

Federal Government Publishes National Tourism Strategy – Little Sense of a New Beginning

A Statement by ZENAT from a Tourism Science Perspective

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The “National Tourism Strategy” published by the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs on 28 January 2026 represents a commitment to greater competitiveness and growth for the German tourism industry. Recognizing tourism as a socially relevant and prosperity-generating key sector sends an important signal in the context of complex global challenges. The focus on reducing bureaucracy, advancing digitalization, improving accessibility, and promoting sustainability is expressly welcome. However, the strategy paper contains a number of gaps and inconsistencies, which this statement seeks to address.

Tourism accounts for around 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions, the majority of which stem from mobility¹. Tourism is therefore not only affected by climate change but also a contributor to it. The “National Tourism Strategy” is incompatible with findings from international climate research, which indicate that planetary boundaries have already been exceeded and that humanity’s room for action is shrinking as global warming progresses². The paper’s focus on climate- and environmentally harmful modes of transport (aviation, cruise tourism, private car travel) contradicts its stated commitment to sustainable tourism. The strategy does not address the potential to shift cross-border medium-distance travel to rail through improved intra-European coordination and expanded rail services. Nor does it include a clear political commitment to the long-term preservation of a price-stable Germany Ticket in order to increase the share of rail travel. Instead, further expansion of air transport is pursued, although this is no guarantee of additional growth in Europe’s already saturated markets.³ Technological solutions such as sustainable fuels and propulsion technologies for decarbonizing aviation are already available but are not yet economically viable due to a lack of political prioritization. Against this background, the mobility policy outlined in the tourism strategy is neither innovative nor forward-looking.

It already appears likely that the reduction in air traffic tax decided by the governing coalition at the end of 2025 will fail to achieve its stated objectives (e.g. promoting tourism in Germany, lowering airfares). It remains unclear whether the resulting tax

¹ Sun, Y.-Y., Faturay, F., Lenzen, M., et al. (2024): Drivers of global tourism carbon emissions. *Nature Communications*, 15, 10384. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-024-54582-7>.

² See, by way of example: Potsdam-Institut für Klimafolgenforschung e.V. (2025): [Planetary Health Check 2025](#).

³ Transport & Environment (T&E) (2025): [Economics of air transport in Europe. Challenging assumptions on the benefits of air transport growth](#). Briefing – November 2025.

shortfall of approximately EUR 350 million will be offset from the budget of the Federal Ministry of Transport, potentially at the expense of rail transport.⁴ The rejection of expanded support for sustainable fuels (e-fuels) is also difficult to understand, as these are a central element on the path toward “net zero” aviation-related greenhouse gas emissions. Parts of the aviation industry itself have recognized this and point, in a recent study, to the costs of inaction.⁵ The measures called for in the strategy not only undermine Germany’s climate targets, but also its international commitments within the EU and under global climate goals. As a result, decarbonizing tourism in Germany—an important competitive factor in a mobility-dependent sector amid international energy dependencies—remains out of reach.

In principle, climate-neutral tourism could be achieved through a well-designed combination of policy measures, even while taking economic objectives into account, as demonstrated by a study commissioned by the British Travel Foundation.⁶ This also includes changes in tourism demand. In the German context, domestic tourism should be promoted and marketed more strategically in order to channel regional growth impulses, particularly into structurally weak rural destinations. By contrast, the strategy paper focuses on outbound tourism, which primarily shifts tourism-related value creation abroad. In the Netherlands, some municipalities have already introduced advertising bans for climate-damaging activities such as air travel and cruises, with courts confirming their legality. An international group of researchers and tourism experts has once again underlined the urgency of decarbonizing tourism, referring to relevant scientific studies.⁷ The federal government’s intended expansion of air traffic not only contradicts the frequently invoked goal of sustainability, but is also likely to be readily exposed by the German public as “greenwashing.”

The foreseeable impacts of climate change and the resulting need for action for German destinations are already well documented.⁸ This also applies to the effects of tourism and leisure activities on sensitive natural areas and biodiversity, which should be reduced as far as possible in order to strengthen resilience—for example through effective visitor management and other necessary protection and steering measures. While the tourism strategy acknowledges that the resilience of destinations to climate impacts (e.g. the 2021 flood disaster in the Ahr Valley) must be strengthened in order

⁴ Deutscher Bundestag (2026): [Kaum Aussicht auf billigere Flugtickets](#). Tourismus-Ausschuss-hib 32/2026, 14th January 2026.

⁵ Air Transport Action Group (2026): [Waypoint 2050. Balancing growth in connectivity with a comprehensive global air transport response to the climate emergency](#). 3rd edition.

