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Call Announcement

Innovation Contest

November 2024

Co-funded
by the COSME programme
of the European Union

This publication was co-funded by the European Union's COSME Programme.
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A. Executive Summary

The ECOTOURS project "Empowering local communities turning them into laboratories for co-development of circular and sustainable tourism ecosystems" is co-funded by the European Union's COSME programme under agreement No 101085853. It foresees the provision of financial support to tourism MSMEs, for promoting the adoption of sustainable development practices and turning marginal areas that are experiencing socio-economic challenges due to the impact of COVID-19 pandemic, into circular, green, and sustainable tourist destinations.

The Call for the Innovation Contest is restricted to ECOTOURS project participants, defining the criteria of selection & providing a prize of the value of 10.000 EUR, that will support the winners in development of the proposed ideas. The idea is motivating the innovation of tourism SMEs in the field of specialized tourism and digitalization (including Apps, AI, Blockchain, experience marketing, destinations or other) to improve the attraction rate of the area (promoting sustainability & community engagement) and facilitate the management of tourism flow at local level. It is planned to provide 1 prize only for joint applications (to foster cooperation among SMEs & local stakeholders): 6 teams (1 per integrated circular tourism itineraries developed) will compete on IT system design basing on users' needs and contest requirements. The winners will use it to develop & implement the proposed solutions in short time, benefitting from the support of partners organization with technical expertise.

This Call and the relevant evaluation process shall respect transparency, equal treatment, conflict of interest and confidentiality and meet the «Guidelines for Awarding Financial Support to Third Parties (Tourism SMEs) ».

B. Abbreviations

COSME: Competitiveness of Enterprises and SME
E.U.: European Union
NACE: Nomenclature of Economic Activities
MSME: Micro, small, and medium enterprise

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1. About this Call Announcement

1.1. Introduction

We are thrilled to announce an Innovation Contest aimed at motivating the innovation of tourism Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) participating in our ECOTOURS project in the realm of specialized tourism and digitalization. This contest seeks to harness the power of collaboration among SMEs and local stakeholders to enhance the attraction rate of the area, promote sustainability, foster community engagement, and facilitate the management of tourism flow at the local level.

1.2. Guiding Principles

The Call will be carried out by respecting the following principles, as defined in the «Guidelines for Awarding Financial Support to Third Parties (Tourism SMEs)»:

1. **Excellence**. The applications submitted by MSMEs selected for funding must demonstrate a high quality in the context of the topics and criteria set out in the Call.
2. **Transparency**. Funding decisions will be based on clearly described criteria and process. All applicants will receive adequate feedback on the outcome of the evaluation of their applications.
3. **Fairness and impartiality**. All applications submitted to the Call are treated equally. They are evaluated impartially on their merits, irrespective of their origin or the identity of the applicant.
4. **Confidentiality**. All applications and related data, knowledge and documents are treated in confidence.

2. About ECOTOURS

2.1. Introduction

The project targets the MSMEs participating in ECOTOURS and local communities in Italy (Provinces of Palermo, Enna, Agrigento and Trapani in Sicily), Greece (Western Macedonia), France (Batia in Corsica), Hungary (Southern Great Plains), Spain (Galicia) and Cyprus, including a natural & cultural heritage of international significance, that are currently facing new common socio-economic challenges due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It focuses on how circular economy principles and standards apply to tourism services and businesses. The concept of circular tourism has recently received increased attention among policymakers and stakeholders worldwide due to its potential to align commercial interests and environmental protection. Circular tourism has been defined as "a model able to create a virtuous circle producing goals and services without wasting the limited resources of the planet that are raw materials, water and energy" (Girard & Nocca, 2017).

