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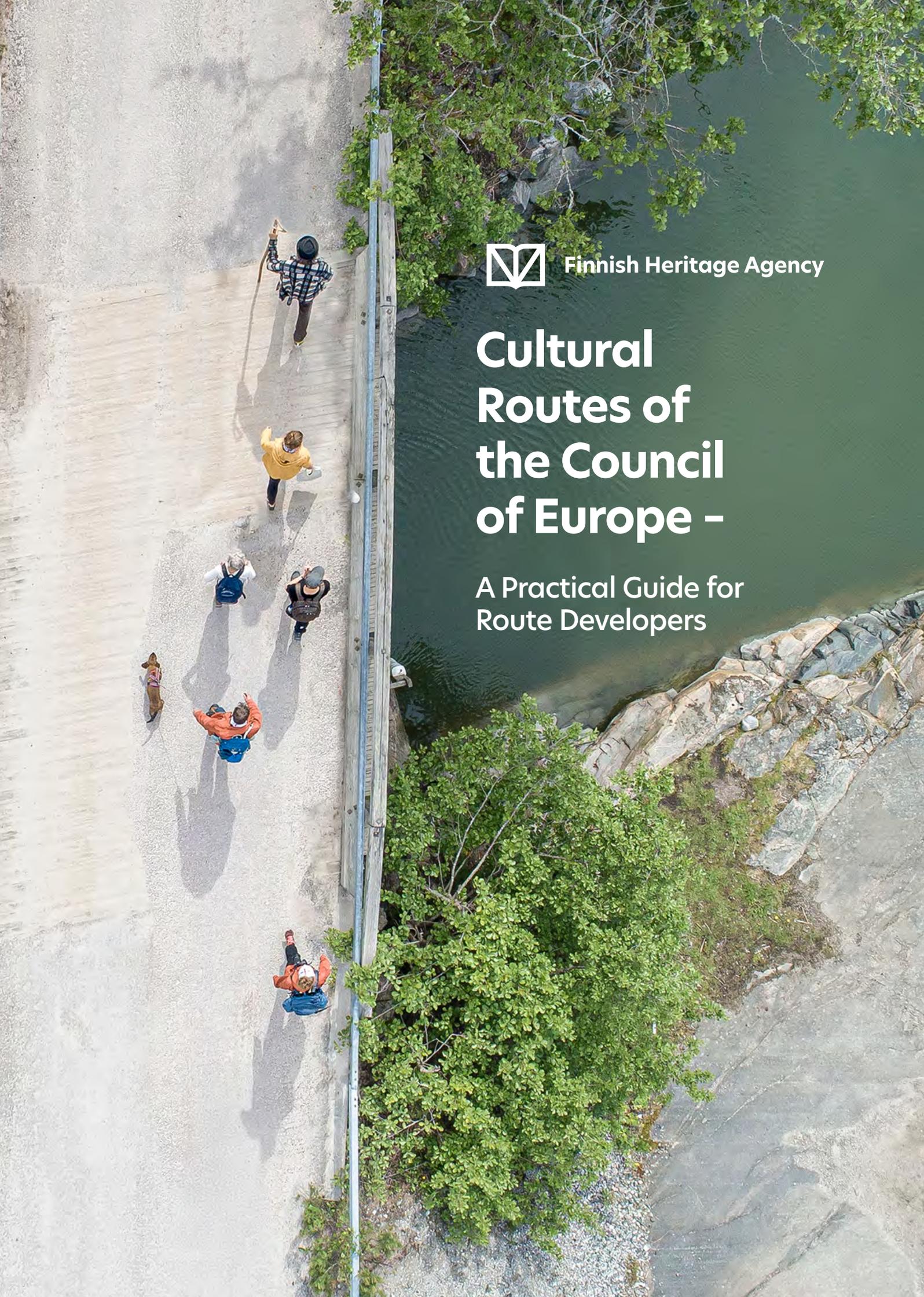
Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe –

A Practical Guide for Route Developers

Finnish Heritage Agency

Contents

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1 Introduction

The Council of Europe (CoE) has appreciated the interconnection between travelling and cultural awareness raising for many decades. The value of various historical and cultural sites as destinations for tourism and learning in and about Europe achieved a concrete form with the installing of the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe programme in 1987. The programme promotes the vision of culture as the foundation of shared identities in resilient and democratic European societies.

Over decades, the programme has developed while it also has kept true to its core cultural values. In the recent project Cultural Routes for Heritage Cooperation and Capacity Building (2025) funded by the Nordic Culture Fund and implemented by the specific working group (* under the Baltic Region Heritage Committee, it was found that the coordination of the programme in this area would benefit from a practical guidebook.

The Nordic and Baltic countries are connected in many ways and not only through geography. There are similarities in forms of architecture, bonds in elements of living cultural heritage, languages, literature and forms of art that connect these countries across generations and borders. This shared heritage is not static but alive, evolving, and guiding in an era of transformations and global uncertainty. It strengthens belonging and reminds us of who we are and why we stand together.

The Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe embody this vision by linking places, stories, and traditions across Europe to foster dialogue and mutual understanding. This guidebook brings practical guidance for developing and managing these Routes, but its purpose is greater: to inspire cooperation, safeguard heritage, and ensure that culture remains an inspiring source for peaceful life together.

This guidebook offers clear advice and down-to-earth examples about organising and managing CoE Cultural Routes. It is especially targeted to cultural heritage organisations in the Baltic and Nordic countries, but it is

composed so that it is useful for anyone interested or already involved in the CoE Cultural Routes across Europe.

The purposes of this guidebook are to

- offer an overview of the Cultural Routes programme;
- advice how to get involved with the programme by joining an existing route;
- explain the process of starting up a new Cultural Route;
- inspire with examples of Cultural Routes and good practices;
- support and inspire in developing also the already certified Cultural Routes' activities;
- disclose typical challenges in putting up and running a route;
- provide sources of more information and support for Cultural Route activities in your region.

*) The Cultural Routes for Heritage Cooperation and Capacity Building (2025) project was led by the Finnish Heritage Agency. Project partners included the Arts and Culture Norway, the Swedish National Heritage Board, the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Estonia, the National Heritage Board of Latvia, and the Department of Cultural Heritage under the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania.

The aim of the project was to support the networking of CoE Cultural Routes in Finland, Sweden, Norway and the Baltic countries and to promote the development and management of the CoE Cultural Routes, strengthening the capacity of respective networks to work successfully and sustainably in the best interest of cultural heritage, following the values of the Council of Europe.

2 Exploring, sharing and learning about cultural heritage through joint action

Europe is immensely rich and diverse in culture, history and cultural heritage. To appreciate and sustain the value of this heritage, people need to know about it. By visiting and experiencing destinations of distinctive cultural and historical value, people can find out and learn about different fascinating corners of Europe.

Well-thought services and products of sustainable cultural tourism allow tourists to gain – instead of overconsumption and superficiality – more profound insights, even about themselves: about their relation to culture, history and the European values, and about sustainable cultural tourism. Making such knowledge and experiences available for audience profits from active work and co-operation between different heritage and tourism professionals and experts.

The programme Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe aims to make European culture, history and cultural heritage better known and more visible and promotes cooperation to make it more inviting and inspiring for tourists from Europe and beyond. By awarding the Certificate the programme highlights selected Cultural Route networks for their excellence in delivering this heritage available for tourists and citizens in high-quality and sustainable ways.

The term 'cultural route' is used in different contexts and by various actors to label routes, roads, and other itineraries that are hoped to interest and attract tourists. As part of launching its Cultural Route programme in the 1980s, the Council of Europe started to delineate its use of the term. Today, the 'Cultural Route of the Council of Europe' refers to these specific certified routes that have passed the criteria and approval process explicated in the programme's steering documents.

In this document, the term 'Cultural Route' refers exclusively to the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe programme and the respective certification.

The Cultural Route Programme offers opportunities to develop diverse forms of cultural heritage, including intangible heritage. A new initiative focused on sauna culture is currently being developed within the Nordic and Baltic countries. Photo: Visit Finland.

THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE (COE)

The Council of Europe was founded in 1949 to cherish and increase especially intra-European relations and common values, such as human rights, rule of law, and democracy. The organisation created a platform for joint discussions and agreements on action in economic, social, cultural, scientific, legal and administrative matters.

Today, the Council of Europe holds 46 member states spanning a geographical area from Greenland to Azerbaijan and from Svalbard to Cyprus. Culture and cultural policies have always had a central role in the organisation's activities. Along with the Cultural Routes, the Council of Europe is also known for the Faro Convention (2005) on the value of cultural heritage for society.

At the core of the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe programme lies international co-operation in cultural heritage. The Cultural Routes are essentially international networks of diverse organisations that are working on or with cultural heritage sites and elements and that co-operate and develop the Routes together, often in processual ways and methods.

Although many of the certified Cultural Routes actually are based on historical routes and itineraries, the notion of a Cultural Route of the Council of Europe surpasses the vision of a single physical route. It should not be seen only as an itinerary that would explain the path from A to B. Instead, each Cultural Route builds on a theme that, through the network structure, creates a whole – a route – that stretches across several countries in Europe and even beyond. The programme format gives the framework that guides the Cultural Route networks' planning and implementation of activities.

The Cultural Route programme is intended to sustain long-standing continuity in international networking and co-operation covering different themes of European cultural heritage. When a new Cultural Route is started, it typically takes a few years to build up the network, plan and implement activities, and then to prepare the application dossier, the file needed to apply for the Cultural Route Certification. Many Cultural Routes have been built upon an existing form of cooperation based on e.g., a previous project.

The Cultural Route network that intends to apply for the certification is expected to fulfil the programme criteria that is outlined in official documents. Following the approval of the application, the programme requests regular reporting of the Cultural Route network's activities every five years.

