

# TRAVEL TO *tomorrow ...*

VISITFLANDERS



Flanders  
State of the Art

# TRAVEL TO *tomorrow ...*

## The Flanders of Tomorrow | 1

### **The Flanders of Tomorrow**

Flanders is one of the most productive and prosperous regions in the world. However we cannot afford to become complacent. Nor should this give us cause to think that we are self-sufficient. Since the Middle Ages, the people of Flanders have prided themselves on their openness to the world, turning Flanders into a crossroads where people from various cultural backgrounds want to build a great future together. Exciting things happen at crossroads.

This is also where people make choices. Today is no different in this respect as the people of Flanders continue to think about the things that shape and define their lives, working for their future in this flat land by the North Sea. Demonstrating creativity and ground-breaking craftsmanship, modesty and obstinacy, it always comes with typical Flemish 'quirkiness'. The 'Flanders of Tomorrow' series provides a platform for Flemings who think about and build their future society. As such, we also fuel the social debate for a better Flanders.

VISITFLANDERS





## Contents

Preamble	8
<b>1 /</b> COVID-19 – The coronavirus pandemic has accelerated the Travel to Tomorrow process	20
<b>2 /</b> Towards a new type of tourism	30
<b>3 /</b> Flourishing travel destinations	44
<b>4 /</b> Tourists and their wishes	66
<b>5 /</b> Entrepreneurs and tourism	82
<b>6 /</b> Travel to Tomorrow? Let's get started!	104
<b>7 /</b> Policy-makers also travel to tomorrow	122
Epilogue	156



## Preamble

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**“Whatever you keep hidden in your heart, God manifests in you outwardly. Whatever the root of the tree feeds on in secret, affects the bough and the leaf.”**

Rumi  
(Persian poet, 1207-1273)



## The Linden Tree

PETER DE WILDE

There used to be an old linden tree in the square in front of the church of the village where I grew up on the fringe of the Scheldt polders. This was where the locals met. We celebrated the Year of the Village in 1978 under its foliage. Annual markets and fun fairs were organised around it. I only found out much later that this tree was planted there in November 1919 to celebrate the advent of peace. A photo of this memorable occasion reveals that the entire village turned up to witness this event, thereby infusing the place with meaning.



Cyclists and hikers, usually from Antwerp, often set out from this tree on a tour of the cobbled roads through our polders. Other linden trees stood guard at various strategic locations, protecting the population from breaches in the dikes, with the assistance of the Chapels of the Virgin Mary, which

were nailed to their trunks. My grandmother often liked to tell us how the rising waters of the great flood of 1953 stopped at her threshold thanks to the intervention of one such figurine in a tree. Her tiny house and cottage garden were situated on the banks of the *Barbierbeek*, where the fertile *Brabantse Kouters* transition into the lower polders. In prehistoric times, the *Waasland* cuesta consisted of a wet borderland near the ever-threatening Scheldt River. A few years ago, they found the oldest human remains in Flanders just a couple of hundred metres from her house.

We were mystified as to what compelled these cyclists and hikers (*'van over 't water'* [from across the river]) to seek their entertainment in the polders. In our minds, this was the playground of hunters and farmers, a convenient larder, a place where fields had their own names and the animals were strange and unseen. We had no clue that these polders were also beautiful in the eyes of these hikers and cyclists. They were there, they were useful and they seemed eternal.





In the 1970s, they started to cut into the soul of this place, which until then was deemed inalterable. Parts of the village were parcelled up, including the *kouter*. Funnily enough, I still remember the instant of this first cut very well. It happened on Wednesday 6 April 1977, a chilly and miserable day. The temperatures had plummeted to almost freezing point overnight and the menacing clouds only made this spring day during Holy Week even more sombre. My sister and I were spending the day with my grandmother. The dark house, which felt like a time capsule from the 1930s, the abandoned stables and the expansive cottage garden were a marvellous place to poke around for unknown objects and strange tales. Even though our grandmother was supposed to be minding two children, she was always busy. In the morning, she would tackle the weeds in her vegetable garden with stubborn determination, back hunched over the vegetable plot: time to clear the space and plant sprouts, spinach, carrots and leeks – a building plot or two would one day take their place. I was just eight years old, staring intently at her calloused hands. The sound of clappers on brass emanated from the familiar spire of the local church in the distance.

Two 'strangers' were making their way across the adjoining overgrown plot of land. This is where the *Oud Hof*, a small ramshackle farm, used to be situated until recently. After the last walls were torn down, the entire *kouter* was parcelled up – "the best land in Bazel", my grandmother had muttered. She meant farmland, of course, being the descendant of several generations of farmers. Recently a group of curious villagers had taken to excavating the subsoil to check whether it contained foundations of long forgotten buildings – before new homes would silence the past forever. The previous year, the same group of people had founded a historical society, named after the local castle of *Wissekerke*.

One of the two unexpected guests, a skinny bloke wearing a turtle-neck, approached my grandmother, hand outstretched: "Hello Madam, my name is Rudi." As he rolled a cigarette, Rudi explained that he and his colleague Lode had taken over the voluntary work of the amateur archaeologists. They were now carrying out an emergency survey. My grandmother gazed at him in alarm: Which emergency? Had someone gone missing in the polders? Had a pipe burst? Was this a new research technique of the pensions department? All very typical and healthy Flemish reflexes.

"Madam, the *Oud Hof* as people call it around here, has probably been here for a thousand years. Not the farm as you know it, but its predecessor. It was the home of a thirteenth-century knight called Bertram of Bordebure." He took a quick drag on his cigarette. "Do you see that elongated subsidence over there? This was probably where the moat around the keep used to be. The knight's successors also built a wall with turrets around it. There once may have even been a taller tower a little further up the road, under your garden perhaps."

"What a load of tosh", my grandmother remarked later that day while peeling potatoes in the half-darkened room near the wood-burning stove. "I've lived here my entire life and I've never heard of this Bertram until today. And now this stranger rolls up to come tell me all about him." But it fuelled my youthful imagination, especially after Rudi told me, cigarette dangling from his lips: "The landscape speaks, lad. The thing is we no longer understand what it's saying."

When they discovered an old filled-in well under her cottage garden, my grandmother started to have her doubts. Especially when they found the fragments of a lost world in the well: remnants of earthenware pots and dishes, stoneware jugs, fragments of Venetian glass, a horseshoe, a latch



and bolt, a spade-shaped object, a leather shoe, the links of a chain and a number of mysterious metal plates. And to top it all off, a 17th century jeton, “minted in Nuremberg”, according to Rudi. We had no idea what a jeton was, had never even heard of Nuremberg and had no notion of what or who was minted and why.

But the place slowly revealed its secrets and began to speak again. To this day, I can still see Rudi, a glass of Duvel beer in hand, standing in the old village inn, elaborating on why a tree had been planted in this specific place, what the reason was behind an elevation or trench in a field that nobody had ever noticed until he mentioned it, why the sightline of the avenue near our school was anything but random, and why the church tower leant at a slight angle. My world subsided with every word he spoke, my gaze started to search for the stories behind these familiar places. Stories that tell us something about the ‘soul’ of a place and their relationship with our deepest sense of ‘homecoming’. “Knowing where we come from and where we belong helps us feel more grounded, feel safer”, says Michael Jones in *The Soul of the Place*.

*“Just as the acorn gives birth to the oak tree, the place we come from holds the code for what we are to become. As such, place orients us, giving us strength for our journey and an optimism for the possibilities the world holds for us as we venture forth.”*

\* \* \*

I was too young to fully realise it at the time but the seed had been planted and wherever life would take me, this fascination for the hidden language of places would join me on my path. Places ask questions, I soon realised. For a long time I thought that the answers to these questions could only be found in books. But places can

also provide answers themselves, can be the answers, something we only become aware of when they disappear or when they lose their soul. Such losses often occur randomly, painlessly, or so we think. Because this is the instant when silence descends and the language of a place becomes a dead language that is no longer understood or spoken by anyone. A place then becomes a formal phenomenon, frozen in time, with questions limited to the how, rather than the why.

Learning to speak this language again is a first step in the process of re-establishing a connection with the full potential of a place. An intense experience, which requires no other skill than an open mind and as little prejudice as possible. It’s only when you really start to listen that stories can come to life again. It requires you to be calm, ‘in the moment’, rather than rushing on to the next best thing. Being perceptive, understanding that someone else’s gaze can also add something to your own experience, or better yet can bring up something, revealing and highlighting it.

Learning to see through someone else’s eyes, through a guest’s eyes, takes me back to these formative years. We didn’t understand why these visitors found our place so beautiful. We could not reconcile their “beautiful” with our ‘useful’. But the ‘beautiful’ camp steadily found more supporters. When my parents took over the village inn, called *De Eenhoorn* (The Unicorn), in the 1980s we soon realised that our terrace was never big enough in summertime to accommodate all these avid visitors. As they walked off the ferry in *Kallebeek* or cycled through the *Waasland*, the polders caught their eye and their attention. Especially now they were at risk of disappearing, making way for the construction of a controlled flooding area, the so-called *potpolder*.

A word that continues to tap into plenty of pent-up emotions in the village. For many a curse because it symbolised the meddling of 'Brussels', for others robbing them of their livelihood and the equivalent of a nuclear bomb for nature lovers when it was announced: no, we don't want your *potpolder*. The silent majority, however, gradually veered towards indifference (we knew the Spanish costas better than our own neighbourhood) and in time, our views evolved in step with the engineers' views. Why don't we make a virtue out of necessity and turn this flooding area into a new natural habitat for plants and animals? And that is exactly what happened: the polders that we had lived in for seven centuries, the rustling wind in the Canadian poplars, the fields and pastures surrounded by green hedges, the farmers who sowed and harvested their crops: all gone. The 'new' wildlife and at times unexpected plants thrive, attracting visitors once again. Most of the – now solitary – linden trees are still there today. Very few passers-by still understand their language. The 'fat tree', a linden tree near the jetty to the ferry, once a beacon at the intersection of dikes and a place where labourers liked to take their break under the shadow of its foliage, has now become the 'tree of love'. Probably because of a few padlocks that were left behind on a fence nearby. New rituals. One hundred years from now, younger generations will probably wonder where the name 'liefkesboom' comes from. The landscape speaks a new language, which is rooted in the old idiom, but which also covers up a lot. Including the indifference. The locals rediscovered and embraced their backyard, especially during the lockdown as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

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The places of my childhood were preserved in my memory, leading a life of their

own there. Like the preserves in my grandmother's canning jars, they were safely locked away to prevent any decay, deep within myself. So deep that the idea of "my place" has remained dormant there for more than twenty years, coloured by the patina of my memories. The years after my childhood were years of chasing down things: getting to grips with my studies, a career, a relationship, a job. Carving out my own place in the world. Whereas 'my' place already existed, but had been covered up in the rush of everyday life.

I visited more than forty countries in just under ten years. Always driven by the inexplicable urge to ask questions about why people chose to claim a place, whether it be the Taj Mahal or a slightly run-down castle in the English countryside. Often the passion of the locals, when they talked about their place, triggered something in me that I found difficult to explain or which I now think I subconsciously repressed. I translated these indescribable passions into formal data, theories and building practices, operating models and economic formulas, typologies and types. Safely sorted without a residual fraction.

But the deeper truth is often concealed in this residual fraction of your life. And you cannot ignore your roots without getting off scot-free.

In looking back, I realise that this undefined feeling of loss crept up on me during intense times or events in my life, where a place suddenly takes on another layer of meaning, because of an intense experience. A sincere question to a place or to the people that take care of this place essentially infers a commitment to connection, or in any event the intention thereto. That instant when you feel displaced, when you take the time to slow down, leave on a trip and put your daily hassle on the back burner: this sometimes creates the kind of silence in which your

candid question can help a place to express itself again.

I sensed this in many a discussion. With volunteers who had taken on the care of a place and whose faith in the community had thus been restored, thanks to the attention of visitors. With an engineer who discovered the original reason why a centuries-old convent was built when working on its repurposing and found a way to express this in language so that it could provide an answer to the questions that we ask ourselves today. With visitors to the battlefields of the Great War who were suddenly overwhelmed by questions about the meaning of life as they walked among the graves and with the many hosts and hostesses who started to reflect on the reason behind their hospitality.

\* \* \*

After spending ten years in the city, I returned to my roots in 2014, rediscovering my place in the process. Because I had left, I was able to see it with new eyes of in a new light, asking other questions, including to myself. Thanks to my many travels I learned to appreciate the value of coming home again, but also of travel itself. I became convinced that travel, living consciously between the moment of departure and the return can have a beneficial effect on your well-being if you are open to connecting with places, with people – an openness that resonated much stronger in me now that it was able to thrive on stable roots. Impactful travel experiences, whether they are caused by the intense experience of a place, a meaningful encounter or an inspiring activity, are inevitably associated with strong emotions. People feel overwhelmed, connected, moved, proud, inspired...

The inevitable conclusion of this train of thought was that the 'soul of the place' was the main catalyst for powerful travel

experiences and for sincere and sustainable hospitality. This 'spirit of place', as ICOMOS calls it, consists of both tangible elements (sites, buildings, landscapes, routes, objects) and intangible elements (memories, stories, festivals, commemorations, rituals, knowledge that is handed down, values, textures, scents, colours etc.), which all significantly contribute to the essence of a place, to its soul. The intangible elements infuse the physical elements with richer and fuller meaning. Moreover, the soul of a place is a continuous process of reconstruction, corresponding with the need for change and the continuity of communities. That is why this soul can vary in time and between cultures. A place can thus have different souls and be shared by different communities.

If you are aware of the value of a place for the local residents and for visitors, travel can never solely be an act of pure consumption. People came around to the idea that travel and tourism does not have to be a goal in itself. Even if visitors undeniably contribute to economic growth and jobs and to prosperity: the visitor's perspective and the deeper connection with the local community can also restore the community's own self-esteem and power. In my opinion this positive, transformative power of tourism seemed like a stronger foundation to start from the one-dimensional economic story of return on investment.

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In the context of my job at VISIT**FLANDERS** I had the privilege of turning this idea, which was shared by an inspired group of employees and fuelled by encounters with such wise people as Anna Pollock or Gervaise Bushe, into the starting premise for a new vision for the future of tourism. We decided to call it Travel to Tomorrow.

From 2017 onwards, we, together with several travel companions from inside and outside the tourism industry, set out to understand what constitutes the positive force of tourism and how this force can become the driving force behind our actions. We listened to many personal stories about unique travel experiences. We also listened to what the locals in art cities across Flanders had to say about their place, about (too many or enough) visitors and the importance of tourism for their own environment and quality of life. Based on these different listening exercises, we formulated insights about how tourism can make a positive contribution to our society. A first fundamental step in this learning process was that tourism is not a goal in itself, it is a means for letting communities thrive.

In 2018, we summarised this process. Our vision was set out in a magazine titled 'Travel to Tomorrow'. What started out as a broader, deeper reflection on the 'soul of a place', and which was subsequently linked to various aspects of sustainability, soon developed into a new vision for the future of tourism. Our findings on the importance of this balance for people and places had thoroughly changed our views on our profession. We chose the image of the linden tree to explain this vision – I later found out that it was not a random choice – because the balance of what people, visitors and entrepreneurs find important, and the needs of the soul of a place, is an organic balance. Like a tree, this balance can grow or die, causing communities to prosper or fall apart. Many of these stories, of these practical experiences showed us what happens when people open their minds and hearts to the positive power of travel and how it can make communities flourish. Inspiring stories that also fuel research and action. This in turn also prompted the publication of the book that you are holding and which will hopefully

help you when you decide to travel to tomorrow.

When a tree has sturdy roots, it is healthier and more likely to weather storms. Communities are rooted in places. This doesn't mean that you are automatically part of a community if you were born in a certain place. Nor does it mean that a community is limited to the people who were born there. Who you are, how you look at your environment, your neighbour or your guest is mainly defined by the connection that you are – perhaps consciously – looking for. The desire to connect is much stronger when there is a balance. And the desire to connect also contributes to a better balance. In this way, a community's strength is revealed once more so that it can flourish.

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Everything came full circle for me when the linden tree in front of the church died shortly after the commemoration of the Great War. The terminally ill tree was felled on 11 March 2018 while the church bells sounded and the villagers looked on. Everyone wanted to bid farewell to this old comrade and many a villager wept openly when it came down at 3.04 pm. Its last flowering branch was raised in the church's nave.

Those who wanted could attach a card to the twigs, with a wish for our community. A wake was organised.

But on 11 November of that same year, we planted a new peace tree in the same location: a 10-metre tall silver lime, weighing in at 4,500 kg. Everyone was once again in attendance, infusing the instant and the place with meaning. The soul of this place, of our place, is still very much alive and kicking. Those who want to take the time to discover it are more than welcome to do so.



## Covid-19 The coronavirus pandemic has accelerated the process of Travel to Tomorrow

**At the time of writing (the summer of 2020), the coronavirus pandemic turned the world as we know it upside down. It also swept through the world of tourism, which will never be the same again. It is impossible to predict how this pandemic will evolve. One thing is certain: the coronavirus pandemic has not changed the vision of Travel to Tomorrow. On the contrary, it is a catalyst even. Travel to Tomorrow is tourism's equivalent of the vaccine against the virus, in a manner of speaking. Because one thing is certain: travel experiences will be quite different once we put this behind us.**

Holidays in 2020 are very different from holidays as we have known them. The tourism industry as a whole is groaning under the impact of the coronavirus pandemic and has been forced to question everything it stands for much faster than expected, in addition to searching for alternatives. Travel has taken on a different meaning. We can no longer hop on a plane to a remote and exotic destination, without a care in the world. Cheap flights to popular destinations are no longer that simple. The focus of holidaymakers and holiday producers has automatically and forcibly shifted, causing them to discover nice places closer to home. Suddenly, mass tourist attractions are no longer overrun.



According to the UNWTO (the United Nations World Tourism Organization), the coronavirus pandemic is "by far the worst crisis that international tourism has faced since records began in 1950." The organisation adapted its vision, aiming to become stronger and more resilient.

According to the UNWTO, sustainability will become the new standard in tourism.

While the sustainable tourism growth models are yet to be widely applied, the ambition of VISIT **FLANDERS** and of Travel to Tomorrow is to encourage people to take this route, to further develop this idea and endorse it.

### NEW BEGINNINGS

The ETC (*European Travel Commission*) and Eurail also realise that things need to change. They have joined forces to define sustainable growth models for rail tourism in Europe. Travelling by train reduces our ecological footprint. The ETC and Eurail have requested political and financial support from the European institutions to promote train travel and offer support for campaigns. Eduardo Santander, the executive director of the ETC, is convinced that the pandemic offers opportunities for change and new beginnings for tourism in Europe.

We now need to look ahead and make sustainable choices. Staying at home has made us realise the value of travel. At the same time, we are more than ever aware of our vulnerability and of the consequences of our travel behaviour on the ecosystem. We are challenged to think about what really matters, about what we want to retain and how we should do this.

Economic models need to be reconsidered. Likewise tourism must reinvent and reorient itself in line with a sustainable model. We have been handed

a unique opportunity for a creative and hard reset. "Things that have been here forever, but which have gone under the radar, are suddenly up for discussion when a major issue arises. That is the change that I have observed as a result of this pandemic. Let us think about underlying symptoms, such as the major ecological impact, vacuou tourism, and overconsumption and reflect on what is truly essential", says Dirk De Wachter (psychiatrist, professor and author).



## Giselinde Kuipers, cultural sociologist

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### YOU CAN ALSO ENJOY EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCES CLOSER TO HOME

The coronavirus pandemic has forced the tourism industry as a whole to reinvent itself. For the time being, we are no longer able to travel to remote destinations. European holidays need to become more attractive, according to Giselinde Kuipers, a Dutch professor of cultural sociology at the Catholic University of Leuven.

In 2020, many people opted to take a staycation. When they had time off, they explored new, unknown places in their own region. "This may potentially have an enduring effect", says Giselinde Kuipers. "During the lockdown, many people went for walks or bike rides close to home and they realized that they liked it. You observe your surroundings in a completely different way: slower and more intensely. As a result, you are more likely to notice what's around you. I was a keen walker but I discovered plenty of places, within walking distance of my house, that I had never heard of before and which are really nice. While many people may forget this experience over time, others will continue to appreciate it. I often travel for work, but because of the COVID-19 measures I took two staycations this year in the Netherlands. I was astounded at the tremendous variety!"

One thing that will linger after a crisis like the coronavirus pandemic is that people will tend to avoid risks. "We all had so much certainty. You could fly to Africa or go backpacking in Thailand at the drop of a hat. The existential certainty that the world was ours and that everything could be easily arranged has been undermined. It will take a while before everyone's sense of safety is restored. A large part of the population will never recover it. Europe will have to become a more attractive destination."

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*"It will take a while before everyone's sense of safety is restored. A large part of the population will never recover it"*

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How can we promote staycations? Should we focus on the fact that they are 'very safe'? "It doesn't sound that adventurous", Kuipers thinks. "I would put it differently: there is a wide variety of things to discover close to home and you can also enjoy extraordinary experiences here. I think this sounds a lot better."

#### **A new sustainability policy**

A global crisis like the current coronavirus pandemic offers the momentum for devising a new policy, including in terms of tourism. Sustainability will play an important role in this. For anyone on this earth – whether human or animal – it is vital that our planet remains clean.

*“You can stop flying to your travel destination but if others don’t follow your example, it won’t make the world a better place”*

“But if you’re the only one to do this, then nothing will change. You can stop flying to your travel destination but if other people don’t follow your example, it won’t make the world a better place. After a major crisis, such as this pandemic, people are more inclined to think of the bigger picture and less about their own individual interests. This solidarity enables you to achieve things that would be very difficult to achieve otherwise”.

“In exchange for its support to tourism organisations, the government can impose a sustainable policy. A striking example: Air France is obliged to collaborate more closely with railway companies. Likewise the local authorities in Flanders can decide to award grants to museums or attractions dependent on how they consider different ways of becoming more sustainable or spreading out tourists.”

#### **Disney in Amsterdam**

Spreading out tourists? “Unfortunately this backfired spectacularly in recent years in Amsterdam. Everyone thought: “Great, let’s take a bike, it’s so authentic, so Dutch. But if you’re not used to cycling in the city it can be quite dangerous and even fatal. What’s more, it’s no longer workable for the locals. They feel like they’ve become extras in what is essentially the Disneyland version of their own habitat. This loss is difficult to explain on the emotional level. Everything is still there, but actually it no longer is: this can feel quite strange and even deeply disturbing”, Kuipers says.

“VISIT**FLANDERS** can tackle such overcrowding by continuing to reflect with visitors on what is or isn’t possible. There are also plenty of regulatory options. Governments have the possibility to take action and should strive to spread out tourists more. You can receive lots of tourists without them getting in each other’s way.”

#### **Off the beaten track**

A first option is to limit the number of tourists, e.g., by limiting the number of hotel beds. This creates a practical obstacle. “One way of controlling human behaviour is to make things difficult. Next you start to promote alternative destinations, by highlighting them as authentic and worth exploring, because they are off the beaten path, away from mass tourism. This story appeals to a lot of people. It may inspire them to visit other places than just Bruges”, Kuipers explains.

“In the Netherlands they tried to solve this by expanding Amsterdam, by calling the wider region Amsterdam: Amsterdam Castle in Muiden, Amsterdam Beach in Zandvoort... I don’t think this is a very convincing strategy as you’re essentially capitalising on the same image. Better to develop a wide variety of images, meanings and associations. But this strategy takes much more time.

People increasingly organise themselves in separate groups, with other tastes and styles. You can capitalise on this with tourism. It ties in with how culture works today because cultural lifestyles and tastes are increasingly fragmented. Tourism can also work like this. Flanders is eminently suited for this because its offering is so diverse.”



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## **#TOURISMHELPS: INSPIRING COVID-19 INITIATIVES**

**They say that hospitality entrepreneurs always remain faithful to their true nature, offering service to people, and they amply proved this during the coronavirus pandemic in the spring of 2020. Their drive and creativity gave rise to plenty of unique initiatives that attest to their tremendous resilience and enterprising spirit. New ideas were launched in the tourism industry on an almost daily basis.**

Hotels offered rooms to victims of domestic violence, to carers, to the homeless and asylum seekers, to patients recovering from COVID-19, to home workers who felt like they were going stir crazy in their own home, and to key workers who needed a place to relax and unwind during the day.

Hospitality vouchers were created for dinners and drinks in the future. An umbrella site for food deliveries and a box with regional products were launched, a cultural café reopened as a supermarket and virtual tastings were organised. Cities and towns promoted their local hospitality businesses and large breweries helped by (partly) waiving the rent.

Virtual trips through Flanders were also developed: you could enjoy the flowering orchards in Tongeren, explore Limburg

from the comfort of your own home and even take a virtual walk through Flemish Brabant. That is how entrepreneurs contributed to and helped strengthen their communities, something they already do 365 days a year really.

Danny Van Assche, the CEO of entrepreneurial network Unizo, also stresses the creativity of entrepreneurs: "During the COVID-19 crisis, a company that usually builds stands for trade fairs started to produce plexiglass screens. Distilleries switched to producing hand sanitiser while lingerie manufacturers sewed face masks. When your business grinds to a halt, you have no choice but to look for creative alternatives and opportunities. Every sector has the creativity to explore new markets, this is also typical of entrepreneurship."



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**THE EVENT RISK MODEL:  
A COVID-19 SAFETY SCORE FOR EACH TYPE OF EVENT**

One of the main challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic was trying to determine how to safely organise an event, a convention or even a small meeting. You need to take social distancing, hygiene, safety measures and so much more into account. But where to start?

The convention bureau of VISIT**FLANDERS** joined forces with the industry to think about ways of doing this and came up with some very practicable solutions. Thanks to this strong co-creative collaboration, they were able to develop a new model, enabling businesses and visitors as well as the locals to meet each other 'live'. The events industry alliance developed an Event Risk Model (ERM) in conjunction with VISIT**FLANDERS**, Event Flanders and the Karel de Grote university college. The professional events industry as well as cities and towns can use this online tool.

The Event Risk Model is a scientific model that assigns a COVID-19 safety score to each event. This score is calculated based on weighting factors that are assigned to specific event parameters. This can include the space where the event takes place: outdoor events are weighted differently and have a different score than indoor events. The presence or absence of hygiene facilities

also influences the final score. Some twenty parameters are taken into account for this.

The Event Risk Model comes with a Code of Conduct (COC) that helps organisers exclude the risk of transmission of the coronavirus at their event as much as possible. This COC offers an insight into the practical organisation of an event. How to deal with social distancing? In that case, we discuss crowd management measures, such as putting up signage with information or ensuring there are a sufficient number of stewards on hand to raise people's awareness. The Code of Conduct also lists the required hygiene and prevention measures for reducing the risk of transmission to a minimum: compulsory temperature checks for visitors, hand sanitiser, paper tissues, face masks and gloves. The Event Risk Model calculates the safety score for all (commercial, cultural and sports) events and meetings (from fun fairs to festivals).



## Towards a **new** type of tourism

**After a hesitant start more than two years ago, the first concrete steps were taken towards the Travel to Tomorrow project, an intensive process of which everyone could, and still can, be a part. We went in search of the right ingredients for a new and different future for tourism, with a growing group of industry organisations, experts and entrepreneurs, in addition to policy-makers and (inter)national experts.**

**The coronavirus pandemic provided additional momentum for this quest for a new vision. En route, we organised a major survey, listening to stakeholders far and wide, formed think tanks, held seminars, published magazines, set up working groups, organised experiments and trial sessions, drew up papers, memorandums and strategic plans.**

Since then, Travel to Tomorrow has brought together a large group of people with different backgrounds, to reflect on a new, sustainable and wide-ranging approach to tourism. The public may not be ready yet, but gradually, they too will become convinced thanks to the impact and activities of more and more people and organisations who have already taken this new story on board.



