

Terms of Reference

UN Tourism National Innovation Challenge: Green Technologies for Urban Heat Mitigation for an Improved Experience for Residents and Visitors

Country of Execution: Malta (global solutions for local application in Malta).

Project Title: UN Tourism National Innovation Challenge: Green Technologies for Urban Heat Mitigation for an Improved Experience for Residents and Visitors

1) Introduction and Background

UN Tourism and the Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) are joining forces to organize a national innovation challenge aimed at sourcing the most innovative solutions in green technologies to mitigate urban heat, improve residents' quality of life, and enhance the tourism experience.

Malta is one of the smallest and most densely populated states in the European Union. As of 2024, its estimated population is 563,443, resulting in a density of approximately 1.7 inhabitants per-km².

Malta's tourism revenue growth is one of the highest among southern Mediterranean destinations. In 2024, it received 3.56 million visitors, up 20% over the previous year.

One of the current issues Malta faces is the lack of natural shade in its urban and tourist areas. This shortage not only exacerbates the effects of high temperatures and heatwaves but also directly impacts the quality of life for residents and the experience of visitors.

This situation is due to several factors:

- **Climate and soil:** Malta has a Mediterranean climate with hot, dry summers. Combined with its limestone-based soil and limited availability of freshwater, this makes it difficult for trees and dense vegetation to thrive.
- **History of deforestation:** Human activity has led to widespread deforestation for various purposes, resulting in the near-total absence of natural forests today.
- **High population density and urbanization:** Intense urban development and high population density have limited the available space for green areas and tree planting.

This lack of shade contributes to the urban heat island effect, affecting residents' quality of life and the experience of tourists, especially during the hottest months.

To address this issue, innovative green technology (green tech) solutions are being considered, such as the implementation of green infrastructure, living roofs, and green corridors that can provide shade and improve thermal comfort in urban areas.

The limitations of soil fertility hinder the planting of traditional trees and vegetation, demanding new solutions adapted to the local context.

2) The Challenge

The Challenge will follow the established UN Tourism Open Innovation approach, as consistently applied throughout previous challenges, culminating in a high-profile UN Tourism Tech Adventures (TTA) – Malta event in 2026. More examples of previous challenges and competitions can be found here: <https://www.untourism.int/startup-competition>

The overarching goal is to source, nurture, and support startups and innovators that can deliver sustainable, scalable, and technologically driven solutions for urban heat mitigation through green technologies.

3) Conditions for Participation

The challenge is open to startups, SMEs, scaleups, and entrepreneurs from around the globe that provide solutions that can be applied locally to solve Malta's heat mitigation problem, whether individuals or legal entities, who are of legal age and have the legal capacity to enter into contracts, and whose representatives have not been convicted by a final judgement for intentional crimes, with a penalty of six months or more, insofar as the criminal responsibility has not expired.

Participants should meet the following criteria:

- Be innovative/disruptive in nature providing value-added solutions.
- Be sustainability-driven.
- Harnessing the impact of new technologies.
- Have a minimum viable product, preferably with a tested pilot and a viable business plan.
- Be scalable: to have potential for international growth and potential to be applied in corporations and destinations (countries, regions).
- Entrepreneur/promoter team: Suitability of the promoter team, motivation, and interest. Emphasize the promotion of gender equity, digitalization, environmental preservation, local communities, and youth leadership.
- The projects must be aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals established by the United Nations and preferably also allow for an introduction or adaptation of digital and technological elements.

4) Categories

4.1 The applicants should belong to at least one of the following categories:

A) Green Infrastructure and Urban Greening:

This category seeks solutions that integrate nature into urban spaces to reduce the urban heat island effect and improve liveability in Maltese cities. Proposals may include green roofs and walls, ecological corridors, smart urban parks, natural shading systems, and the restoration of public spaces using native vegetation. Solutions should prioritize climate resilience, community well-being, and the enhancement of urban environments for both residents and visitors.

B) Sustainable Tourism and Climate-Conscious Experiences:

This category invites innovations that help tourism in Malta transition toward more sustainable and climate-adapted practices. This could include climate-responsive tourist routes, heat-adapted accommodations, experiences centred around cool and green areas, or tools to raise visitor awareness about sustainability and thermal comfort. Proposals should empower local communities, reduce the environmental impact of tourism, and promote healthier, more enjoyable experiences.

C) Technology and Digital Innovation for Urban Climate Adaptation:

This category focuses on digital tools and technological solutions that help manage urban heat and promote sustainable practices. Solutions may include smart sensors to monitor temperature and humidity in real time, digital platforms for urban planning, AI for modelling extreme heat scenarios, or data-driven tools to design cooler tourism routes. Solutions should be scalable, relevant to Malta's specific context, and generate positive environmental and economic impacts.