The programme is considered to hold remarkable cultural political value as it stimulates trans-border and international cooperation, encourages new approaches in the fields of cultural heritage, intercultural dialogue, and sustainable local development. In these ways the Cultural Routes reflect the many sides of European cultural identity, history and heritage and enable a better understanding of Europe.

2.1   Nordic and Baltic countries and the Cultural Routes

Since the first Cultural Route was established in 1987, the number of routes has increased with certain acceleration since 2005. In 2025, there are altogether 49 different Cultural Routes across Europe. Nordic and Baltic countries(* are involved in twenty Cultural Routes, the Viking Routes and the Hansa route being the most popular in terms of network members. Up-

to-date information about the certified Cultural Routes can be found at the Council of Europe Cultural Routes website.

From the beginning, the intention of the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe has been to help both travellers and locals to learn about European culture and heritage. While through time 'culture' and 'cultural heritage' have been academically and publicly debated and redefined as broader and more inclusive concepts than earlier, the Cultural Routes Programme continues to be motivated by the need to spread awareness about the symbolic importance of European unity, history and culture, to strengthen civil society, to promote the principles of the Council of Europe and the cohesion of European society. The more egalitarian and inclusive cultural notions and the European values are well reflected in the Nordic and Baltic countries' conception of cultural heritage.

DEFINITIONS REGARDING THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE CULTURAL ROUTE (2013)

Cultural Route: a cultural, educational heritage and tourism co-operation proj-ect(** aiming at the development and promotion of an itinerary or a series of itineraries based on a historic route, a cultural concept, figure or phenomenon with a transnational importance and sig-nificance for the understanding and re-spect of common European values.

Cultural Route operator: an organisation or a grouping of organisations legally registered in one or several of the Council of Europe member States, or a public in-stitution, which carries the legal, financial and moral responsibility for the manage-ment and functioning of a cultural route and represents the route vis-à-vis the Council of Europe.

Source: *Resolution confirming the establishment of the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes* (EPA), *CM/Res(2013)66*.

)* *By 2025, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden are ac-tively involved in the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe. It means that these countries have joined the programme agreement (EPA); Denmark and Iceland have yet not joined it at the time of writing this guidebook.*

)** *The definition applies the term "project" in referring to Cultural Route networking and activities. This term can be seen also in other Cultur-al Routes programme documents. It nevertheless does not mean pro-ject-based working as such. The essential goal of the programme is to es-tablish long-standing networks that focus on specified themes of European cultural heritage.*

2.2 Thematic networks make the roots of the Cultural Routes

Each Cultural Route is founded on a specific theme. A theme forms the essential, shared source of content for a Route and it is apparent in each Route's name.

The theme of the Route must be defined and clarified so that people who might visit the Route destinations, but who are not experts on the topic can understand what the Route is all about. For example, the European Route of Ceramics is indeed focused on different forms of ceramics, raising awareness about the shared cultural heritage of ceramic arts and industries in Europe. Another example, the European Cemeteries Route, helps to recall the importance and meanings of Europe's significant cemeteries and perceive also the intangible and multicultural dimensions.

The two routes may well appear as very different from each other regarding the themes. What unites them are the umbrella terms of European heritage and history. Together the various themes of Cultural Routes offer a multi-perspective overview to learn about and understand better both the historical roots and the present day of Europe.

Recognising and defining a theme for a new Cultural Route goes hand in hand with creating a network that connects different parties that are linked to the suggested theme. Network activities are at the core of the programme and therefore it is of vital importance to invest in the network building from the start. In practice, each Cultural Route network forms an association (or a federation of associations). The parties initiating the Route decide among themselves in which participating state this associations will be registered so that it has a legal status. The legal status of the associations allows the network activities to take place in a structured order.

Reading about and getting to know different Cultural Route networks and respective associations is essential for learning about the practical side of the programme at large. As the programme is soon turning into its fifth decade of activity, some of the networks have already achieved a more established status with hundreds of members and stakeholders while the more recently founded networks are still growing.

For example, the Hansa Cultural Route with the certification going back to 1991, united by the Union of Cities THE HANSA has a membership of nearly 200 member cities in 14 European countries. At the other end, the 2010 certified route run by the Association for the Route of Saint Olav Ways (ACSOW) has a membership of 32 stakeholders with the large majority

located in Norway. This in part reflects the diversity of the Routes and networks: over the years, some Routes become more established and grow their number of members, while the more recent Routes are at earlier stages of the process.

It is also notable that some Cultural Route networks might, as the consequence of not anymore fulfilling the Certificate's criteria, for various reasons, lose the certification.

3 Cultural Route of the Council of Europe Certification

Articulated criteria and guidelines delineate the achieving of the Cultural Route Certificate. The criteria, along with the proceedings for implementing the programme otherwise, can be found in detail in the resolution documents related to the programme's reference texts.

The criteria and rules for awarding the Certificate have been reviewed and updated. Most recent, the Resolution CM/Res(2023)2, details the current rules for the award of the Cultural Route of the Council of Europe certification.

[Find out more about the reference texts and conventions on the Cultural Routes website.](#)

The rules for certification include

- List of criteria regarding the choice of theme for the Cultural Route.
- List of priority fields of action, to each of which the route should connect.
- List of criteria regarding the compose of the network that is the basis for activities.

3.1 Different structures of the Cultural Routes

The differences in Routes are apparent in their forms and geographic layouts. The first Cultural Route, the Santiago de Compostela Pilgrim Routes (1987), or the later Route of Saint Olav Ways build on historical routes depicting pilgrimage journeys that used to be trodden and often also documented, would categorise as linear routes.

Other Routes can be seen as territorial routes sprouting from geographical contiguity and patterns, such as the Iter Vitis Route (2009) that builds on winemaking and viticultural landscapes and the Transhumance Trails (2023)

Pilgrims walking along the St. Olav Ways in Sweden. Photo: Michel Johansson.

that illustrate the various traditions of humans herding animals, that emerge in cultural landscapes of pastures and meadows in different corners of Europe and beyond, often involving cross- or transborder activity.
The Réseau Art Nouveau Network (2014), making evident the spread of cultural heritage of art nouveau architecture and design, or the Women Writers Route (2022), manifesting the rising of literary women at the turn of the 19th and 20th century, on the other hand, can be viewed as grids that connect sites from different countries and regions on a thematic basis. These grids, the more virtual routes, are also called reticular pattern routes.

Based on their different forms, Cultural Routes can be categorised as the three key types:

- linear routes
- territorial routes
- reticular pattern routes (grid routes)

The variety of themes of Cultural Routes together with their geographical structures reflect also in the practical realisation of each network and its working. Different themes involve different kinds of organisations and interest parties; some themes are more territorially accentuated than others. Furthermore, other topics have accumulated more academic interest, studies and research results, which reflects in the founding of a Cultural Route along with its Scientific Committee.

LINEAR ROUTE: ROMEA STRATA

The Romea Strata Cultural Route showcases an example of a linear route connecting north-eastern and central Europe to Rome. The approximately 4000 kilometres of historic routes once guided travellers from north-eastern Europe, spanning Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, among other countries, to Rome. In addition to the trade of amber, salt, iron, and silk, the route also worked as a major pilgrimage path, with travellers journeying to Rome and sometimes continuing to Santiago de Compostela or Jerusalem.

The Romea Strata European Association (AERS) was established in 2018. Covering seven north-eastern and central European countries the Romea Strate achieved the Certification in 2025. The association currently has 56 members including public administrations, non-profit organizations, universities, SMEs, and religious bodies.

[Romea Strata website](#)

TERRITORIAL ROUTE: TRANSHUMANCE TRAILS

Transhumance is a special form of man herding, for example, sheep or reindeer, a practice that for millenia has taken advantage of regional climatic and geographical circumstances to support optimal grazing for the animals round the year. The back-and-forth movement of men and herds has resulted with several known trails, of which many are still in use. As a practice of livelihood, transhumance has formed cultural landscapes of pastures and meadows as well as mental landscapes involving intangible cultural heritage such as stories and various skills that go into the practice. Exemplifying a territorial route, this Cultural Route, certified in 2023, includes several transborder trails from Europe and beyond, with examples also from Mexico and Guatemala.

The Association Transhumance Trails and Rural Roads (Asociación Vías de Trashumancia y Caminos Rurales) is an international association that is open to regions, cities, municipalities, institutions and organizations that identify themselves with the phenomenon of transhumance and meet the association membership requirements.

[Transhumance Trails website](#)

GRID ROUTE: RÉSEAU ART NOUVEAU NETWORK

The Art Nouveau trend appeared in the late 19th century and spread quickly across Europe through other emerging cultural phenomena of the time such as international exhibitions, illustrated magazines and further artistic and literary interaction. Extending a grid across several countries, the new style became known with different names including Jugendstil and Secession. In architecture, the style can today be seen especially dominant in urban districts that were built during the

increase in urban populations towards the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Art Nouveau styles decreased soon and after the First World Way made way for new designs.

The Réseau Art Nouveau Network was started in 1999 and achieved Cultural Route certification in 2014. The association has 30 institutional members in 16 countries that represent cities or regions that exemplify the Art Nouveau style and are motivated to safeguard and promote this special heritage.

[Réseau Art Nouveau Network website](#)

3.2 How to make use of Cultural Routes?

Along with the general goal of raising awareness about European cultural heritage and the essential values of the Council of Europe, the Cultural Routes have more local and practical aspects of use and significance. Below, there are collected some of the most appreciated benefits of joining the Cultural Route programme.