### THE FACTS

#### Booming business

During the lockdown, many streets and squares were deserted. Terraces and shops remained closed, exhibitions and events were cancelled and holiday cottages closed their doors. A perplexing situation, because we were used to throngs of tourists and a mix of nationalities in the tourist centres of cities such as Brussels, Bruges, Ghent and Antwerp. Tourism had become a booming business in many places across Flanders and Brussels and experienced a strong growth: from five million international tourists in Flanders in 2000 to 7.8 million in 2019. The expectation was that this number would increase to more than 10 million by 2030.

#### 'Tourists go home'

In many places around the world, tourism has created jobs and brought prosperity. Nonetheless, angry locals spray painted 'Tourists go home' on the walls of buildings in Venice, Barcelona and Amsterdam, venting their frustration about the hordes of tourists on their streets (the desolate streets in popular tourist destinations during the coronavirus pandemic suddenly painted an entirely different picture), the noise nuisance, the litter they left behind, the rising real estate prices and the disappearance of the local baker and butcher to make way for yet another souvenir shop. The phenomenon

of overtourism soon took over. In Flanders, the situation was still workable. A survey among the local populations in Bruges, Antwerp, Ghent and Brussels in 2019 revealed that there still was plenty of support for tourism in their city. But at some times of the day, they did experience a nuisance as a result of too many tourists in the city and congestion in the city centre.

#### The world, our village

In 2019, the young Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg made headlines around the world. Every week thousands of young (and older) people took to the streets to remind us of our responsibility for the climate and their future. Global tourism is not an innocent bystander. Images of the polluting trail of litter that tourists leave behind in their wake in fragile nature areas are not exactly a cause for joy. Eight percent of CO2 emissions is generated by tourism-related activities. Cruise ships that unleash hordes of tourists in popular destinations are now the target of public criticism. The unbridled air traffic as a result of the ridiculous prices of low-cost carriers is raising a growing number of questions. A party weekend in Ibiza? It costs next to nothing. You can easily fly to Milan for the day for a business meeting. The world has become our village and travel our good right.

### Lost the plot

Many experts pointed to the economic model that has ruled our society in the past centuries and which is unilaterally geared towards growth and profit maximisation. We referred to travel in production terms: tourism products, tourists or customers, tourism providers... We measured the success of our efforts based on the rise in overnight stays, spending and employment. In doing so, we lost sight of a number of fundamental things. The actual cost of tourism activities – for a place, a community, for nature – was not factored into this system. “If the cost of tourism outweighs the benefits, then the ability of a place to cope with this tourism has been exceeded. Any further growth will cause detrimental damage”, said Jan van der Borg, a professor of geography and tourism at the Catholic University of Leuven.

We often forgot that we, as humans, are part of a unique ecosystem. If we disrupt it – climate change and the loss of biodiversity are two tell-tale signs – we all will pay a price for this in the long term. Business as usual is no longer an option if we don't want to go from bad to worse.

### THE EXPERTS' ANSWER

Many experts participated in the debate during the two-year Travel to Tomorrow process. They shared their vision, their expertise, their dreams for the future. Anna Pollock, a British tourism expert and the founder of Conscious Travel, played a special role in this debate. She tirelessly travelled through Flanders to raise our awareness about the need for change and the importance of a 'flourishing host community', which must underpin any tourism development.

Anna thinks that flourishing destinations have a unique character, a marked personality and a different feeling. The hosts are in love with their home and convey this to their guests. Authenticity is key. The hosts work together to create sustainable communities. A utopian vision? Not if we make the shift from quantitative expansion to qualitative

development, from gross profit to net profit. 'Sustainable tourism 2.0' means that in addition to limiting the negative impact of what you do, you go one step further and try to make a positive contribution to society, to the locals and to visitors, to entrepreneurs, to nature and the planet with your tourism activities.



### BACK TO THE BASICS OF TRAVEL

*Back to basics.* We also took time to reflect on the essence of travel.

What really matters when travelling? What turns a trip into a positive experience that you will remember for many years to come? We decided that we needed input from holidaymakers, which is why we invited 1,600 Belgian and international tourists to share a travel experience that had a lasting impact on them as part of a large-scale survey. It contains a wealth of information. After analysing the results, we learned that travel essentially involves engaging in a meaningful relationship with people and places. And that activities that invite us to see things from a different perspective, that encourage reflection or that challenge us, enhance this travel experience.

When all these boxes are ticked, there is much more to travel than just 'consumption'. In that case, travel can move people deeply, surprising or overwhelming them, making them feel a connection. The place, the (local) people and the activities mainly prefer to speak their own authentic language, telling their own unique

story. The encounter between travellers and the destination then develops into a reciprocal relationship: the holidaymaker departs feeling changed. But he or she also leaves a unique legacy in the local community. Travel has the power to bring about positive change.

## THE FLOURISHING DESTINATION

Based on these facts and analyses, we developed a new vision for the tourism of tomorrow. We started from the belief in the positive power of tourism, which led us to our dream destination: the flourishing community or destination. A good place, for locals and travellers alike.



### The linden tree as a symbol for Travel to Tomorrow

You will find a linden tree in many a Flemish village. Traditionally the linden tree was the place where judgements were rendered or where people met to celebrate together. The tree is firmly rooted in its place and has a connection with all the other living organisms around it. We see the linden tree as a symbol for a flourishing destination where locals, entrepreneurs and visitors experience a connection with the place and draw on tourism as a life force.

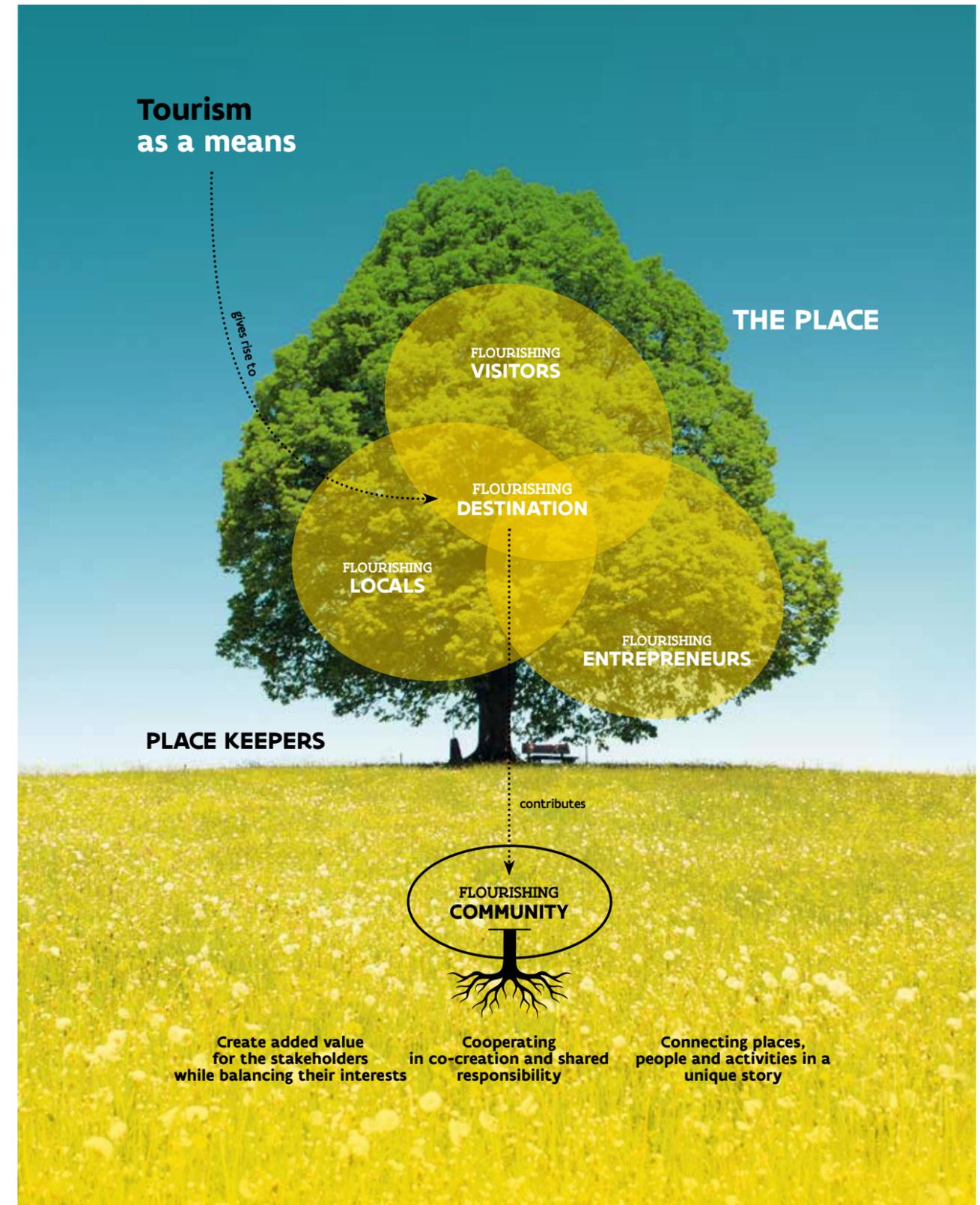
### Place keepers under the linden tree

Place keepers are the many people that take the initiative to build a flourishing community together. They can be local entrepreneurs and all kinds of organisations, as well as private individuals that work towards a nice neighbourhood. They are the driving forces, the trunk of our tree. They deserve encouragement, support, and the space to experiment.

### The added value of flourishing

All the participants of a flourishing community experience the added value of tourism first-hand.

What can this involve? What does flourishing mean for the place, the locals, the entrepreneurs and visitors?



**A COMMUNITY FLOURISHES WHEN**

the visitor

- feels very welcome
- can fully experience the DNA of the place
- experiences the positive impact of his/her stay: new energy and inspiration, personal growth, a connection with the place and the people that he/she meets there
- shows respect for nature, culture and the place's unicity
- has a soft spot for the place and the people, feels involved and is inclined to return to the place or would recommend it to others

**A COMMUNITY FLOURISHES WHEN**

the entrepreneur/service provider

- is vital and profitable and can cope with change in a resilient way
- has good working conditions and is given appreciation
- takes a passionate and innovative/creative approach to his/her product or service, while always retaining his/her unicity
- is an ambassador of the place where he/she works
- strives for a high level of satisfaction through genuine and sincere hospitality and professionalism
- takes the impact of his/her activities on other place keepers and the place into account
- wants to make a positive contribution to society/the community/the place

**A COMMUNITY FLOURISHES WHEN**

the place

- is attractive, pleasant and safe
- invites the locals, entrepreneurs and visitors to meet each other without excluding anyone
- reveals its unique character and identity, while preserving natural and cultural heritage
- provides the space for creativity and experimentation
- draws on the intelligence of the local community
- connects with the rest of the world and makes a positive contribution to a flourishing planet

**A COMMUNITY FLOURISHES WHEN**

the local

- enjoys living in his/her place, knows the place and is proud of it
- is involved in the (tourism) policy of the place so that he/she endorses the desired development thereof
- enjoys the positive effects of tourism: preservation and strengthening of amenities, heritage, culture, revenue, jobs, intercultural encounters...
- experiences the added value of tourism, such as the opportunity to meet visitors, be hospitable

## A NEW MODEL, A NEW APPROACH

The new flourishing destination model requires a number of significant changes to the development and promotion of tourism:

### 1 / Searching for the right balance

While economic profit and profitability continue to be important for all tourism activities, they are not the only objectives. We want to create broad social added value through tourism: for the locals, who help shape the tourism developments while also enjoying them and for the visitors, by offering them a qualitative and inspiring travel experience. The idea is to find the right balance. Factoring in the 'loss of value', such as the environmental cost, is equally important. All local actions must tie in with the bigger picture of shared responsibility for our planet.

We measure the success of a tourism policy and of tourism activities based on the (net) added value for all the parties involved.

### 2 / Connecting people, places and activities in a unique story

In a flourishing destination, we aim for impactful experiences, that are enriching for visitors and the locals as well as for entrepreneurs and service providers, that inspire people and enhance well-being.

We cannot direct or guarantee these impactful experiences, but we can facilitate them by creating the right circumstances. The unique story of the

place and of the makers must be told, the passions of visitors and locals must be shared. Tomorrow's tourism is tailor-made.

Even though the contact may be brief in many instances, a strong connection can be established between all parties involved. In some cases, ties are forged that subsist for a long time after the visit. What is surprising is the warmth: a sincere welcome, engagement and helpfulness that go beyond what is expected. A tailor-made welcome 'for everyone' – because a destination can only flourish if nobody is excluded, if everyone can enjoy the added value of a holiday. As such, the attitude of the host or hostess can make all the difference. People who know their community, who take pride in it and enjoy receiving guests make a strong impression.

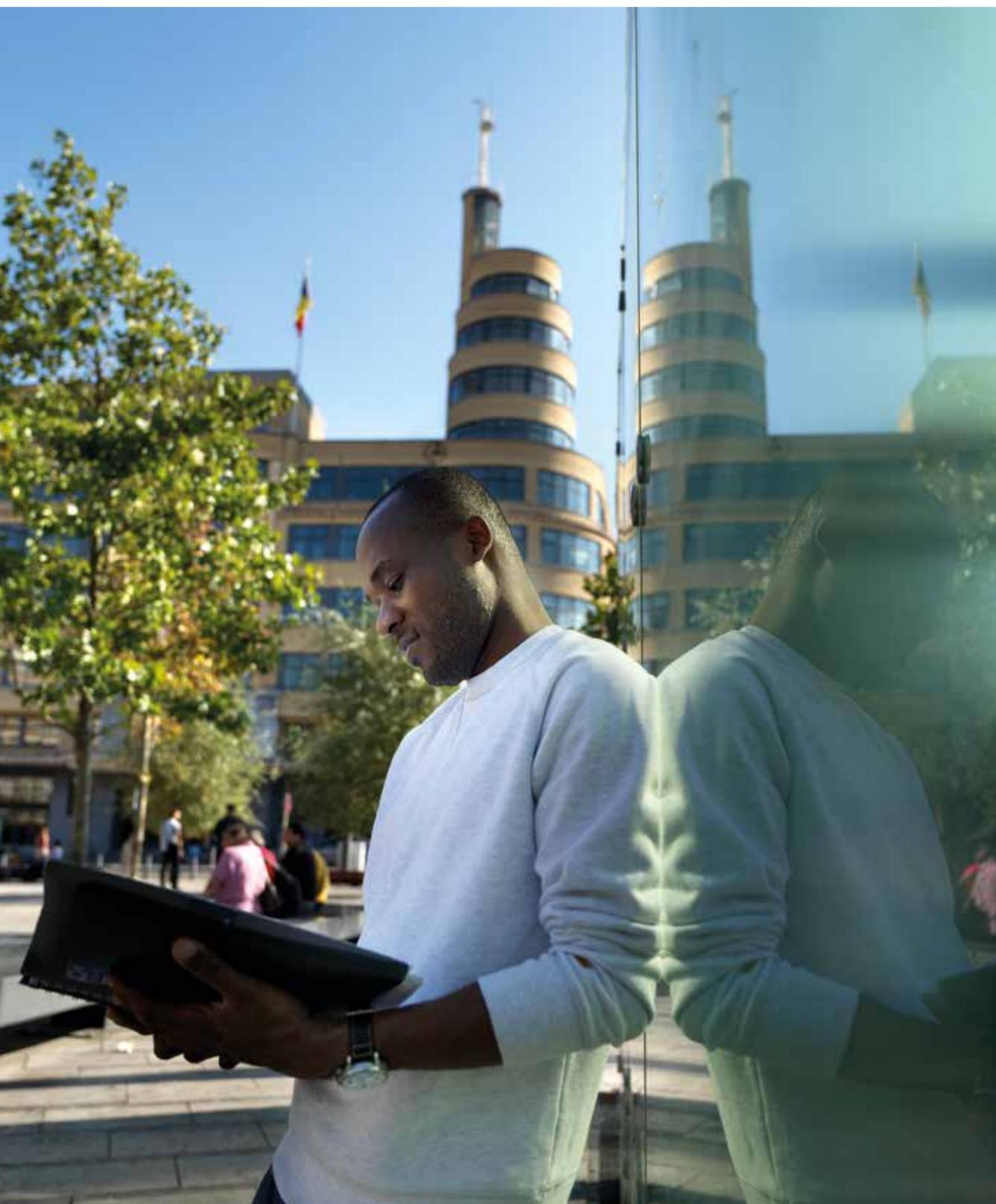
### 3 / The consequences of COVID-19

Travel used to be taken for granted. COVID-19 disrupted our social and economic system, revealing that business as usual is no longer an option. The challenge is twofold. Many tourism entrepreneurs are suffering the consequences of this unprecedented crisis. Survival is their motto. Tourists come back, they all say.



We now need to look ahead and make sustainable choices. Staying home has made us realise the value of travel more than ever, the opportunity to exchange our daily environment for a less familiar place, for new encounters and discoveries (that we can also make at home). At the same time, we are more than ever aware of our vulnerability and of the consequences of our travel behaviour on the ecosystem. We

are challenged to think about what really matters, about what we really want to retain and how we should do this. Tourism must also reinvent itself and take advantage of this opportunity for a hard reset. Travel to Tomorrow capitalises on this.



## Anna Pollock, tourism expert at Conscious Travel

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### TOURISM MUST THOROUGHLY CHANGE

The British international tourism expert Anna Pollock has called on everyone to reflect on a completely different type of tourism. She did this well before the coronavirus pandemic occurred. In her opinion, mass tourism as a successful consumer model has run its course, because ultimately it destroys itself. “Stop focussing on tourism as an economic market product”, she advises. “Instead, let it grow or ‘flourish’ in unique destinations that are created by visitors, locals and entrepreneurs.”

#### As much as possible

“In the past fifty or sixty years, mass tourism as an (economic) phenomenon has exploded, especially given that many forms of transport have become democratically accessible. People travel on a large scale, they take up a lot of space and they consume loads of raw materials”, Pollock says. Tourism was extremely successful until the spring of 2020 when the coronavirus pandemic exploded. “Every country wants a piece of the cake and wants to attract as many tourists as possible. But in many places, like Amsterdam or Venice, people had have enough. Tourism has become a burder over there, causing the loss of many things and even destroying them. Moreover, nobody takes any responsibility for the cost of travel: the environmental damage, the crowds, the bad

handling of heritage and nature. If the only goal is to sustain and even expand this form of tourism, then we are heading for an unmitigated disaster.”

#### Everything's for sale

Being a trend watcher, Anna Pollock found it interesting to see the creative ‘solutions’ that the industry came up with. Are there people who no longer want to lay on the beach in Spain, Turkey or Tunisia? Fine, we’ll think of something else. “At some point, many people switched to adventure travel, to see how far they could push their physical boundaries, for instance in a canoe on a white-water rafting trip. The emphasis then shifted to yoga, contemplation and solitude trend. Now we have the millennials, the generation that wants to be transformed by the travel experience. They return from their travels a changed person. Another recent trend is emerging in the United States. There you can now travel around the world to lend a helping hand to local communities, while experiencing your own social transformation, as part of ‘travel with a social impact’.”

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*“The locals are best placed to recommend their region”*

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*“There is no manual for this”*

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The problem is that it's mainly the marketers who are focusing on these trends. Their job is to transform each need into something that can be sold or marketed. But is this really possible? “Tourism is a service, rather than a product. The escalating urge for more and different experiences is being eroded. The bucket list has been ticked off. *Been there, done that. Boring!* Now what?”

**To the core: ‘flourishing people’**

We need to get back to the heart of the matter: what is tourism all about? Why do people want to travel and what are they looking for? Let's assume that (more) happiness is their goal. But what does happiness mean and how can you measure this?

The American psychologist Martin Seligman performed research into what makes people happy. He soon realised, however, that happiness is the wrong indicator to measure someone's well-being. You're happy when you win the lottery. You're sad when your father dies. But the opposite is also possible. Are you happy when you're rich? The two don't always necessarily go hand in hand..

“Seligman came up with the term ‘flourishing’. When people ‘flourish’, it means that they feel good. They can grow as a person and feel included in a larger group. It is a sustainable system”, Pollock explains. The fact that the word flourishing is related to ‘flora’ and nature says a lot.

**A living system**

Flourishing refers to a certain solidarity, to a sense of belonging to a group. “We can learn a lot from nature. After all, we are all part of a living planet”, Pollock continues. “Tourism especially depends on what is happening in the world, and is part of a larger organic whole. Is a country safe for tourists, does it have good accommodation, can you travel further once you've arrived? You cannot view the industry as a separate entity.”

“This kind of tourism implies that visitors or tourists form a flourishing destination together with entrepreneurs and locals (e.g., in the hospitality industry). You then approach a destination as a living system, just like a forest for example. It has a self-healing effect: when part drops out or cannot contribute enough, another part takes over. This goes one step further than the sustainability that people so often strive for. Yes, I believe in aiming higher”, Pollock laughs.

**Enrichment**

“Figures clarify what I mean by this. In most cases, five percent of everything a visitor spends in a given destination finds its way back into the local community. So for every hundred euros that is spent, five euros will stay in the local community. Currently (under the old system) the idea is to increase these 100 euros to 110 or in

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*“You can earn more with fewer tourists”*

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the best-case scenario to 120 euros, but again, you are only left with five percent of this at the end of the day. And in the meantime, you also get a lot of visitors. Now imagine if you were to say, let's invest in ways of increasing this impact from five to twenty percent, then you won't have to attract that many additional visitors.”

**Coaching rather than directing**

The fact that Flanders want to Travel to Tomorrow and become a flourishing destination, is cause for hope. Research has been conducted on this and experiments carried out for more than two years already. “This requires talking as well as listening, really listening. When people start to talk to each other in their own communities, engage in a dialogue, things can start to grow”, Pollock claims. “In that respect everyone is involved and everyone is an expert. After all, who knows the neighbourhood, the city or the region best? The locals and the entrepreneurs, of course. They are the perfect partners for making their destination flourish, together with the tourists.”

“The only thing we need to watch out for is that we don't come up with a fixed recipe”, Pollock warns. “Because then you'll end up with a checklist, a manual of ‘how to do’ things”. From that moment, you stop thinking. That's where the unique creative process stops.”



## Flourishing travel destinations

Travel to Tomorrow assigns a specific meaning to the word 'place' as the interaction of a place with its visitors, locals and entrepreneurs. The "soul of the place" is regarded as the most important catalyst for powerful travel experiences and for genuine and and for genuine and sustainable hospitality. Travel to Tomorrow explores these propositions, allows experts to discuss their impact and tests them against the practice of tourism today. How can we identify such inspirational places even better? Why do we feel so good there? Which places should we focus on? Tourists often like to head into nature. It is captivating and enchantingly beautiful. At the same time, it can also be threatening and dangerous. The sea is one of these attractive places but perhaps we can do better? In cities, tourists often rely on a guide to find their way around. The religious heritage that has been handed down to us constitutes an additional challenge, in terms of finding a new approach to it.



### A PLACE IS MORE THAN JUST A PLACE

In the framework of Travel to Tomorrow, we prefer the word 'place' ('plek' in Dutch) over the word 'location' ('plaats' in Dutch). "A place is equal to a location plus meaning", says the Dutch biologist, photographer and explorer Arita Baaijens. Meaning, which transforms a location into a place, is the 'result' of people's interpretation of a place, of the value that they assign to it and the emotional relationship they have with it. Peter De Wilde's preamble to this book, about the linden tree in his village, is a good example of this.

Recent research from the National Trust, the organisation that protects heritage in the United Kingdom and opens it up to the public, has shown that visitors experience a significant connection with certain sites. Our brain generates strong positive emotions when confronted with certain meaningful places. These places also influence our behaviour.

More than eight out of ten people (86 percent) describe their place as being part of their identity and a source of well-being. Many people feel a strong desire to protect this place for future generations. Ninety-two percent say they would be upset if their special place were to disappear and 61 percent state that they are actively trying to protect it.

The Flanders Heritage Agency came to a similar conclusion. The people of Flanders are extremely appreciative of heritage sites such as castles and fortresses, landscapes, city and villagescapes and feel that they should be preserved. Sixty-six percent of the Flemish population wants to actively reflect on the future of nearby heritage sites.

#### Immeasurable soul

The value of a place is determined by all the human and non-human connections that make a place a place. UNESCO already referenced the 'spirit of the place' as early as 2008. The spirit of a place is a combination of tangible and non-tangible elements. Tangible elements include the buildings, the land, the landscapes, objects and routes. Intangible elements are memories, stories, writings, traditional knowledge, values, colours, scents, textures, events, and the past.

According to UNESCO, the spirit of a place is transmitted by people and this transmission is an important aspect of its preservation. The World Heritage Organization therefore asks to ensure that the community concerned is involved in the reflection about the future of places. Such open communication and participation is the best way of keeping the spirit of places alive, of developing it.

Arita Baaijens uses the term *chora* when referring to 'the meaning of a place, as sensed by people'. And that is exactly what Travel to Tomorrow is all about. About the power of a vision and enthusiasm, about moving closer to the desired future, and about tapping into people's creative problem-solving capacity.

## Paul Frijters, well-being economist

### TOURISM AND WELL-BEING GO HAND IN HAND

The Dutchman Paul Frijters is a professor of Wellbeing economics at the London School of Economics. He conducts scientific research into the pursuit of well-being. Tourism is a happiness factor, he thinks, but how?

“People feel better when they function well and belong to a social group” is his starting premise. Just think of an enthusiastic member of a choir, a nature guide, or the members of service clubs. They don’t want to miss a single appointment and feel happy among like-minded people. It is also how associations and clubs attract more



*“Make sure that you position Flanders with its own, specific story”*

members. “This positive effect also applies to a region. If a region succeeds in positioning itself as a ‘happy’ entity, with a story of its own, then this will only benefit its tourist appeal”, Frijters continues. “Presenting Flanders as a historical site is a story that works well, especially for Asian tourists. Processions with historical evocations are a good example. Think very carefully about the story that you want to tell and how best to pitch Flanders to the world.”

#### Positive involvement

A ‘happy’ region is created based on the input from its population. Their contribution is vital to add the required lustre to a story. Local stakeholders can be people who earn a living thanks to it, but they can also be volunteers or enthusiasts. The example of the processions has a twofold effect: plenty of locals feel a connection with it, which is why they contribute

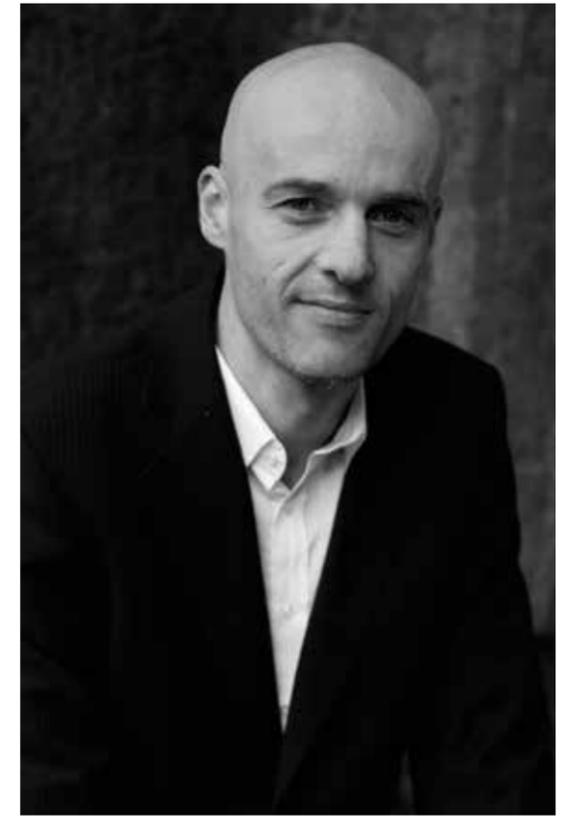
to it. Just think of Dendermonde, Hasselt or Bruges.

