

UN Tourism: Driving social and economic change

An interview with Natalia Bayona, UN Tourism Executive Director by Dr. Stephen Pratt

UN Tourism is the specialized agency for tourism and the global leader of tourism for development, driving social and economic change to ensure that 'people and planet' are always center stage. As society progresses, the tourism sector, much like many other sectors, needs to transform to serve as a catalyst for prosperity at a universal scale. Enhancing the wellbeing of individuals, safeguarding the natural environment, stimulating economic advancement, and fostering international harmony are key goals that are the fundamental essence of UN Tourism. Dr. Stephen Pratt talks to UN Tourism Executive Director Natalia Bayona about UN Tourism's role of driving a sustainable force that is now central to many economies.

UN TOURISM RECENTLY CHANGED ITS NAME. WHAT PROMPTED THE CHANGE, AND HOW HAS IT BEEN RECEIVED SO FAR?

The rebranding to 'UN Tourism' reflects our commitment to a more inclusive approach to global tourism, emphasizing interconnectedness, collaboration, and the achievement of a more sustainable sector. This change highlights the vital role of tourism in promoting economic growth, cultural exchange, and fostering innovation, while also making clear tourism's key role in the wider work and mission of the United Nations.

The response to our new name has been overwhelmingly positive, reflecting a shared vision for an equitable future. With this new brand, the organization aims to reaffirm its

status as the global leader of tourism for development, driving social and economic change to ensure that 'people and planet' are always center stage and they come along with prosperity.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE GLOBAL IMPACT OF YOUR ORGANIZATION, AND WHICH AREAS HAVE SEEN THE MOST SIGNIFICANT INFLUENCE?

The global impact of UN Tourism is extensive, shaping various regions and sectors while promoting responsible, sustainable, and universally accessible tourism alongside inclusive growth and sustainable development.

As one of key economic drivers, tourism plays a vital role in poverty alleviation and job creation, especially among youth, with over

50% of the workforce under the age of 25. Education remains at the heart of our mission, exemplified by initiatives like the [UN Tourism Online Academy](#), which equips tourism professionals with essential training and resources for responsible tourism practices. This not only enhances career opportunities but also positively impacts local economies.

Innovation is another key area where we make a difference, as we facilitate global entrepreneurship competitions, national challenges, and innovation forums that stimulate creative solutions within the tourism sector.

Overall, UN Tourism's influence encompasses sustainable practices, policy development but also investments. Because tourism is an economic sector—and the most human economic sector at that—it needs strategic



investments and the development of investment frameworks so that all actors in the sector can participate in the multiple benefits that tourism can bring.

WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE MAIN CHALLENGES FACING GLOBAL TOURISM TODAY?

There are many challenges that tourism is facing today. Starting from the economic ones, arising from the economic uncertainty and geopolitical instability, and followed by the informality of the sector and the environmental issues.

But tourism has proven to be resilient, both during the pandemic and with its ability to be at the forefront of technological change. Nevertheless, digital adaptation is a challenge itself; the rapid evolution of technology requires the sector to embrace new tools and platforms to enhance customer experiences and streamline operations. The

sector needs to scale up efforts to support all actors so that no one is left behind in digitalization.

Additionally, education plays a crucial role in addressing the skills gap within the industry and ending the informality of employment. Many tourism professionals lack the training necessary to navigate emerging trends, which could hinder growth and innovation. To tackle

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these challenges effectively, we must foster a culture of ongoing learning and investment in human capital.

THE WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM NOTED THAT GLOBAL TOURISM RECOVERY HAS BEEN UNEVEN. HOW DOES UN TOURISM PLAN TO FACILITATE A MORE BALANCED RECOVERY MOVING FORWARD?

UN Tourism is committed to fostering not only partnerships between public and private sectors but investments in the sector promoting sustainable development practices. Our focus includes enhancing regional tourism cooperation, investing in community resilience, and ensuring marginalized groups are included in planning processes.

We recognize how tourism has a unique power to provide opportunity and help traditionally marginalized groups find work, grow professionally and personally, and become more firmly integrated into wider society. In Colombia and Panama, for example, UN Tourism has worked to promote innovation among women and in post-conflict communities. Thanks to this, they have grown to become social entrepreneurs, leaving their marginalized status behind through innovation. It's a clear illustration of how investing in new ideas and talented individuals, wherever they are, can have a profound impact on whole communities, while ensuring that tourism's recovery and growth is enjoyed by everybody.

WHAT STEPS SHOULD COUNTRIES TAKE TO SUSTAINABLY LEVERAGE THEIR NATURAL AND CULTURAL ASSETS TO ACHIEVE BALANCED PROSPERITY?