VISIBILITY

The Cultural Route of the Council of Europe Certificate is valued as a way to highlight locally and/or regionally specific landmarks, landscapes and historical routes, monuments, and also the more intangible forms of cultural heritage. The programme's thematic approach to cultural heritage allows the cross-marketing of points of interest that might otherwise remain distant from each other. Through the Cultural Route networking, joint communication and marketing, more people are reached and the word spread about lesser-known destinations which offers a gateway to increase audience, the numbers of visitors and clients.

While the Cultural Route network helps finding new audiences and potential visitors, the programme can add to the local or regional visibility. The membership and active participation in an international Cultural Route signify the high quality and professional level of cultural heritage work of the member, be that a museum, an interest organisation, or a research institute. The Cultural Route of the Council of Europe Certificate is widely recognised as an appreciated "quality stamp", as recognition of high-standard and versatile heritage work and expertise.

STRUCTURED NETWORKING

The Cultural Route programme offers an established and at high-level regulated international structure for international development on a specific cultural heritage theme and cultural tourism. The certification criteria and regular reporting also bring structure and spurs networks to continue their development work.

Furthermore, the programme is interconnected with key international organisations and their conventions and recommendations including, for example, the European Cultural Convention, Faro Convention, and the UNESCO World Heritage Convention.

EUROPEAN CULTURAL CONVENTION

The European Cultural Convention was adopted and opened for signature in 1954. In Europe's then post-WWII context with invisible and visible divisive demarcation lines the Cultural Convention was founded to support mutual understanding and reciprocal appreciation of cultural diversity among people in Europe. Cultural Convention creates the bedrock for the Council of Europe cultural policies and co-operation in the a reas of culture, education, youth activities and sport among European countries.

The Cultural Routes programme works to translate and bring to practice the principles of the Cultural Convention. For its part, the programme was planned to encourage people to explore their roots and cultural heritage by practising cultural tourism with the help of curated Cultural Routes. In this way, the programme contributes to learning about Europe and its past in ways that help avoiding nationalist appropriation and abusive use of history.

Read more on the Council of Europe website

LEARNING AND ACHIEVING MORE TOGETHER

Participation in a Cultural Route network gives access to an international professional network and being a member of one can as such be fulfilling. However, often the actual work done together in different projects and joint initiatives is found most rewarding. While the gained visibility can add to numbers of visitors and clients, the many activities included in the Cultural Route requirements support in the first line the member parties' learning and capacity building, deepening their expertise and refining or obtaining new skills.

Thematic Cultural Route networks bring together peers with similar interests. The programme structure advocates making use of different synergies by, for example, sharing resources such as pools of data, ideas, best practices, knowledge and experiences, to make easier the work in specific fields of cultural heritage. In short, interaction and coworking through the Cultural Route networks support participants' learning and valorisation of heritage and related capacities.

Many see great value in networking to find suitable, professional partners for various cultural, research, and educational projects. A Cultural Route network offers a framework with tools to realise such projects, including international exchange and learning. At a later stage of Cultural Route networking, the network and programme structures can be seen as the glue that continues to keep the network up and going, initiating new activities and projects.

Not of least value, international cooperation in a thematic field of interest is for many a genuine source of joy and inspiration, new professional connections and friendships that keeps up the flow in everyday work.

DEVELOPING IDEAS AND CREATING NEW PROJECTS

Through the formal organisation, Cultural Route networks have a legal status (as an association or a federation), which means that they are in a position to apply for funding from European, regional and other programmes. From the viewpoint of a singular member, especially with less experience in international project implementation, the network can give access to valuable knowledge about funding possibilities and skills on project planning and grant writing. In this way, participating a Cultural Route network can lower the threshold to joining EU projects.

The challenges and development areas that are recognised as relevant by numerous members of a Cultural Route form a practical reason to work together. Points of developing interest often include, for example:

- Enhancing sustainable cultural tourism and destination development. Sometimes joining a Cultural Route can be found supportive to and offering tools also for cooperation at national and regional levels.
- Strengthening the interlinks between cultural heritage, cultural and creative industries, and innovation, especially with attention to cross-innovation across different interest areas.
- Creating and implementing projects that are beneficial to local or regional development, increase cultural participation, or develop education and youth activities.

- Together, the Cultural Route network members also have more viewpoints to brainstorming and developing ideas (especially regarding the priority fields of activity) and wider access to building partnerships.

SUPPORTING COMMON VALUES

The cornerstone of the Cultural Route programme is the promotion of European values and goals including cultural diversity, intercultural and cross-border interaction, human and cultural rights, sustainable development, and raising awareness about European cultural heritage and identity.

The Cultural Routes often emphasise cultural heritage destinations that are lesser known and/or outside places that are troubled with over-tourism. The Cultural Routes promote sustainable development in tourism and through network activities members can actively boost cultural heritage's role in sustainable local and regional development.

In the context of increasing political uncertainties of the recent years, working internationally to strengthen democratic dimension of cultural exchange has become more important for many. Together with the thematic approach, the Cultural Route programme provides an established framework for standing up together for democratic values and contributing the promotion of ethically sound and diverse European identity and citizenship. The Cultural Route activities illustrate how cultural heritage and tourism can endorse social cohesion at local level across Europe.

3.3 How to join an existing certified Cultural Route?

By 2025, there are already 49 Cultural Routes representing various themes. Joining an existing Cultural Route offers an access to thematically specified international heritage and tourism network for interaction and exchange with peers with similar interest area. But joining a Route can also serve as driver for new connections and cooperation at the national levels, too.

Participation in a Cultural Route means in practice a membership in the respective network association. The terms of membership, typically including a membership fee, are set by each association in their statute or charter that outlines the rules and goals for their activities, following the programme framework as detailed in the programme's reference texts (Enlarged Partial Agreements and respective Resolutions).

The easiest way to learn about each network and association is through their websites that also explain their Route's theme, goals and present projects respectively. Many associations have added on their websites an on-line form to be filled in to express one's interest in the network and membership in the association.

4 Keywords of the management structure of the Cultural Route Programme

The Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe programme is extensive geographically and also in terms of management. There are needed organised actions to run, develop, and administer the programme. This has led to various documents, guidelines, procedures, processes, and organisation bodies that deliver the programme into concrete actions. This section introduces some of them (see more in the glossary in the end of the guidebook).

4.1 EPA – Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes

The Cultural Route programme has grown popular since it started in 1987. This has brought along some changes also to the general managing of the programme. During 2009–2013, there were introduced more effective and sustainable solutions to manage and develop the programme. This process brought the EPA agreement: the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes.

The EPA on Cultural Routes is open to member and even non-member states of the Council of Europe. States that wish to join the agreement would have to approve and sign it. Currently, 43 European states are members of the agreement.

4.2 Governing Bodies of the Programme

Adopting the EPA on Cultural Routes was remarkable for the practical side of financing the programme making it more flexible compared to the previous budgetary funding and governing of the Cultural Routes programme. Participation in the Cultural Routes EPA means that each state that has assigned it pays an annual membership fee. Member states of the Cultural Routes EPA also have the say on the implementation of the programme.

GOVERNING BOARD

As confirmed in the agreement text, each member state of the EPA on Cultural Routes can appoint one person to work as a representative in the Governing Board. It is this Governing Board that can award the Council of Europe Cultural Route certification. This takes place each year in May.

The Governing Board also decides whether Routes can continue to keep their certification. This depends on the reporting of the Route activities. The certified Cultural Routes are required to submit a report every five years for the Governing Board to evaluate each Route's activities and whether they still meet the eligibility criteria that is required to maintain the certification.

CULTURAL ROUTES ADVISORY FORUM

While the meeting of the EPA Governing Board is more formal, the annual Cultural Routes Advisory Forum invites together a diverse group of representatives of Cultural Route operators, networks, international heritage and tourism organisations and platforms, local and regional authorities, civil society organisations, Chambers of Commerce, foundations and other donor organisations, professional organisations in the field of tourism, heritage and culture or other relevant bodies.

The Forum provides a platform for the exchange of experience, review of progress with the implementation of cultural routes, discussions about trends and challenges in relation to Cultural Routes, debates on new professional practice, the launch of new initiatives, and the development of partnerships.

STATUTORY COMMITTEE

The Statutory Committee is composed of the Permanent Representatives of the member states of the Council of Europe participating in the EPA on the Cultural Routes. The Statutory Committee meets each year in October in Strasbourg, France, at the Council of Europe headquarters.

The Statutory Committee determines every year how much funds member countries are expected to contribute to run the Cultural Routes programme. It is also the Committee that adopts the annual budget of the Cultural Routes programme and approve the use of budget. This budget relates to the programme activities the expenditures of the programme's Secretariat (in other words, these funds are not channelled to Cultural Route associations).

EUROPEAN INSTITUTE OF CULTURAL ROUTES (EICR)

The EICR was set up in 1998 based on the agreement between the Council of Europe and the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg. The Institute assists the Governing Board and its Bureau in implementing the Cultural Route programme and works as a repository for its documentary resources.

The Institute gives advice to existing Cultural Route networks and to those that plan to propose new Routes to be certified. The Institute also supports in the evaluation cycles of the already certified Cultural Routes. Furthermore, the Institute leads or participates in projects that focus on cultural heritage management and promotion, cultural tourism, and management of Cultural Routes.

The Cultural Routes Secretariat is also located in the EICR. The European Institute of Cultural Routes receives financial support from the Ministry of Culture of the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg.

SUPPORT AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

Most member states of the EPA provide information and support regarding the Cultural Routes programme. This may include, for example, expert advice, support in networking, state grants for Cultural Route developing, and more. The level of support varies depending on the country.

