

TRAVEL TO *tomorrow ...*

Recommendations for
tourism policy 2019-2024



Memorandum from
VISITFLANDERS

TRAVEL TO *tomorrow* ...

Recommendations for
tourism policy 2019 - 2024

Memorandum from
VISITFLANDERS

2 OUR DREAM

4 **OUR STARTING POINT:**
the positive power
of tourism

6 **OUR STRATEGIC
CHOICES**



In recent years, the tourism policy has proven very effective for Flanders. Records have been repeatedly broken. We continue to attract more visitors and higher revenue—the basic criteria for success. In 2018 alone, our foreign visitors and overnight stays grew by almost 10%, compared to the European average of almost 6%.

The decision by the Flemish Minister of Tourism to expand our destination development and promotion in 2014–2019 by taking a thematic approach was a successful one. We not only attracted more visitors but also strengthened the reputation of our region.

Flanders became more than just a collection of cities and regions and was given more substance. Our strong assets (heritage, art and culture, cycling and gastronomy) were more vigorously developed and promoted internationally. Flanders is gaining a reputation for its strong suits. The programmes that were initiated, such as the Great War remembrance and the Flemish Masters, created leverage for our destination, with lasting effect. This was aided by parallel developments: cities, regions and local associations invested more in public spaces which benefitted residents and businesses as well as visitors.

We succeeded in enabling more people in poverty to go on holiday thanks to an expanded network and removed other barriers to taking a holiday. It was made easier for lodging establishments to guarantee the basic quality of each overnight stay due to a more transparent

Lodging Decree. We demonstrated that attracting conferences doesn't need to be a separate goal in and of itself, but that it can also stimulate local economic growth and generate a positive social impact.

And, in collaboration with other sectors such as culture and sport, we launched a new policy to attract high-profile events to Flanders that are compatible with our assets.

We want to continue to strengthen our appeal to tourists.

Yet, if we are **to remain successful in the future**, we need to take into account many changes and uncertainties. As a government, we are not an all-knowing institution that can perfectly predict the consequences of these changes. Dealing with technology and knowledge (data, Artificial Intelligence, robots), resources (circular economy, sustainability), the climate (CO₂), immigration, and so forth, are challenges that are becoming more and more intertwined and that require thorough adjustments in the way we think and act.

The tourism sector is changing too, and on a fundamental level. In 2019, we've entered a new era: that of the **economy of meaning**. In Europe, a paradigm shift **from 'more' to 'better'** is in full swing.

This transformation is a fundamental one and will expand and deepen the tourism landscape—and therefore also the role of VISITFLANDERS. We want to do everything we can to make the tourism sector in Flanders a leader in this transition so that our residents, tourism companies and visitors can benefit from this. Even though tourism is by definition a non-relocatable sector, if we want tourism to offer sustainable value to the Flemish people, we must make changes that shift the strictly economic narrative from 'more' to 'value'; and from a financial return on investment to **a social return on investment**.

Making Flemish-wide rational policy decisions has direct consequences for the institution that will implement these decisions, namely, VISITFLANDERS. Employees of VISITFLANDERS must be able to find their way in this new reality and have the feeling that they are making a meaningful contribution to the new strategy. As a result of the decisions made, the agency will look for new ways of working, organising and relating to existing and new partners.



OUR DREAM

We dream of **flourishing destinations**¹:

Where you take the time to learn about the local communities and captivating stories.

Where you want to stay for as long as possible as a traveller, student, entrepreneur or expat.

Where guests do not take an indifferent attitude, but rather feel enriched and motivated to return.

Where local communities want to welcome visitors with pride and passion.

Where residents, visitors, volunteers and companies work together to provide balance from the bottom up.

Where people have developed a worldwide reputation for being an intriguing and inspiring community.

Where Flemish people are proud ambassadors of stories about who and what makes their home so special, share these with the wider world, and love to explore their own region to learn more or to be moved by these stories.

Where every Flemish person can participate in tourism. Whether that's as a tourist in their own region, as an entrepreneur, as a service provider, or as a passionate volunteer.

Where the government not only guarantees equal rights, but also equal opportunities and helps to create the necessary conditions to enable creative and inclusive entrepreneurship.

The flourishing destinations we dream of are within reach. Many entrepreneurial tourism professionals and volunteers are not content to merely dream and instead are taking action.

We want to shine a spotlight on this entrepreneurial creativity so we can inspire others. And we want to help to strengthen any flourishing initiatives.