⁶ Peeters, P. & Papp, B. (2023): *Envisioning Tourism in 2030 and Beyond. The changing shape of tourism in a decarbonising world.* The Travel Foundation.

⁷ Buijtendijk, H., Eijgelaar, E., Peeters, P., Amelung, B., Amore, A., Adie, B. A., Balas, M., Cohen, S., Demiroglu, C., Duineveld, M., Fletcher, R., Hall, C. M., Higham, J., Hoogendoorn, G., Huijbens, E. H., Koens, K., Renes, R. J., Saarinen, J., Strasdas, W., & van der Duim, R. (2025): [Expert statement on banning tourism fossil fuel advertisements from public spaces](#).

⁸ See. Umweltbundesamt (2022): [Anpassung an den Klimawandel im Tourismus](#) (including further links to the relevant studies and documents).

to preserve natural areas and cultural heritage, it offers no concrete solutions. Likewise, there is no clear commitment by the federal government to provide stronger support to municipalities and federal states in coping with the climate crisis in the future.

At least the strategy paper clearly identifies the chronic shortage of skilled workers and labor in tourism and outlines possible solutions. With around 6% of all employees, tourism remains one of the most labor-intensive sectors of the German economy and creates significantly more jobs in Germany than the automotive industry.⁹ Unlike the automotive sector, which is concentrated in a few predominantly urban locations, tourism—especially the hospitality industry—generates income and employment opportunities across the entire country, providing urgently needed economic stimulus particularly in rural regions. However, employment in tourism and hospitality has declined in recent years, and since the COVID-19 pandemic many skilled workers have left the sector. It is doubtful whether the measures outlined in the paper are sufficient to make tourism employment, especially in rural areas, more attractive and to curb the migration of workers to other sectors. Achieving this will require addressing structural problems in tourism employment (particularly in hospitality), such as low wages, excessively long working hours, work-life balance, and the gender pay gap.¹⁰ In addition, outbound tourism should take greater social and ecological responsibility along supply chains in international destination countries.

Overall, it is highly questionable whether the growth of the German tourism industry envisaged by the “National Tourism Strategy” can be achieved with the measures presented. What is missing is a bold vision for a future-proof tourism sector in Germany that can generate sustainable value creation even in challenging times. Such tourism must radically reduce its climate impacts, deploy future technologies in the interest of efficiency, quality, and sustainability, and promote broad-based and inclusive societal prosperity. The paper fails to provide a problem-oriented analysis of the status quo. It avoids strategic decisions as well as concrete solutions whose implementation could be measured and evaluated against binding targets. It also lacks a risk analysis or measures to offset contradictory effects.

Meanwhile, many actors in the sector are already well on their way toward sustainable and climate-compatible tourism. Sixteen German companies and industry associations have explicitly committed to implementing global climate goals in tourism.¹¹ Destinations and businesses are using digitalization to drive innovation and operational sustainability. They are investing in appreciative personnel and working-time

⁹ DIW ECON (2024): [Wirtschaftsfaktor Tourismus 2024](#), Study on behalf of DIHK, BTW & DTV, Berlin; Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis) (2025): [Pressemitteilung Nr. N067](#) vom 20. November 2025 (online).

¹⁰ Umweltbundesamt (Ed.) (2023): Messung der Nachhaltigkeit des Tourismus in Deutschland. Texte 73/2023.

¹¹ One Planet Network (2021): [Glasgow Declaration](#).

management to attract and retain skilled workers. Many are already benefiting in the medium term from cost savings and reputational gains through investments in climate protection and sustainability. Some support sustainable mobility solutions, follow circular economy principles, or pursue sustainability certification. Increasingly, entrepreneurs are no longer measuring economic success solely by monetary or quantitative indicators, but also by their contribution to the common good and by guest satisfaction. Yet although the vast majority of the German population wishes to travel in an environmentally or socially responsible manner,¹² sustainable tourism offerings remain insufficiently visible on the market, not least due to a lack of financial incentives. It is therefore important to steer tourism demand more deliberately toward such offerings.

The task now is to systematically learn from the many positive examples and to establish new, globally competitive industry standards in tourism through targeted support measures. In this way, national tourism policy could responsibly reflect Germany's role as the world's third-largest economy, the third-largest emitter of tourism-related greenhouse gases, and the primary tourism destination for German travelers. Finally, it is to be hoped that applied tourism research and the German higher education institutions involved in academic tourism education—both not mentioned in the strategy paper—will be adequately represented in the planned future “Tourism Policy Forum.”

Imprint

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¹² Umweltbundesamt (Ed.) (2025): Nachhaltigkeit bei Urlaubsreisen. Bewusstseins- und Nachfrageentwicklung und ihre Einflussfaktoren. Abschlussbericht. Dessau-Roßlau.