ECOTOURS enhances the capacity of tourism's MSMEs and community tourism's ecosystems to promote circular tourism and to uptake environmental principles, practices and standards in their businesses. Overall, ECOTOURS contributes to turn marginal coastal and rural areas that are experiencing an economic slowdown, into circular, green and sustainable tourist destinations that offer significant travel experiences based on people to people exchange, holistic discovery of territory, its natural environment and biodiversity, its cultural and traditional heritage, while at the same time promoting sustainability principles and practices, fostering environmental protection, the reduction of wastes and natural resources consumption (energy, water, soil, biodiversity), the use of clean energy and green transport means, the recycling and reuse of materials/products, the promotion of locally based food and craft productions.

2.2. Objectives

The primary objective of this Call for the innovation contest is to encourage collaboration among the ECOTOURS SMEs and local stakeholders to design and implement an innovative IT system for circular tourism itineraries. This system should be tailored to users' needs and contest requirements, utilizing gamification, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and other cutting-edge technologies to enhance the overall tourism experience and address key challenges in destination management.

3. Application and Evaluation

3.1. Who can apply?

The present Call is restricted to ECOTOURS project participants (only to the selected SMEs). **One team per each integrated tourism national itinerary** (up to 16 SMEs coming from the same participating Member State as the Call aims to promote cooperation and team working).

3.2. Key Requirements

1. Utilization of Gamification: Gamification should be integrated into the proposed solutions to enhance engagement and drive behaviour change among tourists. This could involve gamified experiences, loyalty programs, interactive challenges, or other gamification strategies tailored to the circular tourism itineraries.

2. The development of a destination management system & crowdsourcing portal. The Destination Management System is a platform designed to manage tourism activities within a particular region or city, centralizing services such as accommodation, transportation, and attractions. It helps local authorities and tourism businesses collaborate more effectively, optimizing the visitor experience and promoting sustainable tourism practices. The crowdsourcing portal is expected to be created on the same platform where individuals or organizations can gather input, ideas, or services from a large group of people, typically through an open call. It allows businesses or projects to tap into a diverse pool of talent or creativity, often accelerating innovation or problem-solving.

3. Specialized Tourism and Digitalization: Proposals should focus on leveraging digitalization to enhance the tourism experience. This could include the development of Apps, utilization of AI, Blockchain technology, experience marketing strategies, or any other innovative digital tools relevant to the tourism context and the platform as described under point 2.

4. Improving Attraction Rate: Solutions proposed should aim to improve the attraction rate of the area by offering unique and engaging tourism experiences. This could involve the development of integrated circular tourism itineraries that highlight the area's cultural, natural, and historical assets.

5. Promoting Sustainability and Community Engagement: Proposals must incorporate elements that promote sustainability and foster community engagement. This could involve initiatives such as eco-friendly practices, support for local businesses, cultural preservation efforts, or community-led tourism experiences.

6. Creating equal opportunities for people with disabilities: Accessible tourism can be defined as a collaborative process that intends to provide universally designed tourism products and services, with equity and dignity. The proposals should take under considerartion the need to increase the travel opportunities to be available and user friendly for people with special access needs (physical or other disabilities).

3.3. Submission Guidelines

Interested parties are invited to form national teams and submit joint proposals electronically via **Google Form** **by 31/12/2024, 16:00 CET**.

Each national team will have to appoint a representative SME to apply for the present innovation call.

Proposals should include a detailed description of the IT system design (2.000 words maximum, only in English language), its alignment with users' needs and contest requirements, as well as a clear outline of how gamification will be utilized.

Each proposal should also include a timeline for implementation.

If the submission deadline is changed, the news will be published immediately on the Call page and all registered MSMEs will be informed on the change.

Following the submission of each application an Acknowledgment of Receipt to the MSME team representative is sent via email automatically generated via google forms (see Annex 2).

Outdated submissions shall not be accepted, the submitter will not be able to access the form.

After the close of the Call no additions or changes to received applications shall be taken into account.

All provided information will be treated confidentially and stored only for the purpose of this Call.

