

Editorial: Tourism diplomacy: responsible pathways for peace, people, and partnership

Background on diplomacy

Diplomacy has long been recognized as one of the cornerstones of international relations. At its core, diplomacy is the practice of managing relations between political entities, traditionally sovereign states, through dialogue, negotiation and cooperation (Pouliot and Cornut, 2015). It serves as both an art and a science: an art of persuasion, compromise and representation and a science of protocol, law and structured engagement. Its central importance lies in its capacity to prevent conflict, maintain peace and build channels for cooperation even in times of political tension (Malis, 2021). In the contemporary global order, diplomacy is not confined to conflict resolution alone. It is equally vital for economic growth, cultural exchange and international collaboration (Faucher, 2016). The ability of diplomacy to build trust and foster long-term relationships makes it an indispensable tool in navigating today's interdependent world. As such, diplomacy is not only about political negotiation but also about the wider processes of fostering understanding, cultivating goodwill and advancing shared human values across borders (Faucher, 2016).

Traditionally, diplomacy was associated with official representatives such as ambassadors, foreign ministers and heads of state. They operate within the realm of formal political negotiations. The "old diplomacy" was often secretive, exclusive and dominated by the pursuit of national interests. However, the rise of globalization and the spread of communication technologies have transformed the practice and meaning of diplomacy and empowered a diverse array of non-state actors, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), multinational corporations, civil society groups and even armed groups, to engage in activities that were once reserved for states (Plundrich, 2024). The late 20th century saw the growth of new diplomacies, encompassing areas such as economic diplomacy (Estrin *et al.*, 2020), environmental diplomacy (Paglia, 2021), science diplomacy (Mauduit and Soler, 2020) and cultural diplomacy (Kunkel, 2021). These shifts reflected the increasing complexity of international issues, which could no longer be addressed solely through political channels. Climate change, global health, migration and cultural integration demanded broader cooperation and the involvement of multiple stakeholders. Non-state actors, including international organizations, businesses, NGOs and even civil society groups, emerged as significant players in shaping international relations (Hart and Siniver, 2020).

Tourism diplomacy

Within this broader transformation, tourism has gained recognition as a powerful dimension of diplomacy (Padmakanth *et al.*, 2025). Unlike traditional diplomacy, which often operates behind closed doors, tourism diplomacy is grounded in direct, people-to-people engagement. It is shaped not only by governments but also by communities, private sector actors and tourists themselves. Hence, tourism diplomacy embodies a more participatory and inclusive form of international interaction (Baranowski *et al.*, 2019).

Tourism, as one of the largest and fastest-growing industries globally, has an influence that extends far beyond economics. While tourism contributes significantly to national Gross Domestic Products (GDPs), employment and investment, it also operates as a medium of communication, cultural expression and relationship-building between nations (Padmakanth *et al.*, 2025). Tourism fosters what is often referred to as people-to-people diplomacy. Tourism encourages direct encounters with foreign cultures, traditions and lifestyles by facilitating the



movement of individuals across borders (Gillen, 2025). These encounters have the potential to break down stereotypes, challenge prejudices and cultivate empathy and mutual respect. Unlike political negotiations, which are often about reaching consensus due to differences, tourism experiences highlight commonalities and shared human values (Silva *et al.*, 2025).

Evidently, tourism diplomacy is not limited to elite-driven strategies. Grassroots initiatives such as cross-border community tourism projects, regional heritage trails and ecotourism networks demonstrate how tourism can serve as a neutral platform for cooperation. In post-conflict contexts, tourism has been used to rebuild trust, encourage reconciliation and create shared economic incentives for peace (Guasca *et al.*, 2022). For example, cross-border tourism initiatives in divided regions provide opportunities for dialogue and collaboration, offering a tangible pathway toward stability and understanding (Díaz-Sauceda *et al.*, 2015). In the current global landscape, tourism diplomacy is becoming increasingly relevant as nations seek innovative and non-confrontational ways to engage with one another. One of its most evident roles lies in the realm of soft power and national image (Zhu *et al.*, 2022). Tourism functions as a powerful cultural showcase, allowing countries to project positive narratives about their heritage, values and modern achievements (Erwin and Sturm, 2022). Through destination marketing, cultural festivals and international events, tourism diplomacy helps shape global perceptions and contributes to a country's reputation on the world stage (Hall, 2019). Therefore, tourism is not merely about attracting visitors; it is about communicating identity and fostering goodwill.