4.2. Key Requirements

Selected initiatives should fulfil the following basic requirements to be selected and evaluated via the criteria in 9.1.:

- Proven Innovation: Deployment of solutions that showcase technological advancements relevant to tourism.
- Scalability: The ability to scale the solution in the market and potentially internationally.
- Sustainability and SDG Alignment: Demonstrated commitment to sustainability the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
- Market Readiness and Customer Fit: Evidence of customer demand, market fit, and readiness for real-world implementation.
- Financial Stability: Robust financial backing and a solid business model to support long-term growth.
- Innovation Ecosystem Engagement: Participation in multi-stakeholder collaborations to ensure broader adoption and integration within the tourism sector.

Standout initiatives that meet the criteria below will be invited to pitch their solutions at the "UN Tourism Tech Adventure" (TTA), providing a unique opportunity to present to a multidisciplinary high-level audience. At least one initiative per category will be selected to participate at the TTA event, which venue and date will be communicate in due time

4.3 Purpose

- Encourage the development of cutting-edge of the tourism sector through collaborative new business models and technologies, leveraging the strengths of both startups and large corporations.
- Gather representatives from tourism innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystems, including startups and large corporations, to share knowledge, business models, and success stories, fostering a collaborative environment for mutual growth and innovation.
- Stimulate synergies between public sector entities, startups, academia, corporations, investors, and accelerators.

4.4. Exclusion from participation

Participants who initially or at any moment during the competition fail to comply with any of the requirements established in these terms and conditions shall be excluded from said competition and from any potential service or prize they would have received through their participation.

Employees of UN TOURISM may not participate. Minors are excluded from participating in the competition.

UN TOURISM shall not be liable for any false, inaccurate, obsolete, incomplete or erroneous data submitted by the participants. In such cases, the participant shall be automatically excluded from the Competition and lose the right to the enjoyment of the prize.

UN Tourism reserves the right of accepting or removing from the competition, without prior notice, any participants who, in their opinion, act fraudulently, in an abusive manner, or in a manner contrary to the spirit of the competition, the principles of the United Nations or the law, third-party rights and/or good faith. Likewise, any participant or related person whose action may be contrary to the reputation or good name of UN Tourism may be removed from the competition. None of the abovementioned actions shall entitle any potential or excluded participants to make claims against UN TOURISM for any damages, expenses incurred, or otherwise.

5) Application Process

Startups which comply with all the requirements described in section 4 “requirements” can apply to this Competition by selecting one of the categories of section 4.1 above.

Although projects commonly contribute to more than one objective, the category in which the positive impact is expected to be stronger should be selected. To become a Participant, applicants shall complete the Online registration form available on the website.

Applicants shall complete in English all required fields requested in the form. The data that participants provide when registering in the program must be true, and therefore any participants whose data is incorrect, or incomplete shall lose any option to participate in the program and to receive any service.

UN TOURISM will use the contact information provided through the online registration to contact participants. UN TOURISM will not be responsible for incomplete or incorrect contact information.

7) Activities

March 2026:

Launch of Call for Applications: Announcement and opening of the application process for the startup Challenge.

March 2026 -April 2026:

Promotion and Outreach: Active promotion of the Challenge through various channels to attract high-potential startups, scaleups and innovative companies.

Webinars and Info Sessions: Conduct webinars and information sessions to guide potential applicants on the application process and Challenge details.

17th April 2026:

Application Submission Deadline: Closing date for startups to submit their applications.

End of April 2026:

Initial Screening: Review and initial screening of all submitted applications to shortlist high-potential startups.

End of April 2026:

Announcement of Shortlisted Startups: Public announcement of the startups that have been shortlisted for the next round.

May 2026:

Incubation Program Begins: Start of the mentorship and training program for shortlisted startups offering ongoing support and training for shortlisted startups, focusing on business development, scalability, and pitching.

May 2026- event (11/12 May 2026 TBC):

On-site Mentoring & Final Pitch Challenge: Intensive preparation for the final pitch, including mock sessions and feedback from mentors. At the TTA Startups present their pitches to a panel of judges, including leading corporations, investors, and key stakeholders. Winners are announced, and strategic partnerships are facilitated.

End of 2026:

Post-Event Follow-Up: Follow-up with winners and participants to ensure ongoing support and track the implementation of their solutions.

8) Benefits for finalists

- Present at Tourism Tech Adventures: Malta
- Participate in the Bootcamp
- Gain global visibility and investor connections
- Support in launching a pilot project in Malta
- Join the UN Tourism Innovation Network
- Access scholarships from the UN Tourism Online Academy

9) Selection process and evaluation criteria

9.1. A panel of experts from UN TOURISM and the partners of the Competition will evaluate the proposals based, amongst others, on the below criteria.