3.4. Questions

Questions on the application process can be addressed at: vvanta@anko.gr

3.5. Evaluation process

Each project partner will appoint one member for the Evaluation Committee who will be in charge of the submitted applications and has no further engagement in the ECOTOURS Project. The evaluators shall have solid knowledge on topics related to IT systems, digitalization, sustainability, sustainable tourism and therefore their views and opinions will ensure that the best proposal will win the prize.

The evaluation will be documented by the Evaluation Committee members on the Evaluation Form (see Annex 3).

Each Evaluator will commit by signing the «Evaluator's Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest» statement (see Annex 4). The appointment of evaluators will be confirmed after the close of the Call, and therefore their selection is without risk of conflict of interest.

The Evaluation Committee will assess each application in a transparent and fair way, respecting the confidentiality of any information identified as confidential at the time it is provided. Evaluations shall be performed applying the highest ethical and moral standards.

Each evaluator will record his/her individual score and remarks of an application on a separate «Evaluation Form» which will be sent via email to vvanta@anko.gr.

Using the overall scores for each application, the coordinating partner (ANKO) will generate a ranking list. An abstract of the winning proposal will be published on the ECOTOURS social media accounts, as well as on the partners' websites.

The applicants will be informed about the decision made by the Evaluation Committee within two weeks from the application deadline via email.

The notification can be:

- **Winner:** The application is the winner of the Call.
- **Reserved list:** The application is on the reserve list of the Call.

Note that the ranking list will be published on the ECOTOURS website.

3.6. Evaluation Criteria

All submitted proposals will be evaluated by the 'Evaluation Committee' according to the following criteria:

- **Innovation (14)**

  How innovative the proposal is. The degree to which the proposal introduces new and creative solutions to existing tourism challenges, whether through technology, service design, or unique experiences.

- **Feasibility & Sustainability (14)**
  - **Feasibility (7)** - How feasible is the proposed action plan. The likelihood that the proposal can be implemented without delays and it can continue to operate successfully after funding ends, considering financial, operational, and market feasibility.
  - **Sustainability (7)** - The extent to which the project incorporates eco-friendly practices, supports local businesses, preserves cultural heritage, and promotes community-led tourism experiences (i.e. use of at least one among: sustainability certification, eco-friendly practices, support for local businesses, cultural prevention efforts, community led tourism experiences, etc.)

- **Gamification (10)**

  The degree to which the gamification enhances the user journey and the overall tourist engagement through interactive, playful elements.
  - **User Journey (5)**
  - **Tourist Engagement (5)**

- **Integration of AI (10)**

  The extent to which AI is integrated into the solution to enhance efficiency, personalization, or decision-making (0-10 points, based on the depth and relevance of AI use)

- **Crowdsourcing features (6)**

  The extent to which the platform incorporates user-driven feedback mechanisms, such as:
  - **Ratings (3)**
  - **Written reviews (3)**

- **Booking Reference system coverage (6)**
  - The number of SMEs integrated into the booking platform (3) if all ECOTOURS SMEs are covered or (0) if less, and

- The quality of the booking reference system, including its ease of use, transparency, and innovation (3)

Scores shall include only integers from 0 min. to 14 max.

Objections

Applicants have the right to object to the evaluation and selection results.

An applicant may submit a request for objections to the jurisdiction partner, if it believes that there has been a shortcoming in the way its application has been evaluated, within five working days of receiving the evaluation results. The request must be:

- Related to the evaluation process or eligibility checks.
- Clearly describe the complaint and reasons for potential consideration
- Received within the time limit (**10** working days) from the communication of the result is delivered.
- Sent by the applicant's legal representative that submitted the application.

A designated objection committee consisting of one officer from each partner will examine the requests and will recommend an appropriate course of action. If there is clear evidence that a shortcoming(s) could have affected the eventual decision, it is possible that all or part of the application will be re-evaluated by the objection committee.

The evaluation score following any re-evaluation will be regarded as definite. This score could be lower than the original score.

Only one request per application will be considered by the objection committee. All requests will be treated in confidentiality.