To achieve balanced prosperity, countries should sustainably leverage their natural and cultural assets through an integrated approach. This begins with thorough assessments to identify unique offerings that attract mindful tourists. Developing

sustainable tourism strategies is essential, prioritizing the preservation of natural and cultural resources alongside economic growth. Stakeholder engagement is critical; involving local communities in decision-making empowers residents and ensures their stories and traditions enrich tourist experiences.

Investment in sustainable infrastructure, including renewable energy and efficient waste management, must support tourism



UN Tourism Executive Director, Natalia Bayona

Thought Leader

One UN Tourism initiative involves developing responsible tourism guidelines.

initiatives, fostering broad economic benefits. Educational programs that integrate sustainability principles can cultivate a new generation of informed travelers and professionals in the sector. Promoting authentic experiences rooted in local culture not only fosters deeper connections between visitors and destinations but also supports local artisans. Collaborative efforts between public and private sectors can share best practices, ultimately maximizing tourism's positive impact on socio-economic development while safeguarding unique assets.

HOW DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION ASSESS ITS COLLABORATION WITH UNIVERSITIES? WHAT ARE THE MAIN OBJECTIVES, AND HOW IS THIS PARTNERSHIP STRUCTURED AND EVALUATED FOR EFFECTIVENESS?

Partnerships are key to UN Tourism achieving its goal of promoting tourism education at every level. Through our ever-growing network, we aim to reach both young people and established tourism professionals, to inspire and empower them to build their futures within our sector.

The UN Tourism Online Academy now offers around 50 courses from 18 academic partners. A total of almost 30,000 students, more than half of them (54%) women, are registered to the platform, with India, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, México, Argentina, Italy, and Indonesia, the top ten most-represented countries, highlighting the truly global reach. And to ensure everyone can be part of our sector's future, we have made 250 scholarships available to our Member States this year alone.

Alongside this, around 100 universities are part of the UN Tourism Affiliate Members Network, while our own network of 'Academies in Collaboration with UN Tourism' also continues to grow. Most recently, we signed an agreement to open a Culinary Arts Academy in Zimbabwe, to go alongside the Riyadh School of Tourism and Hospitality in Saudi Arabia and the Samarkand Academy in Uzbekistan.

That's just a small overview of our work in the field of education, and we continue to advance initiatives at every level, from high school to continuing professional development and training.

Our collaboration with universities centers on knowledge exchange, capacity building, and research initiatives. We aim to foster innovation in tourism, enhance educational curricula, and tackle critical sector challenges. Effectiveness is assessed through measurable outcomes, including research publications, student engagement, and real-world result implementation. Partnerships focus on research and innovation that informs policymaking, with key objectives in community engagement and skills development. We disseminate knowledge through conferences and publications.

By facilitating internships and experiential learning opportunities, Rosen College can connect theoretical concepts with real-world applications.

WHAT ARE THE TOP PRIORITIES FOR THE NEXT FIVE YEARS, AND WHAT FACTORS ARE DRIVING THESE PRIORITIES? HOW DO YOU ENVISION UNIVERSITIES AND RESEARCH CONTRIBUTING TO THESE STRATEGIC GOALS?

In the next five years, we aim to drive both economic and social growth within tourism. To achieve this, we will continue to prioritize innovation, investments and education – three proven pillars of transformation and empowerment.

These are exciting times for our sector, and we are leading from the front. The digital transformation of tourism continues at pace, and we are working to harness the huge potential of Artificial Intelligence. For example, AI could transform how destinations promote themselves and manage their tourist inflows, allowing for more efficiency and greater diversity. There is also significant potential for more and better-targeted investment into our sector. In that sense, for example, we are connecting private investors with community tourism projects, supporting growth while also supporting local businesses, entrepreneurs and artisans and safeguarding local heritage.

Crucially, education will empower future tourism workers as well as sector leaders with the necessary skills and knowledge to

address these challenges effectively. This is key to future-proofing jobs and improving conditions for everyone who works in our sector, including through better pay and more opportunities to grow professional within tourism.

HOW COULD THE ROSEN COLLEGE CONTRIBUTE TO ACHIEVING UN TOURISM'S PRIORITIES?

Rosen College can play a role in achieving UN Tourism's priorities through focused research and innovative educational programs. By engaging in projects related to sustainable

tourism practices, visitor management, and community impact, the college can provide actionable insights that align with UN initiatives. Its strong emphasis on hospitality education and industry collaboration fosters a comprehensive understanding of consumer behaviour and responsible practices.

Moreover, Rosen College can enhance its curriculum to prioritize innovation, effectively preparing students to become future leaders in the tourism sector. The college also serves as a hub for knowledge transfer, offering training programs designed to build resilience among tourism professionals. By facilitating internships and experiential learning opportunities, Rosen College can connect theoretical concepts with real-world applications.



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UN Tourism strives to promote tourism development that supports the conservation of biodiversity.