¹ The 'we' in our dream refers to the general tourism sector. The 'we' in the remainder of the text refers to VISITFLANDERS.

OUR STARTING POINT: the positive power of tourism

When thinking about the future, a governmental organisation such as VISITFLANDERS doesn't start with a blank slate, but it does take a different attitude. Our future vision of the tourism sector has been developed with an open-minded attitude.

It's based on a deep, co-creative process with dozens of participants from the public and private sector, from Flanders and abroad. It's rooted in a large listening survey with more than 1,600 travel stories, meetings with hundreds of tourism professionals, five think tanks, numerous conversations and many internal exercises at VISITFLANDERS. All during the span of a year and a half. We also explored the evolutions in the wider world of travelling. The result was surprising, enthusiasm was strong, and the challenges proved enormous.

Our starting point for formulating this vision for the future is our belief in the positive power of tourism. We need to strengthen this power to bring balance so destinations in Flanders can flourish.



Tourism can make the world a better place. This optimistic conviction was expressed in every conversation we had on this topic. Choosing to focus on the positive power of travel experiences, as a guest, visitor or entrepreneur, doesn't mean that we ignore the negative effects of tourism. However, it does mean that we make the negative impacts our starting point as quick fixes to specific problems (such as overtourism) will fail unless we consider the whole system. An important first step is to recognise that there is no simple approach or one-dimensional solution available.

Striving to enable communities in Flanders to flourish, in a broader sense, must be the aim of all social actors. From our tourism perspective, we make our contribution by focusing on encouraging balance so that **destinations** begin to flourish.

An impactful experience goes hand-in-hand with strong emotions. People feel awed, connected, moved, inspired and proud, and many factors determine the power of a travel experience. Three of these factors can be catalysts:

1 the intense experience of a location, primarily its local culture, socio-economic and political situation, language, nature and heritage. Travellers are moved by the differences and/or newness of the location—as long as they take the **time** to experience this and dare to slow down. The guest's perspective

helps us—the hosts—to value the little things that we no longer notice in our familiar environment.

2 meaningful encounters with other travellers, residents or people in the tourism sector. Each encounter can be a unique and significant moment that may stick in the traveller, resident or entrepreneur's memory and potentially influence their thoughts and actions.

3 the activity or type of trip, such as cycling, walking, a boat or train trip, backpacking, visiting a conference or taking time for reflection. Activities that challenge us to push physical or mental boundaries, or which inspire us and contribute towards personal growth or a better world.

These strong emotions ensure that the experience resonates with us long after the trip. Sometimes people make big life decisions or behave differently when they return from a trip. Travelling, therefore, has the power to bring about a profound and positive change in both people and their environments. This is **the transformative power of tourism**. It's the essence of what we should be aiming for in the tourism sector. The goal we should be working towards day and night, with passion. And it is the cornerstone of the work of VISITFLANDERS: **meaningful encounters in flourishing destinations**.

In order to strengthen the positive power of tourism. Visitors must feel like they're a welcome part of the local community and return home with a warm feeling and the desire to come back another time. Residents and companies must learn to value the virtue of hospitality, to become proud ambassadors of their corner of the world. From Adinkerke to Zoutleeuw, there are residents who are connected with others in their love for the place where they live.

Tapping into this positive energy can ensure that our destinations flourish and thrive, so that travelling to Flanders can continue to be an enriching experience in the future for both guest and host.

OUR STRATEGIC CHOICES

In order to strengthen the positive power of tourism, we consciously choose to build bridges, not break them, and to seek evolution rather than revolution. We want to build upon our successes and what is already working, and not just focus on what's going wrong so we can find a quick fix. In other words, our strategic choices arise from what we already have in place, may sometimes take new directions, and should help us to make our dream a reality.

1

Tourism is now part of the answer as to how destinations can flourish. As a result, we're widening our focus to include not only the demands of the visitor, but also the balance that is required to allow a destination to thrive and prosper.

We want to reconcile the needs of the destination with the demands of the visitor, so that **balance** can arise. We're shifting from seeing **tourism as a goal**, to seeing tourism as a resource. The consideration of which visitors we want to attract will not only be made based on the 'demands of the customer' but by determining ways in which visitors can make a positive contribution towards the destination's development and help minimise or eradicate the negative impact on the destination.

Up until now, one of the primary indicators of success was the growth in the number of visitors. Without ignoring economic factors, we should dare to aim for more than this. Aside from prosperity, **growth is now defined as**

better tourism, with the primary indicator being the extent to which local destinations and their residents flourish. We're aiming for an increase in the net value for everyone involved in tourism.

