



Speech by Mário Borges on Responsible and sustainable tourism destination

Good afternoon, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I would like to thank you for welcoming me in this magnificent event and granting me, as a representative of the Azores Government, the opportunity to participate in this exciting round table about sustainable tourism.

The Azores is a small Portuguese region, located in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. It is just a two hour flight away from Lisbon, Portugal, or a five hour flight from Boston, USA. It sits on the sweet spot between “it’s a nice remote place” and “it’s too close not to go there”.

The region comprises nine small islands, very different in size, but also comprising very Island-specific characteristics. Just to give you an idea, on the biggest island live more than one hundred and thirty seven thousand (137.000) people, while on the smallest Island only live less than five hundred (500) people.

The Azores is an Outermost Region of the European Union and, as you can imagine, it is a paradise-like destination, with beautiful landscapes, incredible sea activities, and fascinating culture, local traditions and delicious food.

Nature-based tourism is the star product. There are many opportunities to experience the islands’ natural wonders, both for the more adventurous tourists, but also for those who seek soft and calm activities.

However, there are many more secrets to find in the Azores. It is the best spot in Europe for whale & dolphin watching, and also a wonderful place for diving.



There are also delightful hotsprings and wellness experiences. And, of course, a very rich culture, full of peculiar traditions and festivities to be discovered.

Tourism in the Azores has only really begun around twenty years ago, but with mild growth until 2014. In 2015, the air space was partially liberalized and a new development cycle started. Many tourists started to arrive on the islands. In 2019, the best year ever for the Azores tourism, overnight stays almost tripled the number of overnights stays in 2014.

This new cycle attracted more tourists and more investors. All the sector and the regional economy were thriving. But this also meant more pressure on local resources and on the local way of living.

Therefore, the Azores needed to strengthen its tourism strategy, with a clear orientation towards sustainability, but also making sure it was adapted to the local reality and resilient in the face of the global challenges that lie ahead.

Historically, the Azores has been deeply committed to being sustainable. There are several initiatives for the conservation of nature and cultural heritage. Being such a small territory, it is quite a feat to have so many protected areas.

So, as tourism progressed as a thriving economic sector, its widespread effect on the economy and Society became noticed. With that in mind and in line with UNWTO's guidelines, the Azores Government saw the potential to make tourism the catalyst for a more sustainable development involving everyone in the process.

There was the need to control tourism's growth, without jeopardizing its potential or the local resources, but, at the same time, this was also an opportunity to make the Azores stand out as sustainable tourism destination, where the balance between the economy, the environment and culture is taken very seriously.



Therefore, it was decided to raise the bar and get an official certification as a «Sustainable Tourism Destination». But it had to be a very serious certification, so the message could be delivered, both internally, for all stakeholders, and externally, for potential tourists or investors. Hence, the certification process was carried out with Earth Check, since it was officially recognized by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council.

The result is that the Azores is the first archipelago in the world to officially achieve this certification. This has become a structural feature in the regional strategy for tourism development, as well as a very strong competitive advantage – one that has been noticed during this last few months, where tourism recovers from the pandemic.

None of this has happened by chance, of course. There are a lot of good examples regarding Best Practices in the Azores. Both in planning as in daily action, the Region's stakeholders have been dedicated to build and work for a better place to visit and to live, now and in the future.

For instance, we are very serious about protecting our fragile sites and ecosystems. There are rules and a strict management by each Island Nature Park. Some of the most iconic places to visit have limited access or are subject to an entry fee.

We have also created a Destination Management Organization, the Azores DMO. This is a structure, under my aegis, that has the mission to organize, implement and control the certification process. It is also responsible for monitoring the Azores tourism strategy and its results, issuing recommendations and remarks whenever necessary.



The Azores DMO is a special agent for positive change. It is relentless in its call for action, trying to bring everyone along. Its modus operandi is based on collaborative work, involving several local stakeholders. Working and advisory groups are part of this work, but the «Green Teams», which are small groups of local leaders from each of the nine islands, have a very special role.

They cater for local interests and make them important for the regional tourism strategy. They give a voice to each individual, be it a local inhabitant, a tourist, or a businessman.

Finally, I need to mention the «Sustainability Charter of the Azores». This initiative has been implemented so every single organization in the Azores could join the work for sustainability and be supported while doing so. Subscribing to the Charter is publically committing to contributing to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Today, more than 150 local organizations, mainly private companies, have subscribed the to Charter's goals and are actively pursuing sustainability practices.

So, what is sustainability? To cater for what we have and work in the name of a common good. How to embody sustainability? By believing in it, involving others, and trying to make a positive change everyday. Who should be involved? Everyone.

Thank you.