



Grand Sites of France and tourism

*FRAMEWORK DOCUMENT OF THE GRAND SITES OF FRANCE NETWORK
Approved by the General Assembly of 19 February 2014*

The need to initiate work on tourism in the Grand Sites of France was revealed during the assessment carried out by the RGSF [Grand Sites of France Network] in 2012, which resulted in the development of its joint plan for the next 10 years (2013-2022).

The Grand Sites of France Network conducted research into this subject during 2013. It brought together a mixed working group assembling stakeholders who manage heritage sites (State, regional authorities, experts) and public tourism stakeholders (at national, regional, departmental and local level). The group held meetings with experts from the sector and managers of the Grand Sites made contributions. Its analysis was supplemented by discussions carried out during the Annual Meetings of the Grand Sites of France in September 2013, which were devoted to the subject: "What kind of tourism should there be in the Grand Sites?".

The discussion also included the results of a major study carried out at the initiative of DATAR [Interministerial Delegation for Territorial Planning and Regional Attractiveness] "Destination Countryside", published at the end of 2013 in Documentation française [French public publishing service]. The study concluded that today's major motivations, linked to the idea of holidays, are change, renewal, and reunion. It emphasises that in the countryside tourists are mainly looking for "high-quality landscapes and heritage sites, craft and economic traditions,.. charm, beauty, a sense of place".

Throughout the text, what is said about the Grand Sites of France is also true of both approved Grand Sites of France and Grand Sites that have not yet been approved and which are progressing towards the label.

Framework

“Since the 1970s, the policy of the Grand Sites of France, represented by the Ecology Ministry, was aimed at intervening in the most symbolic sites, which welcomed a particularly high number of people because these sites were attractive to tourists. Originally the policy was remedial, with the objective of restoring much visited sites which had sometimes lost their beauty and their attractiveness, but now the policy of the Grand Sites of France consist in redefining the sites to restore their original beauty and to provide them with management methods that are adapted to the future.

It is the **fundamental value** of the site that is being restored to the heart of public action and the **capital** that it represents and in which the regional authorities and the State agree to invest. After decades of collection and cultivation, they have chosen to recreate this landscape capital, to maintain it and to "optimise" it. This is the way to capitalise on the **modernity of these destinations**, which become attractive, or become attractive again, to a public enticed by areas full of life and exceptional landscapes, where you are invited to take the time to explore.

Although tourism is not the purpose of the Grand Sites of France policy, it is an essential element in this, because:

- A Grand Site is by definition **a remarkable, well-known, frequently visited landscape**. Sometimes these visits date back to the origins of tourism in our country, and the first "discoverers" of these sites were often behind calls for their protection from the 19th century onwards.
- The major growth in tourism throughout the 20th century in **locations that are attractive but fragile**, and badly structured to support this development, was the source of dysfunction and degradation (to the site, its inhabitants and the visitors themselves), which in fact required the introduction of a suitable policy to deal with this.
- Experience shows that if one wants to rectify these dysfunctions, **we have to think at the broader level of the area of influence of the site**, integrate tourism into restoration and development plans and reconsider ways of working with tourism stakeholders. The sustainable development dimension of a Grand Site of France calls for a reappraisal of the tourism practices that are undertaken there, and their organisation, and **for the shared objectives of management players and tourism stakeholders to be defined**.

As for tourism, this is a major economic sector and its influence in the national economy is growing. It generates jobs that cannot be relocated.

The purpose of the tourist economy is to generate **wealth** through the arrival of visitors in a place: local visitors, national tourists, international tourists.

Strengthening France's international attractiveness and an increase in spending by foreign tourists are the priorities for the Ministry of Tourism (reduction of the trade gap). On the one hand, the Grand Sites of France convey an image of France that is strongly associated with cultural and natural heritage. The Ministry of Tourism has expressed its desire to make a greater contribution to France's objectives regarding tourism.

At local level, tourism makes a major and growing contribution to the economy of many regions, particularly rural ones. Local authorities feel very concerned by the economic impact and the jobs generated by the attractiveness of the heritage sites and the number of tourist visitors to these, and by their influence on the region in which they are located.

The problem

For a long time there has been opposition between the "guardians of the temple" (environmental protectors) and the "merchants of the temple" (tourism stakeholders). This supposed opposition between the tourist approach and the environmental-heritage approach finds a form of synthesis here. The Grand Sites of France Network in fact considers that the concept of a Grand Site of France is not defined in either of these interpretations, but transcends these in a new vision of sustainable development presaging, in France, both a tourism that is in tune with its times and a profound evolution in terms of planning our regions.