In a future tourism policy, we're going to facilitate residents, companies and authorities in their search for a **balance between the various interests of the destination, residents, visitors and entrepreneurs**. This starts with rediscovering the positive power of tourism and making it central. We want to honour the **natural resources and historical authenticity** of our destinations so that our beloved Flanders is a pleasant place to live, do business, visit and so genuine hospitality is, and remains, a given.



Therefore, the tourism of tomorrow will be rooted in local communities more than ever before and will build upon the spirit of place². Neighbourhoods, villages and cities with balance are enthusiastic and proud hosts. A flourishing community is very much connected to its location; a place where entrepreneurs work together, visitors can feel at home and residents can nurture and share their love for the place. And thereby generate greater value³.

Choice 1.1. Together with our partners, we monitor whether, why and how locations flourish, so we can continually adjust the implementation of the policy in order to meet the aim of flourishing communities.

What makes one destination balanced, and the other not? What makes a new initiative more successful at one destination than at others? What makes residents in one place prouder to share their home than in others? You can't intentionally design a flourishing destination or force it to come about with a checklist. Our approach—which involves making a link between flourishing destinations and meaningful stories, conscious travelling, sustainable business and a facilitating government—can offer answers to these questions and is internationally renowned thanks to its innovative nature. Our approach is founded on research, solidarity, flexibility and a long term vision.

We strive to stay at the cutting-edge of **innovative tourism** by continuing to carry out and facilitate research based on realistic needs. We're examining how we can redefine success. However, in doing this, we're not losing sight of traditional economic parameters. By sharing the knowledge we've gained with the world, we're becoming richer because we have a finger on the pulse of the tourism sector and can quickly capitalise on relevant evolutions.

Research and development actors are therefore important partners.

² According to the International Council on Monuments and Sites ICOMOS (Québec Declaration on the preservation of the spirit of place, 2008) the 'spirit of place' consists of both tangible elements (sites, buildings, landscapes, routes, objects) and intangible elements (memories, narratives, written documents, festivals, remembrances, rituals, traditional knowledge, values, textures, colours, odours) that all make an important contribution to the essence of a place and imbue it with spirit. The intangible elements give a more rich and complete meaning to the physical elements. The spirit of a place is furthermore a continual process of reconstruction that responds to the need for change and continuity in a community. Therefore, a spirit can change over time and can differ between cultures. A place can therefore have different spirits and be shared by different communities.

³ In terms of regional economic development, the term 'endogenous potential' is also used, to which we also add the perspective of the visitor.



Choice 1.2. We want to be smart in mapping the places where impactful stories thrive and are communicated by local communities, so we can develop them into Flanders-wide narratives.

Strengthening and connecting stories from local communities with the tourism in their destination is a new extra dimension to the tourism policy that we want to develop in the coming years. We want to give more space to grassroots dynamism and developments, which, when given the right connections and scaling up, have the potential to grow into national and even international attractions.

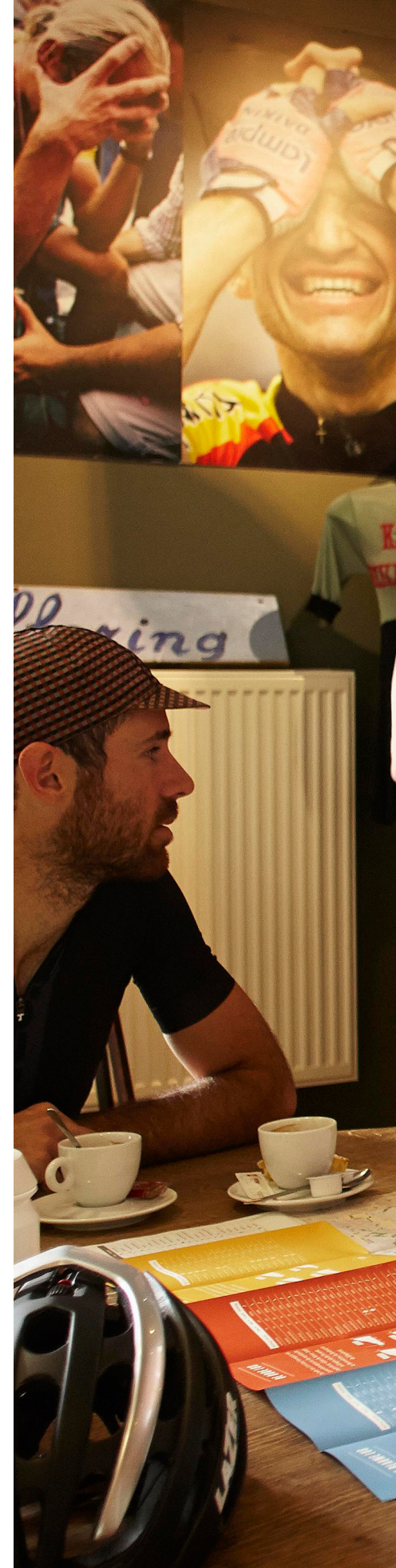
We already encourage the development of a number of these attractions and we want to build upon this further. Examples are the accessibility of religious heritage, network creation of historical sites and castles, the 'in situ' idea and water-based tourism. In addition, we'll never be done telling the stories regarding our Flemish Masters and the First World War. Another example is how we work to attract conferences, conference associations and events that are in line with relevant local or regional areas of growth and therefore strengthen the dynamic between inspiring places, curious visitors and entrepreneurial communities.

