

Market Trends in Experience-Based Tourism: The Growth of Sharing Economy Accommodation and Niche Tourism in Europe*

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Abstract

This study examines key market trends in experience-based tourism in Europe, focusing on the interplay between sharing economy accommodation and niche tourism. Despite extensive research on these areas, existing studies tend to analyze them separately, resulting in a limited understanding of how they jointly shape contemporary tourism development. To address this gap, the study adopts a qualitative research approach based on secondary data, including statistical data from Eurostat and selected industry reports. The analysis combines historical data with forecast-based insights in order to capture both past developments and expected future trends. The findings indicate a strong expansion of sharing economy accommodation, particularly following the post-pandemic recovery, with growth concentrated in major European tourism destinations. At the same time, forecast-based analysis suggests that niche tourism does not follow a uniform development path. Wellness tourism is expected to remain a relatively stable and mature segment, while culinary tourism is projected to experience rapid growth, reflecting increasing demand for authentic and experience-oriented travel. Overall, the results suggest that experience-based tourism in Europe is shaped by the interaction between changing tourist preferences and the growing role of digital platforms. The study contributes to a better understanding of structural transformations in the tourism market and provides insights into the future development of experience-based tourism.

Keywords: experience-based tourism; sharing economy accommodation; niche tourism; digital platforms

Introduction

Experience-based tourism has emerged as a pivotal trend in the modern tourism sector that signifies a transition from conventional travel modalities to more individualized, genuine, and contextually relevant experiences

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(Montebelli & Vavassori, 2017). This change is closely related to how tourists act, as more and more travelers seek meaningful and experience-based forms of tourism instead of traditional mass tourism (Cetin & Pala, 2022). In this context, two significant and interconnected phenomena can be discerned: sharing economy accommodation and niche tourism. The rise of sharing economy accommodations changed how tourism services are provided, making travel more personalized, flexible, and connected to the local area. While niche tourism represents a direct expression of experience-based tourism that focuses on specialized types of travel that are based on certain interests and activities. (Sood et al., 2025; Basoda & Varol, 2021). Niche tourism encompasses a wide range of specialized forms of tourism. Culinary and wellness tourism are two of the most dynamic and well-established parts of the European market. For this reason, the analysis presented in this study focuses specifically on these two forms, as they provide a representative basis for examining broader trends within niche tourism. Experience-based tourism has been extensively examined in the literature; however, current studies predominantly dissect its components individually, concentrating either on sharing economy accommodations or on particular types of niche tourism. Consequently, there is a lack of comprehension regarding how these factors collectively influence experience-based tourism (Mhlanga, 2024). The aim of this study is to analyze key market trends in experience-based tourism in Europe, with particular emphasis on sharing economy accommodation and niche tourism. The study seeks to identify both observed developments and future directions in these segments and uses a combination of statistical data and market forecasts. This study specifically investigates the following research questions:

RQ1: How has sharing economy accommodation evolved in Europe in terms of growth dynamics, seasonality, and regional concentration?

RQ2: How do culinary and wellness tourism differ in their growth patterns and what does this reveal about the development of niche tourism in Europe?

RQ3: What role do digital platforms and evolving tourist preferences play in driving current market trends in experience-based tourism in Europe?

From a practical perspective, the results of the study contribute to a better understanding of the mechanisms shaping experience-based tourism in Europe, particularly in relation to the development of sharing economy accommodation and niche tourism. The results show how changes in what tourists prefer and the growing importance of digital platforms affect the structure of tourism supply and the positioning of destinations. This could help stakeholders make better decisions when designing tourism strategies to make a destination more competitive. The article is structured as follows. The first section discusses experiential tourism and provides information on previous research. The next part covers important market trends on niche tourism and sharing economy accommodations. The subsequent section outlines future development perspectives, followed by a final section presenting the study's conclusions.

Literature Review

Experience-based tourism has gained significance in tourism research. Changes in how tourists act are a major change in the way demand works in European experience-based tourism. More and more, travelers prefer shorter, more frequent trips that focus more on domestic or regional destinations, authenticity, and local food experiences (Sampaio et al., 2024). The sharing economy, particularly with regard to the lodging industry indicates how tourism markets are changing. Prior research indicates that platforms like Airbnb exemplify a type of disruptive innovation that enhances accessibility to short-term rentals and transforms the framework of conventional accommodation markets (Guttentag, 2015). Similar observations highlight the dynamic growth of sharing economy accommodation, particularly in relation to Airbnb, and its growing importance within the tourism sector (Koźlak & Bartosik, 2025). Millennials and other younger groups trust collaborative platforms more and are more open to experiential offerings. Other researchers indicate that this changes the way people want things, means that destinations need to come up with new products (Sofronov, 2018). The peer-to-peer accommodation sector in Europe exhibited an annual growth rate of 31% from 2013 to 2025, positioning sharing economy platforms as substantial disruptors to the conventional hotel industry (Farmaki & Miguel, 2022). This growth has been especially strong in big cities in Europe, where platforms have made the market more competitive and given customers more options. The geographical distribution of sharing economy accommodation reveals clear patterns of concentration and divergence. Mediterranean countries dominate the market, with France consistently maintaining the leading position (Oliver-Esteban & Romero-