“This is not the case for parasitic forms of tourism that exploit certain destinations. We all know the clichéd image of large resorts that more or less use the locals as slaves. These people don’t feel involved in tourism. This often causes problems, or at least inconvenience”, Frijters claims. Take Cuba. Since the opening of the borders, the Cubans proudly show their unique culture to tourists, whereas they led a more hidden existence in the past. This close-knit, happy community with a positive image is necessary for attracting both internal and external tourism. “This is the intersection of tourism and well-being, this is where they go hand in hand. The enthusiasm automatically contributes to a happier and more productive region”.

This leads Frijters into the field of economics. This is not new information. Any entrepreneur can test this rule with his or her employees, a pub landlord with his punters, a hotel owner with his guests.

The next step is policy development. “By definition, the government must stimulate a story that is close to the population”, Frijters thinks. This means, making political choices that at the very least stimulate and underpin this enthusiasm. This support can consist of signage to historical heritage sites, efforts to develop a green viewpoint or safe pavements. The same kind of momentum that makes people happier and more productive is the moment that every mayor tries to promote among the

*“A happy region is reliant on the enthusiasm of its population”*



residents of his city or municipality. The result is neighbourhood parties, running races and flea markets.

#### Sustainability

“The entire landscape tells a region’s story, which is handed down to the following generations.” And this brings Frijters to the aspect of sustainability. The idea is not to send all the tourists to one and the same place, but to spread them. The tourism industry (let’s forget about the coronavirus pandemic for now) is an enormous growth market, which requires a well-thought-through distribution. The average tourist contributes to this because tourists love to explore and ‘find’ a nice altarpiece in a small church, a park with a nice terrace or a lake in a quiet location with sailing facilities. Guiding them towards these places is the job of the local operators and of the government.

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*“Tourists consciously choose a destination that appeals to them”*

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**A conscious choice**

Does this approach by definition give rise to more happiness and well-being? Here too Frijters follows a tiered reasoning. “The population is the first to be convinced that being happy is important, both for themselves and for their children. People think about this very consciously. They have given their holiday destination a lot of thought beforehand. They heard about it from friends, were informed through the media or researched other people’s travel experiences on the internet.”

“The next group is the business world. You can be sure that companies will have tried to predict, for any product launched to market, what customers want and what the product should look like, to stimulate the potential buyer’s happiness experience, using big data and algorithms. The awareness is slowest to grow in governments although they too are beginning to realise that their job is the well-being of the people. A lot of instances are already measuring how happy the population is. In short, well-being is a co-production, involving the government, the business community and the population.”

**Don’t exaggerate**

Tourism is necessary but it is not the same as travel. “Not travelling at all, not getting out is definitely bad for people. People like to feel a connection with the rest of the world, as well as with the people that they consider to be part of their own group, with their own region. But you don’t have to travel a lot to be happy. There are plenty of happy communities where people barely travel but where they engage in plenty of internal contacts. We see that travelling abroad can be quite liberating for people from a rather ‘oppressive’ culture, such as China.”

So what about the cost of this? Frijters’s reply is that of an economist. “You should not be afraid of heavily taxing tourists and for example levying a tax for visiting a region. In Flanders this is easy to do simply because there is a demand. A high tourism tax means more income that can be invested in improving the well-being of your own population”, Frijters concludes. Here too, conscious choices must be made, especially by the government.





## Professor Patrick Meire, biologist

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### TOURISM MUST RESPECT NATURE

The coronavirus pandemic and climate change have presented us with a number of challenges. How can we improve the relationship between humans and nature? Patrick Meire is a biologist, a professor at the University of Antwerp and the president of the nature conservation organisation Natuurpunt, Damme chapter. He also explains how tourism can contribute to a balanced and sustainable ecosystem.

“Have you ever spent the night sleeping in a tent near a large glacier and heard it cracking or ‘singing’ through the night? Or taken a hike in a dangerous storm? It is a really humbling experience”, Patrick Meire starts by saying. “We may think that we are important but we are nothing in the bigger cosmic story. When you live in a city you are even less aware of your own insignificance. There people and their technological realisations, based on inventions made along centuries, have the upper hand. But they are not invulnerable. Natural forces such as hurricanes, floods, fires and earthquakes can destroy any structure in seconds.” Just think of the nuclear plant in Fukushima, Japan. The coronavirus may be minuscule but it has proven capable of making the world grind to a halt. “I see the coronavirus pandemic, the climate change and environmental pollution as expressions of our system’s vulnerability. Nature

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*“We must respect the forces of nature”*

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is a gigantic mechanism, and we heavily rely on it.

We need to realise this and, above all, have more respect for this”, Meire’s posits. “Tourism can help us understand the nature of intact ecosystems and how to use them the right way.”

“As soon as we understand this, it makes perfect sense that people’s consumer patterns must change”, he continues. Stop eating meat?

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*“Solidarity is the cornerstone of sustainability”*

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There is plenty of other food to be had. A walk to the baker? It's a nice walk. A plastic carry bag? No, thanks. No more air travel? There are plenty of other options available. “Imagine that we calculated the actual ecological footprint of each human and you had to insert money into a payment machine for every polluting mile first before you can leave. It would definitely force us to change our behaviour”, he claims.

The problem, according to Meire, is that people do not understand the direct relationship between their activities and the problems that they cause. “There is a prevailing sense that your own small contribution is not that important. How can my behaviour influence things? It's true that it's only a drop in the ocean but if many millions of people think the same way, the impact can be quite significant. This elevates the discourse from the individual to the social level.”

**Solidarity with the next generations**

“The unbridled consumption of all the reserves and the refusal to reduce CO2 emissions undermine our future. We don't have much time. I hope that this process will be reversed soon. The coronavirus pandemic should provide the momentum to do things differently, including in terms of tourism”, Meire thinks.

“Solidarity is the cornerstone of sustainability. Solidarity between people today and solidarity with future generations, to whom we should hand over a viable world. Maintaining authenticity is equally important. I'm from Bruges and I've noticed how the city has changed into one big chocolate shop. Tourists who visit Bruges for just a few hours, stroll

down two or three streets and leave with a box of chocolate, are not sustainable tourists.”

**Change is possible.**

Can we correct mass tourism and people's bad behaviours? Meire believes this is possible, both consciously and unconsciously. “Marketers and behavioural psychologists conduct research into how you can reverse or change habits. Take fashion for example. Who would have paid such a high price for ripped jeans twenty years ago? Nobody, but people do nowadays.” Awareness about improved road safety (e.g., wearing a helmet) or health (e.g., better sun protection, quitting smoking) results in new and other habits. Why can't this apply to tourism?

“Business owners and organisations are largely responsible for taking the initiative. Those who refuse to incorporate sustainability into their way of working are doomed to fail. The product you sell must have a link with sustainability. What is the local aspect? How is it produced? This will play an increasingly important role over time.”

“The element of awareness is extremely important, including in tourism. I recently visited a sheep farm where the owner showed me how they make cheese. At the end of the visit he made us taste it. It was a very pleasant, educational experience. Such projects, which had already slowly picked up momentum, will continue to thrive and develop.”

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*“Bad habits can be reversed or changed”*

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**More nature**

“The maintenance and conservation of biodiversity starts at the local level. Gardens, which account for 9% of the surface area of Flanders, are a good place to start for example. Grow more and different plants. Those sterile lawns are an awful sight. If you don't have a garden, why not plant a climber along your façade or place a container on your window sill? On a macro level, the verges and parks and green area management in a region is equally important, in addition to the larger

areas of nature, of course. There are plenty of stakeholders that can play a role in this, including individuals, local governments, agriculture and nature conservation organisations. More hedges around fields serve to break the wind, reducing desiccation. By planting trees, managing verges ecologically and turning them into flowery ribbons and developing larger nature areas, you create a more variegated landscape, in which agriculture, nature and culture are interwoven, which in turn makes tourists, cyclists and hikers feel good.”



## LABIOMISTA in Genk

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### WHEN ART AND NATURE BECOME ONE

The Flemish artist Koen Vanmechelen is widely perceived as one of the most versatile thinkers of this era. He operates at the crossroads of art, science, philosophy and society. Since the opening in July 2019, his Genk-based LABIOMISTA project is a beacon of diversity and connectedness. It mainly serves as a breeding ground for countless new ideas, creations, projects, and collaborations. Travel to Tomorrow philosophy is applied in the purest possible way in this project, proving that artists are the real architects of change.

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*‘Here culture follows nature rather than vice-versa.’*

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LABIOMISTA – which literally means a mix of life – is a large artistic and tourism park, situated on the site of an old coal mine and the former zoo of Zwartberg. The destination became internationally-renowned in a very short time. It was built with immense respect for nature, the locals and entrepreneurs. Being able to experience the place in an original and authentic way, meeting people and connecting with the locals: these are the three elements that help LABIOMISTA flourish.

“We chose not to overload the site, but to let nature do the talking”, Koen Vanmechelen explains. “This compels visitors to think: how can we respect nature and align our culture with it? I think that in recent years we have done things very differently, especially when it comes to tourism – tourism took priority over

nature, which was repressed as a result, which is unfortunate.”

LABIOMISTA has become a garden of order and chaos, an arena of culture and nature. “Here visitors start to think about what tomorrow’s world could look like. That is something that my work evokes”, Vanmechelen concludes.

#### Art in the community

The art project blends in with a large area of untamed nature, which has been preserved intact, in the twilight zone between the inhabited world and the wildlife of the national park. In addition to Vanmechelen’s open-air exhibition with living artworks (animals) and installations the site also has plenty of space for workshops and education. The City of Genk

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*‘Diversity is engrained in Genk’s DNA.’*

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*“The revenue is spent on public projects”*

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provides optimal support to LABIOMISTA. “The project generates added value through the close involvement of the local population”, says Mayor Wim Dries. “The people of Genk came up with the idea of doing something with this ‘wounded place’.

LABIOMISTA gives something back to visitors, as well as to the community. Better yet, diversity and multiculturalism – the strengths of our city – were the starting point for the project. The interaction between tourists from around

the world and the local community with its diverse roots has contributed to a meaningful development of the region and to a unique visitor experience.”

All revenue from LABIOMISTA is reinvested in the park’s public outreach and in local projects. Vanmechelen: “Without local DNA, nothing global can grow. That is why LABIOMISTA also extends in the surrounding community.”

“To resurrect a site, you need to devise a new, contemporary story, which ties in with the memory of its past. The soul of the miners and of the former zoo is still very tangible here. It provided the foundation to build a hopeful future, which can bring about change in today’s concept of society”, the mayor adds.



## The North Sea and fishing industry

### A TREASURE TROVE OF ANIMALS AND VEGETATION

Willy Versluys is all too well aware that our North Sea is a treasure trove of animals and vegetation. He owns a trawler called 'De Crangon' and runs the De Cierk fish and food market in Ostend. He perfectly understands the Travel to Tomorrow idea, sharing his love for the North Sea and his profession with others, connecting people and organising authentic activities. Willy shows everyone first-hand that our North Sea is a flourishing place.



Willy is a man with a mission. Out of love for our maritime and cultural heritage, he ensured that De Crangon, one of Belgium's oldest wooden fishing vessels, was preserved in its original state and could remain a shrimp trawler. The Crangon was the first vessel ever to be recognised as Flemish heritage.

*"The shrimping trade must be preserved."*

"Twice a week former fishermen take a group of tourists, locals or entrepreneurs out on De Crangon. We teach them how to fish for shrimp the traditional way on the North Sea. They then learn how to sort the shrimp, which is cooked on board. Finally, they are given a crash course in shrimp peeling. This is our way of preserving the trade and teaching them to appreciate the taste of the real grey shrimp. They also get to take a kilo of fresh brown North Sea shrimp home with them. Everyone thinks it's an incredibly instructive experience, especially when the old fishermen start sharing their stories about life at sea", Willy Versluys laughs.



### De Cierk: a meeting and experience centre

In recent years, the City of Ostend and more specifically its Oosteroever neighbourhood (East Bank) has undergone a serious make-over. Here, new and trendy residential districts and futuristic architecture blend in with the local heritage, the water, green areas, the tradition and the history of Flemish fishery. This is also where Ostend's fish market is located. To the north of it you can still visit the warehouses of the old fish market, which is called 'De Cierk' by the locals because of its circular shape. 'Cierk' is West Flemish dialect for circus. Willy came up

*"The old fish market is of major historical relevance."*

with the idea of repurposing the buildings by opening a fish, food and 'meet' market in the old buildings (being the fish lover that he is).

"The old fish market has a lot of historical relevance for the city of Ostend", Willy says. "I felt that it was my duty to preserve these buildings and give them back to the people of Ostend. I like to describe De Cierk as a meeting and experience centre for people of all ages. On the ground floor, local entrepreneurs have the opportunity to open a shop of their own. An artisan bakery or a large fish shop, which we supply with fresh North Sea fish on a daily basis. We also have the space for a large cooking island for organising all kinds of workshops and demos.

The spaces on the upper floor can be rented as meeting rooms or function rooms. In short, De Cierk is the perfect place for tourists, the people of Ostend and entrepreneurs to engage with each other", Willy concludes.

## Caroline Ven, macroeconomist

### THE BLUE ECONOMY IS BECOMING MORE SUSTAINABLE

Caroline Ven is the CEO of the non-profit organisation Blauwe Cluster, which was established in 2017. It focuses on the promotion and development of economic activities at sea. The 'blue economy' relates to traditional sea fishing and shipping as well as to innovations at sea and on the coastline. Blue tourism is part of this. What does Travel to Tomorrow focus on in this sector?

"It is vital that we monitor the evolution of our coastline, even though it is only 67 km long. As a result of the rise in sea levels and the increasingly larger wave action – and bearing in mind the increase in the number of storms – the sea dike is prone to flooding. You could build gigantic concrete structures to counter this, like in the Netherlands, but this vision is outdated", Caroline Ven claims. "We now strive to create a more natural coastline, allowing the water to flow into the hinterland, as is already the case in the Zwin. I am convinced that the qualitative shift away from hard infrastructure has a positive impact on tourism", says Ven.

"Why do people go to the sea? For the expansive views, the clean air, the dunes and the sand, the elements (water, sun and wind).



A continuous wall of blocks of flats is not what we associate with these natural expectations. We believe that buildings that require renovation should no longer be rebuilt. I understand that this is somewhat of a taboo but it frees up more space for attractive nature. This 'blue' tourism would automatically peak year-round rather than only during the summer months."

*"Our ambition is to create a more natural coast infrastructure"*



### Economic ambitions

"Flanders is a world-class region in a number of fields within the blue economy. Dredging companies such as Jan De Nul and DEME are implementing projects around the world. The offshore wind energy sector is also developing at a rapid pace. Have you already heard about

the aquaculture around wind parks? You can grow mussels near the hard structures of these wind parks and they are delicious. We see this as an individual pilot project, which contributes to sustainability – the short food chain – that we can all enjoy.

Moreover, a project is a window on the world, highlighting new and different options for others. Which in turn paves the way for tourism, so everyone stands to benefit", Ven laughs.

## Flemish Masters in Situ

### ART IN THE PLACE FOR WHICH IT WAS ORIGINALLY CREATED

The Courtrai canon Rogier Braye realised that his end was near. To preserve his love of God and of the Church of Our Lady in his city for posterity, he commissioned a painting of 'The Elevation of the Cross'. And he was prepared to pay a hefty sum for it. The Antwerp master painter Sir Anthony van Dyck completed the work in 1631. In addition to his payment, Van Dyck received a box of tasty waffles, for which he thanked the canon in a letter that has been preserved. Braye died in 1632.

This story is a good example of the rich storytelling that underpins the Flemish Masters in Situ project, which puts 45 artworks in the spotlight. The works are situated all over Flanders, in cities and villages. They all have in common that they are still located in the same place for which they were originally created. Thanks to an interesting website and various routes, both of which were developed in 2019,

the public can now find its way more easily to these works. The project was developed by Openbaar Kunstbezit Vlaanderen, with the support of VISITFLANDERS. It corresponds with the philosophy behind Travel to Tomorrow: optimal experience, the spread of tourists to hidden Flemish heritage gems, the growth of the group of interested tourists, benefits for the local entrepreneurs and hospitality industry and a relationship with the locals. Often volunteers or guides give an explanation about the artwork, thereby supplementing the many well-documented information terminals that have been installed in every location.

Flemish Masters in Situ also opens doors that are currently shut. You are welcomed to churches, chapels, convents, beguinages, castles and town halls where paintings by Flemish masters of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth century are still displayed in their original location. You can easily get to these unique places, which are off the busy, beaten path. They include a cornucopia of hidden gems. In some instances, they are located in the Flemish art cities, but the majority are situated in smaller towns and tiny villages such as Deerlijk, Zaventem, Geel, Lennik or Hemelveerdegem.



Some artworks have been restored for the occasion. You can also discover them in amazing detail thanks to the impressive digital pictures on the terminal screens.

By connecting the sites in a series of routes, businesses such as the local hospitality industry and bike and boat rental companies are also involved in the project.

The often unknown works are real gems, worth exploring, just like the places where they spent so many centuries, hidden from sight. The text and images of the in situ story give visitors the opportunity to come face to face with these paintings, highlighting the sublime way in which Flemish Masters took the places for which their

works were originally intended – and where they are still located today – into account. These background stories are always unique.

The personal stories of the locals who describe their relationship with the place and the artwork were also included on the website and terminals. This only enhances the experience, making it more intense. A pilgrim's booklet, to which you can add information after every visit of a masterpiece, serves as a guideline for visiting all the artworks..

The project will be continued in collaboration with VISITFLANDERS. A study is currently ongoing, to further develop this concept and add more sites.

## Ghent Authentic

### THINK GLOBAL, FEEL LOCAL

Kristel Vereecken is a passionate traveller, an impassioned guide and the founder of Ghent Authentic, an association that believes in impactful guiding. In 2010, it earned Kristel the title of 'European Female Entrepreneurship European Ambassador'. She explains, in her home base of Ghent, why discovering and showing places with a soul is so important. At Ghent Authentic, no two tours are the same and that's just the way she likes it.



"There's more to a building than its floor area", says Kristel. "Some places really have a spirit, a soul. We need to pay attention to this in our surroundings and cherish these buildings. Often we are completely unaware of the wealth of heritage around us. We walk past it every day. My international guests give me pause for reflection. Take too frivolous an approach and things will backfire. Just look at the example the former Baudelo Chapel in Ghent, which became the home of the new Holy Foodmarket. Its original function was a place of reflection, wisdom and peace. Turning it into a shop and a pub, where you could eat, just didn't feel right. And people were quick to sense it. I'm not surprised that this place has since closed down."

*"No tours are the same when you book a tour with us"*

### The soul of the place

Kristel: "Some places and artworks have the power to transform people. The ruins of St. Bavo's Abbey in Ghent are one such place. I like to visit this site with groups, it always makes an impression. And yet, there is nothing to see there, except a refectory, a well and seven metres of hornbeam which traces the outline of the church that is no longer there. No heating, no electricity, no facilities. I once took a group of very noisy marketing professionals there for a team building. I invited them to walk around for a few minutes in silence and to listen to the place. You could tell that they felt uneasy at first. When they returned after their walk, something had shifted. They no longer chatted about their work, but about themselves and their dreams. And they listened to each other. They almost all without exception said that they would return to this 'empty' place which was so meaningful, nonetheless. As guides, we are tempted to share a lot of information – it is our job after all – but sometimes letting the place speak for itself makes much more of an impact"



### Impactful guiding

"Visitors to Ghent see me as a local and part of their experience. They see me as I am, warts and all", Kristel laughs. "I want to introduce them to inspiring places in Ghent, but also to the local entrepreneurs. Because, as a guide, you can have a positive impact on the local community. People often forget this. Reciprocity is also tremendously important in everything I do. I want to learn from my guests and also be inspired. Interaction and direct contact with the group are crucial for me. I don't want to use a headset, walking ahead of the group, as I don't like a routine. Just ask a group of

*"St. Bavo's Abbey in Ghent makes people fall silent"*

Buddhist visitors to explain what they see and feel when they visit the beguinage in Ghent. They recognise the religious contemplation in these places, even though they come from the other side of the world. That's why our motto is *think global, feel local.*"

"With every tour I give, I try to make people think and talk to each other. You obviously need to know what you're showing them as a guide. But I find it just as important to observe them and to point out non-verbal behaviour. 'Hmm, you're frowning', I'll say, which often paves the way for a personal note. I want to create the space for this, and make sure that a tour is impactful. People often keep in touch. Some people have even become friends. People return, or they'll invite me to come visit them in their city. Real human contact is so valuable these days", Kristel realises. "What we do with Ghent Authentic is rare and therefore precious."

## Working with Kapittel

### THE TRANSITION OF RELIGIOUS HERITAGE

15 April 2019. That fateful Monday evening, the world watched in horror as Notre Dame in Paris was ravaged by a fire. The calamity fuelled a wave of emotion and offers of support. Religious heritage inspires a great sense of solidarity, of connectedness that people aren't always aware of. In 2020, 1,800 churches across Flanders are waiting for a plan to be able to continue their role in the community. At the same time, many religious congregations and orders are exploring the future, both spiritually and in terms of their heritage or buildings. Kapittel with its motto: 'working together to connect and strengthen' – is overseeing the process: a rather unique journey for places with a special meaning as they Travel to Tomorrow..

Churches, chapels, abbeys, beguinages and convents are the stately witnesses of centuries of religious and community life in Flanders. They are centres of attraction for many visitors, who are overwhelmed by their beauty, silence, inspiration and spirituality. That said, their original functions have largely dissipated since then. The last beguine died in 2013. At the same time, the cost for preserving these buildings is quite prohibitive. So how to proceed?

Many local authorities are discussing ways of initiating the 'repurposing' of this heritage. "We prefer to call it a transition", Kristof Lataire, the driving force behind Kapittel, corrects me. "It is vital that the new future of religious heritage is founded on the communication between all the parties involved, who think of it as part of their community or even part of themselves. So bottom-up rather than top-down. During the 'Kapittel' days among others, we reflect with the local community as a whole on a vision for the future. We thus embark on an

– often gradual – transition process: attentive, communicative, with the love and affection of a community."

#### Inspirational places

"Throughout this entire quest, we always start from the soul of a place, which we intend to preserve. It can be found in the buildings and the estates, in the memories and the stories. These are perfect examples of sites that are suffused with history, authenticity and subjective sensitivities. Our strategy aims to activate this stream of experiences and meanings and possibly divert them, without letting them dry up."

"That is why we always start by looking at the intentions of the people who originally built a site. What did they find important? How was their society inspired and organised? We also focus on what is happening there today. The main question is: how can this place play a



meaningful and major role for the community again today? We strive, among others for sustainability at the ecological, social, cultural and economic level. A new future for religious heritage involves more than just developing new ideas and plans on the drawing table. All too often, a restrictive technical perspective – however good the designer's intentions are – can destroy a place", Lataire concludes.

#### Across the border

The *Collège des Bernardins*, a thirteenth-century Cistercian building in Paris, originally provided accommodation for monks who were studying at the university in Paris. It was given a striking new use. Or rather: multiple new uses. It is important to remember that the architect and all the stakeholders started from the premise

that all the rooms should be given a voice again. For many centuries, the college was a place where people went in search of answers to social questions. This also had to be applicable after the renovation in 2008.

In a society that evolves faster than our ability to perceive the challenges that are coming our way, the Collège des Bernardins offers the space and freedom to understand the world together and build a future that is respectful of people. This gave rise to four perspectives for activities: dialogue and meetings, education, research and art and culture. The Collège has since become a vibrant and bustling space, attracting people of all ages, from a wide range of very different backgrounds and from all walks of life. It hosts concerts, courses, performances, exhibitions, seminars and conferences, workshops, etc.

## Tourists and their wishes

**Do the challenges that the tourism industry currently faces mean that people will no longer travel in the future? No, not at all. But we will see a shift from 'more' to 'better' travel. We are evolving towards meaningful tourism for everyone. Why holidays matters, a Holiday network of VISITFLANDERS makes sure that everyone has access to tourism, including people with disabilities or low-income households. The current generation of tourism students that is training for this job is keenly aware of this.**

What are tourists looking for? Do they actually know what they want? Often travel means 'distancing yourself', in every meaning of the word. This does not necessarily need to be quantified in hundreds of kilometres. What matters is that tourists can rest and relax, in the most improbable ways and places. Switching off their smartphone for a week, taking a bike ride in green surroundings or gazing at a sunset can be more than sufficient.

Travel experiences have proven this. Usually the people you share these experiences with are more important than the places where you experience them. People who attend a conference in Belgium also want to return home, having experienced something special.



Chris De Smedt, programme director professional Bachelor in Tourism and Recreation Management

### EVERYONE NEEDS REST AND RELAXATION

**Holiday is a basic need and a basic right. According to Chris De Smedt, Programme Director Professional Bachelor in Tourism & Recreation Management at the Erasmus university college in Brussels, this will continue to be the case, during and after the coronavirus pandemic. People pine for a holiday, precisely because they need some rest and relaxation. They want to have free time, which they can use as they see fit.**

Even in these difficult times, everyone is still looking forward to a holiday. When you're in quarantine, you miss your freedom the most. "A holiday is everyone's basic right, even if you have financial problems or a disability", says Chris De Smedt. "Especially after a lockdown, which hardly qualifies as a holiday, everyone really needs a few days to unwind and relax."

So what do you do during a holiday? "The easiest thing is to coordinate your holiday in line with what others do or follow the example of role models in the media. But it makes more sense to try to understand what gives you satisfaction during your holiday. Do you seek out some peace and tranquillity? Does it involve spending time with your family? Does it just mean having fun? Or making your children happy? It depends on the holiday. To be valuable, where you go on your holiday or what you do while on holiday must fulfil this need", De Smedt explains.



### Different types of tourists

"During the coronavirus pandemic, we learnt to appreciate certain things more, and we have adapted our holiday in line with this. Although you shouldn't generalise this. People have different needs and holidays provide the answer to this. So there will always be different types of tourists. I think the main problem is the notion that you need 'more, better, further, cheaper', which is driven by the market or the industry.

*“It’s got everything to do with how you look at things. A different perspective allows for amazement and pride”*

Because of demand and supply, consumers no longer know what they want at the end of the day. That is why I always argue in favour of reflecting on our holiday needs. Perhaps you don’t need to travel that far if you go on holiday more often and enjoy your own surroundings more.”

“It’s got everything to do with how you look at things. When we asked students to go out now and then during the lockdown, they inevitably replied that there was nothing to see or do. But if you have people go out and search for funky letterboxes for example, this immediately changes their perspective. A different perspective allows for amazement and pride. We even learn to enjoy ourselves. Our country is relatively green, and foreign tourists are quick to notice this. It is merely a question of noticing and appreciating this.”



### Creative students

Students find concepts such as added value and meaning difficult to understand. This depends on their background. “In our programme, we also focus on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), but they don’t really understand what this means. Students will only begin to understand what they achieve, when they see this first-hand. Students are interested, however, in Why holidays matter, which gives everyone the opportunity to go on holiday”, De Smedt stresses.

Is a tourism degree still worth while doing during this time of the pandemic? “More than ever”, De Smedt says. “The programme pays attention to added value, meaning and the SDGs. The industry needs young enthusiastic employees, who can search for creative solutions to bring about sustainable change in tourism. The new generation can do this. If you want to change something, you need to start working now and enrol in this training to achieve your objectives in four to five years from now.”

### WHY HOLIDAYS MATTER

**Going on holiday is something the average Flemish family takes for granted. And yet that is Why Holidays Matter network of VISITFLANDERS is so important. As the name implies, the network strives to ensure that everyone, including vulnerable households, can take the holiday they need. A difficult undertaking in pandemic times. “Holidays are not a luxury, they are a basic right”, says Zuhail Demir, the Flemish Minister for Tourism, who wants to provide additional support to the network at such a critical time.**

People who live in poverty or who live with a mental or physical disability have fewer opportunities to go on holiday. They don’t have much margin to dream or plan because of their daily worries. Arranging a day trip or a holiday is almost impossible. But they also long for some rest and relaxation, to be able to recharge their batteries. The Why Holidays Matter network has more than 2,200 partners in the tourism industry, ensuring more than 150,000 people can enjoy a holiday each year. And this figure is growing steadily.

