

Press release from Naturefriends International

Sustainable tourism | Digitalisation | Innovation



World Tourism Day 2026:

AI as a catalyst for sustainable tourism development?

Vienna, 24 September 2026

“Digital Agenda and Artificial Intelligence to Redesign Tourism.” This is the theme UN Tourism has chosen for this year’s World Tourism Day. But where should the journey take us?

Artificial intelligence is changing the way we travel: it suggests destinations, automates bookings, provides information, plans routes ... and is increasingly influencing which places are visible. A recent study by Austria Tourism also illustrates how rapidly this development is taking place: 13 per cent of travellers in the ten European countries surveyed stated that they wanted to be inspired by artificial intelligence when choosing their summer holiday destination in 2026. Just a year and a half ago, the figure was only 3 per cent. *“The question is not whether AI will change tourism. The question is what kind of tourism we want to shape with its help,”* emphasises Andrea Lichtenegger, Executive Director of Naturefriends International.

On the one hand, artificial intelligence certainly has the potential to make tourism more sustainable. Visitor flows can be analysed and channelled, overcrowding in sensitive natural areas can be identified at an early stage, and mobility can be planned more efficiently. Digital systems can also support hotels and destinations in the management of energy, water and other resources.

AI also offers opportunities for small and local businesses. It can boost their visibility, support their marketing and communication efforts, improve services and enable new offerings or business models. Automation can also relieve staff of routine tasks. At the same time, the world of work is changing: the digital transformation requires new skills and corresponding opportunities for education and training.

A double-edged sword

On the other hand, digitalisation can exacerbate existing problems. Algorithms, platforms and influencers are increasingly shaping which destinations we become aware of and where we choose to travel. Time and again, we see individual places and destinations being hyped up on Instagram and similar platforms, resulting in tourists flooding in within a short period of time – with negative consequences for the natural environment, infrastructure and the local population.

This also raises the question of who benefits from the value created by tourism. If international platforms increasingly decide which offers are visible and booked, local businesses and communities could be left behind.

And there is one thing we must not overlook: data centres require enormous amounts of energy and water, whilst also taking up considerable amounts of land.

Putting people at the heart of it all

Technology can help us plan our travels and make many things easier and more efficient. But it cannot replace what lies at the very heart of a sustainable travel experience: people. Hospitality, personal encounters, cultural exchange and local knowledge give a place its identity and lend a journey its special quality. It is precisely these human and local experiences that define sustainable tourism – and they cannot be replaced by AI.

With this in mind, we support UN Secretary-General António Guterres's call for World Tourism Day 2026: "Let us shape a digital future for tourism that is open, inclusive and human – and use these new tools to drive sustainable development for all!"

More information:

UN-Tourism: www.untourism.int/world-tourism-day-2026

Publication „AI and Travel“: <https://b2b.austria.info/de-at/wissen/studien-und-berichte/potenzialstudien/ki-und-reisen/>

Contact:

Naturfreunde Internationale

Anna Kodek

1150 Wien, Viktoriagasse 6/1

+43 677 619 529 88

anna.kodek@nf-int.org

www.nf-int.org

The work carried out by Naturefriends International to promote sustainable tourism and raise awareness of the SDGs is funded by the Austrian Development Agency as part of the "Travelling with Respect" project.



**International
Partnerships
Austria**