Beyond image building, tourism diplomacy also plays an important role in peacebuilding and conflict resolution (Guasca *et al.*, 2022), understanding and cooperation among nations, fostering global connections, promoting cultural exchange and stimulating economic growth (Demir and Demir, 2025). Tourism initiatives often create neutral spaces that transcend political disputes. Cross-border tourism corridors, joint conservation efforts and heritage collaborations are examples of projects that open avenues for cooperation where formal negotiations may be stalled (Causevic and Lynch, 2011). These shared initiatives provide tangible incentives for dialogue, demonstrating how tourism can operate as a subtle but effective mechanism for rebuilding trust and promoting reconciliation among divided communities. Tourism diplomacy is also closely linked with the achievement of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It advances goals related to inclusive economic growth, gender equality, environmental protection and intercultural dialogue. When embedded in diplomatic practice, tourism provides a platform for nations to collectively pursue a balance between economic benefits and responsible outcomes. Aligning tourism strategies with the Sustainable Development Goals allows states to promote their destinations while signalling their commitment to global equity and sustainability (UNWTO, 2022).

The importance of tourism diplomacy became particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic. The crisis highlighted both the vulnerabilities of tourism and its potential role in recovery diplomacy. Countries were compelled to collaborate in reopening borders, harmonizing health protocols and restoring traveller confidence. These coordinated efforts underscored the capacity of tourism diplomacy to foster cross-border cooperation in the face of shared global crises (Gössling *et al.*, 2020). The same logic applies to other pressing challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss, where coordinated tourism initiatives can help bridge diverse national interests and responsibilities.

In other words, tourism diplomacy is an intricate relationship between several mechanisms. First and foremost, it facilitates direct, people-to-people exchanges on a massive scale. Every tourist, whether consciously or not, acts as an "informal diplomat" or a "backpack ambassador" (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2019). These personal interactions can humanize a foreign nation, break down stereotypes and build a reservoir of mutual understanding and goodwill that is often more resilient than formal state-to-state relations.

Second, tourism is a vital tool for strategic nation-branding and image projection. A positive national image is a core component of soft power, and tourism provides a platform to showcase a country's culture, heritage and hospitality to an international audience (Budapest Metropolitan University, 2022). By curating and promoting an attractive image,

states can influence global perceptions, which in turn can attract not only more visitors but also foreign direct investment, talented workers and political support (Claro *et al.*, 2023).

Finally, the sheer economic weight of the global tourism industry has made it a tangible instrument of economic diplomacy. States can leverage tourism to strengthen bilateral and multilateral ties and pursue national development goals and even as a tool of economic statecraft. The functions of tourism diplomacy are diverse, ranging from bridging differences and consolidating alliances to boosting economies and facilitating cultural exchange (Li, 2019).

Tourism diplomacy cases

Tourism has increasingly served as a platform for diplomacy, not only through high-profile global events but also through regional initiatives and grassroots collaborations. These activities create opportunities for dialogue, strengthen cultural understanding and facilitate cooperation in ways that traditional political negotiations often cannot achieve. One of the most visible manifestations of tourism diplomacy is through mega-events such as the Olympic Games, the FIFA World Cup and World Expos. These events are not merely sporting or cultural spectacles; they are carefully orchestrated opportunities for nations to present themselves to the world. For example, the 2008 Beijing Olympics showcased China's economic rise and cultural heritage, projecting soft power and shaping global perceptions. Similarly, Qatar's hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup demonstrated how tourism diplomacy can be mobilized to reposition a country's international image and strengthen its ties with the global community (El-Dabt *et al.*, 2025). Despite some political controversies revolving around these events, they illustrate how tourism-oriented diplomacy extends beyond the tangibles to encompass international branding, infrastructure development and global engagement.

Regional tourism collaborations also demonstrate the diplomatic role of tourism. The ASEAN Tourism Forum (ATF), held annually among Southeast Asian nations, provides a platform for cooperation in marketing, sustainability and cultural exchange. Promoting 'Southeast Asia as one destination' allows the ATF to stimulate regional tourism flows while fostering regional solidarity and trust (Henderson, 2015). Similarly, the European Capitals of Culture initiative, launched in 1985, rotates annually among EU member states to highlight cultural diversity while building unity and strengthening diplomatic ties through tourism and cultural programs (Basaraba, 2023). Tourism diplomacy is also evident in cross-border heritage and peace initiatives. Cross-border heritage projects exemplify this diplomatic dimension, with initiatives like the ZBORZBIRK project linking thirty-four collections across the Slovenian-Italian border area and the Walk of Peace trail connecting Isonzo Front remnants across both nations (Lozej and Pisk, 2021).

