



**EuroCluster  
Rural  
Tourism**



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# TOOLKIT AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS OPERATIONS

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## 1. Introduction

### Company Overview

Touring Macedonia is a licensed and innovative tour operator based in North Macedonia, offering tailored soft adventure experiences that showcase the best of the Balkans. Operating under the brand Touring Balkan, the company has expanded its offerings to include unique trips across Romania, Bulgaria, and the broader Balkan region. Touring Macedonia is designing experiences for over 1.000 international travelers each year, with a 95% customer satisfaction rate. The agency mostly operates in B2B mode offering services for clients from Germany, Belgium, The Nederland, Spain, Sweden, Norway. Key asset of the company is the well-crafted supply chain including more than 50 suppliers from the following sectors: accommodation, guiding, transportation, off-road tour providers, horseback riders, tandem-paragliding and similar. Post-COVID, Touring Macedonia will put their efforts on opening new markets for its products from overseas destinations: USA and Asia.

### Commitment to Sustainability

At Touring Macedonia, sustainability is not just a buzzword but a guiding development principle. Company's dedication to sustainable tourism stems from a deep respect for the natural landscapes, cultural heritage, and communities that make the Balkans so unique but also from the understanding that these assets are key holders of the attractiveness of their products. Overall, Touring Macedonia aims to reduce its environmental footprint by 30% over the next five years and contribute at least 10% of our annual profits to local conservation and community initiatives.

## 2. Current Status of the Adventure Travel Industry

### Global Trends

The adventure travel industry has experienced an annual growth rate of 20% over the past decade, with an estimated market value of \$683 billion in 2022. Post-pandemic, 70% of travelers express a preference for sustainable and eco-friendly travel options, with 60% willing to pay more

for responsible tourism experiences. Also, the industry still holds the estimation that 65% of the clients' spendings remain the local destination/economy.

## Regional Overview

The Balkans, with its diverse landscapes, rich history, and vibrant cultures, is becoming an increasingly popular destination for adventure travelers. The region has seen a 25% increase in adventure tourism over the past five years, with North Macedonia alone welcoming more than 75% of its annual tourists directly or indirectly being involved in some form of adventure activities<sup>1</sup>. However, challenges such as limited infrastructure, negative demographic trends and environmental degradation threaten the sustainability of this growth.

## Consumer Preferences

Today's adventure travelers are increasingly seeking personalized and immersive experiences that allow them to connect deeply with the local culture and environment. Research shows that 85% of adventure travelers prioritize cultural engagement and environmental conservation when selecting a destination. This trend highlights a shift away from mass tourism towards experiences that are more authentic, sustainable, and community-driven. In particular, adventure tourists are looking for opportunities to participate in activities such as local crafts, traditional cooking classes, cultural ceremonies, or nature-based experiences that support local economies. This growing emphasis on sustainability has also resulted in travelers being more eco-conscious, choosing destinations that actively protect their natural resources and minimize their environmental footprint. Moreover, 50% of these travelers prefer exploring off-the-beaten-path locations, seeking out unique, less-crowded spots that offer a sense of discovery and exclusivity. The Balkans, with its rich cultural heritage, stunning landscapes, and relatively untapped tourism potential, presents an ideal region for sustainable adventure tourism. Its blend of rural charm, historical sites, and diverse ecosystems appeals to modern travelers who crave both adventure and a deeper connection to the places they visit. This preference for customized and low-impact travel also suggests that travelers are more willing to spend time and resources on trips that align with their values of conservation and cultural preservation.

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<sup>1</sup> The official institutions in the country do not measure these statistical categories. Numbers presented here are based on interviews with peers from the adventure travel sector: tour operators, guides, accommodations.