ORGANISATIONS RESPONSIBLE FOR NATIONAL COORDINATION

Country	Organisation
Estonia	**Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Estonia** **Estonia Folk Culture Center**
Finland	**Finnish Heritage Agency**
Latvia	**National Heritage Board of Latvia**
Lithuania	**Department of Cultural Heritage under the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania**
Norway	**Arts and Culture Norway**
Sweden	**Swedish National Heritage Board**

5 Starting a new Cultural Route – what does it take?

Planning and starting a Council of Europe Cultural Route is a comprehensive task, because it weaves together several approaches to European cultural heritage at once. It is primarily a long-lasting cultural initiative that builds on continuing international networking among peers with similar interests in cultural heritage and tourism. The purpose of the programme is to function as a curated series of destinations for European cultural and heritage tourism and travelling citizens of Europe.

The themes of Cultural Routes build both on tangible or intangible cultural heritage, sites and elements, but the Routes do not translate mechanically as itineraries of interesting destinations for heritage tourism. What makes a Cultural Route exist in practice are the people who work together: heritage and tourism experts, researchers, and further stakeholders continuing their exchange about, research on and development of the Route – and, of course, the travellers that explore the Route.

For creating ideas to start a new Cultural Route, ask the following questions:

- What is the story about European cultural heritage you wish to share and how can that be summarised as one theme?
- What locations, sites (be they built heritage, landscapes, museums or other institutions) or other elements illustrate this story in ways that fit the same theme?
- Which organisations would be involved in initiating and organising the Cultural Route? How would you start and establish the Cultural Route network as an organisation with legal status?
- How does the association and the Route members implement different activities that match the priority fields of action that are detailed in the Cultural Route programme?
- In which ways would you make the Cultural Route visible and attractive for tourists and various actors in the tourism business, locally and internationally?

5.1 Required resources

Starting a new Cultural Route calls for several resources simultaneously, ranging from the very concrete and practical project skills to careful thinking, rounds of discussion, and ongoing learning processes. Surely, creating and managing a Cultural Route hardly works out as an odyssey to be performed single-handedly, but fundamentally builds on co-operation and team spirit. The organising and managing of a Cultural Route involve several considerations also on values, ethics, unbiased information sharing and research, and issues of sustainable tourism.

- Capacities in network building and management – "Keeping up the spirit!"
- Creating connections with research institutions and scholars with research interests in the theme of the Cultural Route.
- Financial capacities, including knowledge about funding schemes and grant writing.
- Project management, coordination and task delegation skills.
- People skills and communication skills.
- Organisational capacities including human resources that can be allocated to network development and association management.

Cultural Routes interlink both informative and educational tasks of audience development with the everyday management of a sustainable and viable tourism destination with its services and products. These tasks take place in an international operative context and in a network of multi-perspective experts and stakeholders. While the exercise may sound demanding the effort can be very rewarding. The organised programme format established by the Council of Europe and the nature of the certification including application and subsequent evaluation processes ensure the high quality of the programme and the value of the certification for each Route, its members and stakeholders.

5.2 Sources of help, information and support

When planning to join an existing or start building a new Cultural Route, one benefits a lot from contacting the national coordinator of the programme. They can give more information about what the process involves in the very practical levels, help finding contacts and networks and advise in preparing the application dossier. As available forms of support vary from country to country it is best to contact the coordination point in your country.

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The European Institute of Cultural Routes can offer some support in the start-up and preparatory phases of new Cultural Route initiatives. The EICR assesses the starting point of each initiative and can follow and support in the Cultural Route development process.

The EICR together with the Secretariat of the EPA are the first to study the final application dossier seeing that it is technically correct with all needed documents and ready to be submitted to evaluation to an independent expert.

6 Cultural Route preparation in five steps

To fulfil the formal criteria for the Cultural Route certification (see Resolution 2023/2), the process leading to a comprehensive application dossier has been divided into five steps.

- Defining a theme for the Route.
- Identifying heritage elements, that is, relevant destinations for visitors in at least three member countries of the Council of Europe.
- Creating a European network with a legal status as a registered association or federation.
- Developing network management and coordinating actions in the five main fields of action.
- Increasing visibility and planning the marketing of the Route.

The following shortly introduces these steps.

6.1 Delineating the theme for a Cultural Route

Each Cultural Route is founded on a specific theme that represents European values. The theme should be illustrative of European history and cultural heritage and helps to understand the diversity of present-day Europe. The theme is also expected to be of interest from the viewpoints of cultural and educational exchanges especially for young people, an applicable resource for initiatives regarding cultural tourism and tourism products and services and for projects on sustainable cultural development.

The key question is: What is the story that the selected theme of cultural heritage would present to tourists and citizens of Europe?

The theme is present or to be identified in at least three European countries. When mapping for countries with cultural heritage of the selected theme, it

is advisable to also consider the organisations that are involved and their profiles as potential stakeholders in a new Cultural Route network and association.

ATRIUM

ATRIUM stands for *Architecture of Totalitarian Regimes of the 20th Century in Europe's Urban Memory*. This Cultural Route focuses on the built heritage left by totalitarian and autocratic regimes that characterized much of Europe during the central decades of the 20th century. This includes both fascist regimes (Mussolini's Italy, Nazi Germany, Franco's Spain) and communist regimes (Soviet Union and Eastern European states).

The Route emphasizes that while democratic Europe firmly opposes these totalitarian regimes, their built heritage remains on city streets as part of shared European history. The ATRIUM Cultural Route helps to explore the sociological, ideological and geographical complexities of the 20th century European history through the lens of urban landscapes in different cities. The Route was certified as a Cultural Route of the Council of Europe in 2014.

[Atrium Route website](#)

6.2 Identifying heritage elements

For the Cultural Route to work in a meaningful way, there needs to be recognised heritage elements: destinations that clearly relate to the selected theme of the Route. These points of interest or objects, of tangible or intangible cultural heritage, should have an established position in that there would be research work available about them and actors or institutions that enable visits and manage the cultural heritage maintenance or safeguarding.

The key question is: How do the selected heritage elements, the destinations, contribute to telling the story of the chosen cultural heritage theme of the Route?

Here, the role of research-based work is important. The Cultural Route initiators identify together with their Scientific Committee the heritage elements, both tangible and intangible, that link the Route's sites and define a common narrative for the sites recognised as part of the Route.

6.3 Creating a European network with a legal status

The elementary action for creating a Cultural Route is to start building a network round the selected heritage theme. The path to this process is not expected to follow any predetermined protocol, but can be found organically, taking advantage of existing connections and relations and/or actively searching for new ones.

The Cultural Route network anchors to an association or a federation of associations that has a legal status in one of the EPA member countries. This is the corner stone for the administrative structure that is needed both in initiating and developing the network but also to build and send in the Cultural Route application dossier. It brings together the sites and the stakeholders of the network, with members in at least three Council of Europe member states.

Initiators for a network can be, for example, museums, other heritage institutions or organisations that may have acquainted through previous projects, exchange schemes or research cooperation. The variety of network members is typically diverse, covering both more focussed heritage actors, non-profit organisations, and public bodies, such as municipalities and cities, publicly funded destination management organisations (DMOs), and travel agencies. A specific part of Cultural Route networks are the science and research parties, such as university departments and science or research institutions.

The key question is: The Route's initiators must ensure that the association responsible for managing the Cultural Route is organisationally and financially viable for the task.

As network activities are at the core of the Cultural Route programme, it is quintessential to invest in the network building from the very beginning. It is wise to find out together among the participating organisations how to share responsibilities and delegate different tasks regarding, for example, outlining types of memberships and fees, communication about the Cultural Route, and association administration. Many Cultural Routes also share responsibilities between developing activities related to each of the priority fields so that each field has an appointed member in the lead (see section 6.4).

Before applying for the Certification, it is recommendable that the network has, for some years, tested, developed and elaborated further their approaches and structures concerning network management, the Scientific Committee, and membership activities. Some networks make use of a project-based phase to build and nurture their organisation and practices.

EUROPEAN HISTORIC THERMAL TOWNS ASSOCIATION, EHTTA

EHTTA is the association that represents the historic thermal spa towns and regions in several countries in Europe that are part of the **European Route of Historic Thermal Town**s.

The association was started in 2009, following the 3-year project called "Thermae Europae" that was funded through the Culture 2000 Programme (2006–09). While in the start there were six founders from six countries, in 2025 the association has 37 Active Members, representing historical thermal towns from 18 countries. Indeed, instead of spas (as business), Active Members represent municipalities and cities that hold long history as thermal towns, places that are known for their spa service, hospitality businesses, and related architecture.

In addition to the Active Members that comply with EHTTA's criteria for a spa town member, the association also has 13 Associate Members referring to associations or regions that are committed to support the aims of EHTTA and the Cultural Route. A further category of membership is called International Partners that allows the participation of thermal towns outside Europe that have a historical connection to European thermal heritage.

European Route of Historic Thermal Towns website

HOW TO FIND AND REACH POTENTIAL ROUTE MEMBERS

- Start where you are: which potential members are you already aware of? Then start exploring the Internet, recognising and mapping down potential members.
- Find out, which parties are included in the Cultural Route programme and what they do. Take a look into the programme website of Resources and find out about Annual Activity Reports (see section for Publications) and the Database about the numerous parties involved.
- Contact your national Cultural Route programme coordinator.

WHEN REACHING OUT TO A POTENTIAL MEMBER

- Outline the aims and goals of the Route network in an easy-to-understand way so that potential members can relate to those. Route aims and activities should meet their basic needs and goals.

- Define shortly what is interesting for tourists about the Route and its destinations. This is important especially for tourism operators, travel agents and destination management organisations.
- Make use of authentic and clear communication and realistic visual contents.

See for more at the Council of Europe website.

6.4 Priority fields of action for the cultural routes

While building up the network, Cultural Route initiators should actively develop a programme of activities with special attention to the five priority fields of action that each Cultural Route network is supposed to address. Achieving the Certification requires activities in all of the five priority fields, even if some of the activities would be of smaller scale. It is understandable that in the beginning a new Route would not have the time or other resources to be equally invested in every priority field.

