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Culture for Tourism. Towards a sustainable future for the Cyclades

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*Introduction*

The **case study of the** **Cyclades** was the subject of in-depth research conducted under the EU funded SPOT cultural tourism project, with specific focus on the islands of Andros, Santorini and Syros. In order to understand and assess the state, challenges and prospects of cultural tourism in the Cyclades, an extensive questionnaire survey with tourists, local residents and business representatives, a roundtable discussion, a symposium, and a series of intensive interviews with culture and (cultural) tourism stakeholders took place, during the tourist seasons of 2020, 2021 and 2022. The coincidence of these activities with the COVID-19 pandemic and relevant governmental measures proved to be both positive and negative.

Among the most **world-renowned tourism destinations** in Greece, and highly competitive vis-à-vis other top global summer-holiday destinations, the Cyclades have always been extremely dependent on tourism for their economic survival. The Southern Aegean islands (Cyclades and Dodecanese) tend to attract 1 out of 4 tourists visiting Greece. **Cultural tourism** differs from island to island, and it does not represent a conscious tourism motive for most Cyclades visitors; however, broadly defined, culture remains the factor that underlies tourists’ decision to visit these islands. The Cyclades’ cultural heritage and assets tend to be their most significant and distinctive comparative advantages vis-à-vis their competitors. They consist of both tangible and intangible, folk, historical/ archeological and contemporary sites, monuments, practices and landscapes, i.e. distinctive traditional Aegean architecture and townscapes, gastronomy and music, art and crafts, feasts and festivals, etc. Nonetheless, Cyclades visitors may not only enjoy these assets but also suffer the limitations of their fragile insular character (e.g., smaller-scale destinations, insularity-induced resource limitations).

The **signiﬁcance of culture for tourism** and concern about the cultural impacts of tourism have been explicitly expressed by various sides. Culture has habitually been considered as the realm most susceptible to adverse tourism impacts and repercussions, although tourism may invigorate, enrich, sustain and/or further develop destination cultures. For instance, the broad spectrum of Cyclades cultural assets elicits variable cultural tourism. Furthermore, tourism may seriously contribute to **cultural sustainability**—and vice versa. Tourism development elicits and invigorates socio-cultural change at the destinations, e.g., by promoting new values and trends, benefitting social relations, and inducing cultural evolution.

Cultural tourism has been significantly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and its global and local repercussions, but also constitutes a valuable asset for **sustainable future (tourism) development**, i.e., through cultural heritage preservation, maintenance of traditional values and provision of authentic experiences for tourists. In the current turbulent and transitional times for tourism, issues of sustainability, growing environmental awareness and cultural sensitivity, realizations by destination regions of the precious resources they possess and their vulnerability, as well as changing market demands, become especially poignant, pressing and pivotal for tourism and destinations in general, calling for change and adaptation to emerging trends, attitudes, needs, challenges and prospects.



# Evidence and Analysis

Tourism in the Cyclades has been continuously growing in the past couple of decades and has been highly—although rather inadvertently—reliant on their cultural particularities. Thus, cultural tourism has helped **enhance and promote tourism flows** in the region, it has directly and indirectly contributed to economic growth, to population retention, to an increase in employment opportunities and variable (infrastructure and other) investments, and to overall **local and regional development**, including cultural development, thus sustaining a beneficent cycle of further cultural tourism development.

On the other hand, **conventional cultural tourism**, as promoted by the Greek State and other top-down institutions, refers mostly to archeological sites, museums, galleries and theaters and certainly reinforces those heritage aspects of the islands’ place identity, tourism and local sustainable development. However, as it is based on relics of the past or high culture, such cultural tourism does not elicit further growth, diversification and change in matters of culture and/ or tourism development and enrichment of overall (cultural) place identity and local standards of life. In the local businesses’ and residents’ minds, **high culture** (and especially historical or archeological) attractions seems to have preponderance vis-à-vis **all other forms of culture** (i.e. landscape/ townscape, dance, religion, sports and other events), most gravely echoing the understanding of ‘culture’ by the Ministry of Culture, and the national level, more generally. This shortcoming has overarching repercussions on the development, management, protection and promotion of all (other) cultural artifacts, sites or other assets for the Cyclades and for Greece. The remediation of this problem will have the additional beneficial effect of attracting and/ or creating a far broader spectrum of the domestic and international cultural tourism market for the Cyclades.