The partners ensure that accommodation, attractions and museums are physically accessible, reduce prices to an affordable social tariff and see a unique, custom approach as part of their hospitality. Local social organisations assist holidaymakers at every stage and level, with practical solutions and support.

### #Discoveriesgalore

In December 2019, 380 participants gathered their ideas and experiences at the Why Holidays Matter forum. The result of their work was #discoveriesgalore, a project for and by holidaymakers and holiday planners, which was inspired by the many tourism gems and treasures around Flanders. A website was launched, with tips for activities and an inspiring book that invites people to explore Flanders in a different way. You can do this alone, with your family or with friends.

Head out and try to see things from a different perspective. Gaze in marvel at your surroundings or your destination, enjoy a new perspective. Dare to let things happen by chance. Find out what a holiday or place has to offer: taste, smell, search, look, feel, know. Get out there.

## SIX INSPIRING HOLIDAY STORIES

For six years, the Why Holidays Matter network of VISITFLANDERS has been collecting stories about a future of travel and hospitality. The total currently stands at 1,500. They are distributed through the network. A group of story weavers also set out for Travel to Tomorrow.

In almost all of the stories, the travellers enjoy new experiences, even when receiving guests themselves. Some people concluded that travel changed their life. Once they broke away from the prevailing economic vision, they found out how tourism can contribute to well-being and sustainability. These stories led to new insights.

### 1 / Seaside care hotel makes dreams come true

The **Royal Villa in Ostend** organises a holiday in combination with rehabilitation or special care. Coordinator Tom Decraecke makes every effort to glean the secret wishes of his guests and try to make them come true, with a team of 25 colleagues. "One of the most things that I do is listen", he says.

### 2 / Eliminate the noise

**Pieter Ghijssels** of VISITFLANDERS likes accessible, inclusive trips. Travelling means pushing back boundaries for Pieter. He shares life-changing encounters and the challenge of eliminating the noise, the minor and major irritations that disrupt the experience in Flanders. His congenital disability has never prevented him from leading an active, social life.



### 3 / The Snuffel Hostel in Bruges makes the neighbourhood flourish

Thanks to this **budget-friendly hostel** young people from around the world can discover Bruges. They generate revenue, which is used to inspire and connect people of all ages and backgrounds in Bruges. A real win-win for all.

### 4 / A youth residence as leverage for a flourishing local community

The story of the **Oud Klooster** youth residence in the Flemish Ardennes involves so much more than just offering children the opportunity to go on holiday. It also attests to the connection that can be established between youth tourism and the local community, because many of the villagers of the small hamlet of Dikkele have become part of the initiative. Erwin Aerts, who took the initiative to found Oud Klooster, had to engage in a process with the village community first, however.

### 5 / The Bokrijk Open-Air Museum strengthens communities (and vice-versa)

**Bea Vaes**, the community outreach officer of the Bokrijk Open-Air Museum explains how a community was created around the museum. The people who live around the estate help care for it, as do craftsman from around the country. A group of more than 100 volunteers helps maintain the vegetable gardens. In Bokrijk, instead of attendants, they have hosts and hostesses, who receive visitors, tell stories, and so on.

### 6 / Offer opportunities instead of stigmatising

'De Plek' is the bistro of Antwerp's Cathedral and can be reached through the sacristy. This simple bistro can be found in the former Saint John's Chapel. Both the locals and tourists like to stop in for a drink and a snack. The people who work here often find it difficult to hold down a job under normal conditions. **Sense**, a social economy enterprise which specialises in hospitality businesses, offers them opportunities instead of stigmatising them.

## Psychiatrist, university lecturer and author Dirk De Wachter

### WE MUST ASK OURSELVES WHY WE TRAVEL

Dirk De Wachter is a Belgian psychiatrist, university professor and author. In the last chapter of his most recent book *De kunst van het ongelukkig zijn (The Art of being Unhappy)* he wishes everyone a 'pandemic of consciousness'. Crises force us to think, including about (mass) tourism.

Should we feel depressed because we must adapt our consumer behaviour as a result of the global coronavirus pandemic? "Not at all", says Dirk De Wachter. "Challenges compel us to think, to reflect. Let's take advantage of this opportunity to reflect on overconsumption. Mass tourism can no longer be what it was. Perhaps we can develop an enriching vision based on this?"

De Wachter hopes that we will ask ourselves more why we travel. "Tourists often travel vacuously – they don't care what they do or where they go – only to do the same thing that they do at home, but away from home. Eating chips, for example. Let's take a long, hard critical look at this behaviour. We also need to think about what's useful and good for people, also in the context of tourism."

#### Echternach Procession

According to some trend watchers, we will look at the world differently after the pandemic, with more attention to stillness and sustainability. "I don't think so", says De Wachter. "Changes happen gradually, in small steps, like an Echternach Procession. A crisis forces us to briefly stop and think about all kinds of

*"Tourists often travel vacuously, only to do the same thing that they do at home, away from home"*

things, but after it has ended, many people will probably fall back into the same routines and patterns. I hope that people will make the shift to a more meaningful form of tourism. Until now, the majority of all holidaymakers just wanted to lay on the beach or go out. I don't want to denigrate this but we can try to turn domestic tourism into something positive precisely because we need to do things differently. There are plenty of interesting tourist attractions in Flanders that we wouldn't visit otherwise. We prefer to fly to museums at the other end of the world. Now is the perfect time to highlight our hidden treasures or nearby monuments."

This must be a spontaneous process, De Wachter thinks. People must be free to make this choice. We can target young people through social



country. Being available 24/7 puts a lot of pressure on the individual. It exhausts our nervous system. We need to use all our free time to lead a meaningful and healthy life. Last year, I traded in my holiday in Italy for a development project in Tanzania. It was a very meaningful trip. When you do something meaningful, it adds another dimension to your leisure time. My holiday thus was more than just the opposite of not working, or rather doing nothing." Now that remote work is becoming more popular, it is vital that we have the resources to switch off our daily work routine when we take a staycation, according to De Wachter.

#### Bottom-up rather than top-down

Can the government play a role in people's holiday experience? De Wachter does not believe in a top-down government that tells us where to go. "The government must stimulate the ideas of the tourism industry bottom-up, creating opportunities: map them, streamline them, provide support, etc. I don't advocate wresting control from the government over culture, like they did in America. There, culture only survives by dint of the goodwill of some very rich people. The government continues to be a major, organising factor in my opinion. Our museum depots are filled to the rafters with works, masterpieces are wasting away in cellars. We can do all kinds of things with this. Sometimes I think that we're not chauvinistic enough. This tiny country has the greatest potential in the world when it comes to modern dance, classical music, painting or modern art... But we don't use it enough."

But De Wachter is loath to emphasise a staycation. "Let's not be too adamant or restrictive, touting the message that you don't have to leave the country because you can see everything you need here. I love Paris and I would find it terrible if I couldn't visit it any more. We need to continue to orient ourselves to the world."

media, luring them out of their lazy beach chairs somewhere in the warm Mediterranean. "Many people will say that they enjoyed doing something different after the trip. Of course you can do nothing and have a good time. But a bit of culture can also be interesting. We need to find ways of portraying this kind of activity in our own country in a sexier way. Young people can play an important role in this."

#### "Meaningful travel" is positive

While the pandemic may bring about some changes, we won't immediately be able to shake off our consumer addiction. "I spent many years flying across the world for work, albeit always in combination with culture. I enjoyed doing it, and I was very eager to do it. So I am guilty but I don't feel guilty because I learned a lot from it and I passed it on to others. People have an innate eagerness and the urge to consume."

Why do people travel? "For purposes of dissociation", De Wachter thinks. "To distance themselves from things, in every respect. If we can't take a long trip, we need to find other ways to dissociate. It means getting away from our smartphone, which is easier in a distant

## THE KEMPEN, A PIONEER WHEN IT COMES TO TRAVELLING TO TOMORROW

Toerisme Provincie Antwerpen (TPA) and the Kempen region were one of the pioneers of the Travel to Tomorrow project. The stakeholders (entrepreneurs, local residents, organisations and local governments) met to discuss various themes. They searched for ways of shaping the tourism policy of the future together. The outcome was a new strategic plan for tourism in the Kempen (2020-2025), based on the Travel to Tomorrow principles.



As Kempen region worker, Wendy Carnier lives, works and breathes the region. She thinks Travel to Tomorrow means continuously striking a balance. "Initially it was all about sharing knowledge. Then we were challenged to set to work with the various conceptual models in the workshops. At times it all sounded very vague and woolly, but this all changed once we started to use the impactful travel experience model of VISITFLANDERS

The starting premise was a balanced interaction between three elements: the place, the encounters and the experiences. Based on this, we will invest in ways of enhancing this Kempen feeling (the proud Kempenaar), the DNA, the unicity and the connection of and with the Kempen region", Wendy explains.

### That Kempen feeling as a guideline

"An experience that is not in sync with the place's identity, such as a noisy laser shooting party or paintball activity in an unspoiled nature area is not the kind of impactful travel experience that we have in mind. Hospitable initiators in De Kempen, who organise a yoga session or a hike in the same location that makes you feel relaxed as a visitor create an impactful experience", according to Wendy. "We decided to assign a prominent role to this Kempen pride in our strategic plan. Although the people of the Kempen are traditionally modest, they can be quite proud of their region and there is a general sense of belonging. Tourism is the perfect way to highlight this even more. It enhances both the visitor's experience and the well-being of the local population."



"In our plan for the tourism of the future, we determine the types of places, activities and encounters that help shape an exciting holiday experience in the Kempen. Based on these 'KempenChoices', the Kempen regional team earmarked ten strategic projects for the region's further development as a tourism region. They must attract visitors and let them experience the core story of the Kempen. For its implementation, the region is relying on the interaction between the efforts of Team Kempen and other partners.

### Coaching and cooperation

"At Team Kempen, we find it important to give every initiative – however small – the necessary opportunities and space. We do this by giving organisations the option to submit a grant application. We don't expect candidates to submit a fully-developed project. All they need to do is sketch the project and present it to us. If it ties in with our plans, we launch a collaboration, which is overseen by a regional employee of Team Kempen, who gives

feedback and writes up a report. Based on this, the group or person behind the idea can set to work to draw up and submit a grant application. We try to give the applicant(s) targeted advice to ensure that the idea ties in with our plans. This creates a win-win situation: by taking the advice into account, the applicant increases his chances of getting the grant. And we receive proposals that are better tailored to our vision. The developed project thus has a positive impact on visitors, the locals, the entrepreneurs and the place.

"Ever since we started to apply the Travel to Tomorrow principles, we have noticed a new approach in our own plans. But our tourism partners and policy-makers also changed track. Previously the main objective of tourism seemed to be economic growth. Nowadays we see the positive financial return as a logical consequence of tourism. The policy is now geared towards a more balanced form of tourism, of which the locals, the entrepreneurs and visitors reap the rewards", Wendy concludes.

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## AN EXAMPLE OF SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION:

### The hidden urban garden in Turnhout

"The owner of Café Chaos in Turnhout loves her city. Behind her café was some undeveloped land which she wanted to turn into a public garden. She submitted a grant application for the works", Wendy explains. "Together, we developed the idea and the result is a garden that is open to everyone, a verdant place to relax in the heart of the city with typical Kempen plants and animals. For the maintenance we rely on social employment. It is also a place where you can join a workshop or simply enjoy yourself without having to order a drink. It is a good example of how the initiative, thanks to open collaboration, has become a project that gives added value for visitors, the locals and the entrepreneur".

### Tongerlo Abbey: striking a balance

A place often has different owners, users and stakeholders. Tongerlo Abbey is one such example. That is why they are working on a new reception and access plan that strikes to achieve a balance between the (resident) religious community, the village residents that regularly pass by the abbey, the entrepreneurs that are based there and the visitors that want to experience the tourism or heritage value. The identity of the place has a different meaning for each of these groups, is experienced differently and must consequently be given different interpretations.



## ORGANISE A FUTURE-PROOF CONFERENCE

In these pandemic times we must dare to look ahead at the future. However looking ahead can be quite difficult when your conference has just been cancelled due to the COVID-19 measures. How can you interest people in a (video) conference, without any physical contact? The VISITFLANDERS Convention Bureau has all the answers.

### 'Live' meetings will continue to be important

Conferences, meetings and events will not become obsolete. On the contrary. The convention bureau of VISITFLANDERS has been capitalising on this for quite some time already. In the past three years, it has successfully invested in attracting international conferences with a link to the economic growth industries of Flanders or with our tourism assets.

### Travel to Tomorrow during your conference

Travel to Tomorrow marks the start of a new chapter. Now the time has come to transpose this to the conference industry. The idea is not to attract every small or large conference to Flanders, but to focus on qualitative conferences. Conferences that are a match with our strong growth sectors and our knowledge and expertise centres, in addition to the Flemish assets, for which we have earned international recognition. These include cycling, fine dining and heritage. We want to screen conferences that can serve as a catalyst for strengthening the priorities of local and regional policy. The conference is a means, rather than the end goal.

### Positive impact in the long term

We prefer international conferences that can let our destination flourish, because they have a positive impact in the long term, also known as a legacy. We do this with governments, professional associations, expert groups, networks, knowledge and research centres, universities and sectoral organisations. But where to start? What does this legacy mean and what exactly do you want to achieve with your conference? What is the role of entrepreneurs and locals in these conferences? How can they mutually influence each other?

### Becoming future-proof

VISITFLANDERS wants to prepare the industry and partners for the future, with its convention bureau. Flanders needs to become a future-proof destination. So the key message is to invest in the right conferences, with widespread support.

### Why are conferences important for a flourishing destination??

A conference brings experts together, facilitates knowledge development, contributes to the reputation of the organisers, the university, the city or the region. It enriches the visitors/



participant, the entrepreneurs and the local in various respects. But that is not enough. We need another approach to develop conferences with a legacy.

### The 'Conferences and Legacy Expedition' project

The 'Conferences and Legacy Expedition' has two objectives. Firstly to develop a policy with a definition, a vision and a collective ambition. Secondly, to develop a handy guideline for the organisation and evaluation of a conference with a legacy.

In this context, a bottom-up, practice-oriented process was launched – despite the coronavirus pandemic, whereby experts from very different sectors set to work – in a co-creative way, with their own conference.

During a video consultation in April 2020, the participants examined specifically how to create a positive impact with a conference: on the locals, entrepreneurs, conference participants and on the place where you meet. This gave rise to ambitious plans and proposals.

### The main take-aways

- 1/ The 'growth' principle is not always associated with 'more'. Conferences can also grow and evolve in different ways. Hybrid formats are a good example of this.
- 2/ The subject of the conference and the city's values must match. This increases the involvement of entrepreneurs, as well as of the local population.
- 3/ Planning and cooperating with different partners and stakeholders is necessary to ensure your conference is a success. The local authorities play a key role in this.

## MUSIC, SPORTS AND POLITICS AT A CONFERENCE FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

In May 2021, the European Academy of Childhood Disability (EACD) will be organising its 33rd conference in Bruges, on the theme of *Composing a new symphony - Challenging times, new collaborations*. EACD members from around the world, as well as speech therapists, nurses, doctors, surgeons and families attend this four-day conference.



The EACD unites European professionals who work with children with a disability such as paediatricians, neuropaediatricians, physiotherapists, ergotherapists, speech therapists, psychologists, nurses, social workers and teachers. The EACD promotes research and supports training for the good and effective treatment of children and adolescents with disabilities.

The organisation wants to develop a positive impact in the long term (or legacy) for children and adults with a disability. To this end, the Local Organising Committee (LOC), led by Professor Elegast Monbaliu (KU Leuven) and Professor Bernard Dan (ULB and KU Leuven) is taking action on three levels.

Firstly the committee wants to compose a symphony (in the figurative sense) with all the stakeholders involved, bringing about real change in the lives of the EACD community at large. The conference opens with a concert. It will have taken 1.5 years of preparation, under the supervision of Dirk Lievens, to get to this point. Lievens is the director of the Municipal Academy for Music, Recitation and Dance in Roeselare. Under his baton, the EACD 2021, the MiraLouise Fund and the Concertgebouw in Bruges will bring together children with and without disabilities, who would not engage with each other otherwise. The children will spend one year rehearsing, together with schools, choirs and orchestras from the region, culminating in the concert in the Concertgebouw on Wednesday 26 May 2021. The organisers hope that this will be the start



of a long-term collaboration and a new musical boost in the region.

Secondly, there is the political aspect. Herman Van Rompuy, the former President of the European Council, will be one of the keynote speakers.

Participants can follow the *Workshop on Disability Policies*, whereby participants search for solutions to improve and increase the quality of life of children and adults with disabilities at the European level.

Thirdly, the conference ends with a **sports day**, on Saturday 29 May 2021. Children with disabilities, their family, trainers, therapists, teachers, researchers and many other sympathisers: everyone is welcome to attend this sporty closing event. New and familiar sports for children with disabilities will be offered: there are plenty of opportunities for try-out, professional friendlies and practice-oriented talks. Here, too, the organisers aim to bring people together and inspire them for the future.

The conference wants to make a difference, both at the local and the international level. Besides targeting the European community, the EACD also welcomes many colleagues from other continents. A large delegation from North America, Asia and Oceania always attended previous EACD conferences. During the pandemic, travel has become a lot less evident. EACD 2021 is therefore working with the available technology to turn this conference into the conference of the future. It will be a **completely hybrid event**, with offline and online participants attending the sessions and social events. In short, a conference by everyone for everyone.

## Entrepreneurs and tourism

**How to run a (tourism) business in the future? If we walk away from business as usual, then what does the future look like? How do we go about things 'differently'? Just a few critical questions that we raised in the context of the 'Tourism Transforms' research process. A process that involved many other Flemish entrepreneurs and during which 'Travel to Tomorrow' developed into our vision for the future. These questions became more relevant following the pandemic.**

Travel to Tomorrow examined three different possibilities, illustrating them with relevant examples. The emphasis is on local, ecological and hospitable entrepreneurship in the tourism industry.



Producers and consumers are quite close to each other in a local economy: they form a short chain. Unizo provides support for this trend with the 'Winkelhieren' campaign. It ties in nicely with the Travel to Tomorrow concept of the flourishing places. This inspires care for the environment. Sustainability and diversity are themes that entrepreneurs do worry about.

An eco-label for travel? Why not? It's all very well to do business and define policies, but you need to show a warm heart when it comes to tourism. Hospitality is a big priority for anyone who receives guests. What does this mean? We exclude no one! Hospitality, ecological entrepreneurship and inclusion go hand in hand.

Danny Van Assche, Managing Director of Unizo

### THE SHORT CHAIN CAN ONLY BE PROFITABLE

**Danny Van Assche is the Managing Director of Unizo, the federation of self-employed entrepreneurs, and previously worked for Horeca Vlaanderen, the federation of hospitality entrepreneurs. So he knows the field and all its concerns very well. "I resolutely argue in favour of own companies and for an extension of the short chain. Raising awareness is extremely important."**

A short chain refers to the shortest possible route between the producer and the consumer, with as few middlemen as possible. The method is already gaining ground in the food industry and has many advantages.

Van Assche enumerates them: "First there is the climate. The longer the chain, the more transport you need and the greater the environmental pressure. Secondly, the company's own control and security of supply are also very important. Long chains result in economic dependence.

*"When a product becomes evident, and everyone goes there continuously, attention tends to flag. We must continue to invest in qualitative and interesting tourism"*




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*“To get rid of unauthorised mass tourism, you need to get creative”*

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Not being self-sufficient is detrimental. Thirdly, the short chain generates added value on the purely economic level because you keep employment and the taxes that are levied in your own country. You ensure that they are settled correctly. I am convinced that local consumption is equal to more authenticity, creativity, better service and more experience. And finally, a last benefit that many people tend to overlook: local entrepreneurs spend an average of 2,000 euros a year every year, sponsoring local associations, schools or sports clubs. So in that sense, you get back a lot of what you buy here.”

“This does not alter the fact that we want to continue to be an open economy, in which international trade can also flourish. But I find the fact that 5.5 billion euros of turnover in e-commerce is going to international companies a great shame”, says Van Assche. Unizo is fighting against this, in a positive way.

### **Winkelhieren**

In 2019, ‘winkelhieren’ (shop local) was voted the word of the year. Unizo’s campaign, which promoted shopping close to home, with local traders, had a lot to do with it. Van Assche: “Shop local means so much more than just shopping. It refers to local or domestic consumption. It means buying products and services from local entrepreneurs. So it is not diametrically opposed to e-commerce. We do want to raise consumers’ awareness about the consequences of choosing the cheapest product from an international supplier. This means less employment and income from taxes, in addition to vacancy on the high street and an attack on the environment.”

“We don’t consume less, but we buy more abroad. This results in enormous competition for our entrepreneurs and also has a major impact on our city centres. If the vacancy rate increases, your village centre becomes attractive. This chain is detrimental.” Shopping local therefore promotes tourism, especially if you follow the philosophy of Travel to Tomorrow.

### **Tourism as a pioneer**

“The debate on local consumption also applies to tourism”, says Van Assche. “There’s no need to worry about quality. Our tourism offering is wide-ranging. But we must continue to challenge ourselves. Because when a product is taken for granted and everyone goes there continuously, attention tends to flag.

We must continue to invest in qualitative and interesting tourism. This is already the case in several places. One example that comes to mind is ZOO Antwerpen and ZOO Planckendael. Both these zoos are continually investing to make the experience more attractive while guaranteeing animal welfare.”

“The tourism industry has already experienced many waves of change, while other industries are just getting started. Tourism for example invested

in digitisation very early on. Many online booking and review systems were developed in this specific context. Everyone now uses them. Online ticketing is quite well-established and is a great way of avoiding crowds. It helps limit the costs or risk and guarantee quality”, says Van Assche.

### **Sufficient margin and structure needed**

Getting entrepreneurs to endorse the new vision of Travel to Tomorrow – in which tourism is not an end in itself but a means for improvement for all the parties involved – is not that difficult, according to Van Assche. As long as you tell a clear story and the entrepreneurs can achieve acceptable margins. “But entrepreneurs don’t like to be told how to do things,” Van Assche cautions. “They like to take the initiative themselves, but that is what entrepreneurs inherently do.”

“You must remember, however, that when a product becomes more exclusive it also generates a higher price. If you limit the number of customers, the revenue per customer must be higher. Let’s take an extreme example: the Galapagos in the Pacific Ocean. The number of tourists has been strongly curtailed to protect the nature on the islands from destruction. This exclusivity means that prices are very high, that only the happy few can still get to these islands. This is completely at odds with our ambition to ensure that everyone can go on holiday.”

“To get rid of unauthorised mass tourism you need to get creative. Often entrepreneurs are more progressive than the government and quicker to come up with something. They generally also like to contribute to a circular economy, although it must always be a profitable undertaking. Entrepreneurs want clear regulations, objectives and sufficient time. This needs to be done gradually, in a way that does not cause financial difficulties for them. Entrepreneurs in the tourism industry also want to think about the future in this way.”

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*“We need to curb the number of cars in tourist areas, but on one important condition: that there is a reliable alternative”*

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### **Cars reign supreme**

Van Assche: “The government must develop a structure but it must also invest in it. The mobility issue is a huge problem. Including for tourism. Because tourists need to get to their destination to enable tourism. This also keeps entrepreneurs awake at night. That is why we are calling on cities and towns to develop their circulation plans in consultation with local entrepreneurs, instead of going for a pure top-down approach. You need people’s support for this. Entrepreneurs know their customers and their surroundings better than anyone else. They can thus play a very important role in this. Entrepreneurs, however, all too often tend to allow customers to drive from door to door. This model is untenable in the long run. We need to curb the number of cars in tourist areas, but on one important condition: that there is a reliable alternative. And currently this is not the case. Entrepreneurs are definitely willing to think about ways of increasing sustainability and reducing overconsumption. Ultimately this concerns them too.”

## #Aalstaanmijligt... koop ik hier (If it were up to me, I'd buy here, in Aalst)

### A PERSONAL APPROACH IS THE DECISIVE FACTOR

Tina Daem could have never surmised that her quest for a unique children's shoe for her daughter would have led to the opening of her own shop. Eight years on, she is a successful entrepreneur in Aalst and the surrounding region. Besides the children's clothes shop Anna Pops, she also has two flats where she welcomes guests who are interested in exploring Aalst. But her most remarkable initiative, which she launched in 2016, is 'Aalstaanmijligt'.



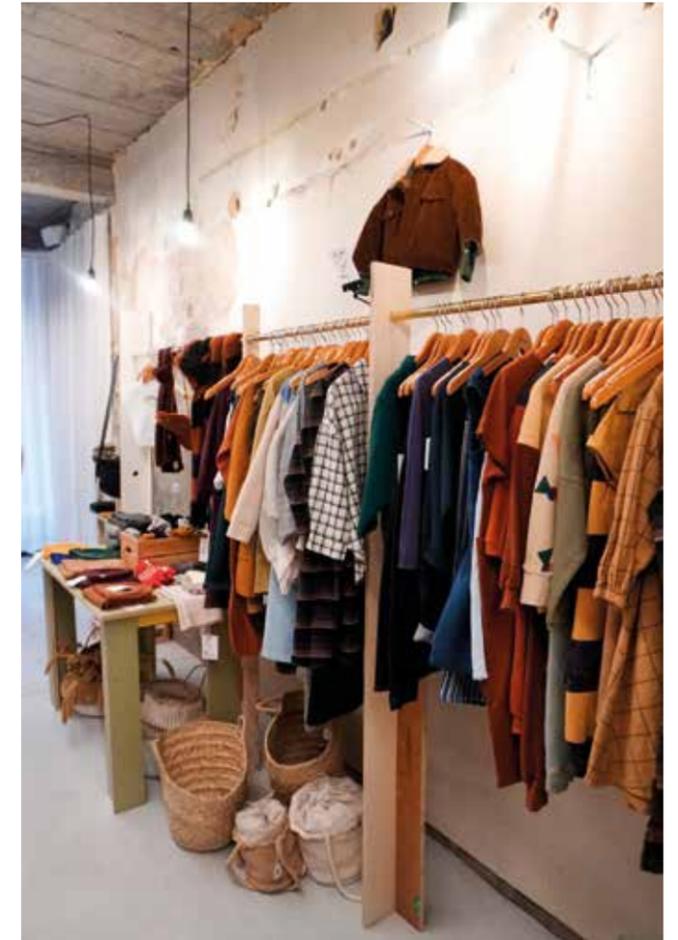
With Aalstaanmijligt, Tina wants to highlight the importance of local shopping and get her fellow entrepreneurs on board. Visitors are introduced to Aalst's entrepreneurs thanks to a handy city map which lists all the traders and catering businesses with a personal approach. "As the route features stylish and personal things that are typical of this city, we can offer visitors and locals alike an inspiring experience. In this way Aalst becomes a place that offers added value, where proud 'Oilsjter' entrepreneurs welcome everyone in a personal and hospitable way", says Tina enthusiastically. "The map is available for free in all the participating shops or pubs and restaurants. That is how we join forces."

This project shows that visitors and entrepreneurs from all kinds of sectors make the place where they work into what it is together. And that a bottom-up initiative can be a success. Tina Daem: "I am absolutely convinced that local entrepreneurs offer added value with their personal service and offering. You can make the difference by offering an all-in experience. We must highlight this added value to consumers, so that they also are aware of it."



### Sustainability put into practice

In addition to all things local, Tina also swears by doing things sustainably. "We only sell sustainable fashion in our shop. We search for qualitative items, adding our own distinctive Anna Pops touch before we sell them", she says. She also chose eco-proof solutions for the interior. The Anna Pops shop originally had an interior that was sourced from the recycling shop. For the last renovation, she collaborated with Onbetaalbaar, a Ghent-based makers collective that works with discarded materials. They designed and built furniture with shelves from old cupboards, especially for the shop. Her most recent project is called Repops, an initiative for reusing quality clothing. "Children grow very quickly. Parents end up buying a lot



of clothes as a result. The production, transport and limited lifespan of these clothes have a major impact on the environment. I want to counter this by selling a selection of good quality second-hand clothing. The seller receives fifty percent of the sales amount in the form of a voucher", Tina concludes.

