Metaverse and Heritage Routes as Innovation Approaches for Networking, Capacity Building and Interregional Investments

*An international European consortium comprising 10 full and 5 associated partners has launched a groundbreaking initiative aimed at transforming interregional development, innovation, and economic growth across Europe. The **MetaHeritage Project**, funded by the European Innovation Council and Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises Executive Agency (EISMEA), combines cutting-edge technologies such as the Metaverse with cultural heritage to create new business models, strengthen regional innovation ecosystems, and promote sustainable tourism.*

Digitisation has become a central priority for the EU and its member states, particularly in the cultural heritage and tourism sectors. MetaHeritage capitalises on this momentum by leveraging the European Digital Innovation Hubs network, established in 2023, to help small and medium-sized enterprises adopt digital innovations. As an evolution of the S3 Pilot Action, the Interregional Partnership "Virtual and Smart Cultural Tourism", recognized by the European Commission in 2023, MetaHeritage underscores the EU's commitment to advancing digital innovation in cultural heritage and tourism.

Rooted in the principles of smart specialisation, MetaHeritage empowers less-developed regions through interregional networking and coordinated investment strategies. Focusing on heritage and cultural routes as well as metaverse applications, the project fosters innovative, targeted solutions that address the unique challenges and opportunities of each region.

Transforming Innovation Across Regions

MetaHeritage adopts a holistic approach to innovation, integrating the value chain across regions at different stages of development. The project focuses on **one less-developed region** (Northern Portugal), one **outermost region** (Azores), **three transitional regions** (Thuringia, Saxony, and Galicia), and **three more-developed regions** (Emilia Romagna, Brussels, and Vienna). This inclusive approach ensures equal participation and tailored interventions, promoting sustainable heritage tourism, particularly in rural areas, while advancing digitisation and competitiveness in Europe.

The project's key goals include:

- **Promoting Sustainable Growth**: Integrating digital and sustainable innovation with heritage tourism and entrepreneurship.

- **Enhancing Regional Collaboration**: Connecting businesses, academia, government agencies, and civil society to foster interregional and intersectoral collaboration.

- **Tackling Regional Disparities**: Providing tools and resources for underrepresented regions to access EU innovation networks and funding opportunities.

Funded by
the European Union

MetaHeritage actively involves a wide range of stakeholders, including European clusters, heritage companies, destination management organisations, digital providers, research institutions, GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums) organisations, civil society groups, and public administrations. This collaboration ensures robust capacity building, the development of innovative business cases, and consultancy services.

The project further strengthens the EU's commitment to prioritising digital innovation in cultural heritage and tourism, aligning with emerging EU funding policies and supporting the European Digital Innovation Hubs initiative to promote digital innovation for small and medium-sized enterprises.

Looking Ahead: A Vision for Sustainable Innovation

By merging corporate and cultural heritage with advanced technologies, MetaHeritage aims to create a dynamic, interregional ecosystem that fosters sustainable growth, innovation, and economic resilience. The project's framework will empower less-developed regions to create business cases that combine heritage routes with metaverse technologies, offering immersive and innovative experiences.

Networking events, collaborations across industries, and participation in innovation ecosystems— such as the Motor Valley regional automotive heritage route in Emilia Romagna serving as an example of good practice—will connect stakeholders with investors, collaborators, and support organisations. These activities will enhance regional networks, provide access to resources, and open new opportunities for growth.

The project consortium will convene on January 30th at the University of Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro in Vila Real, Portugal, for its official kick-off meeting. The event will feature organisational discussions, inspiring talks, and team-building activities to lay the foundation for the project's success over the next two years.

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Project Partners

- Universidade de Tras-os-Montes e Alto Douro
- Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena
- Associazione Clust-ER Turismo
- European Historic Houses
- Conferencia de rectores de las Universidades del suroeste europeo
- Clust-ER Innovatzione nei servizi
- European Cluster Alliance
- Universidade dos Acores
- Technische Universität Dresden
- Time Machine Organisation

Associated Partners

- Asociación Clúster Empresarial de Turismo de Galicia
- Fundação da Casa de Mateus
- Fundação Côa Parque
- Fundacao Gaspar Frutuoso
- Turismo Porto e Norte ER