But there are also **narratives** that we haven't yet utilised, such as how our modern European concept of free trade has its historic roots in our Flemish cities where entrepreneurs changed water into gold (e.g. the Hanze Cities, the harbours and the hydraulic technology we invented long before the Netherlands adopted it), or how the concept of 'freedom' was expressed early on in our belfries, and our ingrained desire for local autonomy. There are probably many more narratives to bring to the forefront.

We're therefore going to **carefully scout** for local stories and judge whether these stories have the potential to interest foreign visitors over time, potentially in combination with other initiatives⁴.

For a long time, our destination development occurred based on geographic delineation, with many different small and large projects being supported. With the programme for the commemoration of WW1 and the leverage subsidies for the Flemish Masters, we have taken a more thematic approach to destination development, but over time the geographic diversity of Flanders as a destination has become somewhat overshadowed. We will, of course, complete our ongoing projects, but we're going to veer towards a more balanced approach. This **hybrid approach** favours **Flanders-wide narratives with potential**, translated into concrete elements in the region. In our vision for the future, in which we want to strengthen local communities, it's logical that we should strive for wider **geographic distribution** (over the whole of Flanders) and to **spread visitor flows over time** (there is no more 'tourist season'), and therefore also the development of experiences, without spreading our resources too thin again.

⁴ In regional economic development, there is a 'project monitor for a region' that is stimulated from the bottom up and makes it possible to get a 'real time' snapshot of the region. We can perhaps learn from this.



2

We connect strong passion groups in Flanders to similar communities worldwide via meaningful stories so that the chance of an impactful visitor experience is even stronger.

Strengthening and communicating the unique spirit of a place in our many and diverse communities provides opportunities to create a connection between the people who live there and the ones who visit: this is crucial to allowing a destination to flourish. We want to guarantee that visitors strengthen our places and people and don't just take the spirit with them by simply viewing or 'consuming' a place. That's why our starting point is that tourism is more than just selling services and generating transactions. Tourism can connect people to each other and to specific places in such a way that the interests merge together into a mutual impact. Rather than looking for consumers who will 'consume' our location, we will search for people who can **bring value** to our location, by zooming in on the aspects in Flanders that we can use to **offer value**.

Meaningful stories from Flanders will find a worldwide audience if 'interest groups' can discover how their passions are experienced in our region and how they can take part in them.

Choice 2.1. Taking the passions of the Flemish people as a starting point, we want to develop a strong narrative that resonates with interest groups worldwide, so they have a desire to connect to the story of our destination.

Traditional marketing uses target groups and target group profiles. But people don't like to be labelled. They do, however, voluntarily join scenes, tribes or communities. These are groups of people that consciously share a meaningful and mutual interest. A story, if you will.

To market Flanders as a tourist destination we need a narrative that isn't based on products or sub-destinations, but rather on **stories about, for and by people at places that matter to them**.

In this respect, we're resolutely choosing to attract people, from anywhere in

the world, who share a passion with us. We want to merge meaning (for people) and value (for brands) and base our international stories on that. We want to turn the C for customer in C2C into a C for community.