The problem posed by the members of the Grand Sites of France Network is as follows: **"How can we imagine a future which both preserves its qualities, its values and the spirit of place of the Grand Sites of France, enriches the overall experience of their visitors, procures a distinctive advantage in tourist rankings, and generates economic wealth and jobs for the area and its inhabitants?"**

The convergence between exceptional heritage value and tourist development should ensue around the dimension of "valorisation" in the literal sense of the term. Thus when we talk about "tourist marketing", the following two questions should be asked:

- Which activities, products and market services could visitors find on site that are in tune with the exceptional value of the sites and the spirit of the place, and which even enrich these, and for which visitors would be prepared to pay, possibly, significant amounts?
- How can we make visitors want to have a real holiday and to return, instead of just visiting?

In short, how can the special nature of tourism in these heritage sites be characterised, i.e. the distinctive and descriptive "Grand Site promise", adapted to the specificities and the heritage-related fragility of the site, and the means to keep this promise provided?

What should the approach to tourism be in the Grand Sites of France?

The key to tourism today: the experience

Human and intangible values are becoming the major components in the visitor's experience: what is perceptible, learning about others, relationships with others... How can these be shared and brought to life? Today, the motivation of tourism is the creation of a restorative link, it is the enrichment of the link within the group that travels, it is a sacred time of dreams. There can be an enormous difference there between these aspirations and a standardised offer. **The visitor does not come to discover a product but to have an experience**, an encounter and an exchange. The visitor expects to be transformed by an overall experience, not by the value of an object.

In a Grand Site of France, the visitor should be able to experience an aesthetic emotion. It should be possible to have this emotional dimension. At the same time, there is also a desire for escape, entertainment, learning, knowledge enrichment... The Grand Sites of France should therefore be able to develop offers which have several functions: wonder, escape, surprise, learning, which enable a shared memory to be created that describes the relationship between the site and the visitor.

The tourist economy of experience disrupts the relationship between market and non-market

We are entering a new tourist economy: the economy of experience (an actual, perceptible, authentic experience). Consumers have high expectations of the products or services but it is difficult to satisfy these by the market offer alone, because the market offer is standardised and often mass-produced. The non-market offer that motivates relations, friends and inhabitants to explore an area is more authentic and more accessible. It is more able to convey an emotion, which a standardised market offer is not able to communicate. We must **improve the non-market offer**, not only for its own qualities but also **because it is this that can trigger the market offer** and therefore a new economy for the area.

The call for a non-market offer also disrupts the conventional plans of the tourism sector. The *top-down* relationship, institutional advice, info-promotions, are no longer suitable. The desire to have an experience and the search for authenticity favours collaboration and a connection with the inhabitants.

A Grand Site of France offers landscapes that are preserved, accessible, interpreted, welcoming. It should also be a place that encourages encounters between visitors and inhabitants, who embody and pass on the values of the area.

The management structure of a Grand Site of France is therefore aimed at not only working with private stakeholders in tourism (hoteliers, guides, local agencies, TOs...) which are present in the area, but also with inhabitants and other stakeholders outside the tourism sector. It enriches the visitor's experience and, in so doing, contributes to the subsequent creation of a market offer that is essential for the economy of the area.

The Grand Sites of France, a supply rationale

Client studies, which would specify what visitors expect from the experience of a Grand Site, cannot be used much because, most often, the visitor is not aware of what he could experience and therefore want. It is, in fact, a strength of the Grand Sites to generate astonishment and surprise. In this sense, we will not talk of the "tourist market" of the Grand Sites of France or the heritage sites. Furthermore, if we think first about demand, we risk influencing the responses and therefore making the Grand Site commonplace.

On the contrary, we must place ourselves in the rationale of supply. The role of the manager of a Grand Site of France is to help the visitor, to stimulate his curiosity so that he feels the richness of the place, its different aspects, what he can experience and do there. It is about **making tourists want to explore, to experience, and also to consume that which they are not yet familiar with**, and which they don't even suspect will interest them, to move them.

Besides, today's visitors are "chameleons". They have a taste for many very different things. This is why we can no longer think in terms of the type of clientele, and it is necessary to move on to the idea of **motivation**, or of a benefit that is looked for. The right question to ask is not with which clientele we should communicate, but to which motivation does the heritage site choose to respond?

The quality of the landscapes, a distinctive value for tourism

"Tailor-made", "more landscape", "more quality" are the fundamental points of tourism in the Grand Sites of France. This is a competitive advantage compared with our neighbours, those in the Mediterranean in particular, those with whom competition on price is often not possible.

At a time when there is massive "landscape decapitalisation", when areas are made commonplace, when planning is standardised, identical from the North to the South of France (advertising posters, private housing estates, business parks, management of roads and public spaces...), **the gamble is that the Grand Site of France can provide the difference**. For that, the visitor must really be able to see a Grand Site of France as a place that is different from the others, which requires collaborative work across the whole area, on all its aspects and on a scale that is broader than the historical monument or the remarkable location, but not too broad either, that of a protected site where things are managed, and where you can experience a difference. On this scale, the "Grand Site of France promise" is real and is likely to be kept.