Calcerrada, 2026). The authenticity dimension is specifically important for niche tourism segments. Research indicates that authenticity is significantly more important for local host experiences compared to standardized business offerings, while safety and instructor qualifications are prioritized for tourism business experiences (Uslu et al., 2024). This highlights the platform's role in shifting consumer value expectations. Niche tourism represents an important component of experience-based tourism. Among these, culinary and wellness tourism are particularly dynamic segments (Richards, 2012). The conceptual evolution of experience-based tourism is rooted in the broader shift from mass tourism to more individualized, authentic, and emotionally resonant travel experiences (Basoda & Varol, 2021). This transformation reflects deeper changes in consumer behavior, where tourism is increasingly viewed as a meaningful and significant means of personal growth rather than mere leisure consumption (Cetin & Pala, 2022). Current literature demonstrates one important limitation: most existing studies analyze either sharing economy platforms or specific niche tourism segments, but rarely examine how these phenomena interact to shape experience-based tourism development. Individual analyses certainly provide valuable insights into their respective areas. Nevertheless, they often overlook important synergies that emerge when these trends develop simultaneously within the same market environment. This research addresses this gap through integration of market data sources, including Eurostat statistics on accommodation trends alongside industry forecasts for niche tourism growth.

Market Trends in Experience-Based Tourism

This section presents the analysis of key market trends in experience-based tourism, with a particular emphasis on sharing economy accommodation and niche tourism. The sharing economy analysis centers on short-term rentals available through digital platforms (the model's most visible and rapidly expanding component). This segment attracts particular attention because of its direct and substantial impact on tourism supply structures, alongside its exceptionally close integration with contemporary digital technologies that facilitate real-time platform operations and data-driven personalization. Niche tourism, understood as a broad and diverse category, includes numerous specialized forms of travel directed toward particular interests, motivations, and activities. Unlike mass tourism, it features greater differentiation and places stronger emphasis on individualized experiences. This study particularly examines culinary and wellness tourism, which constitute both established and rapidly expanding segments within niche tourism. Their selection is justified by their strong growth potential and their close connection with changing patterns of tourism demand. Analysis is based on a qualitative approach using secondary data, including statistical data from Eurostat and selected industry reports related to tourism market development. The analytical framework combines historical data analysis with forecast-based insights. Historical data are used to examine how sharing economy accommodation has developed over time and to show how tourism demand has shifted (Mody et al., 2021). The niche tourism analysis employs a forecast-oriented methodology that uses market projections and industry reports to identify prospective developmental trajectories. Within this framework, forecast data from market analyses facilitate examination of anticipated evolution within niche tourism, in a systematic manner.

Trends in Sharing Economy Accommodation in Europe

The data presented in Table 1, based on Eurostat (2025), indicate a pronounced seasonal pattern in the number of guest nights in short-term accommodation booked via online platforms in the European Union. Demand remains relatively low during the winter months, particularly in January and November (10–40 million), and increases progressively from spring to early summer, reaching up to 100 million in June. The highest levels of activity are observed in July and August (70–165 million), which confirms a strong concentration of tourism demand during the peak summer season. This pattern is consistent with broader findings on tourism seasonality in Europe (Butler et al., 2001). A noticeable decline follows in the autumn months. Overall, the results demonstrate a highly seasonal structure of demand within the sharing economy accommodation market. Due to this pronounced seasonality, the analysis focuses on third-quarter data (July–September) in order to ensure comparability across years and to minimize the impact of seasonal fluctuations (Eurostat, 2025). A similar methodological approach is also discussed in previous research on tourism seasonality (Koenig & Bischoff, 2003).

Table 1. Monthly guest nights in short-term accommodation booked via online platforms in EU (2021–2025, in millions)

Month	Approximate range (millions)
January	10–40
February	10–50
March	10–50
April	10–70
May	20–80
June	30–100
July	70–150
August	90–165
September	40–85
October	35–65
November	20–40
December	25–55

Source: own elaboration based on Eurostat (2025).