The interest groups at whom we'll target our stories may be anywhere in the world and can't be grouped according to traditional demographic categories. We're therefore definitively leaving behind the geographic and socio-demographic approach of our target groups. We're evolving towards



meaning-based marketing in which the mutual interests of the interest groups in Flanders and elsewhere in the world merge into a mutual impact, where meaning (for people) and value (for brands) are two sides of the same coin. In meaning-based marketing, there is always a need for cooperation and/or co-creation.

This allows us to build a **strong connection, loyalty and an ambassador's network**. It adds value, and the foreign interest groups are also prepared to pay for a meaningful experience. We're deepening our approach to interest groups, in relation to our strong stories, so we can focus on them even more closely. A group such as 'cultural value seekers' is still too wide.

We want to give our storytellers extra identity by linking them to a specific theme and making them the hero and co-owner of that theme. We will therefore build upon our marketing of **cutting-edge craftsmanship** and the existing themes such as Kitchen Rebels, Flandriens, Flemish Masters etc. Or we'll look for new themes. It's important that our stories are told by a strong interest group and can be experienced in actual places in Flanders, and aren't limited to specific product lines.

Choice 2.2. We want to set up impactful international campaigns that can be customised, so we can encourage travel to Flanders without promoting mass tourism.

Events or promotions that put the special stories from Flanders in the spotlight are now even more important. We will develop a **global content strategy** that's rooted in local stories that are connected to one another and put worldwide interest groups in contact with the stories from our destination. For example, the events attracted and initiated by EventFlanders will play a bigger role. Because when events are rooted in local entrepreneurship and ownership, they are the ideal meeting points for hosts and visitors. Both become ambassadors of our destination and take over ownership of the stories.

The possibility of offering **customisation** is a guiding principle behind the selection of our stories and the accompanying symbolic actions. An invitation to travel to Flanders will be personalised and lead to a unique interaction with lasting impact. Flanders' identity as a boutique destination helps facilitate this. We're made up of relatively small cities and municipalities, many SMEs and specialist stores with their own spirits. Add to that the rich and vulnerable heritage in our cities and then you know we're not the place for mass tourism.

A more personalised approach is required to increase the likelihood of a transformative experience for our visitors and therefore of making a lifelong impact on each visitor. We will prioritise stories that enable a good **spread of visitor flows and wider geographic distribution**. A wider distribution across the region will be achieved by giving Flanders-wide stories the priority in our international campaigns. A good spread of visitor flows will be created by carefully planning specific concepts such as biennials/triennials, multi-year themes, large events as part of a multi-year strategy.

Customisation means we need a very focused approach to finding the right visitors: the ones who will bring value to our community. These visitors may be organisations, companies or people anywhere in the world. It's not about volume, it's about the right kind of passion. Customisation marries the needs of the visitor with the needs of the stakeholders at the destination. We're leaving behind a geographic and market-specific approach. Instead we help stakeholders at our destination understand the cultural differences within interest groups so they can anticipate the different expectations regarding service and quality. Our **foreign network** is a huge source of knowledge for this.



3

We will merge solidarity and expertise into a network so holidays are possible for anyone who experiences barriers.

We want to facilitate a network that makes holidays possible for people who experience barriers. We're convinced of the beneficial effects of holidays and recreation and do not want to deny those experiences to anyone.

Creating opportunities and providing opportunities doesn't automatically lead to opportunities being taken and therefore increased participation. Encouraging participation is a tricky balancing act. Discounts aren't enough, because the financial barrier is not the only one to be broken down. There are also physical barriers, there is a need

for skills, a certain amount of solidarity and adequate challenge.

Social challenges such as poverty, integration, social exclusion, loneliness, inclusion, the ageing population and healthcare are so complex that one organisation or policy area can't tackle it alone. That's why we work together in a multi-stakeholder network. Participation is an important guiding principle. We work together: we bring all the knowledge and experience together to create better policy. We don't talk about people, but with them. A relaxing holiday or a nice day out with your family is not a miracle cure

for poverty or social isolation, but it's one step in the right direction and part of the answer.

We strengthen the Everyone Deserves a **Holiday Network (Iedereen Verdient Vakantie)**, which is a powerful collaboration that utilises the core competencies of each partner. We choose to share the knowledge we gain with the wider world and research the potential for broader application.

4

We choose a Flemish-wide approach that is high-quality and increases the impact of our actions.

We want to make responsible tourism in flourishing destinations possible and connect people with people and places in a high-quality way. This way, we can make meaningful encounters possible. Therefore, we need to make some broader decisions that strengthen the previous objectives.