At the preparatory stage, it is wise to look at what the Route member organisations are already doing and consider their profile and activities (i.e. what do the organisations do as their day-to-day work, in what kind of projects they have previously been involved, which special knowledge and skills they have etc.) and how they could contribute to the priority fields. The Cultural Route network can together assess, which activities could be scaled up within the network or whether they could be communicated jointly so that those become part of the network's activities.

As said, to fulfil the Certification criteria, the Cultural Route must indicate activity in each priority field. However, the Routes can balance between their priorities so that the activities would not have to be as intense in every priority field and not every member would have to participate in all activities. It is worth to note that Cultural Route networks typically focus on one or a couple of priority fields at a time. This in part explains why building up the Cultural Route network and compiling the application dossier can take some time, up to a few years.

THE FIVE PRIORITY FIELDS OF ACTION WITH BASIC EXAMPLES OF ACTIVITIES ARE:

- Research (Co-operation in research and development).
  - Create a research network (Scientific Committee) that brings together multidisciplinary research related to the route's theme.

- Memory, history and heritage
  (Enhancement of memory, history and heritage).
  - Promote the historical and cultural significance of the Route's sites with regard to common European identity and European culture.
- Young people
  (Cultural and educational exchanges for young Europeans).
  - Organise different activities with young people from different regions and social backgrounds of Europe.
- Arts and culture (Contemporary cultural and artistic practice).
  - Invite artists to showcase their work in connection to the Route or organise cultural events that illustrate links between the Route's heritage and contemporary culture.
- Cultural tourism and sustainable cultural development.
  - Increase the visibility of the Route sites and develop tourism products that support culturally sustainable development.

6.4.1 Co-operation in research and development

The first of the priorities, this field of action emphasises the importance of research and knowledge sharing in the Cultural Route's activities.

The Cultural Routes programme underscores the role of research already in the early stage of developing and conceptualising a chosen theme for a Cultural Route, as each theme should be supported by academic research. Also, each Cultural Route network is expected to have a specific Scientific Committee and to undertake research related activities on a regular basis.

The EICR can help as a contact point between new Cultural Route initiatives and experts and scholars who could support or co-operate in network activities and contribute to the development and research-based discussion of the theme of each route.

Regarding forms of activities, the annual meeting of the Cultural Route could, for example, involve in its agenda a section dedicated to academic perspectives and research (e.g., a research presentation related to the theme of the Route, an academic panel discussion, etc). This would naturally adhere to the Route's Scientific Committee and the network members with special focus on this priority field.

THE EUROPEAN ROUTE OF MEGALITHIC CULTURE

'Megaliths' literally means "big stones" and makes the focus of this archaeological Cultural Route. The theme of this Cultural Route builds largely on scientific research on megalithic culture involving experts from archaeology, historical research, landscape history and from the fields of tourism research and museology.

The Megalithic Route serves as a platform for different parties. In addition to

museum pedagogics and researchers the network encourages educational institutions such as schools, colleges, and universities to develop new cross-border collaborations to share knowledge and understanding about megalithic culture especially among children and young people.

The European Route of Megalithic Culture achieved the Certificate in 2013.

[The European Route of Megalithic Culture website](#)

6.4.2 Enhancement of memory, history and European heritage

The Cultural Routes are essentially about European heritage and history so therefore, the Cultural Routes are expected to promote and raise awareness about the historical and cultural significance of the Route's sites in ways that help to discuss common European identity and European culture.

It is important to notice that the Cultural Route programme also serves for the promotion and implementation of relevant conventions, charters, and recommendations from the CoE, UNESCO and ICOMOS relating to heritage restoration, protection and enhancement, landscape and spatial planning, as well as the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Along with the tangible sites and monuments, the Cultural Routes are supposed to add to the awareness about intangible cultural heritage, including ethnic or social minorities in Europe.

**THE EUROPEAN ROUTE OF HISTORIC PHARMACIES AND MEDICINAL GARDENS
– THE HYGEIA LEGACY SEMINARS**

Advocating the conservation and promotion of the cultural and natural heritage of historic pharmacies and medicinal gardens, this Cultural Route was certified in 2024 and is managed by the association Aromas Itinerarium Salutis (AIS). As part of the network's activities, the seminar Hygeia Legacy has been organised since 2023. These events bring together experts with different perspectives, such as scholars, museum curators, educators, and entrepreneurs, to discuss experiences, viewpoints, and best practices in the field. The annually organised thematic seminar addresses the heritage of historic pharmacies and medicinal gardens with topics that cover both history and contemporary living heritage with topics such as "Building the Future from Heritage through Education" (2024) and "Medicinal Plant Heritage and Sustainable Rural Entrepreneurship for Young Europeans" (2025).

[The Hygeia Legacy Seminars at the European Route of Historic Pharmacies and Medicinal Gardens website](#)

6.4.3 Cultural and educational exchanges for young Europeans

Another branch or awareness raising and knowledge distribution of Cultural Routes focuses especially on young people. To this end, the Cultural Route should organise different activities with young people from different social backgrounds and regions of Europe and increase co-operation activities which involve educational institutions at various levels.

These could include, for example, school exchanges, summer schools, and further activities and projects that invite young people to address questions about memory, identity, and the history of European peoples in ways that place the emphasis on personal and real experiences bringing young people together at heritage sites.

One practical way to participate in this field of activity is through the European Heritage Days and the connected Young European Heritage Makers competition. The competition is organised by Creative Europe and the Council of Europe, and it aims at engaging young people in Europe's rich cultural history.

The Ahlström Ironworks in Noormarkku, Finland, is part of the ERIH network. ERIH has numerous members especially in Finland, Sweden, and Norway. Photo: Ahlström Noormarkku.

THE EUROPEAN ROUTE OF INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE – DANCE EVENT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

In 2018, the ERIH launched the event "WORK it OUT", a dance event that invites young people across Europe to dance to tunes of EDM (electronic dance music) and hip-hop at different outstanding locations of industrial heritage. The event offers a fun and participatory way for the young to explore and learn about industrial heritage sites. Thanks to the popularity of the happening at its premiere, it was developed into an annual event. In 2022, the ERIH won the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe "Best Practices Award" for this initiative.

["Work it out" at the European Route of Industrial Heritage website](#)

6.4.4 Contemporary cultural and artistic practice

Cultural Routes offer many possibilities to mediate across fields of arts. Through different artistic projects the Cultural Routes can contribute to discussing European heritage and reflecting on the values of the Council of Europe. This is especially noteworthy thinking about the complexity of the concept of heritage.

Each Cultural Route supports the continuity of the cultural significance of their theme by stimulating contemporary cultural activities and encouraging artistic projects which explore the links between heritage and contemporary culture. Activities can take very different forms from small scale interventions and performances and to large events such as festivals.

THE HANSA CULTURAL ROUTE – THE HANSEATIC DAY, ANNUAL CULTURAL FESTIVAL

The annual event of the HANSA Cultural Route is the Hanseatic Day that rotates between the Hanseatic cities belonging to the Union of Cities THE HANSA, founded in 1980. Although the event is called 'a day' this cultural festival typically lasts for four days and involves a variety of activities starting with a large parade of the participating Hanseatic cities. Many of these cities are also represented at the Hanseatic Market with their own stands that share travel information and sam- ples of local specialties. Dance and music groups from the Hanseatic cities perform on stages or spontaneously on street corners, creating a lively festival atmosphere throughout the host city. Activities include sampling food and drink, medieval jesters, and demonstrations of traditional crafts and skills among other things. The festival aims to revive the Hanseatic spirit while strengthening community bonds among the historic trading cities.

[The Hanseatic Day at the Hansa Cultural Route website](#)

6.4.5 Cultural tourism and sustainable cultural development

Cultural Routes create a meeting point for cultural heritage and cultural tourism and for local economies more generally. While Cultural Routes are hoped to have a positive impact on cultural tourism at local levels, this needs to follow the principles of sustainable development and specifically sustainable cultural development.

All in all, Cultural Routes align with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UN Agenda 2030). Based on this, they are expected to contribute to culturally sustainable development in several interconnected ways. Initiatives should promote dialogue between urban and rural cultures, developed and disadvantaged regions, and between majority and minority populations. As applying to most Cultural Route activities, the initiatives are expected to actively involve media and connect with tourism organisations and in this way to draw attention to European heritage as part of sustainable, territorial development.

EUROPEAN CEMETERIES ROUTE – STORIES ABOUT PEACE AND JUSTICE

Members of the European Cemeteries Route organise different, imaginative and inspiring cultural events at cemeteries that belong to this Route. In summer 2025 there was organised a theatrical walking performance, "Pen, Bread and Justice", through the cemetery at Certosa Monumental Cemetery in Bologna, Italy, introducing the audience with three significant Bolognese historical figures and different historical periods.

The event contributed to the Route's WDEC (Week of Discovering European Cemeteries) theme of 2025 "Cemeteries for a Sustainable Europe 2025" and specifically the UN SDG Goal 16, Peace, Justice and Institutions. This is part of the Route's initiative "Cemeteries for Sustainable Europe" that is a multi-year project devoted to promoting the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the related SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals).

[Cemeteries for a Sustainable Europe 2025 at the Cemeteries Route European website](#)

6.5   Creating common visibility

For developing the visibility of the Cultural Route across Europe and allowing tourists to easily find their ways to the destinations, each Route needs to outline their visibility plan with a common logo for the Route members.

As part of the visibility plan, the Route should look to actively involve media and create contacts and partnerships with tourism organisations and actors. It is important to articulate the approach of the Cultural Routes programme to sustainable development (with emphasis on cultural sustainability) and cultural tourism.

The key questions are: How to best share and make visible the story of the Route? What joint communication and marketing solutions would best benefit all participating partners in the Cultural Route network?