The data presented in Table 2 show a strong upward trend in the number of guest nights in short-term accommodation booked via online platforms in the European Union in the third quarter of 2018–2025 (Eurostat, 2025). After moderate growth in 2018–2019, the sector recorded a sharp decline in 2020 (–33.9%), which reflects the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international tourism (Gössling et al., 2020). In the following years, the market recovered rapidly. In 2021 and 2022, the number of guest nights increased by more than 30% annually, which confirms a strong rebound in tourism demand. In the subsequent period, the upward trend continued and the number of guest nights reached 398 million in 2025. Overall, between 2018 and 2025, the number of guest nights nearly doubled, which confirms the dynamic expansion of sharing economy accommodation in the European tourism market (Zervas et al., 2017).

Table 2. Guest nights in short-term accommodation booked via online platforms in EU (Q3, 2018–2025, in millions)

Year	Guest nights (millions)	Year-on-year change (%)
2018	203	—
2019	230	+13.3%
2020	152	–33.9%
2021	202	+32.9%

Year	Guest nights (millions)	Year-on-year change (%)
2022	273	+35.1%
2023	310	+13.6%
2024	366	+18.1%
2025	398	+8.7%

Source: own elaboration based on Eurostat (2025).

The data presented in Table 3 show clear differences in the geographical distribution of guest nights in short-term accommodation booked via online platforms across selected European countries (Eurostat, 2025). The highest values are consistently recorded in France, Spain and Italy, which confirms the dominant position of Southern European destinations in the sharing economy accommodation market. France remains the leading market throughout the analyzed period, while Spain and Italy also show a strong upward trend, despite the temporary decline in 2020. In the post-pandemic period, all three countries recorded a rapid recovery and further growth, which reflects the resilience of major tourism destinations. At the same time, countries such as Greece and Croatia show dynamic growth, particularly after 2021, which indicates the increasing importance of emerging and seasonal destinations. In contrast, Germany and Portugal record more moderate growth, although the upward trend remains visible. Overall, the results confirm that the development of sharing economy accommodation is closely linked to the attractiveness and maturity of tourism destinations, with the strongest growth observed in countries with well-developed tourism sectors. The observed differences indicate a clear divergence in development patterns. Mediterranean countries show strong post-2020 growth, while Central and Western European countries follow a more gradual, linear trend. This suggests that platform-based accommodation demand remains closely linked to established tourism infrastructures and destination attractiveness (Dolnicar, 2019).

Table 3. Q3 guest nights in short-term platform accommodation across selected EU countries (2018–2025, in millions)

Country	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
France	40	45	43	50	60	66	81	89
Spain	40	45	23	36	50	56	67	73
Italy	30	33	20	29	41	48	56	59
Greece	12	15	9	12	19	22	26	30
Croatia	16	18	9	17	23	25	26	28
Germany	11	13	14	14	15	16	22	25
Portugal	13	14	6	9	15	17	19	20

Source: own elaboration based on Eurostat (2025).

The combined analysis of seasonal patterns, growth dynamics and geographical distribution reveals that sharing economy accommodation has become a strongly expanding and structurally significant segment of the European tourism market (Eurostat, 2025). The results indicate that demand is highly concentrated in the peak summer season, which confirms the persistent importance of seasonality in tourism. At the same time, the observed long-term growth, particularly after the post-pandemic recovery, demonstrates the increasing role of platform-based

accommodation in shaping tourism demand (OECD, 2024). The geographical distribution further shows that this development is not uniform but is primarily concentrated in well-established tourism destinations, especially in Southern Europe. The dominance of countries such as France, Spain and Italy reflects their strong position in international tourism and the continued attractiveness of these destinations for experience-oriented travel (Dolnicar, 2019). These patterns suggest that tourists are seeking more flexible and diversified forms of travel, which are often associated with more individual and context-related experiences. Thus, the growing popularity of sharing economy accommodation reflects broader changes in tourist behavior and supports the development of experience-based tourism (Sigala, 2017).

