

Calypso widens Europe's travel horizons

Everyone deserves a break

Calypso is an exciting European Commission initiative that could improve the lives of underprivileged citizens across Europe. It aims to allow people who cannot usually do so to travel to Europe's holiday spots, while at the same time helping local economies beat the off-season blues.



Underpinning Calypso is the opportunity for Europe's less privileged citizens to discover parts of Europe unfamiliar to them. Every European citizen should have the right to travel. And what better way to build a sense of European citizenship than through cultural exchange?

Holidays offer a breath of fresh air and a break from routine. They can be an opportunity to step back from the problems of everyday life and to broaden mental horizons. They are a time to discover the rest of Europe and see one's own life from a different perspective. The problem is that a considerable number of Europeans cannot afford them. With the way school holidays are organised, much of Europe travels in summer, or around Christmas and Easter, when the prices sometimes double.



Social tourism is about helping people travel who would not otherwise be able to do so. The four groups identified by Calypso include underprivileged young adults aged between 18 and 30; families facing financial or other pressures; people with disabilities; and over-65s and pensioners who cannot afford travel or are daunted by the challenges of organising a journey.

A win-win situation

The situation across Europe is that more and more regions rely on tourism for all or part of their livelihood, but that rooms lie empty for several months every year. Airlines and ferries see similar fluctuations in business. Access over the out-of-season months could be an appropriate tool to economic revival and job creation.

If every European were given the chance to leave home and discover other countries, Europe's tourist trade would be able to create jobs in the low season by catering for disadvantaged groups through lower-cost travel arrangements and special themed holidays. Moreover, existing good practices show that specific Member States such as Spain actually register a return on investment, when facilitating holidays for their own senior citizens in the low season.



Setting up the system

The European Commission's new initiative is named "Calypso" after the Greek sea nymph who for seven years played host to the war-weary Odysseus on her island. But one of Calypso's many strengths is that it is not just about travel: it also deals with issues of health, age, young people, social integration and the attempt to create a sense of European identity.

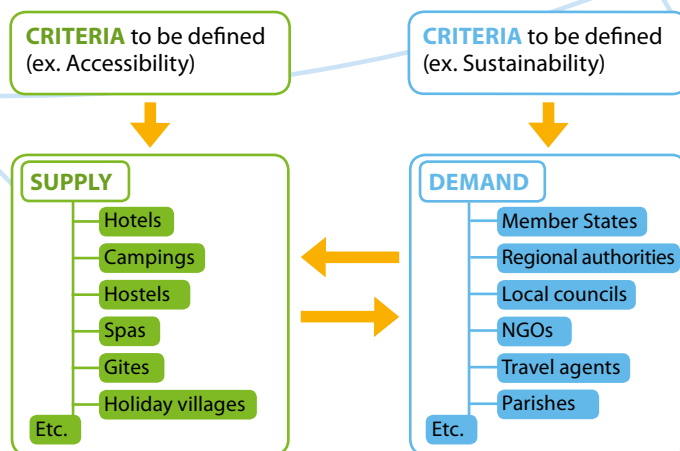


At this stage Calypso is part of a three-year preparatory action (2009-2011), with a budget of €1 million per year. So far, 21 EU and candidate countries have signed up and six workshops have been held across Europe to study good practices and build a common strategy. An expert group composed of public and private sector stakeholders has also been set up to assist the European Commission with Calypso's implementation.

Europe-wide exchange network

The European Commission wants to encourage stakeholder involvement by strengthening the structures dealing with low-season tourist exchanges. It will also investigate the possibility of creating a platform that could enhance opportunities for NGOs, travel agencies and other demand-side structures to interact with carefully vetted hotels, spas and holiday villages. It is hoped that this tool will eventually allow particular groups to travel in the low season to other countries in Europe.

Possible scheme for low-season exchanges



Calypso has something to offer both to the tourist trade and to society. By opening up tourism to less privileged travellers in particular and filling the out-of-season void, it could boost business and employment opportunities for the tourism industry, and at the same time improve the quality of life of Europe's citizens.

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