## Axel Smits, Chairman & Senior Partner at PwC

### TRY TO OFFER SOMETHING OUT OF THE ORDINARY

Due to the corona crisis, we are confronted with themes such as flexible working, changed mobility and local embedding. A lot of things are changing very suddenly. Can we retain a positive impact and extend it in tourism? “The main thing is to achieve a balance between the experience, sustainability and profit”, says Axel Smits. “A little more chauvinism would be more than welcome.” Smits is the Chairman & Senior Partner at PwC Belgium. PwC is an international company that specialises in quality audit, tax and consultancy services. Smits shares a few useful tips.



#### 1 / Buffers are crucial

A lot of this has to do with our economic model in tourism, which often focuses on high volumes and low margins, meaning you cannot build up buffers or reserves. When this volume suddenly drops, smaller players find themselves in troubled waters.

A policy that imposes regulations may offer a solution, e.g., by limiting the number of permits. Replacing quantity with quality also probably means charging slightly higher prices. These could possibly generate the necessary buffers, so focussing less on volume and more on quality, on sustainability.

#### 2 / It can be a little more expensive

Smits doesn't think that adapting the pricing would be a problem. International tourists often find Belgium to be cheap. You won't deter these tourists from coming by charging a little more for a hotel room, for example. But charging tax without offering added value won't work. This applies to the entire hospitality industry: if you offer more of an experience, you can also justify higher prices.



#### 3 / Stimulate chauvinism

Local shopping, staycations... this requires a certain form of chauvinism. The Flemish are not that good at this. As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, people are more inclined to choose the 'local' option at the moment.

Let's keep this up and strengthen this sentiment. The temporary restrictions on foreign travel will also strengthen local tourism.

#### 4 / Invest in online

In terms of e-commerce, many of our traders have unfortunately missed the boat and foreign players have succeeded in bagging a large market share. During the pandemic, they saw online sales boom. We have to catch up. Local sentiment can certainly help.

#### 5 / Try to touch people

Strong e-commerce players are good at creating a singular, strong experience. Because other than that their offering is comparable and the pricing is transparent. So the idea is to offer something singular, something that moves people. Anyone who has been somewhere must love it, so that he or she shares that experience on social media. Then you've scored.

## Rik Vera, co-founder nexxworks

### RESOLUTELY GO FOR THE NEW NORMAL

Rik Vera is an opinion leader and an internationally sought-after keynote speaker with more than twenty years of experience in sales, marketing and innovation. Together with his business partners, he founded nexxworks, which inspires companies to innovate radically, remain relevant and stay alert for The Day After Tomorrow. Or rather, for The Day After COVID-19, because he has a clear opinion on this. What does the new normal mean for tourism and what are Vera's thoughts on the industry's future?

"COVID-19 has dramatically changed the way we live and do business in a short space of time. How long will this pandemic last? We have no idea. There is a lot of talk about an exit strategy. Using this word reinforces the feeling that we are in a prison from which we need to escape. Moreover, this exit implies a return to the old normal, and I don't think that's a good idea", Vera explains. "I find it encouraging when I look at how the population and many business leaders have used the past period to do things differently and to be inventive. Creativity, in combination with knowledge and skills, strength and resilience, is a powerful recipe for the future."

*"Instead of thinking of trips to explore Flanders as a necessary evil, we need to evolve towards: 'Wow, I discovered this and that and it's also close to home'"*

#### Look at it from the positive side

"We have experienced first-hand that things can be done differently. Take remote working. During the lockdown, millions of square metres of offices remain empty. I see this as a positive development: they do not need to be lit, heated or cooled. Thousands of kilometres of asphalt remain unused. The roads don't wear out, people don't lose valuable time in traffic jams and together we emit much less CO2. In other words, we all stand to benefit from this. And yet companies are more productive, faster and more efficient than ever before. Why on earth would we want to go back to the old normal? Concepts such as part-time work and the number of hours in a working day and a working week suddenly seem completely outdated. Control has been replaced by trust, which feels good."

"I think that we all knew that our economic ecosystem, which is founded on endless growth, would not be feasible in the long term. The signs were already there – even from very old-fashioned clubs and from CEOs – that we needed to think about a different economic model, one that strives for a different value creation. We now really have to grasp, secure, enlarge and link these signals with each other. Together with everyone who believes in this."

#### Relying on your own customers

"We should mainly focus on the combination of online and offline. These are not two separate worlds: the strength lies in a combination of the two. Companies such as Airbnb, Uber and Facebook were very smart when they started up. Their quality controllers were actually their users. That's the trick: getting a lot of people to do the job for you without being officially employed. Word of mouth is the best sales and marketing department you can have, and it costs nothing. Perhaps traders, shopkeepers and the tourist industry can also apply this. Instead of doing everything yourself for consumers, you can integrate them in your project, as a partner. This is the kind of creativity I hope to see more of."

"We can introduce a different type of travel to people in a pleasant, positive, emotional, connecting, and committed way. Searching for a few hired influencers will not be sufficient for promoting a holiday. It is much more impactful if your neighbour tells you, full of enthusiasm: 'I've been there. It was really amazing, you should go with your children.' Why do some people go all the way to the Caribbean? Not so much for themselves but mainly to impress people who haven't been there yet. We need to start doing this with our own regions. Instead of thinking of trips to explore Flanders as a necessary evil, we need to evolve towards: "Wow, I discovered this and that and it's close to home too. I don't, have to get on a plane, my travel doesn't have an environmental impact and I support our own economy!" I would really like to see more of that positive vibe here."

#### An eco-label for travel

"When you buy a new fridge, it has to meet a number of standards. You can see how much your fridge consumes, based on whether it has an A/B/C/D/E label. This regulation also exists for many other products, e.g. on supermarket shelves. Why not apply it to trips? Imagine if you were to see the potential impact as well as the



price of your trip on the planet, then you might think twice before booking. The government already taxes the CO2 emissions of our cars – we have now accepted this. Why can't we tax the kind of trips that people book? Because, ultimately, they have the same impact as cars. If you book an A trip, you won't have to pay a surcharge. Just like with a green car. 'Taxation' is a contaminated word, it essentially means that you contribute to your country's well-being.

#### Customer focus

Thanks to COVID-19, there is no denying that the future is thundering towards us. So what does this mean for a company? What does this mean for people who do business? "The answer is simple, there's nothing new about it. Extreme customer focus is a must, more than ever. Connecting with many people and involving individuals will be more important ever. It is a matter of survival. Freezing companies in a temporary coma is a very bad idea. There was never a better time to make companies future-proof. Compare it with the extinction of dinosaurs. They could not be brought back to life either, right?"

## Center Parcs Europe

### WORKING WITH THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDG'S)

“Sustainability and social commitment are engrained in our DNA”, says Vera Geebelen, CSR manager at Center Parcs Europe. “They constitute the roots of our organisation, since the first initiatives of our founder Piet Derksen. Our holiday parks are situated in nature areas that largely consist of forests and lakes and are designed to restore the relationship between people and nature.” In 2020, Center Parcs obtained the Green Key eco label. For several years now, the group has also been committed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations.

In September 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were formally adopted by the UN General Assembly. Over the next fifteen years – so until 2030 – 17 SDGs, linked to 169 targets, will serve as an action plan for sustainable development with a focus on economic, social and ecological aspects.

The goals provide a suitable structure for anyone who wants to contribute to a world with less poverty, more equality and care for the planet. You don't have to be a big player to do this. Even a small company or an individual can be inspired by it and register an initiative. Center Parcs Europe is also joining in.

#### First step

In 2017, the Center Parcs Europe group created its CSR or Corporate Social Responsibility Department. This department is tasked with overseeing all the group's CSR activities. Vera Geebelen: “The integration of all of our CSR activities in one department was a very important step. As a company, you show that you find CSR important by doing this and that you want to take on your social role, embed it in your company and make it part of your strategy. In so doing, we made a statement. And a policy statement is the concrete manifestation of this. This declaration is signed by management and all the stakeholders are involved in it.



#### Green targets

To restore, protect and enrich nature, Center Parcs set itself a series of green targets. In 2020, all its parks obtained the Green Key label, which must be earned again every year. These are the awarded ISO 14001 and 50001 certificates, quality management systems that are aimed at continuous improvement. By 2022, each park will also have its own biodiversity plan. The group aims to reduce CO2 emissions by a quarter by then, in addition to sorting 60 percent of the waste stream. Energy consumption must decrease by 25 percent and green energy must increase by sixty percent. Water consumption will also fall by at least a quarter, among others through water purification. The green targets are extended to the purchasing policy of, for example, maintenance products and materials for furnishing the parks' overnight accommodations. In each park, the protection of endangered plant species and special animals also plays a central role. The green parks are home to a wide range of biodiversity. Consequently, respect for the land, plants and animals is a priority.

“The SDGs, Green Key and ISO provide us with an integrated compass for defining our sustainable and socially responsible entrepreneurship. Every year, we also perform far-reaching audits as part of this effort”, Geebelen explains.

#### Doing good

Besides responsibility for the natural environment, Center Parcs Europe also cares for people – its guests, employees and the community. This is done by building partnerships with organisations that pay attention to vulnerable people and with initiators who build bridges between people and nature. As an employer, the group wants to involve all its staff in the sustainability objectives. Thanks to continuous attention to training, internal communication and initiatives such as participation in the World Clean Up Day, awareness about sustainability is deeply rooted in the organisation.



## Marc Colpaert, cultural philosopher

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### **HOSPITALITY MUST BE AUTHENTIC**

The concept of “hospitality” is the cornerstone of tourism. But what does hospitality really mean? How hospitable are we? How can we know or measure this? And should we do better or do things differently? Cultural philosopher Marc Colpaert is a co-founder and former teacher at CIMIC, the Centre for Intercultural Management and International Communication (Thomas More, Mechelen). “Hospitality is all about giving, unconditional giving”, he claims.

“*Gastvrijheid*, the Dutch word for hospitality, literally means giving your ‘guests’ the ‘freedom’. Does this sound utopian? The word hospitality becomes even more interesting when you translate it”, Marc Colpaert tells us. “In German hospitality translates as *Gastfreundschaft*, with an emphasis on friendship. The French call it *hospitalité*, like the English. In these languages, the emphasis is on ‘host’ and on ‘ability’. So the word infers freedom, friendship and the ability to receive guests and therefore also a responsibility. It’s a good mix.”

“The French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas emphasises ‘the other’ in this discourse. You do everything you can, based on your uniqueness, for this other. Everyone may have different ideas about what this involves, but according to Levinas, hospitality means ‘giving unconditionally’. In their encounter, the host and the guest build a bridge to overcome their differences”, Colpaert says, elaborating on the concept.

### **Unique and authentic**

“Hospitality is part of your personality. You give something of yourself to the other. So don’t try to

copy others because then it becomes a technique, a trick. Guests have a finely-tuned antenna for this, they see through this in no time at all. Hospitality only really works when it is genuine or authentic, the trendy word that we like to use for this nowadays”, Colpaert laughs. “I consider this authenticity to be a strength. You allow the guest, who in effect is always an unexpected factor, to penetrate your vulnerability. This is a vital aspect of the relationship, which must always be balanced. The host temporarily relinquishes a position of power to facilitate an open encounter.”

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*“Hospitality is part of your personality. You give something of yourself to the other. So don’t try to copy others because then it becomes a technique, a trick ”*

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*“True hospitality and excessive consumer behaviour are probably impossible to reconcile with each other”*

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How long must this hospitality last? Is it undefined in time? “It depends on where you are received. In a museum you are welcome until closing time, but you will not be able to spend the night there. An African family will welcome you for a maximum of three weeks. In India this drops to a day because the residents simply cannot afford to feed you for more than a day.”

#### **Tourists are pilgrims**

“Unconditional does mean that in principle you don’t want anything back for your hospitality. You don’t expect anything in return”, Colpaert continues. But does this mean that you should just give everything away for free? “Think of tourism as a form of pilgrimage. It calls on people to be there for someone in need. In that sense, tourism implies that someone sets out to look for something, often without knowing what. This also means that you need a host/hostess who can assist the tourist with his or her hospitality. This comparison demonstrates the vulnerability of the one party and the fact that the other party relinquishes his/her dominant position, which I referred to earlier.”

Colpaert: “When the relationship is balanced and founded on authenticity, then your guest’s satisfaction can be a nice result but this does not necessarily have to be the case. Actually something more essential has happened here. As soon as the traveller no longer feels like a stranger to the other – or the traveller no longer feels that way – recognition and respect develops. Both parties can then discover that *plus est en moi* and start to grow. One no longer reduces the other to a prejudice”, Colpaert continues his reasoning. “In this philosophy, the guest no

longer is the demanding person who has paid to be ‘pampered’, but the recipient of something completely different, something that runs much deeper.”

“That said, this reciprocity is not necessary. Levinas elaborates on the asymmetry of this relationship. By this he means that the encounter is not by definition founded on simultaneity. You can both be affected by it, but it is never compulsory”, says Colpaert. “This idea is also contained in the word ‘unconditional’.

#### **Not a market product**

“We need to think about the extent to which the ‘market’ permits true hospitality. The deeper aspect of the concept of hospitality raises questions about an economy that makes tourists pay for a ‘product’. In an ideal situation, what do guests and hosts want to give and get from each other? And how much should this cost? The quest for the essence of hospitality in tourism has only just begun. True hospitality and excessive consumer behaviour are probably impossible to reconcile. But the guest may also be challenged. Are the desires and the things he takes for granted necessary? What does he actually expect from his trip and is it realistic?” These questions launch a new discussion.

#### **Important questions for tourism**

Can we, tourism players, assist our guests on their pilgrimage to find themselves? “This can be achieved through art, for example, or with a memorable concert. But every encounter and conversation also matters. Tourism, the industry par excellence in which hospitality is the essence, can play an important role in these strange times. Because what we do is welcome guests who are different from ourselves. And dealing with everyone’s otherness is one of the major challenges that we face as a world population because we share responsibility for the earth and humanity. During the encounter between the guest and host, we learn to communicate with each other as connected people”, Colpaert concludes.

## Holiday cottages in Riemst

### MUCH MORE THAN JUST ACCOMMODATION

Hostess Geert Goffin discovered how nice it is to stay in a real house after a home swap in Denmark. She set out to create the same intimate atmosphere in her three holiday homes in Riemst. Guests immediately feel at home there. On her 'gast-vrij' blog, she shares tips for a fun stay.



Geert is not new to the tourism industry. The emphasis in her holiday cottages – StroEnzo, VillaEnzo and ZussEnzo – is on the use of natural materials. “After a few years, I decided to implement some innovations and highlight the thing that all three locations have in common”, she says. “Thanks to a grant from Visit Limburg, I was involved in a professionalisation project. I was assigned a growth coach for this. Together with a communications expert, we determined that the hygge philosophy and the homely atmosphere were the main assets of our accommodation. In Denmark, hygge (pronounced: hoo-gah) translates as cosiness, but there is more to it than warm lighting and candles. It has become part of the Danish national character. I like to share this philosophy through the 'gast-vrij' website and our social media, which receive a lot of attention”, says Geert.

### Warm welcome

The Learning Network Travel to Tomorrow is happy to assist anyone, regardless of your role in the tourism industry. Geert Goffin is the perfect example of this. As a 'small player' in the tourism industry, she was invited to share her ideas with department heads and directors. “That’s where I got the idea of taking a different approach to the welcome pack in our holiday homes”, she says. “When they check in, guests receive four cards, each with a question and an inspiring quote. Each card leads to a different room in the house. Guests thus get to know their temporary home in an original way. In the last room they find the welcome pack with all kinds of tips for activities in the region and a candle that they can light together.”

### Local network

“I also started thinking about ways of collaborating with local partners to have them offer welcoming extras, like a babysitting service, a chef, a dog sitter, a breakfast service or a taxi service. These are all local people and suppliers who are a good match with the warm atmosphere that we want to create and share. We have added a link to them on our website, so that guests can arrange everything directly.” The Limburg-based entrepreneur sees many other possibilities. “We can also offer our three holiday homes to corporate clients for retreats, meetings and team buildings. And I’m interested to see whether people want to organise yoga or meditation holidays here. No lack of ideas”, Geert laughs.

“In the meantime, we have also brought various other accommodation providers in Riemst around the table. Our working group meets every two months, together with the department head of Visit Riemst. We look at how we should approach things and try to inspire each other further.”



## Hidrodoe water activity centre in Herentals

### GUEST HAPPINESS IS CONTAGIOUS

“It’s great, I suddenly know a lot of people, I get new ideas and nice things happen”, Hilde De Laet of Hidrodoe in Herentals laughs. In 2017, the interactive water activity park received the Visit Flanders Award for the best family-friendly tourism product. Hilde is now part of the Tourism Transforms process and of the research unit of the Learning Network Everyone Deserves a Holiday. She is now working even harder to facilitate genuine hospitality.

The Hidrodoe educational activity and experience centre, an initiative of Pidpa, the water company of the province of Antwerp, opened in 2003. By experimenting with more than eighty set-ups, visitors, and children especially, can learn more about water. Hilde De Laet is the park’s Visitor Services & Marketing Manager. “The centre was designed to receive everyone”, Hilde emphasises, “including people with a disability or low income households. This is an expression of social sustainability and genuine hospitality. When guests feel that tourism operators take who they are and what they need into account, they relax and open up. That is the perfect starting premise for a great experience in our water activity centre.”

Hospitality seems ‘easy’ as a concept: make things cosy, stick to a small-scale approach, make sure people feel that they are welcome, pay attention to things such as a clear and attractive programme, a clean environment, clear signage. “If hospitality is just a technique, it can never be authentic. People sense this, they can tell when you’re not genuine. Hospitality comes from the heart. You really have to have a passion for it, be happy with the privilege of

being able to welcome guests. A lot of it has to do with a genuine passion to serve. To see what someone needs and to meet their needs”, says Hilde. “Whether you make a child happy with a balloon, give a birthday boy something extra or help someone to wipe up a spilled bottle of Coke: these are all small gestures, but they put people at ease. Just like you would at home when you have friends or family over to visit.”

“It is important that you involve everyone. Make sure that you notice everyone. For example, we always address children or people with a disability directly instead of talking over their heads to their supervisors. This experience of being ‘noticed’ is at the heart of a hospitable practice.”

Hospitality only develops when you pay attention to it day after day. By talking about it a lot with others, it gets opportunities to grow. “If you see a colleague do something nice, tell them that it inspires you. Exchanging hospitable tips and sharing your experiences is important. Jointly determine the content of your hospitality, that works for the employees, the visitors and the organisation itself. Only then will it become engrained in the DNA of your organisation, only then will hospitality lead to guest happiness.”

## Accor hotel group

### ENGAGING WITH THE ENVIRONMENT

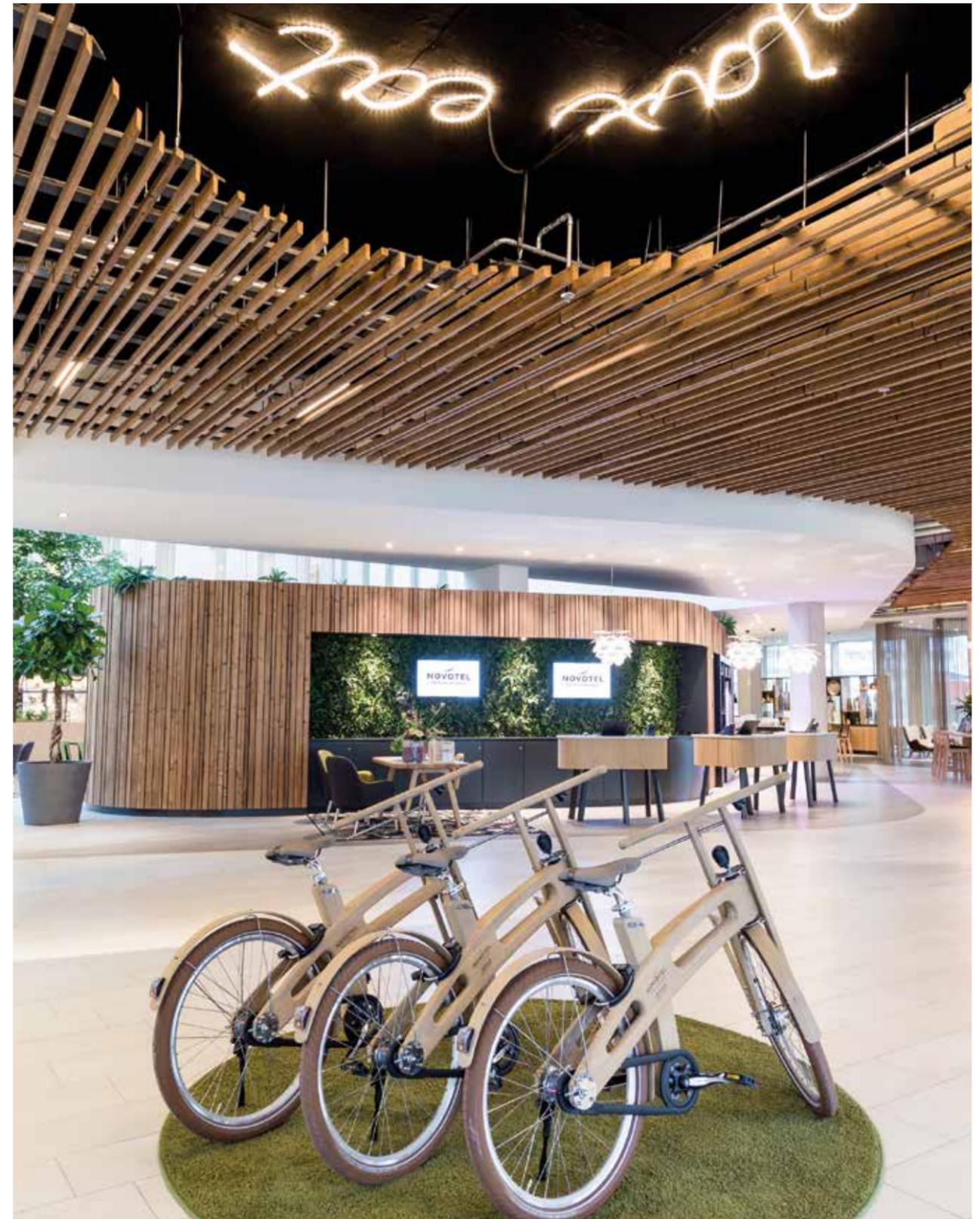
The worldwide Accor hotel group has been focussing on hospitality for over fifty years. Accor has seen the tourism industry and its guests change. While travellers used to primarily base their hotel choice on recognisability and reliability, they are now looking for something different, a unique experience. That is why Accor has adapted the design and services of its hotels and franchisees are given many more options.

The Accor group launched Planet21 in 2012. With this accredited programme, the hotel chain launched four strategic objectives: raising awareness among its employees, engaging with its customers, innovating together with partners and collaborating with local authorities. In addition, the chain also paid more attention to food and buildings. Did you know that some of the Accor hotels introduced rooftop beekeeping? The honey that is produced is then served at breakfast and immediately makes a nice story.

Accor is limiting the ecological footprint of its hotels through various small efforts. The hotels are trying to take up a pioneering role by raising the awareness of the local population, especially in Africa and Asia, and involving them in the operation. In Belgium, the hotels have an agreement with the Too Good To Go app. This distributes leftover meals at discounted rates to

avoid food waste. This benefits the environment and it creates a connection with the environment, because the locals can easily enter the hotel. Some Accor hotels offer concierge services. Locals can drop off their clothes for dry cleaning, collect parcels or book theatre tickets.

Another innovative Accor concept is the 'Mama Shelter'. Old infrastructure in less trendy city districts is re-purposed as a hotel. This transforms an entire neighbourhood into a vibrant place where tourists and locals are welcome. With a lobby that also serves as a co-working space, there is always something going on for both parties. Patrick Maes, General Manager of Novotel Bruges, is very enthusiastic: "By looking at something that you already know from a different perspective, giving fresh ideas a chance and daring to do something that you have never done before, you'll find that there are successful perspectives ahead."



## Travel to Tomorrow? Let's get started!

After the comprehensive Travel to Tomorrow process – culminating in the summit in Bruges in September 2019 – it is clear that many national and international experts as well as people who work in tourism on a daily basis will rally behind the same pre-determined principles. At the end of August 2020, the prestigious American newspaper The New York Times showed, in a contribution entitled “Move over, sustainable travel. Regenerative travel has arrived” that Travel to Tomorrow is garnering national, and even international attention.



This is the essence: Travel to Tomorrow is a process in which a transforming visitor experience originates in a community of people who feel a connection with their place. Tourism professionals consciously look for the soul of a place and the creativity of the community. Conversely, new initiatives by residents who have not (yet) forged ties with tourism operators in their municipality or region are welcomed and supported.

Whether you're the proud owner of a B&B, an avid hiker, oversee tourism policy in your municipality, work as a guide in a museum or have the responsibility for the marketing of a tourist attraction: now is the time to launch the transformation suggested by Travel to Tomorrow. The passion for tourism and hospitality provides a wonderful return for the visitor, the place and the social community.

### HOW TO START?

“What is crucial for making the shift? The connection, the fact that all the people put their heart and soul into it. A passion for your region. The fact that the voice of the place may also be heard, the voice of history, the trees, the nice buildings, the villages, the landscapes. Following a meandering road together and enjoying the fact that you are en route together to innovation. And finally: being very transparent. Doing things together with a good focus, clear agreements and short communication lines”, says Arno Vansichen, facilitator Learning Network Travel to Tomorrow.

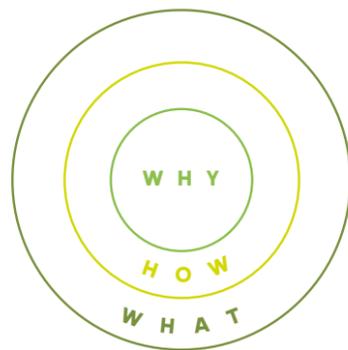
Gervase Bushe, an expert in leadership and organisational development, recommends that each initiator explains and repeats why transformation is necessary. “I see a vision of the future in which people are enthusiastic about participating in many small experiments that fit into that picture. Trying out things implies learning by doing and stimulates the imagination. In a Travel to Tomorrow process locals, entrepreneurs and visitors

have the opportunity to make their voices heard, to collaborate and use their strengths. That is the essence of co-creative work: creating something new together. Co-creation therefore goes further than participation, where stakeholders are allowed to make their voices heard but cannot automatically participate in decisions and their implementation.”

## FROM PASSION TO IDEA IN JUST THREE QUESTIONS

Whether you have a passion for the heritage of the place where you live or do business there, want to help protect the authentic character of the landscape or want to inspire visitors with local traditions: your passion for the place, community and tourism is what drives you. This passion will probably inspire ideas. This can be something specific, such as serving a unique menu with regional products. The concept can also be vaguer, such as involving more locals when welcoming tourists.

Then ask yourself three questions – what? how? why? - as set out in the Golden Circle, a model that was developed by marketing expert Simon Sinek.



The Golden Circle delves deeper into the way of thinking, acting and communicating between the organisation and its target group. The three circles form a simple but powerful model. What, how and why does a certain product or service stand out from other products or services? The usual method for communicating about this is from the outside: what do you offer,

what does it look like, how is it made? That way you can easily reach every customer. Sinek shows, however, that the 'why' question is the most important element in communication. His creed is: Start with why. Travel to Tomorrow also encourages people to start with the 'why' question. The core is 'why', followed by 'how' and "what" as an envelope. With one limitation: the answer to the "why" question cannot simply be: 'to earn money'.

- **Why** do you want to create something in your place, destination, community that will benefit the guest, the entrepreneur, the place and the locals? That is how you formulate your mission.
- **How** could you put this motivation into practice? This is how you formulate the characteristics that are specific to your mission.
- **What** do you do, make or organise? And that is how you create a concrete idea or core theme.