As a certified Cultural Route of the Council of Europe the network member organisations can achieve more visibility both nationally and internationally through the Cultural Routes programme website and communication materials, along with representation at major international conferences, fairs and Cultural Route events.

The Cultural Routes programme calls for Routes to develop professional, consistent, and recognisable Route branding that clearly associates them with the Council of Europe's values and standards.

More advice and materials can be found through national programme coordinators and the EICR. On the Cultural Routes of the **Council of Europe website** there is a dedicated section for visibility materials that the Routes can make use of.

6.6   Timetable - Annual Certification Cycle

The Cultural Route Certification process follows an annual cycle lasting ca. 15 months from initial notification to final decision. The key deadlines and stages are the following:

BY 31 MARCH (MONTH 1)

Cultural Routes networks that find themselves ready for the Certification should notify their intention to apply to the Secretariat by sending an official letter in English or French to the attention of the Executive Secretary of the EPA and Director of the European Institute of Cultural Routes no later than 31st March.

BY 31 JULY (MONTH 5)

Cultural Routes in the application process must submit the complete application dossier by 31st July through a dedicated Council of Europe website. This is the firm deadline for all documentation.

SEPTEMBER - DECEMBER (MONTH 7–10):

Independent experts are selected and contracted to conduct a documentary desk review and undertake field visits along the route. During September through November, the applying Route must reply to any additional requests for information from the independent expert(s). The evaluation reports are then prepared and submitted in December.

FEBRUARY - MARCH (MONTH 12-13):

The EPA Secretariat, with support from the European Institute of Cultural Routes (EICR), examines the evaluation reports. Independent experts are interviewed during the Bureau of the EPA Governing Board meeting in Luxembourg, which typically takes place in late February. Throughout this process, routes must reply to any additional requests for information from the EPA Bureau.

MAY (MONTH 15):

The EPA Governing Board examines the evaluation reports and the recommendations from the EPA Bureau. Candidate Routes applying for certification are given an audition. Following this process, the Governing Board makes its decision about the certification.

JUNE (MONTH 16):

The EPA Secretariat sends out notification letters to the auditioned Cultural Routes concerning their certification as "Cultural Route of the Council of Europe".

OCTOBER (MONTH 20)

Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe certification ceremony

Good to note

- Each year, the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe programme sees a number of new Cultural Route networks applying for certification
- The same annual cycle also includes regular evaluations of certified routes (every 5 years under current regulations)
- Application dossiers must be submitted in English or French
- Only complete application dossiers are considered
- Networks may apply a maximum of three times; if denied, they must wait at least 12 months before applying again.

The structured annual process aims to ensure thorough evaluation of all Cultural Route candidates while maintaining consistent standards across the programme.

7 Network management, funding, and communication

This section takes a look into the key parts of practical work of the Cultural Route networks including network skills, finance, communication and marketing.

7.1 Network management skills

From the start of planning a Cultural Route, it is essential to appreciate that the programme largely builds on network interaction, organising and implementing different activities, as the priority fields of action call for (see section 6.4). When a Cultural Route candidate achieves its Certification, network management and association administration work continue with additional communication and reporting tasks related to the programme interaction and reporting tasks.

Cultural Route networking is a form of international team playing and therefore requires social and communication skills that support fair and friendly interaction among the different stakeholders. It would be recommendable to plan meaningful activities that specifically aim at team building that motivate clear and agile cooperation across the network.

An essential part of managing a Cultural Route is to run the respective organisation's administration with its timeline of meetings, planning activities, budgeting, decision-making, membership matters and so on.

Appropriate use of selected online tools specially planned for virtual interaction, exchange and working can be extremely efficient and beneficial for the network development and communication. It is important that network members are equally involved and heard also in virtual spaces and that there are joint rules on how to use the online tool(s), too.

The Cultural Routes programme provides a flexible framework that allows routes to develop administrative models suited to their specific themes, ge-

ographic reach, and stakeholder composition, while ensuring all meet minimum standards for democratic governance, financial viability, and multi-national participation.

7.1.1 Variations in Administrative Models

The theme of the Cultural Route typically influences the formation of the Route network, the association and how they operate. It is good to note that while Certification criteria are the same for all applicants, each Route network finds their own best solutions to work successfully and in ways that also fulfil the criteria. All Cultural Route associations must meet the basic legal and democratic requirements, but the specific administrative models and styles can vary.

The following takes a short look into a few aspects that the different Route networks reflect.

Geographic scope – The Geographic scope of Routes range from routes covering a few countries to those spanning across Europe and beyond. For example, the European Route of Industrial Heritage (ERIH) stretches over several countries with hundreds of destinations, which allows numerous regional routes within the Route. On the contrary, the Fortified Towns of the Grande Region Route includes only twelve sites in the three countries that the Grande Region area matches.

Membership composition – Some networks are primarily associations among cities or municipalities, others unite museums, tourism operators, universities or research institutes, and others are open to various stakeholders and private persons, too. The European Route of Historic Thermal Towns only involves cities and municipalities, not thermal spas as enterprises. The Cultural Route of St. Olav Ways unites numerous pilgrim centres and parishes; even the membership fees can vary according to the size of the congregation.

Resource capacity – Depending on the compose of the membership, Route networks have varying capacities available for route development and activities. In most cases, the resourcefulness of the network reflects in its activities – which certainly does not mean that smaller networks would not be rich in their various capacities! In a diverse membership, there can be found several kinds of expertise and practical skills that support the fluent and productive management of the Route. Different capacities range from project and network management skills to budget planning and grant writing skills, from thematic research expertise to production of imaginative artistic

and cultural events. All the different perspectives, skills, and capacities make a difference in the international weave of a Route network.

Governance structures – Each Cultural Route must have a legal body, an association or a federation of associations that allows the official representation of the Route. Again, depending on the size of the network, one association may well be enough to manage and coordinate the whole Route with its different members and sites. Others benefit from the federation structure that involves national branches with sub-associations. For example, the Liberation Route Europe (LRE) that is managed by the LRE Foundation holds national branches in five countries.

In addition to general governing structure, there can be applied structures that interlink with the network's resources. In Routes that have several sites per country, it can be useful to have national members-in-chief that act as points of correspondence between the international Route association and the national level. Also, with regard to the priority fields of action, similar allocation of responsibilities can be applied, appointing international sub-groups on each priority field.

Temporary structures – A great deal of the Routes' activities build on project-based work. To this end, it is possible to have temporary arrangements that help creating work groups that run a project together. In large Routes, this can be necessary even in the Route's internal projects. In addition, two or more Routes can also cooperate and implement a joint project. This can well require building up interim teams across borders and Routes.

Organisational maturity – Lastly, organisational maturity is easily reflected in the actions and structures of Routes. Older routes tend to have more established systems, practices and structures than newer routes that are still in their formation process. Governance structures and models of cooperation are likely to evolve and change as the network matures. This might require respective alterations in the association's (representing the whole Route) charter.

7.2   Resourcing and financing a Cultural Route

Achieving the Cultural Route Certification functions as the confirmation of high quality and value, but as such it does not guarantee direct access to funding to the Cultural Route's activities or administration. The Cultural Route programme does not, nor do the respective Secretariat or any of the programme's other management bodies, have budget allocations that would be channelled to certified Cultural Routes.

7.2.1 Membership fees and in-kind contributions

For many, membership fees are an important additional source of funding for certified Cultural Routes. The membership fees are required by and paid to the Route association (or the federation of associations). Many Cultural Route networks negotiate and delineate membership fees so that they best fit the (potential) members and the networks' needs. In practice, this means diversifying and balancing membership fee rates so that they either support the participation of diverse members or otherwise steer the membership compose. For example, smaller member organisations (in terms of annual budget, turnover, or number of staff or members) might pay a reduced fee. Some Cultural Routes accept private persons as members with affordable fees that for public parties such as cities might well be ten-fold.

For a well-functioning Cultural Route association, it would be recommendable to have at least one paid worker to run the day-to-day activities of the Cultural Route administration. Sometimes this is organised through an in-kind contribution by one or more of the key members of the Cultural Route. In practice, this would mean that one or more employee(s) of member organisations allocate at least part of their working hours to the Cultural Route management. Of course, in-kind contributions by member organisations can support the Cultural Route's activities and management in diverse ways, not only financially but also with expertise and special skills and other resources.

7.2.2 Project-based funding and grants

In the long run, a Cultural Route's essential form of activity includes the priority fields of action (see section 6.4) and their implementation through various initiatives and projects. This, again, calls for project-based working that requires, in addition to creating feasible project ideas, knowledge about suitable funding programmes and schemes, and grant writing skills. This means the ability to envision and compose structured and clear project and funding applications, and, having succeeded with applications, actual project management skills in taking the planned processes into action with heed also to reporting to the funding body about actions carried out and budget use.

Several Cultural Routes have proved to be successful in finding extra-budgetary project funding from different sources. In 2024, Cultural Routes achieved more than 8,5 million euros for various projects and initiatives. Projects that Routes vary a lot in their budgetary size and geographical scope. The larger projects benefit from schemes under the European Union pro-

grammes in the cultural, educational and local development sectors (Interreg programmes, Creative Europe, Horizon, Erasmus etc.) Grants from local, regional, and national funding sources are often smaller, but nevertheless remarkable for the Routes' projects and development initiatives.

It is wise to study different funding scheme options and to find out about their different requirements and conditions in issuing funds, budget planning (e.g. need for self-financed share), and reporting protocols. As a thumb rule often applies that the larger the granted sum, the more one must prepare to invest in grant writing, organisational capacities (including liquid assets), and reporting.