Ranking list

All proposals will be ranked in descending range. In the event of a tie (equal final scores), the highest individual scores for the following criteria will be considered in the order listed below:

1. **Innovation (14)**
2. **Feasibility & Sustainability (14)**
3. **Gamification (10)**
4. **Integration of AI (10)**
5. **Crowdsourcing features (6)**
6. **Booking Reference System Coverage (6)**

For example, if two applications both receive a final score of 50, the winner will be determined by whichever application has the highest score in criterion **1. Innovation**. If both applications have the same score for Innovation, the next criterion **2. Feasibility & Sustainability**, will be evaluated and so on.

3.7. Languages

The Call Announcement is available in English (the project's working language).

The Application Form has to be filled in in English.

3.8. Beneficiaries' obligations

Beneficiaries shall comply with the obligations set out in this Call Announcement and in the Grant Agreement already signed with the funding ECOTOURS partner at national level.

4. Financial support

The team that wins the contest will receive **€10,000 including VAT** which will be used for development of the IT system for the promotion of all 6 itineraries. **All winning SMEs will be paid upon completion of the crowdsourcing portal. The total amount will be transferred divided by the total number of SMEs having supported the proposal.**

4.1. Financing Process and Grant Distribution

At the end of the negotiation, the team representative will have **5 calendar days** to accept or reject the evaluation result. Therefore, the following scenarios might happen:

- The beneficiary accepts the evaluation decision and its execution begins.
- The beneficiary does not accept the evaluation decision, so the beneficiary is automatically excluded and the next beneficiary in the reserve list is contacted.

The team will need to execute the activities within the agreed timeframe to use the funds granted.

5. Call Publication and Further Information

Email address for further information: vvanta@anko.gr

6. Confidentiality

6.1. General obligation

Access to the received applications will be given to the consortium team and its Evaluation Committee. All requested data will be used only in the framework of this Call, in line with art. 13 of the E.U. Regulation n. 2016/679.

During the implementation of the action and for five years after the payment of the balance to the Consortium, all parties must keep confidential any data, documents, or other material (in any form) that is identified as confidential at the time it is disclosed ('confidential information').

The confidentiality obligations no longer apply if:

1. The disclosing party agrees to release the other party.
2. The information becomes generally and publicly available, without breaching any confidentiality obligation.
3. The disclosure of the confidential information is required by E.U. or national law.

7. Acknowledgement of funding and participation

Any communication activity related to the action (including brochures, leaflets, posters, presentations, etc., in electronic form, via social media, etc.) and any infrastructure, equipment or major result funded by the grant must:

- display the E.U. emblem.
- include the following text:

  "This [insert appropriate description, e.g. report, publication, conference, infrastructure, equipment, insert type of result, etc.] was co-funded by the European Union's COSME Programme."

In addition, it is strongly recommended for all beneficiaries to spread and share their personal experience in ECOTOURS in their networks and social channels. For that purpose, a communication package can be shared with the selected beneficiaries to motivate them to share and spread.

8. Implementation of the action / Timeframe

The beneficiary will have to complete the implementation of the action (innovative IT system for circular tourism itineraries) by **28th February 2025.** Request for an amended version should be completed by the **31st March 2025** at the latest.

Annexes

Annex 1 – Application Form

ECOTOURS Innovation Contest Application

Welcome to the ECOTOURS Innovation Contest. This contest seeks to encourage innovation in the field of specialised tourism and digitalization, aiming to enhance sustainability and community engagement through innovative IT systems. Please fill out the form to submit your proposal for evaluation.

*** Indicates required question**

Email*

Title of the Proposal*

Description of the team members (SMEs) in docx / pdf format*

Proposal description (max 2,000 words). Please upload your proposal in docx / pdf format.*

Please answer the following questions, referring to the description of the action and the evaluation criteria for assessing your proposal.

