

UNWTO opens call for ‘Best Tourism Villages’

- *UNWTO is recognizing villages across the world that are committed to the promotion and preservation of their cultural heritage and sustainable development through tourism*
- *New initiative announced at the opening of UNWTO Middle East regional office in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia*

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia/Madrid, Spain, 26 May 2021: *The search is on for the best examples of rural villages harnessing the power of tourism to provide opportunity and safeguard their communities, local traditions and heritage. The initiative of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) will identify villages taking innovative and transformative approaches to tourism in rural areas in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).*

With the vision of making tourism a positive force for transformation, rural development and community wellbeing, ‘Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO’ aims to maximise the contribution of the sector to reducing regional inequalities and fighting against rural depopulation. It also seeks to advance the role of tourism in valuing and safeguarding rural villages along with their associated landscapes, knowledge systems, biological and cultural diversity, local values and activities, including gastronomy.

The launch of the ‘Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO’ initiative takes place on the occasion of the opening of UNWTO’s first Regional Office in the Middle East (Riyadh, Saudi Arabia), underscoring the focus of the Office on, among other issues, the role of tourism in rural development.

Celebrating tourism as a driver of rural development and wellbeing

“Tourism can be a driver of positive change for rural communities all around the world,” said UNWTO Secretary-General Zurab Pololikashvili. “We want to recognize the uniqueness of each village and showcase the best initiatives to make tourism a means for a better future in rural areas. As we restart tourism, we work to ensure that we leave no one - and no village- behind.”

At the opening of the UNWTO Regional office in Riyadh, His Excellency Ahmed Al Khateeb, Saudi Arabia’s Minister for Tourism, said: “We are proud to be a partner of UNWTO as they launch this important initiative. For our rural communities, tourism is an opportunity to share their vibrant culture, amazing food and famous Saudi hospitality, while benefitting from the socio-economic opportunities provided by the sector.”

The initiative includes three pillars:

1. The 'Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO' Label: The Label will recognize a village which is an outstanding example of a rural tourism destination with recognized cultural and natural assets, that preserves and promotes rural and community-based values, products and lifestyle and has a clear commitment to innovation and sustainability in all its aspects – economic, social and environmental.

2. The 'Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO' Upgrade Programme: The Upgrade programme will benefit a number of villages that do not fully meet the Label criteria. These villages will receive support from UNWTO and its Partners in improving elements of the areas identified as gaps in the evaluation process.

3. The 'Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO' Network: The Network will provide a space for exchanging experiences and good practices, learnings, and opportunities. It will include representatives of the villages awarded the 'Best Tourism Village by UNWTO' Label, the villages participating in the Upgrade Programme, as well as experts, public and private sector partners engaged in the promotion of tourism for rural development.

UNWTO Members States can present up to three villages to be assessed by the Initiative. Applications will close on 31 July 2021. The selected villages will be announced in October 2021, on the occasion of the 24 session of the UNWTO General Assembly (Marrakesh, Morocco, 12-15 October 2021).

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