We already guarantee basic quality by offering equal opportunities to lodging owners. We want to increase the significance of meetings for our economic growth hubs by connecting them to stories about, and in, historic heritage at relevant destinations. We also want to take stock of other aspects. If 'flourishing' is a wider concept than profitability, then how should we look at the working conditions of people who want to do business in tourism? If we want to connect people to people and places in a meaningful way, then we need to embrace developments in digitalisation and Artificial Intelligence in order to strengthen these objectives⁵. And if we want to connect places to each other with stories, we need to make sure that these places are fully accessible.

Choice 4.1. we want to help to create the circumstances required for those who are already running tourism businesses to do so in a profitable and meaningful way⁶, so the conditions for sustainable business in tourism are improved.

We want opportunities for entrepreneurs in tourism to also result in maximum value creation, so the sector must continue to perform well. Finding and retaining **high-quality employees** is a huge challenge for the tourism sector. We want to examine whether we can contribute to increasing the resiliency of the people and businesses in tourism, and how we can do this. Firstly, we want to improve the competence of tourism employees and entrepreneurs. But we also want to connect people in tourism with each other, so that the group can lift up the individual.

In order to support the **sustainable profitability** and innovative efforts of our businesses, we want to inform tourism companies about, and give them maximum access to, tools offered by the Flemish government such as ecology support, the KMO portefeuille, and tailored support via business paths for innovation.



Choice 4.2. we want to proactively become a bridge to policy areas so the impact of our actions is increased.

We should facilitate local initiators in creating the necessary conditions that will allow their initiatives to succeed. As VISITFLANDERS, we are a partner for initiators and can help them to approach neighbouring policy areas and create synergy in response to concrete issues, rather than getting heavily involved in the details of the initiatives. Ownership remains with the community.

Since the **accessibility** is a key factor for experiencing the stories at our destination, certainly if we want wider geographical distribution, we want to

place maximum emphasis on access to both sub-destinations and Flanders itself, taking the SROI (Social Return On Investment) into account. We want to look at the perspective of the visitor with regard to **mobility solutions**, such as multi-modality, which are now developed for Flemish people.

Choice 4.3. we want to focus on guaranteeing basic quality but also make quality improvements possible in a way that serves the needs of the flourishing destinations and their residents, entrepreneurs and visitors.

A balanced development and experience of destinations will be strengthened if they satisfy a number of quality requirements. As an enforcing body, we define and guarantee the basic quality. New technologies must be able to help us with this.

The decision to implement further quality improvements must be taken by the destination itself in response to its needs and wishes. We will take an inspiring and facilitating role.

⁵ There is no contradiction between the development of data tools or Artificial Intelligence (AI) and striving for flourishing destinations, however, it's clear that the tools must serve the objectives and not the other way around. Experts in the field of AI development also believe that 'there is a generation on the way that will once again place greater value on human interaction [...] and artistic and social personal development will be central in our lives' 'We must defend our human nature, not against technology, but against ourselves'. Luc Steels in Knack, 23 January 2019, pp. 64-67.

⁶ According to the London School of Economics, healthy and meaningful work are parameters that, in addition to a basic standard of living with a reasonable income, determine the well-being and happiness of a person.

COLOFON

Responsible Publisher:

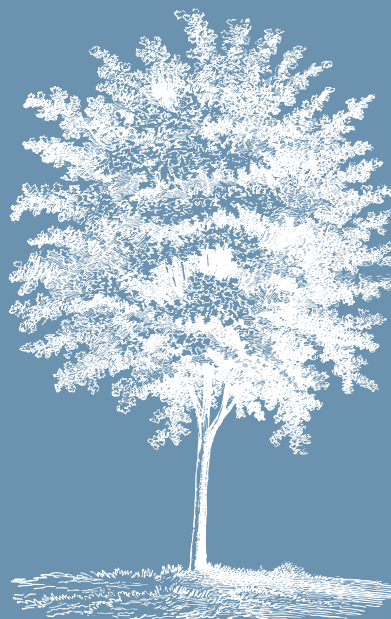
Peter De Wilde
VISITFLANDERS
Grasmarkt 61, 1000 Brussels
Belgium

Legal depot:

2019/5635/12/4

copyrights: iStock, Jan D'Hondt - Westtoer, Steven Ledoux and Stad Gent - Dienst Toerisme,

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a database or retrieval system, or be published in any form or in any way (electronically, mechanically, by print, photoprint, microfilm or any other means) without prior written permission from the Publisher.



VISITFLANDERS



Flanders
State of the Art