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### 3. Sustainable Business Practices for Touring Macedonia

#### Environmental Responsibility

##### Minimizing Environmental Impact

Touring Macedonia is committed to minimizing its environmental impact, with a targeted goal of reducing its overall carbon footprint by 30%. One of the core strategies for achieving this involves promoting low-impact activities that align with the growing demand for eco-friendly tourism. Activities such as hiking, trekking, cycling, biking, traditional horseback riding, and kayaking provide travelers with immersive ways to explore the natural beauty of North Macedonia while ensuring minimal disruption to the environment. These experiences allow for a deep connection with nature without relying on fuel-intensive activities, thus significantly reducing carbon emissions. However, to further reduce its environmental impact, Touring Macedonia should also focus on increasing the use of public transportation for tour transfers. Currently, less than 3% of transfers utilize public transport options, but the company has set an ambitious goal to increase this to 10% within the next three years, given the overall performance of the public transportation in the destinations they operate their products. Encouraging travelers to use public trains, buses, and shared transport systems not only lowers carbon emissions but also helps integrate tourism more deeply into local infrastructure, supporting broader sustainability goals. This can be achieved by restructuring tour itineraries to include convenient and eco-friendly transport options while educating clients on the environmental benefits of choosing public transport over private or rental vehicles.

##### Sustainable Transport and Accommodation

Sustainability extends beyond just the activities offered and also encompasses the transportation and accommodations used throughout the tours. Touring Macedonia should continue its dedication to partnering with suppliers who prioritize eco-friendly practices. As of now, 70% of the company's lodging partners incorporate some form of sustainability measures into their operations, such as the use of solar panels, thermo-facades, recycling policies, and offering sustainable practice recommendations to guests. These accommodations also engage in educating their guests on environmentally responsible behavior, encouraging a culture of conservation.

To push its sustainability goals further, Touring Macedonia should aim to increase this number to 90% by 2026, ensuring that nearly all lodging partners are committed to energy efficiency, waste reduction, and eco-conscious practices. This can include stricter partnership criteria, where only businesses that meet certain environmental standards are included in the supply chain. Additionally, encouraging existing partners to adopt more rigorous sustainability policies through workshops, incentives, and certifications will ensure long-term progress toward environmental responsibility.

The company's transportation strategy has already seen positive steps. In 2023, Touring Macedonia made significant investments in its assets by purchasing a hybrid seven-seater vehicle, reducing the carbon footprint of its tour transfers. This move aligns with the company's broader goals of offering greener travel options while maintaining high standards of service and comfort. The future focus should be on gradually replacing or retrofitting more of its fleet with hybrid or fully electric vehicles to further lower emissions. Partnering with transport providers who prioritize low-emission or zero-emission options will be essential in ensuring that Touring Macedonia remains dedicated in sustainable adventure tourism in the region.

By committing to these environmentally responsible initiatives, Touring Macedonia not only contributes to the global fight against climate change but can also strengthen its brand as a forward-thinking, sustainable tour operator. The continued investment in eco-friendly practices throughout the supply chain ensures a balance between offering rich, adventure-filled experiences and protecting the natural environments that make these experiences possible.

## Cultural and Social Responsibility

Touring Macedonia stays strong in its commitment to supporting local communities. Currently, 100% of Touring Macedonia's tours involve collaboration with local businesses, artisans, guides, and service providers, ensuring that a significant portion of the tourism revenue directly benefits the local economy. By working with local stakeholders, the company promotes sustainable tourism that values local expertise and heritage while fostering economic development in rural areas.

However, to further amplify its positive impact on the communities it serves, Touring Macedonia should explore additional strategies to deepen its engagement and support for local economies.

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One such strategy would be the introduction of more localized experiences within its tour products. These could include activities that offer direct interaction between travelers and local communities, such as:

*Visiting Local Markets:*

Organize visits to authentic local markets where travelers can purchase fresh produce, handicrafts, and locally-made products. These markets often reflect the heart of the community, providing an opportunity for tourists to engage with locals while contributing directly to their livelihoods.

*Traditional Workshops and Craft Demonstrations:*

Incorporate visits to workshops where local artisans practice traditional crafts such as pottery, weaving, or woodworking. Tourists can learn firsthand how these products are made, participate in hands-on workshops, and have the opportunity to purchase unique, handcrafted items. This approach not only provides a memorable experience for travelers but also gives artisans an additional income stream.

