

RIVER TOURISM IN FRANCE IS QUITE UNDERDEVELOPED



In 2016, river tourism in France attracted 10 million passengers, resulting in the booking of 2 million overnight stays. Despite having the longest network of waterways in Europe - around 8,501 kilometers - France is not taking full advantage of its river tourism potential.

During a discussion day held in Paris on the theme of river tourism, the General Directorate of Enterprises (DGE) - the organizer of the event - unveiled the results of a study aimed at highlighting the noteworthy international practices in this segment of the tourism market. **The objective of this encounter was to propose operational recommendations to river tourism operators in France with the goal of increasing this sector's economic activity.**

Currently, river tourism in France has an annual turnover of around 500 million euros. However, this amount could be much higher, as is the case in some neighboring countries. In the Bavarian and Austrian regions through which the Danube river runs, nearly 240 river cruise ships are in permanent operation. Thanks to a well-developed infrastructure (well-equipped stations along the river, bike paths, an app to find lodgings and nearby attractions...), the Danube's tourism potential has been maximized - to such a degree that some local officials are attempting to reduce it.

While France could find inspiration from the Danube in terms of its river tourism content, the Mekong, which crosses 6 Asian countries, was singled out by the DGE for the quality of the cooperation between the countries involved. Under the banner of the Mekong Tourism Coordinating Office, these six countries (China, Cambodia, Laos, Burma, Thailand, and Vietnam) have set up a joint river tourism strategy - redesigned each year at the Mekong Forum - which has recently been focused on participatory marketing.

These are all successful practices which, with some adjustments, could be applied to France's river tourism industry. With under-equipped ports of call, an offering which gives more importance to the "boat" service rather than to the territory being visited, an aging fleet of rental boats and the lack of promotion of destinations, France could be doing much better in terms of taking full advantage of its river tourism potential, according to the DGE.

The study made some recommendations which could be applied to river tourism in France. Firstly, the DGE recommended that the boundaries of each river tourism operator be clearly defined by State services. Further recommendations concerned the regulation of the statutes governing boats, rules of ownership, environmental constraints etc.

The study also made it clear that a clarification of "who does what" is essential for improved dissemination of information. A clearer operational framework would also facilitate entrepreneurship and innovation.

The creation of a cluster of river tourism within the scope of "Atout France" has also been suggested, especially for the promotion of innovative and collaborative projects. In the same vein, setting up of an incubator-type support structure would enable innovative companies to be promoted, with the view of improving the marketing of destinations and products. **The sector's**

professionals could also be promoted through the creation of a quality label guaranteeing stopover facilities or the creation of a "river brand" on the France.fr portal.

Lastly, promotion of river tourism could be done on a national scale such as by holding a "river celebration" day or by means of a contest to reward top French river ports of call.

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