Forecasted Trends in Niche Tourism in Europe

The data presented in Table 4 show a steady increase in the value of the wellness tourism market in Europe over the period 2025–2031, based on forecast data (Market Report Analytics, 2024). From 2026 onwards, the market is expected to continue its upward trend, reaching approximately USD 400 million by 2031. Annual growth rates are projected to remain relatively stable, ranging between 4.3% and 5.6%, which indicates a predictable and sustained expansion of this segment. This pattern suggests that wellness tourism is likely to develop in a stable and mature manner, without significant fluctuations, which distinguishes it from more volatile tourism segments. The relatively moderate growth rates may indicate a high level of market consolidation and gradual expansion rather than rapid short-term increases in demand. At the same time, the continued growth of this segment is expected to reflect structural changes in tourism demand, particularly the increasing importance of health, well-being and lifestyle-oriented travel. These changes indicate that tourists are likely to place greater emphasis on quality of life, preventive health and mental well-being when making travel decisions. From this perspective, wellness tourism represents an important component of niche tourism and a key element of experience-based tourism, as it is closely linked to more personalized, purpose-oriented value-driven forms of travel, which align with broader changes in tourist behavior.

Table 4. Europe wellness tourism market size (2025–2031, in USD million)

Year	Market size (USD million)	Year-on-year change (%)
2025	300	—
2026	313	+4.3%
2027	330	+5.4%
2028	345	+4.5%
2029	360	+4.3%
2030	380	+5.6%
2031	400	+5.3%

Source: own elaboration based on Market Report Analytics (2024).

The projections presented in Table 5, based on data from Precedence Research (2025), point to a rapid and sustained expansion of the culinary tourism market in Europe in the coming years. From 2026, the market is expected to enter phase of intensive growth, with its value expected to reach approximately USD 17.5 billion by 2031. The consistently high annual growth rates, which remain above 15% and exceed 20% towards the end of the analyzed period, indicate that this segment is likely to be characterized by strong growth momentum. The projected development reflects deeper changes in tourism demand. Food-related experiences are expected to increasingly function as a primary motivation for travel, rather than a complementary activity. This shift highlights the growing importance of authenticity, local identity and cultural engagement in shaping tourist behavior. In this context, culinary tourism is expected to contribute to a more place-based and immersive form of tourism, where the experience is closely linked to local environments and traditions. At the same time, it is expected to support

diversification of tourism products and create new opportunities for regional development. As a result, culinary tourism can be considered one of the most dynamic components of niche tourism and a key driver of experience-based tourism in Europe, reflecting an expected transition towards more individualized, experience-focused travel patterns.

Table 5. European culinary tourism market size (2025–2034, in USD billion)

Year	Market size (USD billion)	Year-on-year change (%)
2025	6.5	—
2026	7.5	+15.4%
2027	8.8	+17.3%
2028	10.2	+15.9%
2029	12.3	+20.6%
2030	14.5	+17.9%
2031	17.5	+20.7%

Source: own elaboration based on Precedence Research (2025).

The analysis of the wellness and culinary tourism segments, based on forecast data, indicates that niche tourism is not expected to follow a single, uniform development path. On the one hand, wellness tourism is projected to develop in a relatively stable and predictable manner, that reflects long-term changes in lifestyle, health awareness and travel motivations. On the other hand, culinary tourism is expected to demonstrate significantly stronger growth dynamics which suggests that it will remain in a phase of expansion and continue to respond rapidly to evolving tourist preferences. These differences imply that niche tourism is likely to consist of segments at different stages of development, ranging from more mature and stabilized forms to rapidly growing and still evolving ones. At the same time, both segments are expected to reflect broader changes in tourism demand and contribute to the ongoing transformation of tourism towards more experience-based forms, although they do so in different ways and speeds.

Factors and Development Perspectives in Experience-Based Tourism

The evolution of experience-based tourism is propelled by a complex matrix of interrelated socio-technological and economic factors that simultaneously reshape tourism demand and supply. These drivers reflect broader transformations, fundamentally altering how tourism products are designed, delivered, and consumed through place-based co-creation. Contemporary travelers are progressively moving away from standardized products, seeking instead experiences that are authentic, contextually embedded, and emotionally resonant, often enhanced by digital augmentations. Consequently, tourism providers are under significant pressure to differentiate their offerings through "experiential value," which acts as a key mediator for tourist satisfaction and a primary source of competitive advantage. The synergy between demand-side motivations (the search for meaning) and supply-side innovations (platform-based solutions) has facilitated the expansion of specialized segments, such as the sharing economy and niche tourism (Stors & Kagermeier, 2017). Table 6 categorizes these multifaceted drivers, their specific determinants, and their role in shaping the modern tourism.