*Cultural Exchange Programs:*

Develop programs that facilitate cultural exchanges between visitors and local residents, such as home visits, storytelling sessions, culinary classes or farm tours. These intimate experiences foster deeper connections between tourists and locals, ensuring that cultural heritage is both preserved and celebrated.

Through these enhanced activities, Touring Macedonia could aim to inject an additional 10-15% of the cost of their products back into local communities, further boosting the local economy. This would not only support local businesses but also contribute to the preservation of cultural traditions and the empowerment of rural communities. Additionally, these community-based activities would enhance the overall experience for travelers, aligning with the increasing demand for authentic, immersive travel that positively impacts local people. By making these shifts, Touring Macedonia can strengthen its role as a socially responsible operator, setting a strong example for the wider industry. It would demonstrate the company's dedication to not only providing memorable travel experiences but also ensuring that its presence contributes to the long-term sustainability of the communities and environments it operates in.

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## Cultural Preservation

Touring Macedonia sustains in its commitment to preserving and promoting the rich cultural heritage of North Macedonia and the broader Balkan region. One of the key pillars of this effort is educating 100% of its clients on the importance of respecting local customs, traditions, and practices. By providing guidance on cultural norms, including appropriate behavior when visiting religious sites, interacting with locals, and participating in community events, the company ensures that tourists are not only informed but actively contribute to the preservation and appreciation of local heritage. This cultural education should begin before the tour, with materials and briefings provided during the booking process and it should continue throughout the journey with the help of local guides who should be deeply knowledgeable about the region's history and customs. Clients should be encouraged to adopt a mindset of respectful curiosity, ensuring that their interactions with local communities are both meaningful and considerate.

### Cultural Preservation Recommendations:

#### *1. Educate Clients on Cultural Respect*

Touring Macedonia currently educates all clients on respecting local customs, but this can be strengthened by expanding pre-tour briefings and in-tour guidance. Develop concise cultural guides and videos to ensure travelers understand local etiquette. Recommendation: Continue this approach with a focus on educating clients before arrival and reinforcing cultural respect throughout the tour.

#### *2. Expand Cultural Immersion in Itineraries:*

Currently, 75% of itineraries feature cultural immersion activities. Touring Macedonia should aim for 100% cultural integration in all tours within the next two years. Recommendation: Incorporate hands-on experiences, such as workshops on traditional crafts, local culinary classes, and cultural exchange programs in every itinerary to offer deeper insights into North Macedonian/Balkan traditions.



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### *3. Promote Local Artisans and Traditions:*

Support cultural preservation by creating more partnerships with local artisans and cultural institutions. Recommendation: Collaborate with artisans to offer exclusive workshops and curate tours around traditional festivals and crafts to ensure cultural heritage is preserved and economically supported.

### *4. Enhance Guide Training:*

Invest in training for guides to strengthen their cultural knowledge and storytelling skills. Recommendation: Provide continuous education to guides, ensuring they are well-versed in local customs and capable of leading cultural immersion activities, which will elevate the traveler's experience and deepen engagement with local communities.

## **Economic Responsibility**

### Ethical Business Practices:

#### *1. Uphold Fair Trade and Transparent Pricing*

Touring Macedonia ensures that 100% of its local partners receive fair compensation, aligning with the principles of fair trade. The company is also committed to maintaining transparency across its pricing structures and implementing ethical guidelines in all aspects of its operations. Recommendation: Strengthen the current ethical framework by conducting regular reviews of compensation practices to ensure they remain aligned with fair trade principles. Additionally, introduce annual transparency reports that outline the company's pricing policies, providing clarity to both local partners and customers about where funds are allocated.

#### *2. Promote Local Economic Empowerment*

To ensure that local communities benefit from tourism revenue, Touring Macedonia should emphasize supporting smaller, family-owned businesses and artisans. Recommendation: Develop programs that channel extra 10-15% of tourism income directly into local communities, encouraging sustainable development and fostering long-term economic resilience. Expand

partnerships with local market vendors, craftsmen, and service providers, ensuring fair compensation and exposure to international visitors.