Smaller-scale, community-driven initiatives can be equally powerful in manifesting tourism diplomacy. For instance, community-based tourism (CBT) projects in border areas of the countries in Southeast Asia have fostered dialogues among local communities while strengthening cross-border ties (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2016) in spite of the recent border tensions between Thailand and Cambodia. In post-conflict regions such as the Balkans, tourism has been used to encourage reconciliation and rebuild social fabric by developing joint cultural and heritage routes (Aussems, 2016). These examples illustrate that tourism diplomacy does not always require large-scale international events; it can also thrive at the grassroots level where people-to-people exchanges occur most directly.

Key characteristics of diplomacy through tourism

Tourism diplomacy stands apart from traditional statecraft because of the way it works and the spaces where it takes place. Instead of being limited to formal negotiations or closed-door meetings between political elites, it unfolds in everyday encounters, through shared experiences, cultural exchanges and human interactions that cut across borders. This makes tourism a softer and more approachable form of diplomacy, one that relies on dialogue, trust and mutual respect. To appreciate its role in international relations, it is important to look at the

qualities that make diplomacy through tourism unique. These characteristics show how tourism benefits people and fosters peacebuilding and partnerships, as well as supports efforts toward a more sustainable and inclusive society (planet).

People-centred: Tourism diplomacy possesses several unique characteristics that distinguish it from more traditional forms of diplomacy. It is inherently people-centred. Unlike state-to-state negotiations that often occur at elite levels, tourism diplomacy involves direct encounters between ordinary people across borders. Tourists, hosts and local communities all become actors and even equal partners in diplomacy through their interactions, creating bonds that are personal, emotional and cultural in nature. This “people-to-people” dimension makes tourism diplomacy more accessible and inclusive (Baranowski *et al.*, 2019).

Experiential and cultural: Tourism diplomacy is often experiential and cultural. Tourism allows individuals to engage with foreign cultures in immersive ways, through food, festivals, heritage sites or nature experiences. These embodied experiences carry a deeper impact than abstract diplomatic dialogues, as they foster empathy, appreciation and mutual respect by engaging multiple senses and emotions (Collinson and Baxter, 2022).

Multi-scalar: Tourism diplomacy is multi-scalar. It operates simultaneously at global, regional, national and community levels in a hybrid format (i.e. in person and online to create a blended approach). Mega-events shape international perceptions, regional forums build intergovernmental cooperation and community tourism fosters local-level understanding. This multi-scalar nature enables tourism diplomacy to complement and reinforce traditional diplomatic strategies (Gillen, 2025).

Non-confrontational and flexible: Tourism diplomacy is non-confrontational and flexible. Unlike political negotiations, which often focus on contested issues, tourism emphasizes shared interests such as cultural pride, heritage preservation and environmental protection. It creates neutral platforms for cooperation where sensitive political discussions might otherwise be avoided (Baranowski *et al.*, 2019). It is flexible, as it allows serendipitous or unplanned but contingent matters to be addressed.

Economic and developmental dimension: Tourism diplomacy carries an economic and developmental dimension. Stimulating cross-border flows of people and capital generates mutual economic benefits that incentivize cooperation. When linked with responsible tourism practices, these benefits extend beyond profit to include empowerment of local communities, protection of heritage and advancement of sustainability goals (Goodwin, 2011).

The benefits of tourism diplomacy extend to multiple stakeholders. For states, it enhances soft power, strengthens national image and creates economic opportunities. For regions, it fosters integration, builds solidarity and enables joint branding strategies. For local communities, tourism diplomacy provides opportunities for cultural recognition, livelihood diversification and international exposure. For the global community, it contributes to peacebuilding, cross-cultural understanding and the pursuit of shared sustainability goals (Heslinga *et al.*, 2019). In sum, tourism diplomacy represents a form of international engagement that transcends politics while remaining deeply connected to the human experience.

Key challenges in tourism diplomacy

Geopolitical tensions and instability: One of the biggest obstacles to effective tourism diplomacy is geopolitical conflict or political instability. Regions that would otherwise benefit from cross-border cooperation or joint tourism initiatives often suffer from sudden diplomatic breakdowns, border closures or travel restrictions. For example, cross-border cooperation enables tourism development in the Kosovo-Albania border region, which has been hindered by the closure of state borders. Closure of states within the classical boundaries causes obstacles, not only for the development of cross-border tourism, especially when viewed from the perspective of sustainable tourism development in this region (Ramadani *et al.*, 2020).