Culture and tourism emerge from this exploratory study as positively interlinked in the minds of the locals, the visitors and the entrepreneurs involved in cultural tourism and tourism more generally in the Cyclades. The **culture–tourism relationship** is generally viewed as holding great potential for all sides involved and for local cultural and overall sustainability, despite the broad acknowledgement that the great potential for cultural sustainability in the study area is, to date, far from met. The **role of tourism** in local cultural development, management and appropriation is also viewed by the study participants with a degree of trepidation and ambivalence, although by generating revenues, there is an increased incentive for further and better cultural resource protection and preservation. Furthermore, the significance of the **government’s role** in (cultural) tourism promotion, development and management and the inclusion of more cultural attractions in the tourism product runs high among local entrepreneurs and other actors/ parties involved in tourism, culture and local overall development.

The understandings of all sides involved in our research coincide as regards the state and challenges of cultural tourism in the Cyclades, expressing the desire for more and more diverse attractions/site/events in this area. Although there seems to be satisfaction with locally provided cultural tourism aspects and attractions and apparent interest in all types and forms of cultural tourism, admittedly several aspects of existing current Cycladic cultural tourism **leave much to be desired** (number, diversity, pricing and quality of offered cultural activities).

# Policy Implications and Recommendations

* **The historical and cultural heritage of the Cyclades** needs to be properly managed, promoted and stewarded, based on the overarching acknowledgement of its importance and broad expression of willingness to support its further development.
* **Cultural attractions, sites and events** in the Cyclades need to be further and sustainably expanded, increased and diversified, as there is great potential in their growth and for new/ further locations and traditions to be developed for purposes of cultural tourism.
* **Cultural tourism** needs to be upheld and further developed as the most obvious and promising means to upgrade the Cycladic tourism product and to raise both the economic revenues and the cultural standards of the islands. Such investing and promotion of cultural tourism can improve the brand of the destination, minimize ‘mass tourism’, attract more niche markets, as well as extend the tourism season, while providing increased incomes, employment, further investment and a higher overall local quality of life.
* The further growth, promotion and development of cultural tourism, however, needs to take place on the basis and serving the goal of **local (cultural) sustainability, development, while monitoring/ safeguarding from negative implications/ repercussions** of tourism for local culture, social wellbeing, environmental integrity and healthy economic prospects.
* **Collaboration/ cooperation between all involved parties, as well as all sorts of partnerships** (public-private, horizontal-vertical, multi-scale/ level, intersectoral etc.) in the above is crucial and critical; indeed, it is the only guarantee for the success of all measures.
* **The government (all levels)** needs to invest responsibly in the potential and further development of Cycladic cultural tourism and support local/ regional entrepreneurship in this regard. There is great need for an increase in general tourism-related funding, planning and management; regulation of cultural activities; heritage preservation and promotion; and serious and sustained investment in infrastructure (i.e. ports of entry, public transport, public services, etc.).
* Significance of a future sustainable **development of all aspects of Cycladic cultural tourism** in the islands, in order for their full, diverse, rich and complex identity to be safeguarded and further developed and enriched, through cultural tourism.
* Such a development obviously ought to entail **all forms and aspects of the islands’ culture**, such as folk, popular/ vernacular, contemporary etc.
* Furthermore, it ought not to cater only to short-sighted pursuits of pure economic profit, but on **building positive long-term reciprocal interconnections between tourism and culture**.
* **Tourist flows** need to be better regulated in the area, without compromising the islands’ cultural integrity, economic independence and socio-economic standard of living.

Project Identity

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| **Project name** | Social and innovative Platform on Cultural Tourism and its potential towards deepening Europeanisation (SPOT) |
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| **Website and social networks** | [www.SPOTprojectH2020.eu](http://www.SPOTprojectH2020.eu)  fb: @SPOTprojectH2020  twitter: @H2020Spo |
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