## Sustainable Growth

### Balance Business Growth with Sustainability

While aiming for 10% annual growth, Touring Macedonia is dedicated to maintaining a balance between business expansion and its sustainability goals. This involves diversifying product offerings and incorporating eco-conscious initiatives into its operations. Recommendation: Establish a clear roadmap for growth that includes specific sustainability metrics, such as reducing carbon emissions, increasing energy efficiency, and supporting biodiversity conservation. For each new product or service introduced, ensure that it aligns with the company's environmental and cultural preservation objectives, integrating sustainability from planning to execution.

### Diversify Product Offerings to Support Sustainability

As part of its growth strategy, Touring Macedonia should further develop eco-tourism products, such as nature conservation tours, wildlife tours, and community-based cultural exchanges. Recommendation: Invest in sustainable tourism development by offering carbon-neutral tours, partnering with eco-friendly lodging, and using low-emission transport options. This not only ensures growth but also enhances the company's appeal to environmentally conscious travelers.

## Building a Network of Sustainable Partners

### Expand Partnerships with Sustainable Operators

Touring Macedonia currently collaborates with over 50 local operators that share its commitment to sustainability. To enhance its impact, the company plans to grow this network by 20% within the next two years, focusing on operators that prioritize environmental conservation and ethical business practices.

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Recommendation: Proactively seek out partnerships with eco-conscious operators and offer support to existing partners in adopting sustainable practices. This can include providing training, resources, and incentives for businesses that commit to reducing their environmental footprint and adopting fair labor practices. By expanding the network, Touring Macedonia will strengthen the local supply chain and will contribute to the overall sustainability of the tourism industry.

### Promote Certification and Adherence to Sustainability Standards

Less than 20% of Touring Macedonia's partners currently hold recognized sustainable tourism certifications. The company is committed to increasing this figure to 50% within the next three years by pursuing certifications for itself and encouraging partners to do the same. Recommendation: Collaborate with recognized sustainable tourism organizations/providers to obtain at least two major certifications by 2025. Create a program that encourages partners to pursue certifications through education, workshops, and incentives, ensuring that sustainability becomes a core value throughout the supply chain. This will build credibility with eco-conscious travelers and set Touring Macedonia apart as a leader in responsible tourism.

## Marketing and Communication Strategy

### Promote Sustainable Tourism

Touring Macedonia's current marketing strategy focuses on highlighting the company's commitment to sustainability, with 30% of the marketing budget dedicated to promoting eco-friendly travel. This strategic focus has already yielded positive results, with a 15% increase in bookings from environmentally conscious travelers over the past year. However, there is significant potential for growth in this segment. Recommendation: To build on this success and double eco-conscious bookings by 2026, Touring Macedonia should further enhance its sustainable tourism marketing efforts by implementing the following actions:

*Targeted Campaigns:* Develop targeted digital marketing campaigns that specifically appeal to environmentally conscious travelers. This could include highlighting the company's eco-friendly initiatives, such as carbon-neutral tours, partnerships with green accommodations, and the use

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of renewable energy in operations. Use platforms like social media, email marketing, and eco-travel blogs to reach a wider, sustainability-focused audience.

*Leverage Testimonials and Success Stories:* Showcase testimonials from past eco-conscious travelers who have had positive, environmentally friendly experiences with Touring Macedonia. Incorporate their stories into promotional materials, blog posts, and videos to inspire potential customers.

*Sustainability Certification Badges:* Feature sustainability certifications prominently across marketing channels, including the website, brochures, and social media. Certifications build trust with eco-conscious travelers and can serve as a key decision-making factor.

*Collaborations with Eco-Influencers:* Partner with sustainability influencers and eco-travel bloggers who can amplify the message of sustainable tourism and drive traffic to Touring Macedonia's website and social media platforms. By leveraging their audience, the company can attract more eco-conscious travelers who align with its values.