7.3   Marketing and communication

Each Cultural Route should outline their Communication Plan. In the building up of a Cultural Route there will be created a common logo that supports the visual profile of the route. Only after the Certification, both the "Cultural Route of the Council of Europe" logo and the Cultural Route's own logo can appear together. The logos should be visible in all communication materials.

A well-designed website is a must for each Route. From the perspective of the visitor of a Route and its destinations, it is very important that the Route website provides clear descriptions of the sites included in the Route and how to get there with advice and links to further information.

The use of social media for the Route's communication should be carefully planned. Still, the more tangible media channels also make a difference, including for example local newspapers.

Finding partners to cross-marketing is very important, starting from cross-marketing among the Cultural Route network members. Cross-marketing can be especially rewarding when planned with attention on cultural tourism and related products and services.

Help and advice on increasing visibility and communication can be found through national programme coordinators and the EICR. On the Cultural Routes of **the Council of Europe website there is a dedicated section for visibility materials** that the Routes can make use of.

7.4 Cultural Routes and tourism development

This section shortly discusses cultural tourism focusing on cooperation with destination management organisations (DMO), tourism product development and, quintessentially, sustainable cultural tourism.

The whole point of Cultural Routes is to create networks that together can help raise awareness about different themes relating to European cultural heritage among tourists and travellers. In other words, the Cultural Routes programme serves as a basis for cultural tourism.

Cultural tourism produces, on business grounds, regional and local tourism products and services valorising cultural resources. It creates opportunities for visitors to explore, experience, and learn about culture and cultural heritage.

Perceiving the Cultural Routes as advocates of high-quality cultural tourism, it is important that members of the Cultural Route network have skills in and knowledge about tourism and cultural tourism especially. The Cultural Route associations rarely sell products or services to create income for their own use, but the Route networks function to support their members and stakeholders in cultural tourism product and service development.

7.4.1 CO-OPERATION WITH DMOS (DESTINATION MANAGEMENT ORGANISATION)

Most countries have their national tourism promotion agencies, and many places also have respective actors at local and regional levels. Public tourism promotion agencies are often referred to as destination management organisations, DMOs. These agencies can be very helpful in developing the practical activities of Cultural Routes, especially those that are put into action at national or local level.

As experts on tourism and travelling promotion, the national DMOs make crucial contact points for all Cultural Route network members. These are "must" partners especially in the practical side of Cultural Route development.

With their own networks the DMOs are mediators and in a key position to bridge the activities of Cultural Routes with the everyday of tourism business.   DMOs could offer advice in tourism product development, destination marketing and connecting with tour operators. Along with various promotional and marketing materials, data, statistics and future foresight analyses of the tourism sector in general they can also advise in running

Sustainable forms of transportation are an essential part of developing sustainable tourism. Photo: Juha Kuva Visit Finland.

economically viable cultural tourism business that is ecologically, socially and culturally sustainable.

7.4.2 CULTURAL (HERITAGE) TOURISM

Cultural tourism builds essentially on interaction and cooperation between different stakeholders. Often a successful cultural tourism product is built together in networks with local actors. This means in practice that different actors can focus on their fields of specialty and benefit mutually from each other's expertise.

At best, different actors from the entire local economy are involved in creating successful encounters between service suppliers, cultural (heritage) specialists and tourists. In such an ideal case, the traveller achieves valuable experiences and new understanding about European culture while the local community benefits in several ways from tourism income, cultural exchange and social interaction.

7.5 Sustainable tourism and cultural heritage

Today, considerations on sustainability are expected to be an integral part of tourism development and it is emphasised in the notion of sustainable cultural tourism. Sustainable tourism is also the basic premise of the Cultural Routes programme. The UN Agenda 2030 along with the SDGs is central for the implementation of sustainability in the programme. Each Route is expected to demonstrate their commitment to sustainability thinking in their activities, including the five priority fields of action.

Sustainable cultural tourism emphasises responsible travel practices that respect local communities, minimise environmental impact, and ensure that tourism revenues also support heritage conservation and local community development.

By integrating principles of cultural sustainability – including community participation in decision-making, fair distribution of tourism benefits, and safeguarding intangible heritage such as languages, customs, and traditional knowledge – this approach helps ensure that cultural heritage remains a living, evolving element of society rather than a commodified product. When it is well implemented, sustainable cultural tourism can create a virtuous cycle where heritage preservation is economically viable, local communities have control over their cultural narratives, and visitors gain meaningful experiences that encourage ongoing support for cultural heritage work across Europe.

Many Cultural Routes attract the tourist's attention to locations less visited, and the tendency to avoid already over-crowded tourist destinations is conscious. This is one of the simple but effective and practical ways how the Cultural Routes can have an influence on building more sustainable cultural tourism. Several Routes advocate slow tourism and bring to visitors' attention opportunities to extend their stay at the destination and visit several sites (this is also why cross-marketing with local partners matters, section 7.3). Routes also encourage to make use of low-carbon travel (e.g. cycling, hiking, riding). All in all, cultural routes are not a tool for developing mass tourism.

Sustainable, slow cultural tourism encourages tourists to:

- Stay longer in fewer places instead of hurrying between many destinations.
- Engage more deeply with local culture, communities, and daily life.
- Use slower, more sustainable forms of transportation (trains, cycling, walking).
- Support local businesses and traditional practices.
- Reduce their environmental footprint.
- Focus on quality of experience over quantity of sights seen.

THE ALVAR AALTO CULTURAL ROUTE: STRENGTH FROM SUSTAINABILITY

The Alvar Aalto Route, certified in 2021, connects 20th century architectural sites designed by the iconic architect across Finland and Europe, is decisively heading towards more sustainable cultural tourism through its ongoing project "Strengthening Sustainability – Alvar Aalto Route as a Pioneer of Sustainable Cultural Tourism." The project aims to support tourists in making responsible choices and enhance the Route's environmental sustainability by developing several key initiatives. A sustainability strategy is currently being created together with the Route's member destinations to provide concrete tools for sustainable development, while sustainability communication is being improved to offer travellers clear tips on responsible tourism. The project is also mapping out low-carbon travel options, with cycling and public transport being better integrated into the Route and developing a Responsible Travel Guide to inform future visitors of sustainable cultural tourism. Through these efforts, the Alvar Aalto Route is working to enhance both its accessibility for low-carbon travel and its overall contribution to sustainable cultural tourism practices in the Cultural Route programme.

Strength from Sustainability at the Alvar Aalto Cultural Route website

Säynätsalo Town Hall in Finland is part of the Alvar Aalto Cultural Route, which has carried out a sustainable tourism development project.
Photo: Harri Taskinen, Tavolo Bianco Oy.

Lists

Paths to Action - How to develop a Cultural Route from the scratch

When you get inspired to start outlining a new Cultural Route, start by learning about the programme and the existing Cultural Routes. As you get along, list yourself questions of different kinds: questions relating to the Certification criteria, the most practical things regarding travelling and tourism products and services as well as sustainability matters.

START BY LEARNING ABOUT CULTURAL ROUTES AND THE PROGRAMME.

WHY	→	HOW	→	WITH WHOM
Learn about the values and motivation of the Council of Europe and the Cultural Routes programme.		Explore the existing Cultural Routes on the CoE website and through Routes' own websites.		Start mapping and finding suitable peers for a network to plan the theme for the Cultural Route.

ASK YOURSELF AND YOUR PEERS QUESTIONS ABOUT THE ROUTE'S THEME.

What is the story the Route would deliver to travellers and citizens of Europe?

How does the chosen theme manifest in the different countries involved in the network?

How does the theme contribute to a better understanding about European history and the present-day Europe?

LINK THE CONTENTS OF THE ROUTE WITH THE ROUTE REQUIREMENTS.

NETWORK

- Which parties are involved in building the Route network?
- Which ones would you foresee as future members?
- In which country would the network association be based?

RESEARCH

- Map and contact parties with research interests in the Route theme.
- Collect sources and data about the theme.
- Which parties and people would make the Scientific Committee?

ACTIVITIES

- What does the network do?
- How are the five priority fields put to action?

COMMUNICATION

- Launch the website for the Route and/or the association.
- Call for the design of the Route logo.
- How do you communicate among the network?
- About what and how do you communicate outside the network?

THINK CAREFULLY ABOUT THE PRACTICAL SIDE OF TRAVELLING THE ROUTE.

WHAT	→	**WHERE**	→	**FOR WHOM**
Express the theme of the Route so that the tourist sees its value and gets interested.		Which sites (destinations) are involved in the Route? Would the Route be linear, territorial, or a grid route?		Who would be interested to visit the Route sites? How would they (sustainably) find their way there?

↓

SHOW AND TELL

What marketing materials do you have to offer?
How do you share news about sustainability thinking in your Route network?
How do you co-operate with local tourism businesses?

DEVELOP THE ROUTE NETWORK MANAGEMENT

Which tools and platforms of communication would you use?
→ Agree on shared rules / code of conduct for open,
inclusive andequal communication.

**Discuss and outline the structures and the charter (rules)
of the network's legal assocation.**
→ Pay special attention on the membership categories and fees.

**Outline the network's and the association's
annual timetables and events.**

Define and delegate tasks among the network membership reagarding
→ network management and adminstration;
→ network activities with special attention of the five priority fields of action.

TAKE THE TIME YOU NEED TO APPLY FOR THE CERTIFICATION

Build the basic structures of the Route,
the network, and the association.

Study the formal requirements of Route Certification
and the application form.

Develop contents for the application document piece by piece.

Plan well in advance your entrance into the application round;
it lasts for ca. one and a half years.

Among the network, consider and discuss together,
what happens after the Certification decision.

Challenges and Solutions for Cultural Routes

Getting more advanced in the Route network activities, there might emerge various issues and challenges to consider and answer. Some of the possible challenges can be specific and closely interrelated with the Route's theme and structure, while others are more universal. This list looks into some of the usual challenges that may appear along the way.