Climate issues and environmental vulnerabilities: Climate issues are reshaping which destinations are viable and safe. Destinations, particularly small islands, coastal areas or those

reliant on fragile ecosystems, face increasing risks from extreme weather, rising sea levels and loss of biodiversity (Loehr, 2020). These environmental stresses not only affect tourist attractiveness but also heighten tensions around who bears responsibility for mitigation and adaptation. There is also a growing pressure to reduce tourism's carbon footprint; aviation and cross-border travel represent "hard to abate" emissions. Efforts to address these issues are often politically and economically uneven.

Unequal capacities, resources and infrastructure: Countries and regions differ greatly in their capacity to leverage tourism diplomacy. Many developing destinations face limitations in infrastructure, human resources, digital connectivity, regulatory coherence and access to finance (Chorna et al., 2024). These gaps hinder their ability to compete in international tourism markets or to sustainably manage tourism flows. Also, in media diplomacy (which often forms part of tourism diplomacy), weaknesses such as lack of narrative framing skills, limited training, language barriers, or weak coordination between government bodies reduce effectiveness.

Over-dependence and vulnerability to crises: Tourism is highly sensitive to crises. The COVID-19 pandemic showed how fast cross-border travel restrictions, health scares and lockdowns can choke off tourism flows. These shocks do not just reduce arrivals; they damage credibility, financial stability, employment and diplomatic initiatives tied to tourism. Many countries have had to scramble with governance, safety protocols and restoring traveller confidence. Moreover, this kind of vulnerability tends to be worse in places with less institutional resilience or where tourism is a large part of the economy, increasing the risk of economic instability (Watson and Deller, 2022).

Cultural commodification, identity politics and local community resistance: Tourism diplomacy often aims to showcase cultural heritage or identity, but doing so risks commodifying culture or distorting it for external audiences and other vested agendas. Host communities can feel that their culture is being packaged, staged or misrepresented, which may lead to resistance or confrontation. Also, the standardization demanded by international tourists sometimes homogenizes local identities, thus undermining distinctiveness. As tourism diplomacy tries to position a place for international consumption, local voices may be marginalized in decision-making (Stone and Nyaupane, 2020). This can erode the deeper goal of mutual respect and authenticity.

Coordination, governance and policy coherence: Tourism diplomacy involves many actors: national and local governments, private sector operators, community groups, NGOs, media and often international bodies. Ensuring coherent policies across these actors is a daunting task (Schroeder, 2015). Poor coordination and lack of transparency will likely lead to issues such as overlapping jurisdictions, misalignment of priorities (e.g. economic growth vs. environmental protection vs. cultural preservation), regulatory hurdles (visas, cross-border mobility), image washing and futile planning.

Implications for practitioners

The challenges outlined above carry several important implications for practitioners of tourism diplomacy. Firstly, diplomacy through tourism cannot assume stability; political tensions, crises or external shocks can emerge at any time. For this reason, contingency planning and conflict sensitivity must be integrated into tourism diplomacy strategies to ensure that programs remain adaptable and resilient under changing conditions (Baranowski et al., 2019; UNWTO, 2022; Zenker and Kock, 2020).

Secondly, the incorporation of environmental sustainability is equally crucial. Too often, environmental well-being is treated as an afterthought, retrofitted onto tourism initiatives once problems arise. Environmental responsibility claims are nothing less than greenwashing or marketing gimmicks. For tourism diplomacy to be credible and effective, environmental sustainability must be embedded from the outset. This involves not only reducing the ecological footprint of tourism activities but also aligning initiatives with broader climate and biodiversity goals (Gössling et al., 2020; UNWTO, 2022).

Thirdly, capacity building also emerges as a key concern. Many destinations, particularly in the Global South, lack the institutional, infrastructural and human resources to fully participate in or benefit from tourism diplomacy (Garcia, 2025). Without targeted investments in training, governance and technological support, tourism diplomacy risks deepening inequalities rather than creating a more level playing field. Ensuring equitable participation requires strengthening local capacities so that all regions can engage effectively (Malis, 2021).

Fourthly, genuine community participation and respect for cultural authenticity are vital for maintaining legitimacy. Tourism diplomacy initiatives that sideline local voices or commodify heritage risk alienating the very communities they are meant to empower. Involving host communities in planning and decision-making ensures that tourism diplomacy reflects mutual respect, avoids backlash and strengthens local ownership (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020).

