EU initiatives, such as the [EU-funded Routes4U](#) programme, could be also considered.
- Cultural Routes are mostly interregional in nature and interregional exchange can contribute to improving policies by facilitating the exchange of good practices and knowledge on important topics such as developing and managing routes. These include, for example, successful governance models, use of technology, branding, innovative approaches for engaging and working with stakeholders (e.g. tourism boards, private sector, etc.).
- Cultural Routes can also make a strong contribution to local economies and communities as they build on local knowledge and skills and often promote lesser-known destinations. For instance, 90% of Cultural Routes pass through rural areas. The good practices identified can serve as inspiration on how to promote overlooked villages, cultural heritage sites and sustainable tourism. For example, the [Wine roads network of Northern Greece \(Cult-RInG project\)](#), which developed 8 thematic routes, provides insight into how to promote wine tourism alongside cultural tourism, raise awareness of the history of wine and viticultural products and

bring economic benefits to local businesses. Working with the tourism sector professionals is also an opportunity for diversifying the tourism offer.

- One lesson from the Platform's webinar on Cultural Routes was that regions and cities need to take advantage of the opportunities that digital tools provide to improve access to heritage assets and audience engagement. The project "Sea, Nature, Sicily – underwater and nautical itineraries' (Cult-RiNG) and the good practice (Green Pilgrimage) from Sweden on a [website based application](#) developed by Visit Ostergotland, are some of the examples that could inspire other regions.

Forthcoming events:

- The EPA organises several annual meetings including **Cultural Routes Annual Advisory Forum** in close collaboration with one of the member States of the EPA on Cultural Routes. Romania will be hosting the 2019 event in October in Sibiu¹¹.
- Each year in June, a **Training Academy** for the Cultural Routes managers and partners is organised in close collaboration with one of the [certified Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe](#). The Training Academy aims to provide training on specific current issues in the field of cultural heritage management and tourism promotion to Cultural Routes operators. The Training Academy offers hands-on approaches to the selected topic through the participation of academic or professional experts with whom the Cultural Routes operators can have some exchanges of views.¹²

Sources of further information:

- [Study on the Cultural Routes' Impact on SMEs Innovation, Competitiveness and Clustering', a joint study, between the Commission and the Council of Europe](#)
- 2018, Cultural heritage [e-book](#) developed by Interact and the European Commission Directorate - General for Regional and Urban Policy
- EC, [Mapping of Cultural Heritage actions in European Union policies, programmes and activities](#), 2017
- [ICOMOS, International Cultural Tourism Charter. Principles And Guidelines For Managing Tourism At Places Of Cultural And Heritage Significance](#). ICOMOS International Cultural Tourism Committee. 2002.
- [EC, The Guide on EU Funding for the Tourism Sector, 2014-2020](#)

¹¹ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes/-/romania-to-host-the-2019-annual-advisory-forum-on-cultural-routes-in-sibiu-2-4-october-2019->

¹² <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes/training-academy>