Manage the many but address the person

The Grand Sites have had to deal with the effects of a particular mass tourism. This is why they want to break with this model, that is based on mass travel by the population for short periods, designed so that the tourist gets back to his habits of consumption and of life, and generating standardised levels of service with no connection to local resources. This does not prevent many Grand Sites from still having to manage high levels of visitors, and they will have to do this for a long time because they often attract a lot of people in a limited time and space. Therefore they have to manage the many and are not able to exempt themselves from this responsibility. But today they want to do things differently, by not welcoming "the masses", but **persons**, and by creating the conditions for a relationship with visitors that is not trivialised.

Every visitor should be able to have the chance to access the values embodied by the Grand Site of France. This means defining these values well, explaining them, sharing them with economic stakeholders, and transmitting them in forms that are adapted to each Grand Site. The visitor's experience will be positive if he finds consistency in the whole experience that he has in the area, with his different contacts. A **"chain of values"** should therefore be created in the area, and visitors should be allowed to experience this. Beyond service providers appropriating the spirit of the site, these should be committed to a quality of products and services consistent with the excellence of the locations, which they are sure to recoup in revenue.

In favour of tourism in tune with the heritage nature of the Grand Sites of France

Points of convergence between tourism stakeholders and the Grand Sites of France

A group of points of convergence or common interests emerges between the managers of the Grand Sites of France and those responsible for tourism:

- The Grand Sites of France are part of the perspective of sustainable development that favours the rise of gentle mobility and **contributes to the ecological transition**, in keeping with the environmental challenges of the 21st century.
- **The quality of the area and of landscapes** is recognised as being part of the capital that is important for tourism, which has to be looked after. Through their preservation, their diversity and their management style and development, the heritage sites can make a difference compared with the tourist offer of other countries, they can be "a competitive asset"
- **The Grand Sites of France are high value non-market spaces** (landscapes). Market value can be generated from this non-market value. The economic value is mainly measured by the indirect spin-offs that the sites can generate for tourist service providers. It should be based on product activities and market services that are in tune with the spirit of place and which even contribute to this, which visitors like to find there and for which they are prepared to spend a lot.
- **The Grand Site of France embodies a strong image capital, which radiates out.** It is a symbol that can be a gateway to a much larger area, to other more secret places to explore, that invites them to go further and encourages them to stay.
- **The Grand Sites of France are areas that are managed** by identified structures, teams, representatives, with whom it is possible for tourism stakeholders to work. It is an interesting governance situation.
- **The Grand Sites of France are on a good scale**, neither too small nor too big, where there is more chance than elsewhere of guaranteeing the "promise" made to visitors, in terms of the quality of location and the human experience.
- **Grand Site stakeholders and tourism stakeholders agree on the strength and uniqueness of tourism** in these areas, consisting of: the intrinsic quality of a protected landscape, the decisive role of the inhabitants in receiving visitors, tourism as a particular experience to be enjoyed in a high value and unique area, tourism as a contributor to the vitality of an area throughout the year, the Grand Site as providing visitors with the means to explore, understand and experience.

In favour of joint commitments by tourism stakeholders and the Grand Sites of France

The members of the Grand Sites of France Network and the managers and stakeholders in public and private tourism that are involved with the Grand Sites of France are invited to join forces as far in advance as possible to jointly define the shared modes of action that are linked to visitor hospitality, the promotion of the Grand Sites of France, tourist marketing in these areas and the evaluation of visitor satisfaction. They decide to broadly share these objectives with stakeholders in the area of each Grand Site of France and to trial offers for visitors that result from these recommendations. These recommendations will feed into and encourage forms of work to be developed for the future in order to promote tourism that is in tune with the demands of preservation, management and development of these heritage sites:

- **Grand Sites of France stakeholders and tourism stakeholders jointly clarify the values** that they can share for the area, in order to enable the alignment of values between all the area's stakeholders who contribute to protection and to tourism (public, private, inhabitants).
- **They favour the visitor's overall experience** during the whole of his stay: the image, the landscape, the visit, the stay, the accommodation, the activities, the opportunities for encounters, the conviviality, the souvenir to be bought, because everything contributes to the visitor's experience.
- **They address each visitor as a person** and not as part of a mass, and give him the chance to access the values of the site, by making sure that emotion can emerge.

- **They seek to favour the holiday** and not the quick visit: better for spending per visitor and for the economic vitality of the area, better for the experience of the visitor in an area of high quality landscape, heritage and hospitality.
- **They favour the off-season:** extending the season is a major economic issue for tourism professionals, allowing a reduction in concentration in fragile congested places, reducing the size of developments, ensuring a better experience for the visitor.
- **They are not seeking an increase in the absolute number of visitors** for good economic efficiency for the area, but an increase in the length of holidays, better distribution throughout the year, an increase in spending per visitor on local products and services.

The members of the Grand Sites of France Network aim to bring this framework document to life, i.e. to make it known and to share with their partners the objectives and principles that it contains, as well as to implement these objectives and principles specifically in the approved or planned Grand Sites of France.”