

ASCEND

ASCEND “Boosting Adventure Tourism SMEs Competitiveness and Economic Development” is a project founded by the Interreg IPA South Adriatic 2021/2027 Programme, within Priority PA 1 “A smarter South Adriatic Programme area, by promoting innovative and smart economic transformation” and Specific Objective 1.1 (*Enhancing sustainable growth and the competitiveness of SMEs and job creation in SMEs, including by productive investments*).

PROJECT OBJECTIVE

ASCEND addresses the challenge of limited innovation and sustainability among Adventure Tourism SMEs in the South Adriatic area, a territory rich in parks, protected areas, coastlines, mountains, river basins and wetlands with strong tourism potential that has not yet been fully enhanced.

The project aims to strengthen the competitiveness of SMEs in Albania, Montenegro, Molise and Puglia by supporting the creation and improvement of adventure tourism products and experiences, promoting targeted training, cross-border cooperation, access to grants for businesses and greater visibility in international tourism markets.

MAIN PROJECT ACTIVITIES

The ASCEND project supports the development and competitiveness of SMEs operating in the Adventure Tourism sector within the Programme area, with particular attention to parks, protected areas and the pilot destinations involved. Through an integrated process combining analysis, training, financial support and international promotion, the project aims to strengthen the sustainable tourism offer and foster the creation of new products and experiences linked to adventure tourism.

In its first phase, ASCEND will carry out a joint mapping of Adventure Tourism SMEs, identifying operators, services, potential and needs in the territories involved. This activity will be accompanied by the definition of a cross-border catalogue of good practices, focusing on innovative and sustainable models capable of improving business competitiveness and enhancing local natural and cultural resources.

The project also includes capacity-building activities addressed to SMEs, including local co-creation workshops aimed at developing innovative, sustainable and attractive tourism products, also during the low season. These initiatives will be complemented by a cross-border “train-the-trainer” programme, designed to make the training model replicable and to strengthen operators’ skills in the long term.

Another key result will be the definition of local Action Plans and one Joint Cross-border Action Plan, with the aim of increasing innovation and competitiveness among Adventure Tourism SMEs in the South Adriatic area. These tools will provide a common framework for action, connecting local needs with a shared vision of sustainable development and cooperation.

To provide concrete support to businesses, ASCEND will also activate a pilot sub-grant scheme allowing selected SMEs to receive grants of up to €10,000 for the development of new programmes, itineraries, services and tourism products. Selection will take place through an international call based on sustainability, relevance and innovation criteria, with the aim of involving SMEs: 8 in Albania, 8 in Montenegro and 12 in Italy.

The promotion of results will be a central element of the project. ASCEND will organise fam trips addressed to travel agents, influencers and tour operators, offering them the opportunity to directly experience the products developed by the beneficiary SMEs. The project will also participate in international tourism fairs and will carry out communication, dissemination and promotion activities to increase the visibility of the new tourism offers. At the end of the project, a final cross-border conference will present the main results achieved and support the capitalisation of the outputs, promoting the continuity of the actions launched and the transfer of the ASCEND model to other territories interested in the sustainable development of adventure tourism.

EXPECTED RESULTS

- Strengthening the competitiveness of Adventure Tourism SMEs through training, mentoring, cross-border cooperation and access to a pilot funding model.
- Development of new sustainable adventure tourism products and experiences, with particular attention to natural areas, parks and lesser-known destinations.
- Validation of a joint sub-grant scheme that is transferable and replicable in other territories and contexts interested in developing sustainable adventure tourism.
- Greater international visibility for the destinations involved and consolidation of the South Adriatic as an attractive area for Adventure Tourism.
- Support for SMEs, public authorities, parks and protected areas, NGOs, local communities and tourists thanks to more innovative services, more sustainable practices and stronger cooperation among territories.

PARTNERS:

- Provisional management consortium of Regional Natural Park Coastal Dunes from Torre Canne to Torre San Leonardo, Italy (Lead Partner)
- National Tourism Organisation of Montenegro, Montenegro
- Ministry of Environment, Albania
- Tourism and Hospitality Autonomous Agency of Molise, Italy
- Management Consortium of the Porto Cesareo Marine Protected Area, Italy
- Gargano National Park Authority, Italy

ASSOCIATED PARTNERS:

- Puglia Region - Department of Tourism, Economy of Culture and Valorisation of Territory, Italy
- Public Enterprise for National Parks of Montenegro, Montenegro

TOTAL BUDGET: € 1,008,502.50

EU contribution: € 830,152.45

National contribution: € 178,350.05

DURATION: 01.07.2025 – 31.12.2027

WEBPAGE OF THE PROJECT: <https://ascend.southadriatic.eu/>

PROGRAMME SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS:

FACEBOOK: <https://www.facebook.com/interregipasouthadriatic>

LINKEDIN: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/87434644/admin/dashboard/>

INSTAGRAM: <https://www.instagram.com/interregipasouthadriatic/>

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