

VALENCIA | INCLUSIVE TOURISM

Smart Tourism Isn't Just for Tourists

Visit Valencia is a non-profit Foundation encompassing more than 450 companies and bodies, such as the Valencia City Council, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Valencian Business Confederation. The collaborative governance model has contributed to the evolution of tourism in Valencia since 1991, directly influencing the wellbeing of Valencian society.



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A view over the old town in Valencia.
Image: northleg_official / Unsplash

The Challenge

Whilst a strong tourism industry can boost the economy and contribute to the development of the destination, if not managed well, tourism can also create problems in cities across a range of domains. Within cities, negative economic impacts include tourism gentrification, which may push out local small businesses and result in changes of the local vicinity's physical and cultural identity, and rising costs of living in popular destinations; negative social impacts include possible friction between visiting and local populations and disruptions in the daily life of local residents; and, negative environmental impacts include noise pollution, increased waste, and depletion or increased competition for local natural resources. It is therefore

important to not only manage potential negativities of tourism, but also ensure that the local resident population are included in the benefits that a vibrant tourism industry could bring.

Valencia lies on the Spanish south-eastern coast and is the third-most populated municipality with close to 800,000 city residents. Its historic centre is one of the largest in Spain, spanning 1.69 km². The city provides a diverse range of tourism experiences, from the historic churches and UNESCO-heritage sites to its Mediterranean beaches, museums, and futuristic buildings. In 2022, Valencia's figures for overnight stays and travellers reached close to pre-pandemic records in 2019, confirming the recovery of the city's tourism sector.

PLANO GENERAL



Partnering experts, including the Aragonese Center of Augmentative and Alternative Communication and the Valencian Association of Parents of Persons with Autism, deployed more than 60 pictograms as inclusive signage across Valencia to help persons with communication or language difficulties identify main tourist attractions and services.

Image: Visit Valencia

The Solutions

This recovery is in part facilitated by Valencia's move to prioritise its tourism sector for "smart" transformation. Recognising the significant potential of the industry in driving economic growth and enhancing the city's reputation, Valencia City decided to capitalise on increasing demand for sustainable and inclusive travel experiences. Additionally, Valencia aimed to tap on the potential of leveraging technology and data to optimise tourism operations, improve visitor experiences, and minimise the negative impacts of tourism on residents and the environment.

Valencia City adopted three key strategies for the smart transformation of its tourism industry.

1. Developing Accessible Experiences for People with Disabilities

Investments in accessible tourism aimed to ensure that individuals with disabilities could fully enjoy the city's attractions and amenities. Valencia's city representatives worked closely with PREDIF, the state representative platform of people with physical disability, and 52 tourism entities to meet the requirements of PREDIF's inclusive tourism programme.

Accessible tours were implemented in several languages for those with reduced mobility. Information offices offer braille translations and pictograms. A 24/7 interactive InfoTourist platform provides a comprehensive English guide, and its Visualfy

system—an auditory accessibility system—leverages artificial intelligence (AI) to send visual notifications to users. All in all, these cater to diverse needs to enable greater inclusivity, which not only enhances the tourism experience, but also solidifies Valencia's reputation as an inclusive and welcoming destination.

2. Monitoring and Quantifying Tourism Footprint

As part of Valencia's commitment to sustainable economic growth, and its aim to become carbon neutral by 2030, it was important to manage tourism's impact on the city and its residents. By monitoring and quantifying the tourism footprint, through methods including citywide installation of sensors and regular public surveys, local authorities gained insights into visitor flows, resource consumption, and environmental impacts.



Valencia is the first city in the world to verify and certify the carbon and water footprint of tourist activity in the city.



Additionally, this data-driven approach allowed the city to anticipate and make informed decisions to mitigate negative social impacts of tourism, such as implementing crowd control measures, controlling irregular accommodation, and regulating noise, thus ensuring a more sustainable and harmonious coexistence between tourists and locals. Altogether 60 people, representing the tourism ecosystem, citizens

and institutions, participated in tourism governance through the Municipal Tourism Council.

Milestones in Valencia's development of sustainable tourism were reached steadily over the years. In 2020, Valencia was the first city in the world to verify and certify the carbon footprint of all tourist activity in the city. This involved measuring the sources of greenhouse gas emissions and their effect on the environment in 10 different areas related to tourism, such as transport, accommodation, waste treatment, and others. In 2021, Valencia became the first city in the world to measure the water footprint of tourist activity, by calculating the consumption and pollution of fresh water that is derived from different components of tourist activity.



Valencia's beaches are popular destinations for both locals and visitors during the summer.
Image: Charlie Gallant / Unsplash

3. Digitalising Tourism for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)

With tourism contributing an estimated €3,600 million to the city's economy, digital strategies that promote and include tourism-related SMEs are important to develop the local industry and ensure economic inclusivity.

By providing digital tools and platforms, such as online booking systems and digital marketing support, local businesses gained broader exposure and accessibility to potential customers. For example, tourists can access any venue simply by using a QR code, without the need for paper tickets. Guides, maps and brochures are available in digital format, and tourist information

agents are ready to help at tourist offices, and via WhatsApp and live chats. These are enabled by more than 400 free, high-speed public Wi-Fi hotspots available throughout Valencia, as part of the European Union's WiFi3EU programme.

Sistema de inteligencia turística (SIT, in English: Tourism Intelligence System), a big data platform designed by Visit Valencia and hosted in the cloud, is helping tourism providers and operators understand key traveler trends in a simple and easy way.

Public data—covering passenger demand, accommodation offers and demand, and air traffic—is updated every week, whereas destination-specific information is accessible and tailor-made to restricted users. This comprehensive database of tourism data helps relevant stakeholders and business provide optimised offerings, such as collecting data for sustainable tourism management, improving the accessibility of tourism services, and developing new products that diversify or improve the market.

Thus, Smart Tourism has improved tourists' experiences, facilitated local business growth, increased competitiveness, stimulated the local economy and supported sustainability, benefiting both established enterprises and emerging entrepreneurs.



L'Umbracle, part of the City of Arts and Sciences complex, is a sculpture garden and landscaped walk with plant species indigenous to Valencia.
Image: herraes / Adobe Stock



Valencia's Smart Tourism drive has contributed to the local economy's growth and resilience, fostered a more inclusive society, and enhanced the long-term viability and attractiveness of the city as a destination.



The Outcome

Valencia's Smart Tourism drive has contributed to the local economy's growth and resilience. With SMEs experiencing improved business performance and market reach, this has in turn led to increased job opportunities and entrepreneurship, enhancing economic vitality and stability within the city.

Beyond economic inclusivity that has benefitted both residents and the local economy, the focus on accessible tourism has not only improved the experiences of visitors with disabilities, but also promoted social inclusivity. Valencia City's efforts to ensure equal access to attractions, transportation, and services has fostered a more inclusive society, strengthening social cohesion and cultural diversity.

Smart Tourism has further advanced Valencia's sustainability, through monitoring and quantifying its tourism footprint to identify areas where implementation of sustainable practices can be improved. By optimising resource allocation, managing visitor flows, and reducing environmental impacts, the city has minimised the strain on its infrastructure, natural resources, and local communities. This commitment to sustainable tourism is contributing to the long-term viability and attractiveness of Valencia as a destination.

As a result, Valencia was named European Smart Tourism Capital in 2022 and will be the first Mediterranean city to be named European Green Capital in 2024. 📍