CHALLENGE 1: FUNDING AND RESOURCES

The Routes may struggle with securing stable funding and sufficient resources to maintain activities in long-term.

Solution: Expanding the funding base and capacities in financing skills.

- Establish clear membership fee structure from the outset.
- Secure necessary project expertise and competencies at the planning stage.
- Ensure sustainable funding model that supports long-term operations.

CHALLENGE 2: CAPACITIES AND MANAGEMENT

Capacity and management issues cause sometimes challenges. Expanding route network while keeping goals clear has proven to be sometimes demanding. Effective coordination across countries and network members requires clarity in management structures and communication.

Solution: Transparency in management and decision-making.

- Develop comprehensive action plans with concrete milestones.
- Schedule regular meetings with clear agendas and decision-making protocols.
- Define easy-to-follow tracking progress methods.
- Establish transparent processes for member input and virtual communication.

CHALLENGE 3: COMMUNICATION AND VISIBILITY

Sometimes routes lack know-how and resources in communication and visibility, particularly in the tourism sector, where visibility and branding are crucial.

Solution: Targeted and well-designed marketing and visibility.

- Learn from successful examples and benchmark against established routes to identify best practices.
- Invest in professional digital marketing and brand development.

CHALLENGE 4: CROSS-SECTOR UNDERSTANDING

Building mutual understanding between the tourism industry and the cultural heritage sector has not always been easy, which affects cooperation and the ability to attract visitors. Cultural Routes may sometimes lack knowledge about tourism industry and vice versa.

Solution: Product development and storytelling.

- Build capacity in sustainable tourism product development among route members.
- Create compelling narratives that connect the heritage sites and experiences.
- Develop stories that attract tourism industry partnerships.

CHALLENGE 5: MEMBER COMMITMENT

The success of a Cultural Route depends on the active involvement of its members, but sometimes there is a lack of commitment, common spirit, or shared understanding of the goals.

Solution: Supporting member ownership and alignment

- Ensure that Route objectives directly support member organisations' goals.
- See that members have meaningful decision-making power over Route activities.
- Build commitment through genuine sense of ownership and shared benefits.
- Create structures that balance collective vision with individual member needs.

CHALLENGE 6: POLITICAL AND MUNICIPAL SUPPORT

To some extent Routes also depend on decisions made at municipal and regional levels. The degree of political awareness, local priorities, and willingness of authorities to support the initiatives can vary greatly between municipalities/regions/countries.

Solution: Informing and engaging municipal and regional authorities

- Increasing political awareness and support.
- Adapting to varying local priorities and contexts.
- Creating advocacy frameworks for Cultural Route initiatives.

Selected materials for inspiration and more information

WEBSITES

[Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe programme, website](#)

[European Cooperation Network along Pilgrimage Routes](#)
This network aims to facilitate cooperation among many parties that are involved in pilgrimage routes management and promotion.

[UN Tourism – tourism and culture, webpage](#)

PUBLICATIONS

[Annual Activity Reports of the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe programme](#)

Bogason, Á., Rohrer, L. & Brynteson, M. 2024.
[The value of social sustainability in Nordic Tourism Policy](#).
Nordregio report 2024:18.

Bogason, Á. Brynteson, M., Rohrer, L. & Tomren, L. 2025. [The Right Kind of Tourist? Rethinking tourism's impact on Nordic communities](#).
Nordregio report 2025:5.

[The CORDIS Results Pack on cultural tourism](#). 2024.

[Cultural Routes Management: from theory to practice. Step-by-step guide to the Council of Europe Cultural Routes](#). 2015. Council of Europe.

Martens, D. 2022. [The experience of common European heritage: A critical discourse analysis of tourism practices at Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe](#). *Journal of European Landscapes* 3. 45-59.

[Monitoring the Sustainability of Tourism in the Nordics](#). 2021.
Nordic Council of Ministers.

[Sustainable cultural tourism. Report of the OMC (open method of coordination) working group of member states' experts](#). 2019. European Union.

Zouridaki, M., Apostolakis, A. and Kourgiantakis, M. 2024. [Cultural Routes Through the Perspective of Sustainable Mobility: A Critical Literature](#)

Review. *International Journal of Tourism Research* 26 (5), e2756.

PROJECTS

[Culturality. Cultural Heritage in Rural and Remote Areas for Creative Tourism and Sustainability](#).

2024–28. This Horizon Europe project brings together 13 organisations from 9 different countries to study, analyse and promote cultural and creative tourism activities to aid the sustainable development of rural areas, encouraging job creation and population settlement.

[INCULTUM. Visiting the margins: INnovative CULtural ToUrisM in European peripheries. 2021–24.](#)

This Horizon Europe project dealt with challenges and opportunities of cultural tourism with the aim of furthering sustainable social, cultural and economic development especially in marginal and peripheral areas. The project made use of participatory approaches in working with local people.

Glossary

Annual Advisory Forum	The programme's most important annual event, bringing together representatives of Cultural Routes, national bodies, international heritage and tourism organisations to discuss trends, challenges, and best practices.
Application dossier	The complete documentation package that candidate networks must submit to apply for the Cultural Route of the Council of Europe certification. The dossier includes a detailed certification form covering the candidate route's theme, conceptual framework, network structure, activities across the five priority fields of action, financial and operational plans, legal status documentation, and defined impact indicators. The application must demonstrate compliance with all certification criteria established in Resolution CM/Res(2023)2 and is assessed by independent experts before presentation to the EPA Governing Board.

Certification	A guarantee of excellence awarded by the EPA to Cultural Route networks meeting specific criteria outlined in Resolution CM/Res(2023)2.
Certification Cycle	The annual process for new route applications, running approximately 15 months from March (notification deadline) through June of the following year (final decision). Includes application submission, expert evaluation, and presentation to the EPA Governing Board.
Cultural Democracy	A principle emphasising equal access to cultural participation, expression, and decision-making for all people. Cultural democracy recognises diverse cultural expressions as equally valid, supports communities in defining and managing their own cultural practices.
Cultural Recreation	Leisure activities that involve active participation in cultural activities, including attending or creating arts performances, visiting museums and heritage sites, engaging in traditional crafts, participating in festivals and cultural events, or practicing cultural, contemporary or living heritage expressions such as music, dance, or storytelling. Cultural recreation enriches personal well-being, fosters social connections, strengthens cultural identity, and promotes lifelong learning through meaningful engagement with diverse cultural forms and heritage.
Cultural Route of the Council of Europe	A certification awarded to transnational networks promoting European shared culture, history, and memory in cooperation through chosen themes.
Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes (EPA)	Established in 2010, the EPA is the political and financial body that awards the certification, decides on programme strategy, and conducts regular evaluations of the Cultural Routes. There are currently 43 member states in the EPA.
European Institute of Cultural Routes (EICR)	The technical agency based in Luxembourg since 1998, operating under an agreement between the Council of Europe and the Luxembourg Government. Provides support, training, and expertise to candidate and certified Cultural Routes.

European Values	Fundamental principles that all Cultural Routes must promote: human rights, cultural democracy, cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue, and mutual exchanges across boundaries.
Five Priority Fields of Action	All Cultural Routes must demonstrate activities in: (1) cooperation in research and development, (2) enhancement of memory, history and European heritage, (3) cultural and educational exchanges for young Europeans, (4) contemporary cultural and artistic practice, and (5) cultural tourism and sustainable cultural development.
Governing Board of the EPA	The decision-making body composed of representatives from EPA member states that awards certification and evaluates routes during annual meetings, typically held in Luxembourg in May.
Network	A multidisciplinary grouping of heritage sites, cultural institutions, local and regional authorities, universities, and socio-economic actors working together around a common theme about European cultural heritage across multiple countries.
Regular Evaluation	Certified Cultural Routes undergo mandatory evaluation every five years to verify continued compliance with certification criteria. Routes must submit reports and undergo independent expert assessment.
Resolution CM/ Res(2013)66	The Committee of Ministers Resolution confirming the establishment of the EPA and defining its aims, tasks, and structure.
Resolution CM/ Res(2023)2	The Committee of Ministers Resolution establishing current certification criteria and rules for awarding the "Cultural Route of the Council of Europe" status.
Santiago de Compostela Declaration (1987)	The founding declaration that established the first Cultural Route (Santiago de Compostela Pilgrim Routes) and launched the Cultural Routes programme.

Scientific Committee	An advisory body composed of multidisciplinary experts from different regions of Europe who research and develop the theme of a Cultural Route. The committee ensures that the Route's activities and projects are based on scientific consensus and academic rigor, validating the conceptual framework and historical and cultural foundations of the Route. Every Cultural Route network must have a Scientific Committee.
Sustainable Cultural Tourism	Tourism development that safeguards heritage, supports local economies, promotes less-known destinations, and ensures access to cultural heritage for all citizens while following the UN Sustainable Development Goals.
Training Academy	An annual training programme organised by the European Institute of Cultural Routes (EICR) that provides education and capacity-building for Cultural Routes stakeholders. The Academy offers seminars, workshops, and advisory meetings to support candidate networks preparing certification applications and to strengthen the professional development of certified route operators in areas such as heritage management, tourism development, and network governance.
Transnational Cooperation	Cultural Routes must involve at least three Council of Europe member states and demonstrate cross-border collaboration through their activities and network structure.
University Network	A network of academic institutions coordinated by the European Institute of Cultural Routes (EICR) that contributes to the research, documentation, and academic development of Cultural Routes. The network supports routes through scholarly research, student exchanges, and academic publications related to Cultural Routes themes.
Visibility Charter	A requirement for certified routes to create common visual identity using both the "Cultural Route of the Council of Europe" logo and the Route's own designed logo on all signs and communication materials.