Innovation: How innovative is your proposed solution in addressing the challenges of circular tourism and digitalization?*

Feasibility : How feasible is the proposed solution in terms of its implementation and viability after the project's completion?*

Sustainability: How does your solution promote sustainability (e.g., use of eco-friendly practices, sustainability certification, support for local businesses, community-led tourism experiences)?*

User Journey: How gamification enhances the user journey?*

Tourist Engagement: How will gamification influence and improve the overall tourist experience?*

Integration of AI: How does your solution integrate artificial intelligence to improve the efficiency and impact of the tourism experience?*

Crowdsourcing: How does your solution leverage crowdsourcing (ratings & written reviews) to engage the community or tourists in co-developing or enhancing tourism experiences?*

Booking Reference: How many SMEs are involved in the development of this solution and how **the quality of the booking reference system**, including its ease of use, transparency, and innovation is provided.*

Processing personal data is in accordance with Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council Nº 2016/679 (GDPR) on the protection of personal data. Submitting a binding application will be considered as an expression of your consent to the processing of the personal data listed in the application form. The data will be used for the project application process and in the case of chosen participants for the needs of registration, security and official administration of the project.*

If the proposal is successful **the prize will be split and paid to all national MSMEs participating in ECOTOURS and then transferred to your selected implementing organisation upon completion.***

Annex 2 - Acknowledgment of receipt

Thank you for submitting your application for the Innovation Contest Call to receive financial support in the frame of the SMP COSME action ECOTOURS.

The evaluation will take place in the next few weeks. You will be notified as soon as possible.

Annex 3 –Evaluation Form

Application No:	
Applicant:	

Evaluation criteria	Sub-Criteria	Points
1. Innovation	How innovative is the proposal	14
2. Feasibility and Sustainability	**Feasibility:** Viability of the proposed action after project completion	7
	Sustainability: Use of eco-friendly practices, support for local businesses, preserving cultural heritage, and promoting community-led tourism experiences.	7
3. Gamification	**User Journey:** How gamification enhances the user journey	5
	Tourist Engagement: Impact of gamification on tourist experience	5
4. Integration of AI	**Integration of artificial intelligence** to improve the tourism experience	10
5. Crowdsourcing	**Ratings**	3
	Written Reviews	3
6. Booking Reference	**Number of SMEs involved**	3
	The quality of the booking reference system, including its ease of use, transparency, and innovation	3
	Total:	…/60

Remarks

Annex 4 – Evaluator's declaration of Confidentiality and Absence of Conflict of Interest

I, the undersigned, declare that, in participating as an independent evaluator in the evaluation of applications received in the SMP COSME Innovation Context Call of ECOTOURS.

I undertake to treat as confidential all information contained in the applications which I am asked to evaluate, both during the evaluation and afterwards.

I will not reveal to any third party the identity or any details of the views of my fellow evaluator(s), neither during the evaluation nor afterwards.

I do not, to the best of my knowledge, have any interest in any of the applications submitted in this Call, I have not been involved in their preparation and I do not benefit either directly or indirectly from the eventual selection.

Should I discover a conflict of interest during the evaluation, I undertake to declare this and to withdraw from the evaluation.

I declare that, to the best of my knowledge, I have no direct or indirect **conflict of interest** in the evaluation of this application. The Evaluator,

Project Partner:	
Name and Surname:	
Signature:	
Date:	

Annex 5 – Financial Agreement

Payment disbursement to the MSMEs:

The 10.000 euro prize will be split and paid by PRISM - upon completion of the IT service - to all winning national MSMEs participating in ECOTOURS and then transferred by them to the implementing organisation.

Proof of payment will have to be provided by each MSME to ANKO as soon as completed and no later than the 15 April 2025.

By submitting the national proposal all MSMEs are committed to ECOTOURS partner's instructions to ensure timely and full completion of the innovation contest call.

The prize will support the implementation of the solution selected in the contest. The whole amount is devoted to the destination management system & crowdsourcing portal to be used in local circular tourism itineraries set up, promoting their development during and beyond the project.