*Sustainability Content Strategy:* Develop an ongoing content strategy focused on sustainability topics. This could include blog posts, guides, and infographics on eco-friendly travel tips, the company's green initiatives, and the positive impact of sustainable tourism on local communities and the environment. Regularly updating this content will establish Touring Macedonia as a thought leader in the eco-travel sector.

*Incentivize Sustainable Choices:* Offer discounts or special packages for travelers who choose eco-friendly options, such as booking carbon-neutral tours, staying in green-certified accommodations, or using public transportation during their trips. This will encourage more travelers to align their choices with sustainability, while reinforcing the company's commitment to responsible tourism.

### Expand Awareness of Sustainable Practices

Touring Macedonia should also focus on raising awareness among travelers who may not currently prioritize eco-friendly tourism but are open to learning about it. Recommendation: Create educational campaigns that highlight the environmental and cultural benefits of sustainable tourism, helping to shift consumer preferences toward responsible travel options.

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Offer incentives, such as special offers or eco-conscious tour highlights, to encourage these travelers to make more sustainable choices.

## Engaging Clients in Sustainability

### Enhance Pre-Trip Communications

Touring Macedonia currently includes sustainability tips in 100% of its pre-trip communications, which encourage clients to reduce their environmental impact and support local businesses. To further engage clients and enhance participation in sustainability initiatives, the company should:

*Develop a Comprehensive Sustainability Guide:* Create an informative sustainability guide that clients receive prior to their trips. This guide can include detailed tips on reducing their environmental footprint, insights into local customs, and information about the communities they will visit. Recommendation: Incorporate engaging content, such as infographics or videos, that highlight practical actions clients can take during their travels to be more eco-friendly and culturally respectful.

*Implement Pre-Trip Webinars:* Host pre-trip webinars focusing on sustainability practices. These sessions can feature local experts discussing the importance of conservation and how clients can contribute positively to the communities they will visit. Recommendation: Encourage client participation by offering incentives, such as discounts on future bookings or exclusive eco-friendly merchandise, for those who attend these sessions.

*Set Clear Participation Goals:* Aim for a 95% customer participation rate in sustainability initiatives within the next two years. Track participation through surveys and feedback mechanisms to assess engagement levels and identify areas for improvement. Recommendation: Regularly communicate the importance of client participation in sustainability efforts, showcasing success stories and their positive impacts on local communities and the environment.

### Expand Eco-Friendly Tour Options

Touring Macedonia aims to increase eco-friendly tour options by 50% over the next five years. To achieve this goal, the company should:

**Conduct Market Research:** Assess current trends in eco-tourism and gather feedback from clients to identify desired eco-friendly experiences. **Recommendation:** Utilize surveys and focus groups to gather insights into the types of eco-friendly tours that clients are interested in, ensuring new offerings align with their preferences.

**Collaborate with Local Partners:** Strengthen partnerships with local businesses and conservation organizations to develop unique eco-friendly experiences that benefit both tourists and the community. **Recommendation:** Introduce tours that include local conservation efforts, such as wildlife monitoring or habitat restoration projects, allowing clients to actively participate and support environmental initiatives.

## Measurable Sustainability Goals

Touring Macedonia is committed to setting measurable sustainability goals, including reducing waste by 30%, increasing local partnerships by 20%, and supporting conservation efforts with 10% of annual profits. To effectively implement these goals, the company should:

*Create an Action Plan:* Develop a comprehensive action plan outlining specific strategies, timelines, and responsibilities for achieving sustainability goals. **Recommendation:** Regularly review progress toward these goals and adjust strategies as needed, ensuring accountability and transparency in sustainability efforts.

*Engage Clients in Conservation Efforts:* Incorporate opportunities for clients to contribute to conservation initiatives, such as donating to local environmental organizations or participating in conservation activities during their tours. **Recommendation:** Promote these opportunities in pre-trip communications and highlight the positive impact clients can make through their contributions.