## PUTTING AN IDEA INTO PRACTICE, WITH PEOPLE AND RESOURCES

Based on this reasoning, the idea takes shape and becomes a core theme to work on. Formulate your theme in one sentence, as if you have already implemented it. Express yourself in positive and active terms. This will make everyone curious and give them the energy to participate in it.

Naturally the execution of any idea will take time, money, space, knowledge, permits and information. Make a list of everything and categorise it from indispensable to less important.

Projects by pioneers show that it is important to elaborate on the core theme from the outset and ask yourself the question: who will participate? Els Meersschaert, one of the coaches in the Travel to Tomorrow pilot projects, put it like this: "We found that a top-down approach is not a good idea. Gather anyone who can contribute to your project or has an interest in it around the table from the outset. Rely on a coalition of willingness. At the start, Travel to Tomorrow may sound a little strange to many people, but this gradually changes. Look for a minimum of support and make sure that it can always grow. Don't give too much thought to what you will do but learn while doing it."

Arno Vansichen, facilitator Learning Network Travel to Tomorrow: "I have noticed that local authorities and tourism professionals are often surprised by the potential of the local residents and visitors. This happens when they do not rely solely on their expertise, but also on others

as equal partners. I notice that many operators are afraid of talking to locals. Relinquish this reluctance. It will help to build partnerships in which attractive new things can be created."

A 'who' can be a person, a group, an association, a company or an organisation, but also something else that deserves a voice in the execution of the idea. Think of a place, a local custom, a landscape element, an event. The closer it is to the core message, the greater the estimated influence. That is how you create a stakeholder map.



## BUILDING SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

With a stakeholder map, an initiator can ask himself which people he or she wants to participate in a team of supporters (= mobilise your core team). Who do you need to speak to in order to obtain the necessary support or formal permission (= get a mandate)? And who could help support the idea and make it bigger (= involving the community)?

This creates circles of involvement and answers questions such as:

- Who can contribute ideas, knowledge, expertise, experience, time, a network?
- Who inspires you?
- With whom do you like to work?
- Who will benefit from the idea?
- Who can help finance it?
- Who is working on similar ideas?
- Without whose support or approval does your idea not stand a chance?

Or also, in the negative sense:

- Who would be negatively impacted by this idea?
- From whom can you expect some opposition?
- Who would feel overlooked if you didn't involve him or her in your idea?

The most central circle of people that are involved is that of the core team. These are the people with whom the place keeper would like to work. He inspires and mobilises this team. Together they clearly define the idea and prepare the necessary contacts.

Then you need to consult with people whose support or explicit approval is necessary. They are crucial for getting a mandate. The aim is to listen to the vision of the other and to discover which wishes, ideas or conditions must be taken on board.

When the support and cooperation of many people is needed, meetings in larger groups are organised. The participants link everything that has already been discovered into a bigger story in workshops, thinking days or design days. Ideas to execute the plans are developed in more detail. Additional shoulders gradually support their implementation. Often several (sub)projects are developed, each of which all contribute in their own small way to the implementation of a shared vision for the future.

## APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

You need to use an open system when building involvement and support, in which dialogue and cooperation with others play a central role. To this end, Travel to Tomorrow recommends starting with the theory of the 'Appreciative Inquiry', devised in the 1980s by the American professor David Cooperrider. Its usefulness has now been sufficiently proven. Rather than asking yourself within a group or organisation, 'What is going wrong and how are we going to solve it?', Cooperrider asks the question: 'When did everything go right and how can we achieve this again together?' That way, no negative comments and accusations are raised. Instead you get plenty of positive elements that will give you the energy to get started.

Cooperrider distinguishes four steps to generate this positive energy, the so-called four Ds

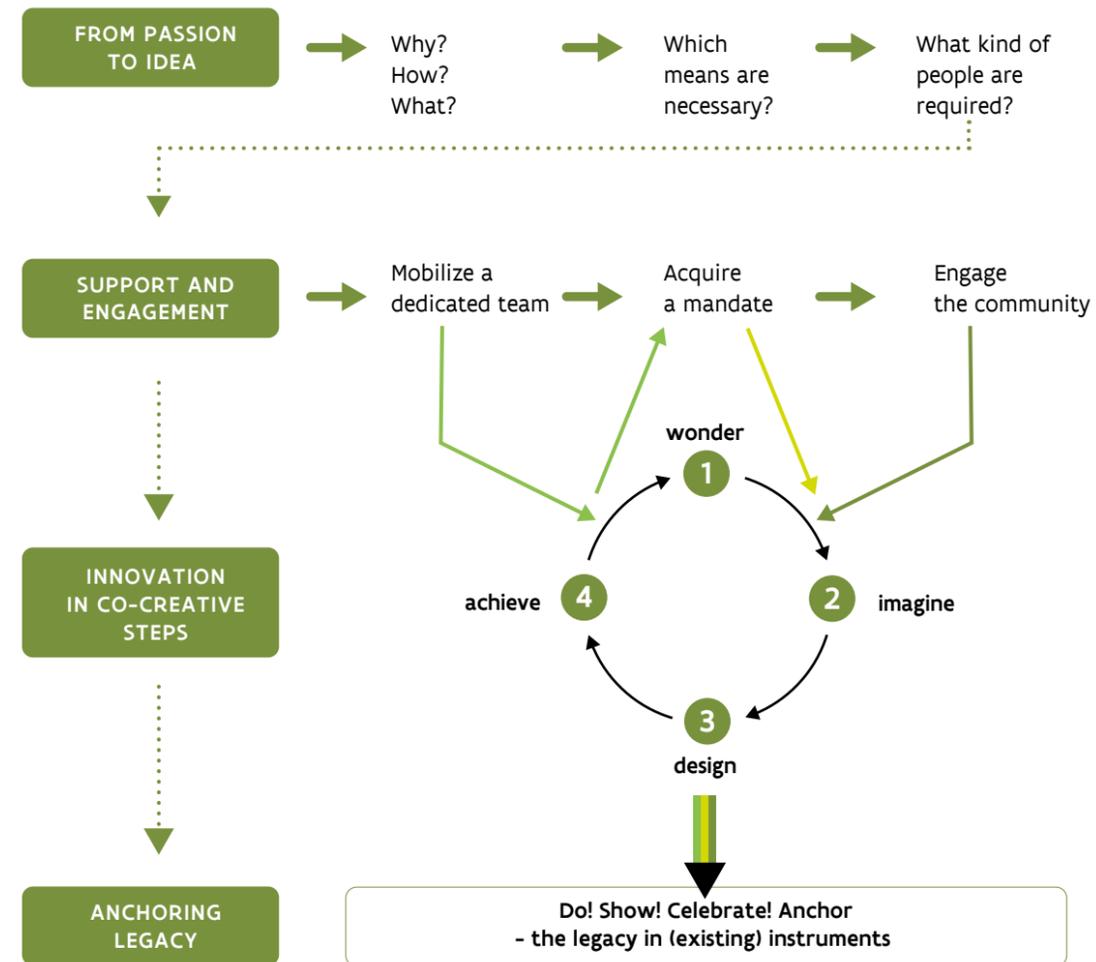
- *Discovery*  
**Wonder**  
Appreciate what is available
- *Dream*  
**Imagination**  
A vision of what is possible
- *Design*  
**Embedding**  
Designing the desired future together
- *Destiny*  
**Achievement**  
Achieving your planning with concrete actions

The core theme inspires the people involved who then walk through the four-step process together, so that new practices grow from already existing strengths. They imagine what is possible and enthusiastically set to work to design and execute the project. This process can be endlessly repeated.

Erik Hennes, regional coordinator of Visit Meetjesland, puts it as follows: "This appreciative approach provides an answer to the question of how we can work with the industry in a different way. Not 'for' the sector, but 'with' the sector. As a tourism expert, you don't suggest the answers under this approach. Instead you ask positive questions. What already went well? What do we want more of? With this we can even discover the wish behind complaints that are voiced and work together. A curious and open question such as 'How would you approach this?' focuses on what is possible."

There are several reasons why the model of appreciative inquiry is convenient to apply. People like to cooperate when they experience that what is already good, is then also seen and selected as part of the continuation of the process. Attractive visions of the future have a stimulating influence and inspire enthusiasm. Open and positive questions draw people into the story. This generates co-ownership, support and a lot of energy that can be bundled in actions. That is the essence of co-creation.

In the pursuit of innovation, a positive focus is much broader and more effective than focus on what is not going well. To fuel innovation you need imagination, which happens more easily when people feel relaxed around each other and realise that every voice counts. Change works best when 'gamified': devise something, try it out and learn from your experience.



## THE JOURNEY IN FOUR STEPS: APPROACH AND TIPS

**1 / Wonder** stands for a quest for experiences that – no matter how small – show that the core theme has already been developed to a certain extent and reveals the opportunities it conceals.

The aim is to ask appreciative and investigative questions and to connect the discoveries with each other.

### Approach

Think of one or several moments when you saw people pass on their love for their place to visitors. Where hospitality and pride went hand in hand. What are the best stories? Which instances genuinely touched or deeply moved someone? What are the contributions you observed yourself and others make to achieve this? What do you think is essential in this story? What can we learn from this?

**Tip: Surprising questions give rise to surprising answers.**

You know the kind of questions that skilfully extinguish a fiery process of creativity, like a bucket of ice-cold water that drenches a flame. Such as: How must I do this? How long will this take? How much will it cost? Is it permitted? Will we pull it off? How do we get the others on board? How will we measure this?

Instead ask questions that surprise, disrupt, make you think more. Ask questions to which you don't know the answer. What does this place have to tell us? What do we want it to (continue to) look like in the future? What action will our children/ grandchildren remember as being positive?

**2/ Imagination** means looking ahead and thinking about what is possible if the discovered strengths are linked with each other in different ways. It means daring to develop things and hoping that everything is possible. With a certain image in mind, we then ask ourselves what can contribute to making this dream come true. That is how you discover levers that can help you take steps in the right direction.

### Approach

Tell us about your greatest hope for making our village or our city the ultimate hospitable place. What do you think will happen in the next four years? What will you do? What are others doing? How does our place also have a voice in this development? Elaborate as much as you can and avoid 'yes, but' thoughts.

**Tip: 'Yes, but' is for later. Ask yourself 'what if?' instead**

Stop replicating the status quo and ask new questions instead that start with 'what if'. What if tourism were a means of creating flourishing communities? What if the revenue from tourism is invested in flourishing, local economies? What if our hotels and museums were to become hubs, where locals and visitors meet? What if visitors can experience a genuine welcome in our local community life, our local small-scale festivals, fun fairs and gatherings? What if they get on the train going home with a clear idea of what they will do differently from the day they get home?

**3 / Anchoring** means making choices that render ideas visible and tangible. You throw them out like anchors. Ideas and levers (reasoning: 'If, then') form a design or mind map when combined. Which levers have the most potential for implementing the theme? The choices are defined based on feasibility, in other words by a limit in time, resources and mandate. It is important that these boundaries are clearly defined before the selection process starts.

### Approach

Making choices, which arise from the many possibilities during the broadening phase of imagination, requires a democratic process. When developing these choices, start with a brainstorm. What ways do we see for working on this? Then you establish an order. Which actions belong together? Start with something that everyone finds attractive and achievable, as an exciting experiment. Next describe what your plan looks like. Visualise it or make it more tangible with an image, a model, a prototype or a story that shows what it will be like when it is finished. Everyone immediately understands what your intention is, how it works and how valuable and innovative it is.

**Tip: Everyone on board.**

When working on different ideas in larger groups, it is important that everyone has the time to familiarise him or herself with all the proposals and add ideas to them.

**4 / Realisation** does exactly what it says: achieve, execute, take action. Here you get answers to the following questions: What must we do? Who do we need? Theory gives way to practice. Time to get stuck in. Always remember the four questions of the appreciative inquiry to avoid losing sight of the right focus.

### Approach

Groups can reflect on the following questions: What is going well? Which successes have we achieved? What are we proud of? What surprised us? What could make our actions or results even stronger? Who are we still missing in our project? What did we learn? What are we still curious about? Which successes can we already drink to? Well done! What could we celebrate after a next phase?

**Tip: Organise things as easily as possible.**

Needless complexity has a detrimental effect in groups in which the enthusiasm already flows naturally. Usually a simple overview of each idea, that is drawn up by the group that takes ownership of this idea, is sufficient.

## MAKING NEW ENERGY MORE SUSTAINABLE

Perhaps a widely supported vision of what tourism can contribute in your region, city or in your specific place is now growing. You may discover new perspectives and actions in your tourism operation. The values and approach are more clearly defined, which is why you should set them down in a mission and vision, policy plans, a business plan, procedures, regulations or consultation structures.

Insights arise that you can translate into what you expect from employees, using job descriptions and/or training. It also becomes clear which people in your environment can make visionary contributions that make you want to include them in your administrative bodies. Perhaps you want to organise these administrative bodies in such a way that a diversity of voices can deeply inspire your organisation or company

That is why it is important to regularly oversee the process from a proverbial helicopter, reflect on it, ask yourself what is being learned and what is changing. So take a step back now and then to oversee everything. Discover where strengths become visible, where energy is released, and how you can channel and apply this in your company, board or organisation.

## WHERE'S THE PARTY?

As soon as a place keeper can demonstrate and test ideas, the motto is: just do it! When others are given opportunities to join in the experience, they respond with insights and ideas. Moreover, coming out with new things is also a gift for others, whose imagination is stimulated and they dare to be creative. As such, every step forward becomes a cause for celebration. And that is something that we happen to excel at in Flanders.

That is what Travel to Tomorrow is all about: together we imagine a new future for a tourism that contributes to a transforming travel experience and to the connection with places and in communities.

When place keeperstake steps in an appreciative and investigative manner that contribute to a flourishing destination, they find themselves on a path of creativity, connection and innovation. Beautiful things are then created and others will want to help share or enrich these ideas or use them as inspiration in other places.

## CHECKLIST

The co-creative flow that we introduced above has its origins in statements that have already been frequently discussed. We list them again below.

- Are all the stakeholders under the linden tree involved and connected, can they participate in the discussion, the thought process and the action?
- Can stakeholders without a voice also participate, such as the place, nature, future generations?
- Does your initiative contribute to a flourishing community where social, economic and sustainable values are in a healthy balance?
- Is maximum effort put into co-creative collaboration instead of top-down directives?
- Is the focus on strengths and opportunities rather than on problems and shortcomings?
- Is the higher purpose (Simon Sinek's 'why') always clear to everyone?
- Does the plan look as simple and lively as possible?
- Does the new energy that is created get every opportunity to develop optimally?
- Is there room to celebrate each new step together?
- Is the collaboration organised in a sustainable manner, based on a connection with the place and with each other?

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## A NEW VISION REQUIRES A NEW MEASUREMENT FRAMEWORK

Travel to Tomorrow wants to let destinations flourish by creating a connection between the place, visitors, entrepreneurs and the locals. This focus is new and different from the kind of tourism that is usually measured in number of reservations, overnight stays or day trips. As people start to realise that 'more' does not always equate 'better', we will need new key indicators that paint a more holistic picture of the destination. Because to measure is to know, and what we measure will partly determine our behaviour.

In addition to the literature on sustainable development, which has been published in the past decades, there has also been a trend in political-economic literature for some time that questions traditional growth models and proposes alternative well-being indicators. That is what the British-Italian economist Mariana

Mazzucato suggests in her book "The Value of Everything" (2018), in which she renews the discussion on 'value' within the economy. In their book "Mismeasuring our lives: Why GDP doesn't add up" (2010), the renowned economists Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen and Jean-Paul Fitoussi also ask which indicators determine value and social well-being. Such ideas were subsequently implemented in initiatives such as the UN's "The World Happiness Report" and the OECD's "Better Life Index".

### Working with dimensions and indicators

Tourism can therefore learn from existing developments within broader social domains in order to arrive at an extension of critical success indicators. The researcher Bart Neuts is working on this at the Catholic University of Leuven. Existing knowledge was used for each stakeholder group (locals, visitors, entrepreneurs, the place) to distinguish the dimensions on which tourism has a positive – or a negative – influence. For residents, quality of life studies provide insights into relevant domains that support the local quality of life and are influenced by tourism. For example,



visitors can strengthen the local culture and identity. For visitors, inspiration can be drawn from tourism experience studies, whereby tourists, for example, flourish thanks to in-depth contacts with a hospitable local population and thanks to a qualitative tourism offering. On the entrepreneurial side, the literature on sustainable business models provides an overview of potential dimensions (e.g., economic return) and indicators within these dimensions (e.g., turnover, profit margin, liquidity, solvency as expressions of economic return). Finally, the place looks at ecological effects and local impact factors. As such, the framework pays attention to social and ecological effects, without losing sight of the positive economic impact.

### Measuring framework with two levels

Starting from the existing theoretical frameworks, the measurement framework is thus formed from 22 dimensions, each of which combines different indicators. However, because many indicators are not yet available – for example because they are not technically collected (think of the emissions from tourism companies, the quality of employment) – the measurement framework is being developed on two levels. Level 1 provides a detailed, complete overview and proposes methods for collecting unavailable data in the future within destinations (with survey questions, among others). Level 2 represents a limited index of indicators that can already be calculated at present and serves as a practical extension of the more economic figures. As such, a multidimensional interpretation is given to the state of the flourishing destination.

## FLORA ET LABORA

The philosophy of Travel to Tomorrow has been developed since 2017 under the working title Tourism Transforms. During this process, the participants listened to and researched the opinions and perceptions of the many partners, both in the tourism industry and among visitors. What drives and moves them? What is the role of tourism in the future? In which direction do we want to take VISITFLANDERS? The answers to these questions gave rise to a policy paper and an action plan titled 'Flora et Labora'.

The first conclusions and suggestions were incorporated in a memorandum and were confirmed in the policy paper 2019-2024. This policy paper sets out five substantive themes: nature, heritage, culinary, cycling and holiday participation. In addition, the focus is on four supporting components, namely knowledge-driven work, strategy monitoring and dissemination, increasing quality and promotion.

As the executor of the policy paper, it is a major challenge for VISITFLANDERS to concretise these objectives and translate them into practice. The agency has a wide range of very diverse employees in Flanders and abroad, with a wide range of tasks. That is why one coherent plan was needed to set out a direction for all the activities, to strengthen each other's efforts, and to make clear, both internally and externally, what the agency stands for. This action plan is now ready and is supported by the entire organisation, because it was elaborated by the entire organisation.

### Nine working groups

In February 2020, every employee was invited to register for nine working groups. Each working group would develop either a theme or a supporting component of the policy paper into a plan of action. Participation was free. Everyone could participate in several working groups, but people were also given the option not to participate. A group of approximately one hundred colleagues registered to be part of this process.

The working groups were free to work within the framework that was set out and in accordance with predetermined criteria. The provisions on a specific theme or component in the policy paper served as the minimum requirement. The ideas behind "Travel to Tomorrow" were used as a checklist: does the idea take the residents, visitors, entrepreneurs and the place into account in a balanced manner? This is how we came up with a list of building blocks for an action plan.

VISITFLANDERS is a relatively horizontal organisation, but during the working groups this was put into practice even further. Department heads and team managers participated as

ordinary colleagues, not as managers or coaches. CEO Peter De Wilde purposefully stayed away to avoid weighing in too much on the process. The working groups were therefore given a lot of trust and responsibility to draw up the action plan of VISITFLANDERS for the coming years.

### On the right track

Each working group had a facilitator or a regulator, fixer, arbitrator, coordinator, in short someone who makes things easy for the others (= facile). This person was responsible for appointments and meeting rooms, for monitoring the timing and for enforcing a meeting technique that distributed the speaking time fairly. This was by no means an easy task and the facilitators consulted with each other about their tasks. It was agreed that the method of the appreciative inquiry would be used in every first session.

The sessions that were attended by foreign employees, who speak another language, were partly conducted in English. They often met digitally, attending remotely. VISITFLANDERS rolled out software for this. This turned out to offer tremendous added value, but it was also very future-proof. In mid-March, the coronavirus pandemic swept across the world and virtual meetings became the new normal for everyone.

In early May 2020 – after about eight sessions of three hours and consultation meetings in smaller groups – all the working groups signed off on an action plan, within the agreed deadline.

After a round of feedback from a large internal sounding board group three editors voluntarily summarised three hundred pages of material in one plan. Because the predetermined criteria had been followed by all the working groups, it was relatively easy to draft a coherent plan. After a final round of feedback by an external jury, the final decisions were made. We now have one plan on the table, that was developed by one hundred people and is ready for execution.



### Great team work

Almost all the expertise at VISITFLANDERS was pooled and exchanged, accelerating the thinking process, and ensuring that the output was thoroughly thought out. In the process, bridges were built that did not exist before. There was more willingness to cooperate, more understanding between colleagues who no longer saw each other on a daily basis. Everyone became convinced that all of VISITFLANDERS had to execute this mission together.

Naturally there are always things that can be improved. For example, more cross-pollination is required between the various working groups, so that new visions can be immediately picked up and integrated. The task of the facilitator was also underestimated. But generally speaking, the approach has paid off.

Ownership is high, the commitment is equally high. Our colleagues regard this as their plan. They are more than ready to implement it. They chose Flora et Labora as a working title: Flourish and Work. A team that chooses such a slogan is ready to go.

## INSPIRATION TO GET STARTED YOURSELF

In books, videos and on websites you will find plenty of interesting information and tips to get started. There are plenty of options to choose from. That is why we share some recommendations. You can find more information online at [www.reizennaarmorgen.be](http://www.reizennaarmorgen.be).

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

#### Walk Out Walk On

**Meg Wheatley & Deborah Frieze**

This is a hopeful book about people and communities around the world, that overcome seemingly insurmountable challenges together by linking their collective knowledge and energy. This is what a future with resilient communities could look like.

#### Flourishing Enterprise

**Chris Laszlo & Judy Sorum Brown**

This book contains reasons and examples of why we need to make the shift in business from sustainability to flourishing. This should be an important goal for any business today.

#### Wie (niet) reist is gek

**Ap Dijksterhuis**

"Of the many methods to massage our mind, travel is the most beneficial and natural way." Travelling inspires more empathy, it creates space, it stimulates your creativity, you seem to have more time and it makes you happy.

#### Doughnut Economics

**Kate Raworth**

Raworth thinks maintaining a liveable world and preserving social aspects is more important than growth. If the boundaries – hence the donut – are not crossed on both sides, the balance is better.

#### Measuring What Counts: The Global Movement for Well-Being

**Joseph Stiglitz**

Nobel Laureate in Economics Joseph Stiglitz refutes the idea of the use of gross domestic product (GDP) as an indicator of economic growth. Instead he prefers to use criteria that take into account inequality and economic vulnerability, sustainable development and people's well-being.

#### Grand Hotel Europa

**Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer**

This is a wonderful novel about the old continent of Europe. A place where the past displaces the future and where the exploitation of this past, in the form of tourism, offers the most realistic perspective for the future.



### VIDEOS

#### The opinion of experts

What should the future of tourism look like now? We listen to three experts: Anna Pollock, Gervase Bushe and Chené Swart.



[https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLRjVWI0w-2DIIB\\_lyYdC3P1ViCrYaOGWq](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLRjVWI0w-2DIIB_lyYdC3P1ViCrYaOGWq)

#### Impactful travel stories

In the beginning of the Travel to Tomorrow process, we went in search of intense travel experiences. The result is a collection of beautiful travel stories that you can watch again online.



<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLRjVWI0w-2DmfdXmGZ9dog5hAzpqqDqjC>

#### Will you travel to tomorrow with us?

In this video we list pressing questions that the tourism industry should ask itself about consciously Travelling to Tomorrow. We go in search of the right ingredients for a new and better future for tourism.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ruu90nDtnd4>

We made a second video about how Travel to Tomorrow is put into practice, heading to Flanders Fields to better understand this.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MEctXG5vxko&t=2s>

### WEBSITE

[www.reizennaarmorgen.be](http://www.reizennaarmorgen.be)

## Policy-makers travel to tomorrow with us

**People are already travelling to tomorrow in plenty of places. Policy-makers are also hopping on the train. They facilitate actions, support initiatives and help spread the outlined vision. It is important that this vision is widely adopted, throughout Flanders and by every visitor, local resident and entrepreneur in the place they share.**

The policy-makers in regions and cities discuss some aspects of their approach in Mechelen, the Meetjesland region, Bruges, Ghent, Leuven, Antwerp, Limburg and the Westhoek region. The latter has forever been marked by the Great War, which was commemorated in a magnificent and stirring way in 2014-2018. What are their focuses for the future and for innovation?

Travel means moving around, which is a government competence. Some new initiatives in the field of mobility, such as DeWaterbus in Antwerp, have proven very popular. When choosing a trip, people are mainly influenced by the masses, says researcher Bart De Langhe. At the same time, the government has various options for influencing this behaviour. Kristof Lataire and Griet Geudens of VISITFLANDERS emphasise that Travel to Tomorrow is a positive story that extends beyond economic and environmental sustainability. It allows everyone to connect with the soul of the place. Zuhair Demir, Minister for Tourism, has the final say.



### Griet Geudens and Kristof Lataire of VISITFLANDERS

#### TRAVEL TO TOMORROW GOES ONE STEP FURTHER THAN SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Travel to Tomorrow involves more than just sustainable tourism, say Griet Geudens, Quality-Sustainability Coordinator at VISITFLANDERS and Kristof Lataire, Travel to Tomorrow project leader. It extends beyond the tourism industry and is actually simpler. Sustainable tourism is a stepping stone to Travel to Tomorrow.

“Travel to Tomorrow is a positive story: it implies a renewed quest for the added value of tourism. A process in which everyone is involved. We investigate the added value of tourism for visitors, the local population, entrepreneurs and for the place itself. Another very important principle of Travel to Tomorrow is connected to that place: we start from the soul of the place and the inspiration of the people who live there or who have shaped the place. We want locals to be proud of their place. ‘Encounters’, for example between locals and visitors, are another important aspect of Travel to Tomorrow. This encounter can be the result of a shared passion. This is also a guiding principle of Travel to Tomorrow: connecting people through their passions. They could share a passion for cycling, for heritage or nature, for art, etc. Many people like to share this passion, like to talk about it with others, travel because of their passion... We strive to connect more people based on what they find meaningful.”

#### New partners

“The main difference between sustainable tourism and Travel to Tomorrow lies in the goal. The end goal used to be tourism, albeit in the most sustainable form possible. Now this goal is a flourishing destination, and tourism can be a means of achieving this. That is why we involve other partners and together we ask ourselves whether tourism is the right way to make a destination flourish. If the answer is yes, we ask how. As such, we are taking a more modest approach, in tourism. We have set ourselves a higher common goal, together with many different partners. Another novelty is that we are using co-creation to understand how tourism can contribute to this flourishing destination. As a result, VISITFLANDERS will adapt its operations.”

“Another principle of Travel to Tomorrow is the combination of different meaningful activities that facilitate encounters. An example that comes to mind is *Het Predikheren* in Mechelen, which opened last summer.



*Predikheren* is the new central library of Mechelen, in addition to being a co-working space, a bistro, a meeting place, a cultural centre, a garden to relax... Many different activities are possible in one and same place, in the renovated monastery or nearby. This transcends the concept of sustainability."

#### **Economically viable**

"Is Travel to Tomorrow economically feasible? There should be no misunderstanding about the economic value of tourism in the context of Travel to Tomorrow. Economically viable is a better question. It's an and-and story, rather than an either-or. The coronavirus crisis has presented us with a good opportunity to rethink our tourism industry. Many entrepreneurs will have to rethink their business. Whether you are a government, a pioneering local or an entrepreneur, you can take action to make tourism more sustainable. And not just at the ecological level. Travel to Tomorrow also provides leverage for the economy and society to go about things differently and offers entrepreneurs opportunities to flourish. Only if we combine all these principles, will we be able to make an economic turnaround that can increase the entrepreneur's clout. If we can convince an entrepreneur to connect with the soul of a place and to tell the story of this place, then visitors will come to this entrepreneur, precisely because he does this."

