

Press Release

Unexpected Upgrade: Europe Flips the Script on Responsible Travel

- The European Travel Commission launches “Unlock an Unexpected Upgrade”, a global movement to inspire travellers to see responsibility as a benefit, not a burden.
- Supported by the EU, 36 national tourism boards and industry partners, this initiative aims to shift traveller behaviour through aspiration, not obligation.

Brussels/ New York, 16 October 2025: Europe, the world’s most visited continent, attracts nearly **700 million travellers each year**¹ — a testament to its rich culture, diverse landscapes, and warm hospitality. This remarkable success presents not only opportunities but also a shared responsibility to ensure tourism remains a force for good, enriching local communities while protecting the environment for generations to come.

Guided by this vision, the European Travel Commission (ETC) — co-funded by the EU and supported by a coalition of leading destinations and travel brands — has launched “**Unlock an Unexpected Upgrade**”, a global movement that reimagines responsible travel not as a limitation but as an enhancement.

Unveiled at the **Skift Transatlantic Summit** on 15 October in New York City, the initiative encourages travellers to experience Europe through a richer, more rewarding lens: showing that responsible choices can elevate their journeys while benefiting local communities and the environment.

From obligation to aspiration

Grounded in behavioural science and nudge theory, the initiative replaces “sustainable travel”, often seen as vague or guilt-driven, with the more tangible idea of “responsible travel”. At its core lies a simple but powerful message: **“Travel responsibly. Unlock an unexpected upgrade.”**

Instead of focusing on what travellers should avoid, the campaign highlights what they gain: fewer crowds, deeper connections, more authentic experiences, and better value.

Miguel Sanz, President of the European Travel Commission, noted:

Our challenge was to reposition how Europe promotes travel. We want to unite European destinations behind a shared vision that inspires positive visitor behaviours — not through guilt, but aspiration. Responsible choices aren’t a burden; they’re an upgrade to a more rewarding way of travelling.

¹ UN Tourism, 2025

Responsible travel as a reward

The movement encourages travellers to make small but powerful shifts, such as exploring Europe outside the peak season, venturing beyond well-known destinations, choosing low-carbon transport, and supporting local businesses. Each choice is presented as an upgrade: an opportunity to discover hidden gems, enjoy quieter moments, and forge genuine connections with local culture.

“Unlock an Unexpected Upgrade” invites travellers to rediscover Europe with curiosity, care, and connection. Its **growing collection of editorial stories** captures this spirit — from kayaking the Baltic Sea and walking Dubrovnik’s ancient walls off season, to celebrating Carnival like a local in Germany.

A growing global travel movement

A campaign is currently active in **North America** to promote the new movement. It also runs across **Visit Europe’s website**, social media channels, and under the hashtag #UnexpectedUpgrade, alongside presentations at leading international travel trade shows. In 2026, the campaign will expand to **China, Japan, Brazil and Australia**, broadening its global reach and inspiring travellers worldwide to experience Europe more responsibly — and more rewardingly.

Adoption has been **Europe-wide**, with **all 36 member destinations** of the European Travel Commission endorsing the initiative. The EU and seven National Tourism Organisations co-funded the North America rollout, reflecting strong alignment across Europe’s tourism community.

Momentum is also growing among industry partners. Several **global travel brands** are already amplifying campaign content through their own channels, with more expected to join soon, strengthening the collective effort to make responsible travel the new standard for exploring Europe.

Rooted in research, designed for real-life change

The campaign’s long-term approach is grounded in a global research programme that began in 2024 across six key long-haul markets for Europe: Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Japan and the USA. By analysing behavioural data, online travel discussions and media coverage, ETC has established a **Global Responsible Travel Index** to track shifts in traveller attitudes year on year and measure real-world impact over time.

Since its soft launch, the campaign has surpassed expectations: impressions exceeded targets by **15%**, generating over **550,000 flight and hotel searches**, nearly **20,000 bookings**, and **26,000 overnight stays**. It also inspired over **50,000 rail and bus searches**, advancing Europe’s commitment to lower-carbon mobility.

This is more than a campaign. It’s a collective movement to make travel more meaningful and rewarding for everyone. We invite all travel and tourism partners who share our vision to join us — together, we can make a difference, added Miguel Sanz.

Discover more at: <https://unexpectedupgrade.eu/>

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About the campaign

The European Travel Commission thanks the “Unlock an Unexpected Upgrade” partners for their support:

- France Tourism Development Agency (Atout France)
- Eurail B.V.
- Fliggy
- German National Tourism Board
- National Inbound and Domestic Tourism Association of Moldova
- Malta Tourism Authority
- Polish Tourism Organisation
- RailEurope
- Rome2Rio
- SmartGuide
- Slovenian Tourist Board
- Tourism Ireland
- VisitFlanders

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Note to editors

The **European Travel Commission** (ETC) represents the national tourism organisations of Europe. Established in 1948, ETC's mission is to strengthen the sustainable development of Europe as a tourist destination and to promote Europe in third markets. Its 36-member tourism boards work together to build the value of tourism for all the diverse European destinations through cooperation in sharing best practices, market intelligence and promotion. For more information, visit europeantravelcommission.com.

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