Finally, the governance of tourism diplomacy must be coherent, inclusive and forward-looking. The involvement of multiple stakeholders, governments, private sector actors, NGOs and communities often leads to fragmented or conflicting priorities. Effective governance structures should foster coordination across levels and sectors, maintain a long-term vision and manage trade-offs among economic, environmental, social and diplomatic objectives (Hall, 2019). Only through integrated and participatory governance can tourism diplomacy realize its potential as a force for responsible and sustainable international engagement.

Future directions for research

In recent years, tourism diplomacy has shown itself to be an increasingly dynamic field, shaped by rapid technological change, shifting geopolitical tensions and evolving expectations of sustainability and responsibility. Moreover, the growing emphasis on responsible tourism provides tourism diplomacy with a distinct ethical foundation. When guided by the responsible tourism principles, tourism diplomacy moves beyond mere destination promotion and becomes an avenue to empower the communities (making places better to live in), enrich visitors (making places better to visit) and harness partnerships (Ting *et al.*, 2020). One notable reflection is the way that environmental policy and sustainability are no longer marginal concerns but central to how tourism diplomacy is perceived, practised and evaluated. Both public and corporate environmental initiatives can stimulate tourism, often with spillover effects into neighbouring regions (Ramadani *et al.*, 2020). This underscores that diplomacy through tourism will need to integrate environmental responsibility at all levels, not simply as part of “sustainability checklists” but as integral to strategy, branding, infrastructure and cross-border cooperation.

Nonetheless, gaps remain. One is long-term evaluation. Many programs are evaluated soon after implementation, but fewer studies track sustained diplomatic, social, environmental or image-related outcomes over multiple years. For instance, while mega-events may produce an immediate boost in international visibility, their legacy in terms of community empowerment, environmental stewardship and intergovernmental collaboration often remains unclear years later. Therefore, longitudinal studies can overcome the gap of underestimating deeper, more enduring transformations. The ability to develop long-term evaluation frameworks that integrate qualitative and quantitative indicators would determine whether tourism diplomacy produces lasting contributions to peacebuilding, sustainability and mutual understanding.

Another gap is comparative research: Comparing tourism diplomacy practices across regions or cultural contexts, how, for example, Southeast Asia and Europe or Latin America differ in their abilities to mobilize tourism diplomacy and what transferable lessons might exist. After all, diverse cultures possess distinct values, different governance traditions and unique modes of engagement. All of which shape how diplomacy is expressed through tourism. Understanding these contextual nuances is crucial for developing adaptable frameworks rather than one-size-fits-all models. Such research would enrich the theoretical foundation of tourism diplomacy and guide policymakers in tailoring strategies that resonate with local identities while fostering global cooperation.

Equally important is the need to examine the governance frameworks, underlining the growing role of non-state actors and hybrid forms of diplomacy. Local governments, civil

society groups and private enterprises increasingly shape diplomatic narratives and practices in tourism, often operating outside the traditional state-centric framework. Research on paradiplomacy and informal cooperation can shed light on how these actors negotiate power, authenticity and representation and how they complement or challenge national-level initiatives.

The rise of digital diplomacy is another area that deserves attention. Social media, immersive technologies such as virtual and augmented reality and digital platforms are now central to shaping destination narratives and mobilizing international audiences. For example, a case study in a tourism village in Indonesia found that social media played a powerful role in reintroducing the village to international audiences during and after COVID-19 restrictions (Satrya *et al.*, 2024). The ability of online platforms to amplify narratives, shape destination images and mobilize communities suggests future tourism diplomacy will be hybrid, both physical and digital. Future studies should critically assess how digital tools are used to construct images of place, who controls these narratives and how digital diplomacy can avoid risks of misrepresentation, cultural appropriation or simplification of complex identities.

Sustainability, especially climate actions, will likewise re-define the future of tourism diplomacy. With tourism's significant contribution to emissions and environmental degradation, research must move beyond "green" branding to interrogate how diplomatic strategies can support mitigation, adaptation and environmental justice. Studies could explore how cross-border diplomatic tools might be mobilized to address shared ecological challenges such as biodiversity protection, water management and low-carbon mobility.

Finally, how diplomacy is utilized to foster regenerative and meaningful tourism as well as build resilience to effectively manage risk and crisis are other critical areas for further investigation, especially for intraregional and cross border tourism space. As such, a multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary approach is more than likely useful and even required to look into the complex phenomena. Pertinent issues such as multi-stakeholder involvement, rapid development of digital technologies, health-related crises, natural disasters and political instability call for more praxis and action research on tourism as a diplomatic vehicle that effectively mobilizes knowledge into practice.

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