"You can see the positive power of tourism in the results of the resident surveys that VISITFLANDERS carried out in recent years in various art cities, and more recently in Ypres. Three quarters of the population are favourably disposed to tourism in their own city. Only six percent are against it. Tourism brings life to the city, making their city more appealing, which in turn inspires pride. This also illustrates the positive power of tourism. Provided, of course, that you also take into account the wishes of the locals and give them the opportunity to get involved in tourism development if they want to."

#### **More intense, more genuine**

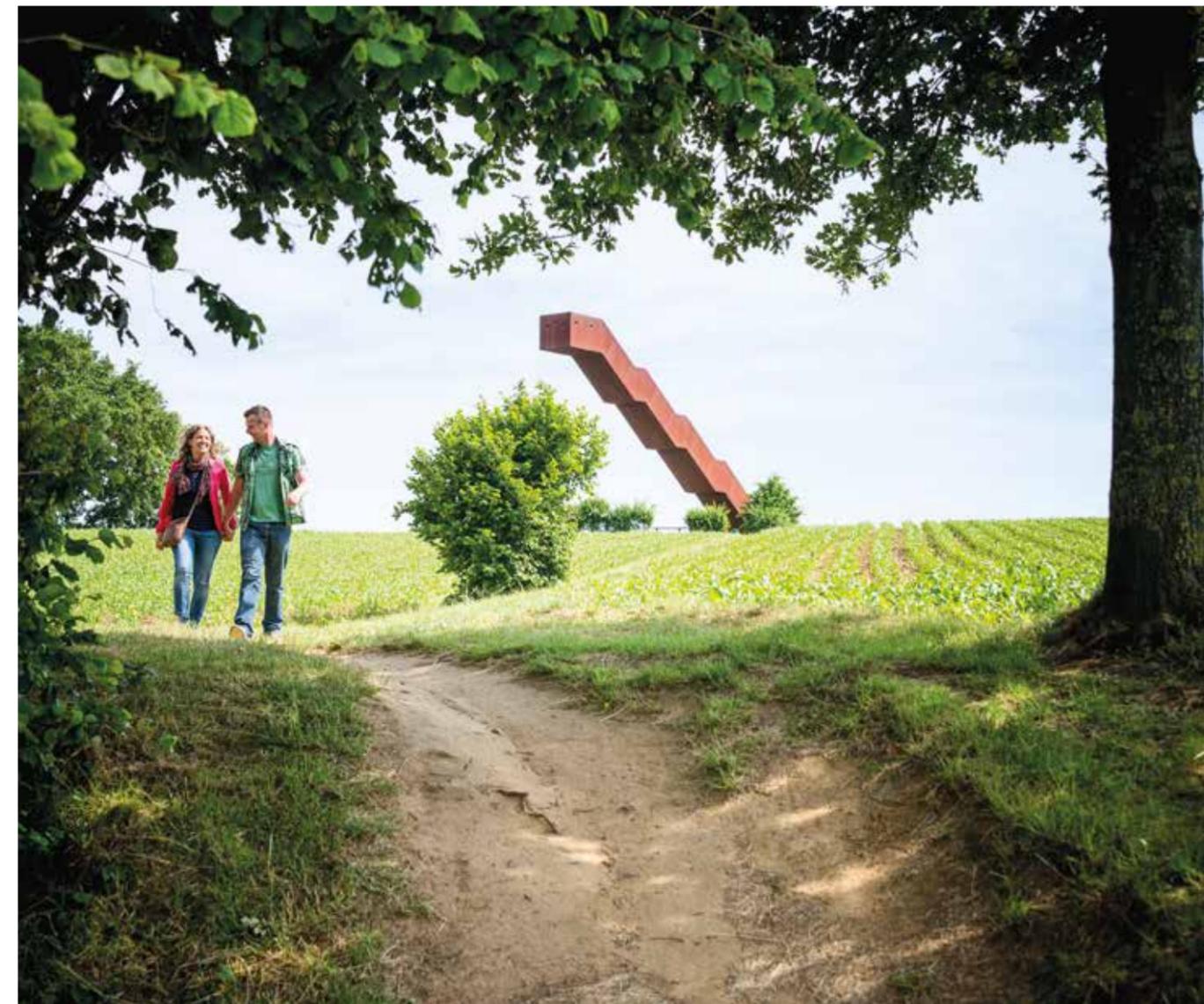
"If everyone goes along with the story, you will sense this as a visitor. The encounters are more intense, more genuine. As a visitor, you will feel less like a 'customer' or a 'tourist'. A large market square in the centre of a city must once again become a place where everyone comes together, both residents and visitors alike. If we think less from an 'industry' point of view, we can develop tourism differently, as part of a larger whole. It would be great if visitors feel more immersed in an environment that is pleasant to be in for both locals and visitors. It also illustrates the sociological added value of Travel to Tomorrow. Travel to Tomorrow creates so much more than just tourism. It involves creating a flourishing community and tourism contributes to this. Travel to Tomorrow is therefore more than just the story of tourism as a means. Heritage, nature, culture, well-being and other aspects can also make a community flourish. As long as the community is not just limited to the residents and/or the entrepreneurs but also takes the visitors into account."

#### **Back to basics**

"More than sustainable tourism, Travel to Tomorrow is a story with a common goal that involves everyone. That's why we're so excited about it. To Travel to Tomorrow we need

everyone. Together we look at what is best for a place. As a tourism actor, we can share our expertise and explain what the possibilities are. If others see the added value of this, we can build this together. The future of tourism lies in sustainability. That much is certain. But we also look at the broader story. We return to the basics and ask ourselves: "What is the soul of this place, what role does it play and how can we contribute to improving it?" This

message is easier to convey because everyone feels responsible. The Travel to Tomorrow story is more comprehensive and at the same time much simpler than sustainable tourism."



## Bart De Langhe, professor in marketing

### WE LIKE TO BE INFLUENCED BY WHAT THE MASSES DO

Bart De Langhe specialises in behavioural economics and is a marketing professor at the ESADA Business School in Barcelona. How do consumers or tourists behave? Can you influence their choices? If yes, how? Professor De Langhe searches for answers.

Anyone who leaves on a trip is easily guided by what others say or write about when choosing a destination, accommodation, etc. "You can find reviews on the internet about anything and everything. Both about top and niche destinations. We like to be influenced by what the masses do, because we feel insecure as individuals. To reduce this uncertainty, we check various information sources. We think it's safe if others have done it before us", says Bart De Langhe.

We also want to be part of a group. So we go to places where our peers have also been. This allows us to exchange experiences. "But we don't want to do exactly what they did. We'd rather have a little more than these other people. If they stayed in a three-star hotel, we book ourselves into a four-star hotel", says De Langhe.

#### Long-term experiences

There are two reasons why we love to travel: on the one hand to relax and have fun and on the other for the long-term 'meaningful experience'. These reasons are more difficult to fulfil with domestic tourism. "Relaxing in your own country is more difficult, because you can't get away or sufficiently break with 'ordinary' life.



Moreover, you feel that this form of travel is less meaningful. Your own country is less special or less extraordinary. You feel less of a sense of urgency to visit places that are close to home. You tell yourself "I'll do it next year" and in the end you never get around to it. Companies or the government can strengthen this sense of urgency by presenting a certain



experience as something that you won't have a chance to experience later on. You need to visit this place 'now'.

According to *De Langhe*, the government has various options for controlling our travel and other behaviour. "The first options are of an economic nature: behaviour with bad consequences can become more expensive, for example by levying a tax on airline tickets. The second category consists of legislative tools: a ban on plastic bags or abolishing certain flights. Legislative and economic tools are effective, but they are also unpleasant. They can even lead to misunderstanding among the population."

"There is a third way, the *behavioural economist* tools. You use them to analyse how 'details' around you influence human behaviour. For example, you hide plastic shopping bags behind the cash register so that consumers don't see them and have to ask for them. Finally, with the fourth category, the government can change the way people think by creating different associations. That is what marketers set out to do with advertisements", *De Langhe* explains.

#### Supercomputer

What can consumers do? "Our society is based on the idea of individual responsibility, we all feel that we have a 'free will'. But if you look at human behaviour in a scientific way, this raises questions. There are three main categories of variables that are used to explain human behaviour: your genetic material, all the experiences you have had and have experienced in your life up till now, and the context that you find yourself in now. If you had a supercomputer that measures all these variables, you would be able to build a model that can perfectly explain human behaviour. Every decision you make can be traced back to these variables. You have little or no control over this yourself. This approach tends to place the responsibility for decisions outside the individual and offers opportunities for influencing people", *De Langhe* adds.



## ANOTHER VISION ON MOBILITY

Mobility, sustainability and tourism are all strongly linked. There's no denying this fact. Travelling by train, bike or even on foot offers plenty of new perspectives. These six initiatives take a different approach, calling on people to reflect on how we travel.

### 1 / DeWaterbus for locals and tourists

DeWaterbus is a boat that takes you to and from the city of Antwerp to the port cheaply, quickly and sustainably (collective transport).

From Steenplein in the heart of Antwerp you can sail to Hemiksem (southbound) or Lillo and Liefkenshoek (northbound). DeWaterbus has since been integrated into people's commute as an alternative means of transport to and from Antwerp and is easy to combine with the tram, bus or bicycle (which you can take on board with you for free). But the water bus service also offers opportunities for recreational visitors or tourists for getting to the city from the hinterland and enjoying activities in and around the nature areas. Or vice versa, for visiting the city, for a spot of shopping or enjoying some culture or the city's pubs and restaurants. This only works if the point of departure and arrival are sufficiently attractive, by providing other infrastructure such as (temporary) hospitality businesses or bike rentals and repairs in addition to tourist information about the region. When this is a well-thought-through tourism hub, this provides additional value for both the local population and visitors.

### 2 / De Schorre: next-level mobility plan

The De Schorre Provincial Domain in Boom is the home base of Tomorrowland, among others. At certain times of the year, this is a place that attracts a lot of visitors, that is when there's no coronavirus pandemic to keep people away. Recreational visitors or tourists as well as the locals like to use the domain as their 'park'. A tailor-made mobility plan is indispensable in this context, bearing in mind that De Schorre is situated between two residential cores. Mobility expert Bart Busschaert developed a next-level mobility plan for the leisure park. Depending on the event's scale there are four different options. The emphasis, among others, is on traffic coordinators, a stepped up train and bus offering and additional (bicycle) car parks. The objective? To improve access to De Schorre and limit nuisance for the local population and entrepreneurs.



**Tips from Alex Ternier, the director of De Schorre in Boom, for creating sustainable, recreational mobility:**

- Find out how (in which way, via which roads) your visitors travel to you.
- Decide which measures you must/want to/can take based on survey results. Check what you need for this.
- Offer visitors as many options as possible, so they can easily make the right choice.
- Go in search of the right triggers and incentives to compel visitors to change the way they get around. Make transport an experience in itself.
- Hang in there. Behavioural changes often take time. Don't panic if the efforts require more from you compared with the initial profit that they generate.

### 3 / Buurtpunt, an initiative of Netwerk Duurzame Mobiliteit

The Flemish Network for Sustainable Mobility is an umbrella organisation that groups a wide range of mobility associations such as Autodelen.net, Bond Beter Leefmilieu, Fietsersbond, Mobiel 21, Taxistop, Trage Wegen, TreinTramBus and Voetgangersbeweging (for car sharing, the environment, cyclists, public transport users, and pedestrians). The network defends the joint interests of these associations, providing support for and representing their members, offering input for Flemish mobility policy and coordinating the collaboration on projects and campaigns. The ambition is threefold: to give sustainable mobility pioneers more clout, push governments to adopt an integrated sustainable mobility policy, and get more and more people to make the right choice and choose sustainable transport options.

The network supports a wide range of initiatives, including the *buurtpunt*. The baker, the butcher, the corner shop, the village pub. Until recently, they were all staples of village life but they are increasingly disappearing. If you live outside the city, you need a car for almost everything you do. Setting up a community centre or *buurtpunt* is a way of grouping amenities, services and meeting places in one place, close to the community. The format and services that are provided are based on local needs, wishes and possibilities. This can include a local market, a mobility centre or a village pub.

Netwerk Duurzame Mobiliteit (the Sustainable Mobility Network), Cera and the *Innovatiesteunpunt voor Landbouw en Platteland* (Innovation support centre for agriculture and rural areas) share knowledge and experience with local initiators about the concept, helping them to set up a community mobility centre.

### 4 / Electric tourist buses and boats

Brussels has Hop On Hop Off buses, which take in the capital's main sights and attractions. Soon they will be 100% electric. In the course of 2021, a fleet of twelve electric buses will replace the current ones. An industry first. The idea is to limit the impact of these sightseeing buses to a minimum in the city centre.

Bruges has also opted for silent and emission-free electric boats for guiding tourists on the city's canals. More and more places are switching to an electric alternative even though the coronavirus pandemic did not exactly make this transition any easier. As of this year, two electric tourist boats are already sailing Bruges' canals.



**A tip from Bart Busschaert, mobility expert and founder of Scelta Mobility Consultancy**

"All too often, mobility is still seen as a government competence, while entrepreneurs can help make a difference. As the manager of a hotel, a conference centre or a tourist attraction, you also have a major impact on your visitors' travel behaviour. You could consider only publishing information about the car park on your website. An alternative would be to also mention the nearest bicycle shed, bus stop or station. Choosing to offer visitors a free public transport ticket instead of a parking ticket is another example of what entrepreneurs and organisers could do themselves."

### 5 / Sustainable international travel in the arts sector

Kunstenpunt – which informs and groups art and music professionals, gives tailor-made advice and shares knowledge with the Government of Flanders – inspires artists and people who work in the arts to travel sustainably when on tour, prospecting or attending conferences. They do this with *Start to train!* This train map shows you which destinations you can reach by train in under 6.5 hours.

### 6 / Flemish civil servants no longer take the plane for short business trips

The Government of Flanders also wants to become more sustainable. Civil servants are no longer allowed to take a plane for a foreign duty trip of less than 500 km or less than six hours by land. No more taking the plane to Paris, Amsterdam or London.



## Stijn Baert, professor in labour economics

### MAKE A GREAT LEAP FORWARD IN TERMS OF LIFELONG LEARNING

Tourism accounts for approximately nine percent of employment in the Flemish economy, which is quite a lot. “The coronavirus pandemic has had a major impact on every aspect of life and there is only one way to solve this, through innovation. That is why more training will be necessary” says Ghent University professor Stijn Baert. He is a member of the economic recovery committee of the Government of Flanders, which has been tasked with defining the new economic accents post-pandemic.



where the sun shines a little longer and harder, such as Greece (26%) and Cyprus (20%), this percentage rises to twenty percent and more. The fact that these countries have fewer other economic assets than Flanders also explains this.

### More afraid of losing their job

“We recently conducted a survey among a panel of 3,821 Flemish employees, in which more than 1 in 5 respondents indicated that they were afraid of losing their job due to the coronavirus pandemic. In fact, one in seven feared that they would be laid off before the end of the year. This fear was significantly greater in the hospitality industry and tourism industry. The fear that this crisis would negatively impact their career in general and their salary was greater in these sectors. Insofar that employees can accurately predict the evolution of employment in their industry, this naturally presents the sector with a major challenge.”

Clearly tourism is an important sector for the labour market. In Flanders, some 260,000 people are employed in tourism, which is almost nine percent or just under 1 in 11 people. In every football team that you would randomly put together with working Flemish people, one person on average would be employed in the tourism industry. According to Eurostat data (2017), this figure is comparable to countries such as Denmark, Germany and Sweden. In countries

As always in an economic crisis, there will always be people who lose out. “Only those who use this crisis as an opportunity to innovate will see their international market share increase. During

the troubled 1980s, Gaston Geens, first minister-president of Flanders grabbed this opportunity to sustainably boost the prosperity of our region with investments in future-oriented sectors. The DIRV (= Third Industrial Revolution) campaign and the Flanders Technology fairs, with the arm of a robot in the logo, are two examples of this. *Flanders could not afford to, and did not want to, miss out on these new trends.*

### Flanders has strong assets

“That is exactly the point we are making with the Flemish recovery committee. We are arguing in favour of using this crisis as a momentum for realising breakthroughs in Flanders, in order to emerge on the other side as an improved version of ourselves. A quantum leap in lifelong learning. Daring to invest in a digital, sustainable and care economy. Obviously, this also means focusing on a sustainable tourism industry and investing in digitisation within this sector.”

“Flanders – and I like to include the wider Brussels region in this – has many tourist assets, with a rich historic past, more recent attractions and relaxation options, and – let’s be honest – the best cuisine in the world. In any event, we must think about how we can attract even more people to our region. The employment in our country, and a sufficient number of strong shoulders that can provide the support we need for our healthcare system and pensions, can only benefit from this.”

Tourism is a powerful tool to get an entire region back on track after a crisis. Just think of the province of Limburg. After the closure of the coal mines and Ford Genk, the region’s focus switched to tourism. Limburg now has a considerable number of major attractions and has become a cycling paradise. This is also the province that invented the cycle route network. All Limburgers support hospitality in their province. “In this respect, we can translate the best practices *from this reconversion to the Flemish level*”, Stijn Baert agrees.



### Shortage professions in tourism

Even before the crisis, the list of Shortage occupations of the Flemish Employment Agency VDAB included ‘travel agent business’, ‘hotel and restaurant manager’ and ‘multi-purpose hotel employee’. There are not enough people (quantitatively) who have the right training and skills (qualitative) to fill such vacancies. Stijn Baert: “I always like to refer to the ‘retrain, retrain, retrain’ creed that I shared with the Flemish Parliament during a parliament hearing, in line with the ‘jobs, jobs, jobs’ creed. We will have to quickly retrain people who lost their job during this crisis so they can take on jobs that are in high demand. Otherwise these vacancies will be missed opportunities. Apparently, these hospitality jobs are the kind of jobs for which we will have to retrain people.”

“This highlights the fact that Flanders and Belgium are among the worst in class when it comes to lifelong learning. The recovery committee has proposed to take advantage of the coronavirus pandemic to have Flemish people undergo a competence check at regular intervals, similar to

a medical check-up, and see whether they are interested in retraining towards future-oriented sectors. Who knows, this may result in more retraining towards tourism.”

### The hospitality industry, a special case

The VDAB’s list of bottleneck professions also features vacancies that are difficult to fill for front of house staff, such as a *maîtres d’hôtel*, waiters and bartenders. While these jobs do not exclusively require training and skills, the working conditions and working hours are less appealing.

“This also highlights something I have been advocating for some time: work should pay off,” says Stijn Baert. “This means: the difference between a net salary and social benefits should be increased and workers should receive better support in the form of more accessible and flexible childcare. This can make all the difference when you’re thinking about applying for a job as a bartender or waiter.”

### Holiday in your own region

The coronavirus pandemic makes us more defensive. Should the government oblige all Flemish people to take a holiday here? “No, that would be taking things a step too far”, Stijn Baert replies. “As an economist, I am not a big advocate of protectionism. If we encourage our citizens to mainly shop for local goods and services, other countries and regions may also follow suit. This would be very detrimental for an export-oriented economy like ours.”

“Now, in addition to being a scientist, I am of course just a Flemish citizen like you, and as such I can certainly recommend Flanders as a holiday destination. We should be prouder of what we have to offer. We cannot expect people abroad to love our region even more, if we do not love it enough ourselves. I personally love holidaying in Flanders and have been for many years already!”. Stijn Baert concludes with a laugh.

People are already travelling to tomorrow in plenty of places. Everywhere travellers are checking in and policy-makers are quick to hop on the train. Because at the policy level, they must focus on the balance between visitors, locals, entrepreneurs and the place they share. Many policy-makers consciously choose their city, municipality, region and province to Travel to Tomorrow. We can only encourage this. The policy-makers of eight cities and regions explain how they set to work.



## Mechelen

### TOURISTS MAKE THE CITY TOGETHER WITH THE PEOPLE OF MECHELEN

Mechelen has been changing for over twenty years and was already implementing the Travel to Tomorrow philosophy well before it took concrete shape. Strong tourist growth and the challenges associated to this increased the need for a shared vision on the development of sustainable tourism.



Visitors make the city together with the people of Mechelen. Tourism helps the local community to grow and flourish in a respectful way. Tourism makes a meaningful contribution to the urban economy without dominating it and provides good jobs and decent incomes, creating new opportunities. Tourism helps to preserve and expand natural and cultural wealth. It respects and cherishes natural and cultural heritage, the living environment of the local population. Finally, it facilitates meaningful interaction between visitors and residents. Tourism in Mechelen is inclusive and focuses on 'guest happiness'.

#### Getting started

While the Mechelen team was working on a vision paper, several concrete projects were launched in which the Travel to Tomorrow philosophy was applied. A plan was conceived to symbolically complete St. Rumbold's Tower after some 500 years with a seventy-metre spire made of cardboard and plywood, a project that relied on the helping hands of as many Mechelen residents and visitors as possible.

The Neverending Park – Hof van Busleyden project is also a good example of Mechelen's ambition. Over a two-year period, the theatre company ARSENAAL/LAZARUS and Museum Hof van Busleyden gathered ideas from the people of Mechelen for a better city. As part of the *De Grond der Dingen* project, each resident was given one square metre to make his/her city more liveable. The proposals were negotiated and discussed together and considered and weighed. Mechelen promised the project 20,000 m<sup>2</sup> of land in 2021 to realise a selection of these ideas. The proposals were shown in the temporary exhibition 'The Neverending Park'. Travel to Tomorrow was also integrated in three pillars of *Samenwerken aan morgen*/Collaborating for tomorrow, the post-pandemic recovery plan for the city: in particular in building trust, stimulating the resilience of the sector and in promotion and product development.

#### Four tips

Els Van Zele, Destination Marketing Expert of the City of Mechelen, and Rebekka Koch, responsible for Groups, Reception and PR, give four tips to get you started.

#### 1 / Avoid vagueness

"Clearly define the common goal, avoid 'woolliness' and being vague. Set down your vision in a document, so that it becomes an instrument that everyone can fall back on and which you can also refer to yourself."

#### 2 / Dare to fall flat on your face

"If you start from a questioning, open attitude, people will be more likely to respond and you will get a lot of positive feedback. In the beginning, your story may not feel that consistent. After a few times your self-confidence in terms of what you want to achieve will grow and your approach and story will also run more smoothly. Sometimes the political agenda is different from what you envisaged. In that case, keep defending what you believe in and keep putting it on the agenda again and again. This takes time and energy, but at some point in the future you will reap the benefits. There is no point in wanting to see immediate results: let the story rise like a loaf of bread."

#### 3 / Choose an agile approach

"Don't wait for the big action plan but take action yourself. Don't use a fixed template to get all the parties on board. Head for your target gradually. You can make adjustments en route, depending on the interests and stages in which partners find themselves. In the meantime, the common goal and collaborative opportunities become clear for all the parties involved. That's how you move forward. Sometimes things go wrong, but you learn from it."



#### 4 / Start from the collective

"We brought together a lot of different people – who did not even know each other – in workshops and consultations. The result was synergy and cross-pollination. Together we started from the same basis: we all love Mechelen and together we are building the future of our city. This leads to positive rather than negative reactions. If you start from what you have in common, you always have a basis to fall back on, even if you may not agree on everything. To create a flourishing destination, making a profit and doing business are essential. But this shouldn't come at the expense of everything else. Explaining this also helps to convince entrepreneurs."

"You don't achieve a transformation in one, two, three. Keep your goal in mind, make sure you clearly understand it by elaborating supporting goals. Laying down the goal in a clear vision paper has helped us to attract the attention of politicians. To make it concrete for all your partners, you need to elaborate a shared and specific action plan. I haven't looked at the paper for a while now, but it is implemented in all of our actions."

## Meetjesland

### HOSTS AND AMBASSADORS PROMOTE THE REGION

Meetjesland is one of the testing grounds of VISITFLANDERS for new insights into tourism. The region intends to become a flourishing destination, which is why it works with hosts and ambassadors.



In the Meetjesland, Flemings, Scots and Romanians reflected on the future of tourist destinations together. They share the same conviction that tourism can make a region flourish, not only for the entrepreneurs, but also for the locals. This requires a different approach. They tested it together, among others by exchanging experiences.

By appointing 26 tourism entrepreneurs as hosts of the Drongenoeed Landscape Park and proclaiming 23 locals as ambassadors, the Meetjesland creates enthusiasm and ownership. "They contribute to the positive image of the

landscape park and stimulate support for the conservation of the beautiful landscape and valuable nature", says Leentje Grillaert, who is responsible for tourism as a member of the Provincial Executive. "Thanks to a European rural development subsidy programme, the hosts and ambassadors were able to follow two intensive coaching programmes. They were immersed in the assets that nature, landscape and cultural history have to offer in the landscape park. They explored different spots in the area during excursions. They now can convey their knowledge and enthusiasm to guests and people from the area." The participants learnt from experts, but above all from each other.

The tourist advisory board of Sint-Laureins has become an example for the entire region. The new merged municipality of Lievegem followed suit and Eeklo set up a working group for tourism with a concrete action plan. Because the enthusiasm in Sint-Laureins is so great and not everyone can be a member of the council, council president Willy Van Zandweghe thought that working groups would be a great way of channelling all this enthusiasm. "One successful project from our advisory board is the *Fiets en Ontdek* event", says Willy. "This project has been running for several years now. It was developed



because people complained that the tourist council organised too many projects with the restaurants and cafés, at the detriment of the accommodation sector. Instead of taking a defensive approach, we chose to develop this event together with them. The accommodation sector is very happy that we are putting their businesses in the spotlight in this way. It also introduces locals and other people who live in the Meetjesland to the tourism industry in the region. Through word of mouth and Facebook, interested people from all over Flanders attend this event.

#### Collecting 1,000 stories

Visit Meetjesland is working on a new plan for the future of tourism in the region, with the main objective of evolving into a flourishing destination. Once again, the emphasis is on appreciating and researching what is already available. The service collects about 1,000 stories about unique experiences that visitors, locals or entrepreneurs fondly remember. This is done by *ramasseurs van verhoalkes* or story collectors – volunteers, entrepreneurs, employees who are willing to take the time to listen to a story from a guest, a customer, a neighbour or a

policy-maker. They will use these stories to make decisions for the future, together with the representatives of the region. Such stories can be a great way of developing better contacts. A very educational process for all the people involved, which paves the way for a better understanding of each other's points of view.

#### Three tips

- 1 / **Every complaint implies a wish.** Do not respond to the complaint. Instead ask positive and investigative questions and listen to what is really important to the people at the destination. What do they themselves find important? How would they approach it?
- 2 / Choose **appreciative participation** and take it to a higher level. Instead of solely consulting and informing, think together and base your search on what is already working.
- 3 / **Stop** trying to **convince people.** Looking for solutions together works much better and creates more of a connection.

## Ghent

### WE DON'T WANT TO BE A 'SELFIE CITY'

The number of tourists in the Flemish art city of Ghent is peaking, something they are proud of. But the tourist throngs also provide food for thought. Something the people of Ghent like to do together. Because the city also wants to strike a balance between locals, visitors, entrepreneurs and the place.



The consultation process on the question of which future the people of Ghent want for their city consisted of a city-wide debate, the discussion of the results of a residents' survey, and workshops. Thus all the ideas, dreams and perspectives were heard and shared. "All this input was used to develop our tourism policy", says Tourism Alderman Bram Van Braeckvelt.

"We want a vibrant and liveable Ghent that is sustainable, social and enterprising. The number of tourists has increased sharply in recent years. This is nice, we like to be hospitable. Ghent

wouldn't be Ghent without its tourists. Tourism is very important, but support for tourism is equally important for Ghent residents and for Ghent. We are now at a tipping point and so we will pursue a policy that benefits Ghent, the people of Ghent and tourists."