Table 6. Key factors shaping experience-based tourism and their impact on experiential value

Dimension	Key determinants and mechanisms	Impact on experiential value
Social	Shift from passive consumption to active participation; fatigue with mass tourism; search for identity experiences	Increases personal relevance and strengthens emotional engagement
Technological	Development of digital platforms; use of artificial intelligence; role of big data and social media	Enables personalization and supports co-creation of tourism experiences
Economic	Increasing competition between destinations; growing importance of the experience economy	Supports differentiation and strengthens long-term relationships with tourists
Cultural	Interest in local traditions, everyday life and intangible heritage; search for authenticity	Enhances cultural immersion and local connection
Environmental	Growing environmental awareness; climate-related challenges; demand for sustainable and responsible tourism	Promotes low-impact and more conscious forms of travel

Source: own elaboration.

Experience-based tourism has emerged as one of the most dynamic and influential directions in contemporary tourism development, fundamentally reshaping how value is co-created in the global market. Its growth is shaped by a combination of social, technological, economic, cultural, and environmental forces that collectively redefine how tourists perceive value and how destinations design their offerings (Sigala, 2017). As global tourism shifts away from standardized, mass-produced services, the demand for meaningful, authentic, and emotionally engaging experiences continues to intensify, particularly in the realm of peer-to-peer interactions (Richards, 2012). This transformation positions experiential value as a central component of competitive advantage for destinations and tourism providers. As shown in the previous analysis, different segments develop at different rates, leading to a more differentiated and segmented tourism market. At the same time, digital technologies and platform-based solutions remain critical for decentralizing tourism activity and facilitating closer interaction between visitors and local environments. Another important perspective concerns the increasing role of local context in shaping tourism experiences. Tourists are becoming more interested in place-specific elements, such as culture, gastronomy and everyday life, which strengthens the connection between tourism and regional identity while empowering local communities and supporting more sustainable forms of development (Precedence Research, 2025; Cirella, 2020). Ultimately, experience-based tourism's future depends on blending digital efficiency with authentic human values to secure its resilient global role.

Conclusions

This study analyzed major changes in Europe's tourism industry. It sheds light on the ways in which experiential travel models align with and are shaped by sharing economy platforms and emerging niche markets. The results show the sector has progressed past post-pandemic recovery into structural evolution, with travel value now centering on deeper, more authentic, and personalized experiences. The analysis of sharing economy accommodation reveals a robust expansion, with guest nights in the EU reaching approximately 398 million by 2025. This growth is not merely quantitative but reflects a qualitative shift in tourism supply, where platforms have enabled a more localized and context-embedded form of travel. However, the persistent concentration of demand in Southern European markets like France, Spain, and Italy suggests that the sharing economy reinforces existing geographical hierarchies while introducing new competitive dynamics (Dolnicar, 2019). Furthermore, the divergent growth trajectories of wellness and culinary tourism illustrate the multifaceted nature of niche tourism. While wellness tourism is expected to represent mature, stable segment driven by long-term lifestyle shifts (Global Wellness Institute, 2023), culinary tourism is projected to undergo rapid, momentum-driven expansion, where food-related activities serve as the primary catalyst for travel (Precedence Research, 2025). The alignment of niche tourism services with platform-based accommodation not only enriches the travel experience but also encourages tourists to form a more authentic relationship with the cultural values and identity of host communities. In

conclusion, experience-based tourism in Europe is being reshaped by a synergy between digital innovation and a socio-cultural demand for "authentic" encounters (Basoda & Varol, 2021). For destinations to maintain a competitive advantage, they must move beyond traditional infrastructure-led strategies and focus on the strategic design of emotionally resonant, value-driven experiences that align with the evolving motivations of the contemporary traveler. While these findings offer significant insights into the current market trajectory, the analysis should be viewed within the specific context of its methodological framework. By primarily using macro-level secondary data from Eurostat and industry reports, the study provides a comprehensive overview of broad market trends, which creates a robust foundation for future granular investigations. While the thematic focus was intentionally directed toward culinary and wellness tourism within the European Union to ensure clarity of analysis, this approach highlights the potential for expanding similar investigations into other emerging niche segments or non-EU markets. Furthermore, as the provided projections are based on current stable growth models, they serve as a valuable baseline for understanding market potential, even when considering the inherent unpredictability of global macroeconomic shifts. Recognizing these contextual nuances opens several meaningful avenues for further academic inquiry. Extending the scope of this research, future scholarly work could focus on the influence of Artificial Intelligence and hyper-personalization on tourist behavior, particularly in relation to the exploration of niche tourism offerings. There is also a productive opportunity to investigate the "regenerative" potential of these segments, examining how the sharing economy can further enhance local community support (Zervas et al., 2017). Ultimately, this research underscores that the future of experience-based tourism in Europe depends on a synthesis of technological efficiency and cultural integrity alongside regulatory adaptability and sustainability.

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