Each criterion is scored from 1 to 4 with 1 being the lowest and 4 the highest:

- Business Model (1–4)
- Innovation /Creativity (1-4)
- Product/ Service (1–4)
- Scalability & Internationalization (1–4)
- Team Maturity and Composition (1–4)
- Value Capture Potential through Collaboration (1–4)
- Commercial Impact Potential (1–4)
- Inclusion of Technology (1–4)
- Partnership Readiness (1–4)
- Positive Social or Environmental Impact (1–4)

9.2. Based on the above-mentioned criteria, initial screening and filtering of all applying entities will be carried out by UN TOURISM and its partners.

9.3. An Expert Committee will be appointed by UN TOURISM for the final event. It will be composed of an international network of allies. The Committee will evaluate the filtered projects per category and will carry out the selection of each winner. Decisions made by the Committee are final.

9.4 The evaluation process is strictly based on the specific project, not on other initiatives developed by the participants or their previous background. If the evaluation of the specific project reveals irregularities, the application will be disqualified.

10) Industrial and Intellectual Property and Personal Data Protection

In case the processing of personal data is required due to the development of the Program, the organizers of this Program assume the following commitments:

- To use the data provided only for the purpose of the call.
- To ensure that authorized persons for processing personal data (UN TOURISM) will commit to respecting confidentiality and that the data will not be shared with third parties without the participants' authorization.
- To take all necessary measures to offer an appropriate level of security to the risks that may arise from processing personal data, ensuring their security and integrity, as well as preventing their alteration, loss, accidental or unlawful destruction, processing, disclosure, or unauthorized access.

UN Tourism and any other data processor will follow the protection obligations established by applicable regulations. The participant may exercise their rights of access, rectification, cancellation, and opposition by sending a postal mail to the Organizer's address provided in the header of these Terms and Conditions or by sending an email to comm@UNTourism.org to contact the Organizer, indicating the right they wish to exercise and attaching a copy of their Passport, National Identity Document (DNI), or equivalent documentation.

- The participant expressly consents, solely by participating in the Program presented here, that UN TOURISM may use their name for the purpose of announcing the winning project to the other participants, without any remuneration in their favor.

When submitting applications, project promoters guarantee that:

- The projects are original to their authors and/or they have free disposal or ownership over them. Participants agree to indemnify and hold the organizers harmless against any legal actions, claims, or demands regarding intellectual property rights or personal data of third parties related to the projects they present.
- If the projects result from the collaboration of several participants, the project will be treated as a collaborative work, with the resulting rights belonging to all of them as co-authors.
- The participant authorizes UN TOURISM to upload the project summaries to their respective official websites and agrees that website visitors will have access to such information according to the website's terms of use.
- The participant authorizes UN TOURISM to use the name and title of their project, with no time limit, to be mentioned on the website or for any actions or events related in any way to UN TOURISM, as well as for inclusion in UN TOURISM's historical records and various media linked to the program.
- UN TOURISM will not claim any ownership of the information provided or any industrial or intellectual property it may contain. The participant does not assign any industrial or intellectual property rights derived from the projects to UN TOURISM.

- The participant expressly authorizes UN TOURISM to use their data to provide information about events and activities that may be of interest.
- Participants accept the transfer of their data to UN TOURISM after the competition ends.

11) Final Considerations

This Program may be modified, interrupted, and/or cancelled if justified circumstances require it. Likewise, UN TOURISM reserves the right to declare all or some of the benefits void if no project meets the expected quality according to the decision team's criteria. UN TOURISM is not responsible for any deficiencies in the platform or problems related to computers, networks, or any other cause that may result in the loss, damage, or delay of entries.

12) Applicable Law

These Terms and Conditions will be interpreted in accordance with the general principles of international law, excluding any specific national law.

Nothing within these Terms and Conditions or related to them shall be understood as a waiver of UN Tourism's prerogatives and immunities.

13) Use of Name, Emblem, and Logo

Participants will not use in any way the name, emblem, or official seal of UN Tourism or the United Nations, or any abbreviation of the name of UN Tourism or the United Nations, in relation to their businesses or any other domain, without prior written authorization from UN Tourism. Under no circumstances will authorization be granted to use the name, emblem, or official seal of UN Tourism or the United Nations, or any abbreviation of their names, for commercial purposes. This obligation does not end with the termination of the Competition.

14) Indemnity and Limitation of Liability

UN Tourism will not be responsible under any circumstances for loss, direct, indirect, or accidental damage, liability, or expense incurred or suffered by the participant and alleged to be a consequence of the Competition or related to it.

Participants agree to indemnify UN Tourism and hold it harmless from any legal responsibility, claims, losses, damages, and expenses that may arise, directly or indirectly, as a result of this Competition or in relation to it, including but not limited to any infringement of intellectual property rights or other rights of third parties related to the submitted projects.

15) Acceptance of Terms and Conditions

Participation in the Competition implies full acceptance of these Terms and Conditions. The failure to accept any part of these Terms and Conditions will result in non-participation in the Competition, and if selected and/or awarded, automatic renunciation of recognition.