"We don't want to be a 'selfie city', where tourists snap some pictures and leave without really getting to know the city. We want to entice tourists to immerse themselves in our city. Because Ghent has much more to offer than the Ghent Altarpiece and the Castle of the Counts. We want to show what we are like and how we experience our city. Tourists need a few days for this experience. We genuinely believe that they can enjoy unique experiences in Ghent. There is no other city like Ghent. I also see tourism as a lever to focus on what we are good at in Ghent, like social entrepreneurship, for example. It is interesting for residents to interact with tourists, but at the same time we must avoid an overload. That is why we spread tourists in time and space and limit informal accommodation, which increases house prices and creates unfair competition. We believe in a sustainable story."



#### Two tips

- 1 / Dare to **focus on your own strength** and capitalise on your assets to (have people) experience your place.
- 2 / Let us all **work together** to turn the many beautiful places in Flanders into a fantastic hub of attraction that is in balance.

## Antwerp

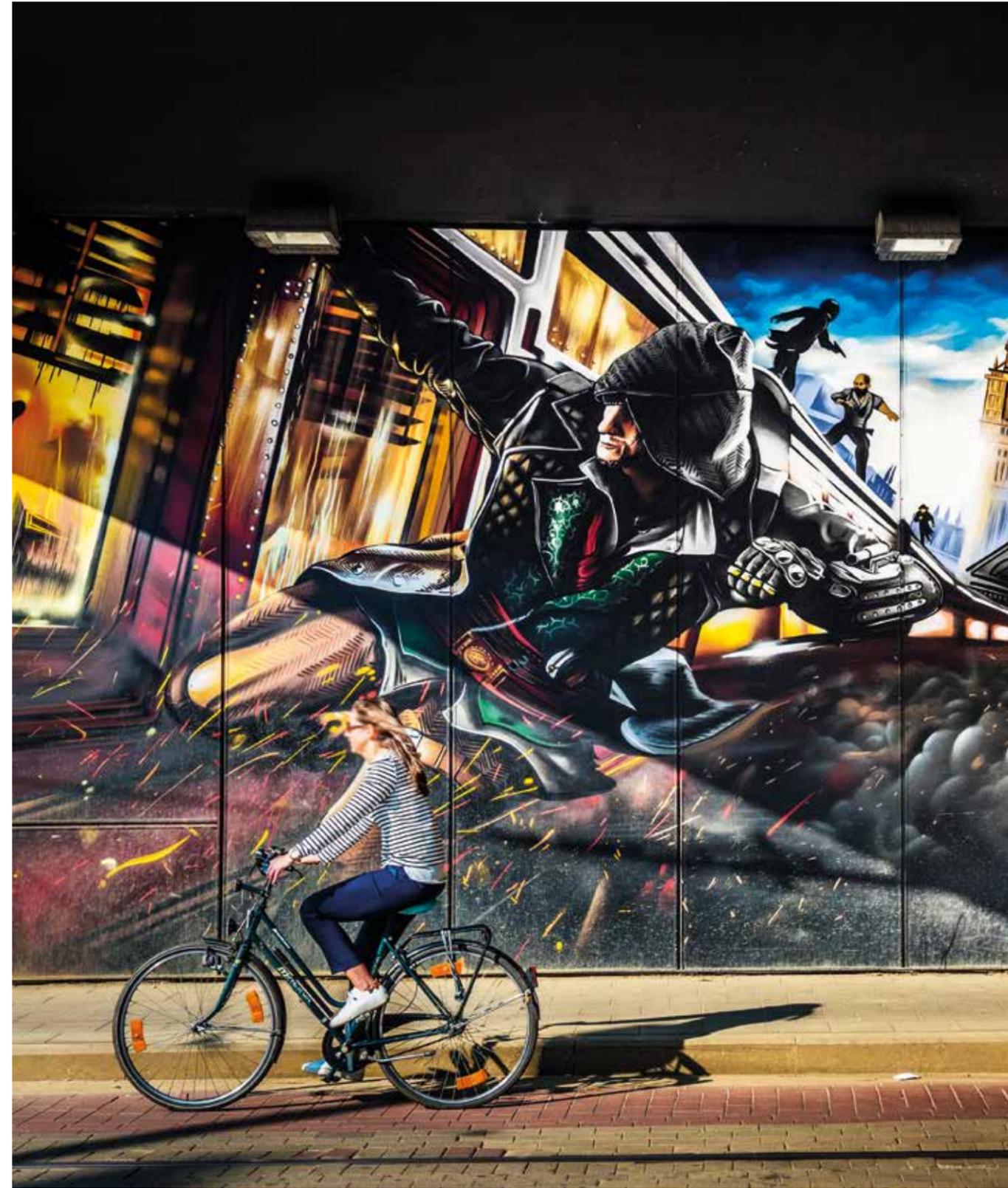
### ATYPICAL HUMAN-SIZED TOURISM

“Antwerp has worked hard in recent years to put the strategic plan for 2016-2025 into practice. The main challenge was to market the city as an attractive destination, but in a quirky way: atypical, personal and on a human scale”, says tourism alderman Koen Kennis. The plans were implemented in two projects.



This is Antwerp was launched in 2011, originally as a tool for youth marketing with a website and a magazine in which young people from Antwerp had a starring role. They developed a to-visit list, referring young visitors to the latest hotspots, newest fashion and trendiest nightlife. Over recent years, This is Antwerp has evolved into a more mature project, in which the creative economy and art hold a prominent place. There was one constant: the input of a team of committed young Antwerp residents who want to help put their city on the map.

A second project consists of creating added value for districts and neighbourhoods. Antwerp is such a vibrant city because of the diversity of the city's districts, each having its own character and colour. This quality of the city must be preserved and further enhanced. By interacting with residents, entrepreneurs and other stakeholders in those neighbourhoods during different sessions, we were able to develop the identity of the neighbourhoods in more detail. As such, we are able to spread visitors across our pocket-sized metropolis and direct them to places where they can stroll through different neighbourhoods with their own local colour, with small museums, boutiques, cafés and restaurants. Where you can discover old and new, historical and contemporary features. Each neighbourhood has its own character.



## Leuven

### TOURISTS TAKE A PIECE OF OUR DNA HOME WITH THEM

Leuven attracts students as well as tourists from around the world. Mayor Mohamed Ridouani wants to connect the past and the future, as well as the tourists and the people of Leuven.



"I think we can still add a number of accents, focussing on the identity of the city among others. We want to connect our heritage, such as the magnificent town hall, with an optimistic view of the future. I hope that we can really send a message to our visitors with our architecture, our local population and all the plans we have."

"Tourism is good for the hospitality industry and trade, but we mainly want to attract tourists who are interested in the identity and history

of our city and in the people who live here. We don't just want them to go home with an image of our beautiful buildings and places. They also need to get an idea of our history and the DNA of our city", says the mayor. And tourists must be able to connect with the locals."

"The people of Leuven are open-minded and curious, they want to find out more about these tourists. What are their stories, their backgrounds, which insights can they give us? By not seeing them as tourists, but as guests who want to learn something about our city, you become a host yourself. A host is engaged, curious and also tries to learn something from his/her guests. This paves the way for contact and a connection. This also creates the best opportunities for entrepreneurs. Guests leave their story with us and take a piece of our DNA home with them. This fosters a better society and more understanding."

"In that context our town hall, which is a tourist attraction, will be repurposed. It will become a place where visitors can learn something about our history as well as a meeting place for the people of Leuven. I think that this is a more organic approach to tourism. Everyone will be involved: the local population, entrepreneurs and tourists", says Ridouani.



#### Tip

"I try to learn from colleagues in other large cities. We have plenty of magnificent heritage and beautiful cities in Flanders, a story that we can tell together. So let's work together and **learn from each other**. I want to share my experiences with others", Mohamed Ridouani stresses.

## Bruges

### QUALITY OVER QUANTITY

As one of Flanders' leading art cities, Bruges has been attracting tourists in droves for many years. Nowadays Bruges prioritises 'quality' rather than 'quantity', however. Based on the Travel to Tomorrow principles, the city has mapped out a new tourism policy, in the interest of its residents and inspired by the insight that what benefits them also benefits visitors and entrepreneurs. The coronavirus pandemic has since thrown a spanner in the works.



A four-leafed clover is a symbol of good luck, much like tourism is for Bruges. And it's unique, much like the city itself. That is why it is used as a format for explaining the four objectives of the new vision on tourism. Tourism

must support the city's dynamics. It should be balanced, uniting people, attractive and enterprising, which in turn contributes to the well-being of the local population, entrepreneurs and visitors. Mayor Dirk De fauw explains the situation: "We have seen a tremendous increase in the number of tourists. Worldwide but also in Bruges (which is why the empty streets of Bruges during the lockdown were such a mind-blowing sight, ed.). Many of them only visit Bruges for a few hours and they tend to all congregate in the same place in the heart of the city, preferably at the same time. As such the locals feel 'oppressed' by tourists at certain times of the day. Sustainable tourism starts from a deeply-felt respect for the city and its residents. To control the impact and strike a balance, we need to supervise tourist development. "We want to break away from a volume-oriented mindset, redefining the success of tourism in a different way", says Mayor De fauw.

"We focus more on 'qualitative tourists', that have less impact. We target visitors who are interested in authenticity, in more in-depth knowledge. That is why we are also investing



in meeting and convention tourism. Business travellers come to Bruges at other times and tend to stick to other locations. We also look beyond the historic centre. We include the seaside and the hinterland in our story. As such, we hope to spread visitors in time and space, achieving a better balance. Because the people of Bruges are proud of their city and like to receive people. The tourism industry accounts for 6,000 jobs, but everything must always be in balance", De fauw opines.

#### Two tips

- 1 / "There's no need to **reinvent the wheel**. Use national and international examples as a reference. Look at their tourism policy and which measures they take to turn tourism into a positive story."
- 2 / "Make sure that you are **on good terms** with your stakeholders. The hotel industry, the restaurants and pubs, the shops and the local population must all endorse your policy."

## Limburg

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### **LIMBURG IS SYNONYMOUS WITH HOSPITALITY**

Limburg believes in Travel to Tomorrow. Recreational and business tourists are increasingly searching for more meaningful destinations, with good facilities, a clear identity and an adapted offering.



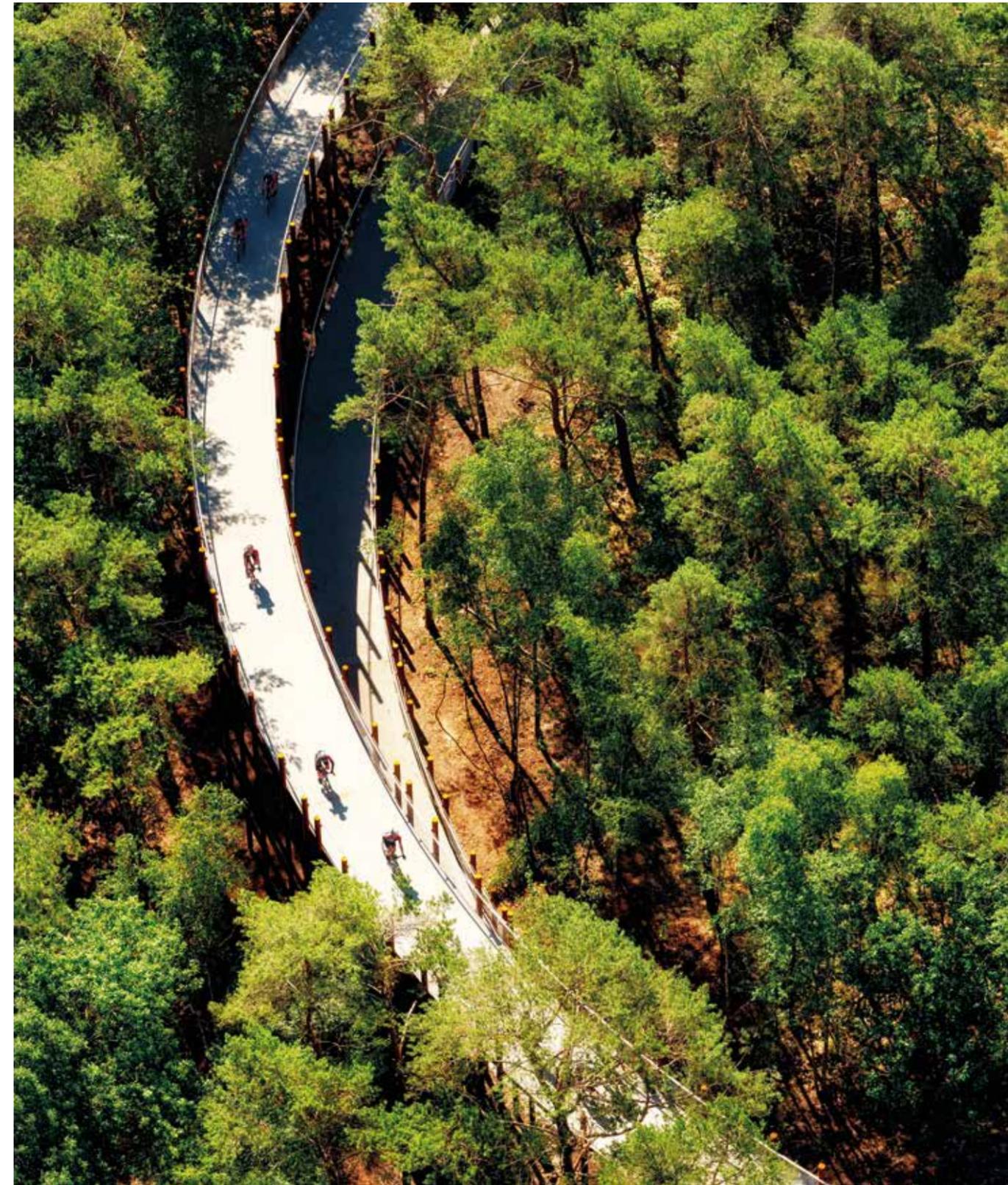
In Limburg they call tourists 'guests' because Limburg is synonymous with hospitality. All the stakeholders joined forces to better understand how Limburgers wish to receive these guests and with which objective. More than 1,250 tourism partners spent one year developing a model for moving forward. All the findings from the discussions, surveys, studies

and work sessions were shared online with all the sectoral partners at [www.gastenplan.be](http://www.gastenplan.be). The ideas, insights and thoughts served as inspiration for drafting a tourism plan that was drawn up by and for the people for whom it was intended.

Tourism is an important spearhead in Limburg's prosperity. It is the province's fourth economy, after health care, construction and the manufacturing industry. Limburg consequently continues to further develop qualitative tourism, offering guests meaningful experiences. As a result, guests are even more likely to visit Limburg. They bring prosperity, creating opportunities for entrepreneurs, in addition to jobs. A propitious business climate benefits all the people of Limburg.

Tourism is not an end in itself but a means for building a better Limburg. Because everyone stands to benefit from meaningful tourism, which offers growth opportunities for entrepreneurs, makes communities better, and improves the quality of life of the local population.

Hasselt's alderman for tourism, Rik Dehollogne, explains: "In Hasselt, we believe in a strong tourism policy that starts from our city's DNA.



For as long as people can remember, Hasselt has been known as the city of taste, as a very welcoming city. Our visitors tell us that they always feel really welcome in Hasselt. The people of Hasselt are genuinely nice, accessible and sincere. They will go that extra mile to make the stay of their visitors as pleasant as possible. Entrepreneurs and locals welcome visitors with open arms. They want them to feel at home here. This hospitality is apparent in how we welcome people, in our tourist offering. In addition to its hospitality, Hasselt also naturally attracts people because of its taste. In Hasselt we do everything in style: eating, taking a walk, meeting, spending the night. A little over the top perhaps, but also alternative and experimental. It is this mix that makes Hasselt such a nice place to be, whether you're a local or a visitor."

### Three objectives for 'meaningful tourism'

- 1 /** Increase the brand notoriety and appeal of Limburg. From now on, the Limburg brand will be positioned as a green, vital destination for a meaningful holiday. As a region that strikes a balance between relaxation and an active trip, between tradition and the future, between the countryside and the city. The brand starts from Limburg's history and *terroir*.
- 2 /** Increasing guest satisfaction by creating meaningful experiences for tourists and Limburgers.
  - In Limburg, landscapes, attractions and heritage will be connected with each other with qualitative hiking and cycling trails. The idea is that everyone can visit and experience these places in a sustainable way. The tourist season lasts 365 days a year, with an attractive and varied offering.
  - In addition to this, valuable Limburg heritage is also repurposed, with a

designation that holds international appeal. The brand-new be-MINE-PIT mine experience centre in Beringen is a good example of this. It will immerse visitors in the mines and will tell the story of Limburg's miners. The highlight will be an interactive underground simulation, giving visitors a taste of what it was like to work in the mines.

- In Limburg they also feel that tourism is a basic right. That is why they seek to lower the threshold for people with mental or physical disabilities or for people who lack the resources for tourism.
- 3 /** Public and private entrepreneurship enhances sustainable growth. The arrival of guests contributes to economic growth, resulting in revenue and creating jobs. Entrepreneurs and the local authorities play an important role in the creation of guest experiences.
    - They will thus be offered the required network, the knowledge and the data, in addition to logistical and financial support where necessary. Investments that significantly contribute to the guest experience, relating to the experience of the brand identity, inclusiveness or cross-overs within the Limburg ecosphere, will therefore be at the top of the list for this support.
    - Tourist partners can participate in the joint Limburg promotion that is being set up by VisitLimburg.be. By focussing on the corporate and conference markets, the economic impact of tourism is increased, Limburg's image as a knowledge region is enhanced, and the off-peak months in recreational tourism are offset.



### Ten tips

- 1 /** Focus on meaningful encounters.
- 2 /** Lower the thresholds.
- 3 /** Choose sustainability.
- 4 /** Capitalise on the themes.
- 5 /** Rely on your knowledge of the tourist offering.
- 6 /** Build on the DNA of your place.
- 7 /** Use the partner model and combine communication resources.
- 8 /** Grow through training.
- 9 /** Rely on support measures.
- 10 /** Focus on passion groups, dare to choose specific niches that tie in with your offering.

## Westtoer

### FLANDERS FIELDS CONNECTS PEOPLE FROM AROUND THE WORLD

From 2014 until 2018, Flanders commemorated the centenary of the Great War, inspiring the whole world in the process. For the commemoration in Flanders Fields, Westtoer, the tourist authority of the Province of West Flanders, set to work based on seven principles that are quite similar to the ideas behind Travel to Tomorrow. The locals, visitors and entrepreneurs were all involved in the resulting story. Flanders Fields connects people from around the world with each other and with the Westhoek.



Flanders Fields does not just exist in the minds and hearts of the people who live and work here, but also in those of the people who visit our region. Everyone feels this connection, this inspiration. It is a place that inspires respectful visits. An experience that forces you to reflect on all there was and is, but which also sets the ball rolling.

#### Seven basic principles

##### 1 / Respect for the war victims, for history and for the landscape.

Stephen Lodewyck, programme coordinator Centenary of the Great War at Westtoer: "The landscape was tremendously important during the war and during the commemoration. In a sense, you cannot understand the war, how it unfolded, and warfare unless you are familiar with the landscape and can read it. We did two things, starting from this key idea. We developed a number of experience points in the landscape in addition to several tourist routes."

##### 2 / Good hospitality attests to our respect for visitors and is crucial. The result is qualitative accommodation and substantive information and explanations at the various sites. We organised training sessions for the private sector. Visitor flows were spread in time and space as much as possible, which enhances the serenity when people visit war heritage.

Stephen: "We started with the preparations in 2010 and closely involved regional entrepreneurs in our plans. In view of the remembrance theme, ours was a respectful approach. By including entrepreneurs in this story, they were on the same wavelength. Our idea was to avoid a more or all too commercial approach to the subject. Our intention was to focus on meaningful tourism, that inspires reflection."

##### 3 / Accessibility means that remembrance tourism is open to everybody. To locals and visitors from Belgium and abroad, to people of all ages, to the public at large and to experts. With attention to people with disabilities. Precisely because the target audience is so diverse, Westtoer suggested several different storylines and working methods, while providing layered information.

##### 4 / Historic visions, many war stories and the complexity of history were all covered in different types of commemorations, from multiple perspectives. This was all achieved by dint of dialogue and new insights. Stephen: "We were very much aware that any remembrance is a delicate exercise. In addition to the official ceremonies with government leaders and the military emphasis, we also chose to stimulate cultural-tourist forms of remembrance. GoneWest, the commemorative programme of the Province of West Flanders, was a good example of this. Moreover, we wanted to highlight all aspects of the war, not just the battles. We wanted to also tell stories of life behind the frontline, from the perspective of the people of the colonies of these superpowers who came to fight in Flanders Fields, from the women's standpoint, and so on. We started by aligning all these stories from the outset, as part of a clearly-defined programme. This contributed to the unity and strength of the remembrance programme as a whole in the Westhoek Region."



##### 5 / Deepening knowledge about World War I. There is a great need for additional scientific-historic research. Such historic research contributes to the polyphony of the many stories of the history of World War I. We can achieve this by organising study days and study trips, setting up discussion platforms, and through further reflection on remembrance tourism.

##### 6 / Internationalisation by providing for international communication and focussing on Europe in the discourse. The New York Times had the following to say about how we approached the commemoration of the Great War in Flanders: "A model American institutions could learn from."

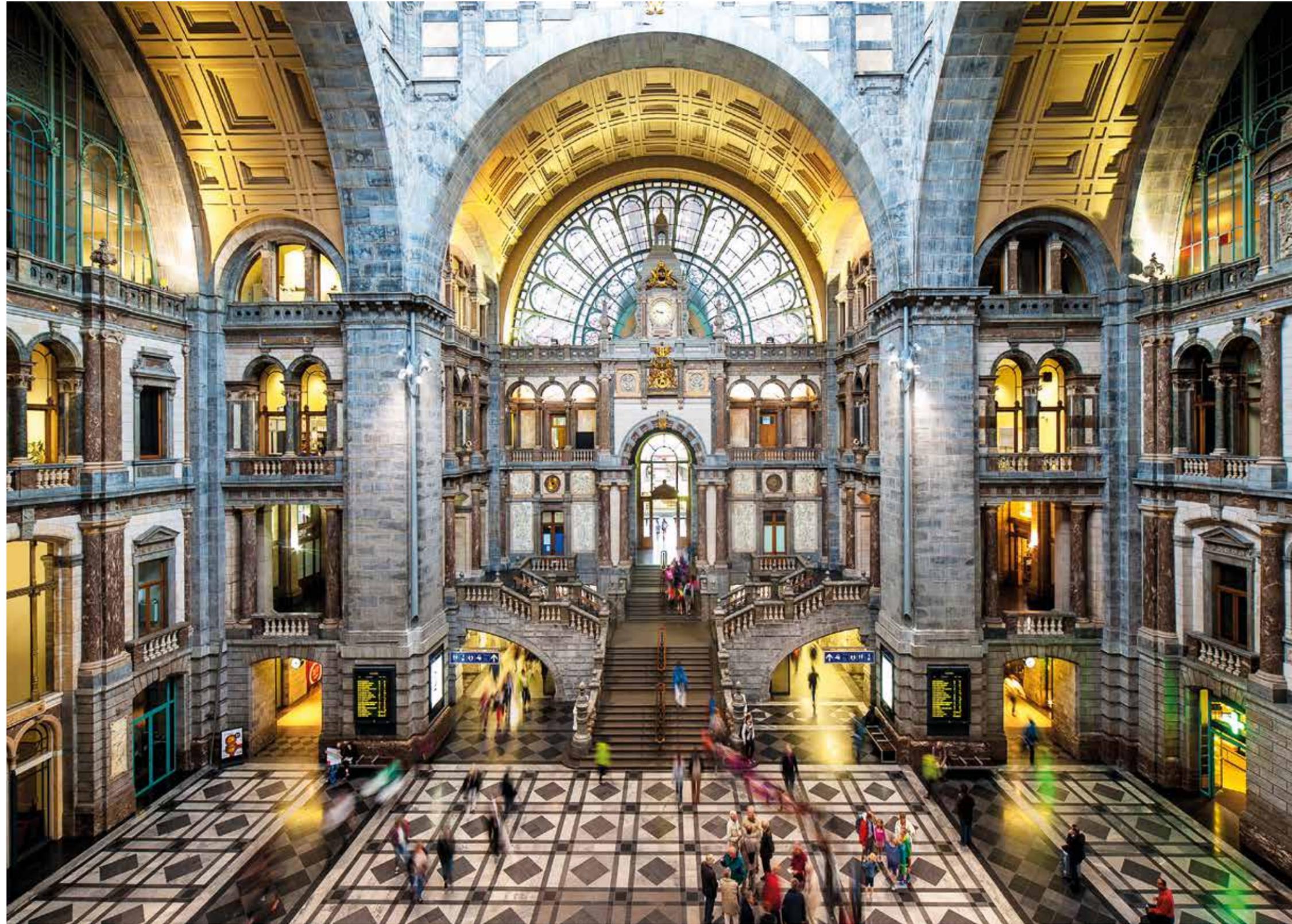
##### 7 / Message of peace. Stephen: "In the Westhoek our intention is to share a lasting memory of the war with others, while also preserving our war heritage for future generations and conveying a message. A message that is firmly endorsed in the region. A message of 'No more war', of peace, which is also very tangible in the Yser Tower and in the Flanders Field Museum."

# Epilogue

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***To Particularize is the  
Alone Distinction of Merit.***

William Blake  
(British artist and author,  
1757-1827)



## The Travel to Tomorrow story is my policy

ZUHAL DEMIR, FLEMISH MINISTER FOR TOURISM

This book explains how a growing group of people in Flanders and beyond are reflecting on the future of tourism, the value of travel, the vitality and soul of places, the creativity and welcoming hospitality of entrepreneurs, and the transforming power of encounters with another place, culture or person. VISITFLANDERS and many of its 'travel companions' went in search of the positive force of tourism, seeking to understand how it can become a driving force for our actions.

This book does not tell you how to set up a sustainable tourist operation or policy in the future. Nor does it dictate how we should travel in the future, in respect of the balance between destinations, their population and their 'temporary residents' or visitors. Is this because we don't find this important? Quite the contrary, but there are plenty of other publications and websites that focus on sustainability in the ecological and economic sense of the word.

Personal stories and the experiences of private individuals show us how tourism can make a positive contribution to our society. We distilled information from research questions and answers to check whether insights extend beyond people's personal world. Practical experiences show what happens when people open their minds and hearts to the positive force of travel. Their stories are inspiring and will hopefully encourage people to spring into action.

Communities in balance, in inspirational places with a soul, are naturally open

to visitors, whether they are temporary (tourists) or less temporary (e.g., expats). I'm firmly convinced that hospitality thrives where the interests of the locals, visitors, entrepreneurs, and the place itself are all in balance. In today's world, we all know of plenty of examples where this balance has been disrupted. I have observed this on the streets of Venice and Barcelona, with their throngs of visitors, or in the serially-reproduced experience after having waited in a long queue. The balance is also out of kilter on well-beaten paths to sites such as Angkor Wat or the Taj Mahal and on the increasingly massive cruise ships that sail our seas. When I see how intermediary platforms without value(s) or shady circuits take an increasingly large cut of the profit of the new slum lords who rent out tourist accommodation, it seems as if they are motivated by a perverse interpretation of the Olympic motto *citius, altius, fortius* (faster, higher, stronger): these increasingly powerful multinationals solely seem motivated by achieving the highest possible profit without creating any real added value for the local community.



Besides the economic relevance of tourism, which obviously continues to be a factor, I also want to point out other criteria, that shape our prosperity as well as the well-being of our communities, and how we live together. Tourism can have a positive impact in this context. Based on this conviction, I decided to make the positive force of tourism a cornerstone of my policy as Minister for Tourism at the end of 2019. Travel to Tomorrow is my policy and my response to the challenges that of the coronavirus pandemic. The coronavirus torpedo that hit tourism mid-ship has only accentuated the issue, confirming our analysis that things need to change, that we need to do things differently. So what does 'a return to what things were' mean and do we want this?

This book is a collection of stories, introducing readers to a multitude of voices, of people who love tourism and travel and whose outlook is firmly focused on the future. I dedicate this wonderful polyphony on our journey to the future to all these positive thinkers.

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